A Closer Look at Professional Identity!

Guest Editor: Thomas J. Sweeney
Why a Special Issue on Professional Identity?
by Craig S. Cashwell, CSI President

I am excited to introduce this special issue on professional identity, my presidential theme for the year. The intent of this special issue, from its original conception, was to provide a series of articles that would be informative at the time of publication, but that also would serve as an important resource for counselors and counselor educators for years to come. As you read this special issue, I trust you will find this to be the case.

Why a special issue on professional identity? When I took my course on professional orientation 25 years ago, only 34 states had counselor licensure, and many of these were weak laws. CACREP and NBCC were fairly new organizations that were only beginning to accredit programs and credential individuals, respectively. I realized then that counselors were the “new kids on the block” of mental health service delivery and that we had much to do to “grow up” as a profession. I was trained by professional counselors to be a professional counselor.

I have been blessed during my career to see many advances in our profession, but also chagrined to see much fragmentation. Within my spiritual tradition, it is said that a house divided against itself cannot stand. As a profession, we remain quite fragmented, which makes us weaker and more vulnerable. There is a clear need for professional advocacy, a clear message about who we are as a profession that can be delivered to consumers and policy makers. While the ACA 20/20 working group made great progress on many fronts, the inability to reach consensus on training standards for the profession shows how far we have yet to go.

Since its inception, CSI has recognized that counseling is a unique profession with an important niche in the human services world. I am unapologetic about who I am as a counseling professional and my professional identity. I value social work, but I am not a social worker. I value psychology, but I am not a psychologist. I work with couples in my private practice, but I am not a marriage and family therapist.
I am a Professional Counselor.

I hope you enjoy this special issue, but more importantly, I hope you are motivated to take action to advocate for our profession. As the adage goes, “talk is cheap.” If the words in this special issue do not spur you to action, all who have worked to develop this special issue have labored in vain. CSI is, at its core, a grassroots organization with many selfless laborers working at the local level for the betterment of the counseling profession.

What will you do?

Finally, I must express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Tom Sweeney for serving as guest editor for the special issue and to Dr. Donna Gibson for transforming the Exemplar into a world-class publication. I am reminded that our profession is in most capable hands.

Dr. Craig S. Cashwell
CSI President

Professional Identity: What’s in a Name?
by Thomas J. Sweeney,
Exemplar Special Edition Guest Editor

When I was asked by President Cashwell to edit a special issue of the Exemplar on the topic of professional identity, I was delighted to accept. I started my professional identity journey in graduate school. Little did I know, decades ago, that we as a profession would be grappling with identity as a topic of discussion in 2015. When you know what it means to identify yourself as a professional counselor, then you will do so quite simply with confidence and pride.

My goal as editor was to ask those who know from preparation, scholarly research, and extensive experience to share in a brief format what makes professional counselors unique among other helping professions. They define our uniqueness regardless of setting or specialty. They provide a view to your future as an evolving, maturing professional. Perhaps most importantly, they emphasize what it is that we have in common in this country and how that is unique in the entire world. Finally, they provide practical approaches and tools for advancing professional identity in graduate education and throughout your careers.

Identity Crisis

CSI was founded in no small part because of a counselor identity crisis begun in the late 1970s. It was brought on by the credentialing and marketplace aggressiveness of other professions including psychology, marriage and family therapy, and social work. Make no mistake, our efforts would have evolved over time, but to this day, there is still a tension among professionals in the marketplace. A strong, resilient professional identity is essential to professional counselors being at the forefront of changes toward a wellness, developmental, preventive approach to promoting respect and dignity for all people.

No Identity Problem for CSI Members

So what’s in a name? We believe that it connotes a unique education backed by responsible oversight as with any creditable profession.
Education

CSI has always advanced the idea that our national standards of preparation were essential to defining who should be identified as a professional counselor. Why? Because the national standards are developed, debated, and systematically refined by experienced practicing counselors, counselor educators and supervisors, representatives of the public that we serve, and those in graduate programs who are closest to their delivery. They are, by intent and definition, the minimum national standards for the preparation of a professional counselor (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, CACREP). Could an honor society expect anything less? Should those paying for their graduate preparation accept anything less from the institutions that recruit them as students?

Competencies and Ethical Practice

CSI also advocates for both state and national credentials for our members. Practically speaking, it was to advance the idea that without a credential as proof of our competencies and protection of the publics that we serve, we could be seen only as a “recognition” society with no substance to our claims of promoting excellence. Ethical judgment and practice are essential to excellence in both preparation and practice.

Credentialing bodies invest heavily in the development and enforcement of guidelines. They require continuing education to maintain and advance competence. While membership organizations are critical to helping foster ethical guidelines and providing continuing education opportunities, it is the credentialing bodies that ensure protection of the consumer when one practices as a “professional counselor.” In sum, this special issue will provide the reader with both background and tools needed to understand the meaning of a “professional counselor identity.” As a consequence, the informed reader will advocate for the profession as a means to advancing wellness and human dignity for all as found in CSI’s vision statement.

In the beginning, there was Sister Lois! As Chi Sigma Iota celebrates its 30th anniversary, we had the privilege of getting the inside story of the evolution of our honor society from none other than CSI’s first member, Sister Lois Wedl, Ph.D. S. Lois is not only Member #1 of CSI, but she was also the very first chapter president of the very first CSI chapter, Alpha. So, it is fair to say she “was there” from the very beginning. S. Lois describes her involvement as completely unexpected and totally delightful – a wonderful gift!

Sister Lois’ journey into the counseling profession began at age 51 when she left her home of 32 years at Saint Benedict’s Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota. When she arrived at Ohio University, she had planned to take four courses in the Master’s Program. However, her advisor suggested that she add a course in gerontology because she very likely would be working with older persons in her religious community. This course was so new that it was not even listed in the catalogue. S. Lois agreed to add the extra course, bringing her first quarter load to five courses! The instructor of the course was a new faculty member: Dr. Jane Myers. Unbeknownst to S. Lois, taking this unexpected course resulted in life-long connections, both

Owning our Counselor Identity: The Final Frontier for Becoming a Profession

by Carol L. Bobby, CACREP President & CEO

In the beginning, there was no “profession” of counseling. People counseled, but without any specific training. People called themselves counselors, but without knowing what it meant. There were no standards for determining who could enter the “profession,” nor were there any guidelines to outline what the “counselor” needed to know or how the “counselor” should be educated. There were also no codes for determining if a “counselor” was practicing in an appropriate manner. As a result, counselors were not recognized as qualified helping professionals, and counseling was not considered to be a bona fide profession.
This began to change in the late 1970s and early 1980s when leaders in the field of counseling made bold moves designed to legitimize counseling as a profession on par with other helping professions such as psychology and social work. These moves included the creation of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in 1981, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) in 1982, and Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) in 1985. CACREP, as the organization for setting educational standards for counselor education programs, was designed to address the need for defining how all counselors should be educated and what they should know. NBCC, as the certifying body for individuals who wanted national identification as a counselor, was designed to address the need for determining which individuals were qualified to enter the profession through examination and a review of the education and supervised experiences completed. CSI, as the first honor society to recognize excellence of both professionals-in-training and those in practice, was designed to solidify counseling as a distinct profession with highly qualified individuals who would continue to improve the profession through their commitment to advancing their own and others’ knowledge and skills.

These three prestigious organizations were not established in isolation. Much work preceded their creation. The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) began developing counselor education program standards in the late 1960s and early 70s. In fact, the first CACREP Standards were derived directly from the work of ACES. During this same time frame, the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) which was created in 1952, now the American Counseling Association (ACA), began working on a model counselor licensure bill that could be used by states interested in regulating the practice of counseling. In 1976, Virginia became the first state to license counselors. APGA had also developed ethical standards for its members, as did NBCC upon its creation. Thus, by the early 1980s, all of the elements for counseling to evolve into a respected profession had been put into place with an active membership association, the adoption of educational program accreditation standards, and the development of requirements for certification and licensure. The final element, the creation of a professional honor society, “provided a much needed link between students, educators, practitioners, and administrators in various counseling settings who identify themselves as professional counselors, first and foremost” (CSI; https://www.csi-net.org/History).

Some may ask why CSI should be viewed as a key element in the creation of the counseling profession, but the answer is quite simple. There is no profession of counseling if counselors continue to let other professions take over their licensing boards and claim their license as their own. There is no profession of counseling if counselors let others conduct research on what counselors should know and do. There is no profession of counseling if counselors do not own their professional identity and advocate for excellence across all elements of the profession.

CSI’s focus on building a strong professional identity through recognition of excellence in research and practice, development of leadership skills, and a focus on advocacy completes the loop. Between CACREP’s continued focus on strengthening the professional identity of all graduates of CACREP-accredited counselor education programs and CSI’s continued focus on recognizing excellence for those counselors who identify themselves first and foremost as professional counselors, there is every reason to believe that the counseling profession will conquer the final frontier and become fully recognized as a profession of highly skilled and knowledgeable individuals who are proud to say, “I am a professional counselor!”

“There is no profession of counseling if counselors do not identify themselves with pride when they explain to people who they are and what they do.”

-Dr. Carol Bobby

Recorded Professional Identity Webinars
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“Strengthening the Counseling Professional” Series

Who Are We and Where Are We Going
Dr. Craig Cashwell

The Role of Counselors’ Professional Identity
Dr. Donna Gibson

Supervising for Professional Identity:
Integration of Chi Sigma Iota’s Mission Into the Supervisory Context
Drs. Melissa Luke & Kristopher Goodrich

http://www.csi-net.org/Webinars_Recorded
Protecting Counselor Professional Identity through Advocacy for the Profession
by Theodore P. Remley, Jr.
Alpha Zeta Chapter,
Our Lady of Holy Cross College

As can be seen in this special edition, counselors have worked long and hard in the United States to create a sound professional identity for themselves that is recognized by the general public and that unifies the profession. Now that the counseling profession has achieved a professional identity, counselors must ensure they continue to have opportunities to serve clients. There are many threats to counselors and the counseling profession that must be addressed and ultimately overcome in order to ensure the long-term success of the profession.

Although it may seem self-serving to some for counselors to advocate for the profession, the reality is that clients who need counseling services will not receive them if counselors are not able to find employment and make a living practicing as counselors. So, in an important way, advocating for ourselves is also advocating for our clients.

Today, there are two major areas in which counselors have a pressing need to advocate for the profession: job classifications and state licensure board laws and regulations. If counselors are able to meet the challenges in these two areas, they will make important strides in protecting and strengthening counselor professional identity.

Chi Sigma Iota (CSI; www.csi-net.org); the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC; www.nbcc.org); and the American Counseling Association (ACA; www.counseling.org) are addressing advocacy areas in various ways. CSI, NBCC, and ACA have provided a framework for leadership in advocacy for the profession. CSI has created foundational documents that can guide the work of counselors who wish to advocate for the counseling profession. These documents include the Six Advocacy Themes (http://www.csi-net.org/?page=Advocacy_Themes) and the Principles and Practices of Leadership Excellence (http://www.csi-net.org/?page=Leadership_Practices). CSI also jointly sponsored the annual Leadership Essay Contest that encouraged counselors to think about and engage in leadership with the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (http://www.csi-net.org/?page=Essay_Contest). NBCC actively participates in the Fair Access Coalition on Testing (FACT; http://fairaccess.org), a nonprofit organization that works to ensure that members of the public have access to qualified test professionals. NBCC also employs a lobbyist and maintains an office in Alexandria, Virginia, to support counselor advocacy efforts (http://www.nbcc.org/Advocacy). ACA employs a full-time government affairs staff that provides continuing leadership in the area of counselor advocacy (http://www.counseling.org/government-affairs/public-policy).

But the reality is that every single counselor must personally advocate for the counseling profession if the job is going to get done. Organizations cannot be the only advocates for the counseling profession. True change occurs when counselors individually take responsibility for the profession and take action in their work places, in agencies, and within licensure boards. Individual counselors often make change happen.

Job Classifications

The most pressing challenge to the counseling profession is the lack of job classifications for counselors in organizations that hire counselors. Imagine the impact on the professional identity of counselors when they are hired as a mental health technician, social services provider, social worker, or psychological assistant. Unfortunately, many agencies today do not have job titles of counselor, mental health counselor, or professional counselor. As a result, professional counselors sometimes are hired in job categories and with job titles that are not appropriate. In addition, many of the existing job categories into which counselors are hired today are lower-level and lower-paid positions. The job categories often have few or no higher levels to which counselors can be promoted. Many counselors are stuck in organizations with job titles that do not reflect their training and skills and that have few or no advancement possibilities.

It is important for counselors to work toward organizations creating job categories that include titles such as Professional Counselor I, Professional Counselor II, Professional Counselor III, etc. Similar categories exist in most organizations for social workers and psychologists, and equivalent categories are needed for counselors.

Despite these two obstacles, persistent and determined counselors throughout the United States have been successful in convincing organizations to create job categories for counselors where none previously existed. This area of advocacy, creating job categories for counselors, is exceptionally important and provides an opportunity for one individual counselor who is successful to have a positive impact on the entire profession.
State Licensure Board Laws and Regulations

In order to get many bills passed in state legislatures that initially created state licensure for counselors, leaders had to compromise and agree to statutory language that restricts the practice of counselors. Some of these restrictions have a negative impact on counselor identity.

Restrictions that need to be removed over time from state licensure laws and regulations include the following: limits on counselors having the authority to diagnose and treat emotional and mental disorders; limits on counselors administering and interpreting tests they have the appropriate training necessary to utilize; difficulty transferring a license from one state to another (known as portability or reciprocity); and existence of exemptions to licensure that allow individuals to practice as counselors without being licensed (usually in governmental or non-profit agencies). The American Association of State Counseling Boards (AASCB; http://www.aascb.org/aws/AASCB/pt/sp/home_page) discusses these issues at its meetings, but board members must protect the public and must be careful not to advocate too strongly for the profession. As a result, AASCB is having limited impact on the changes that need to take place in state counseling laws and regulations. Again, individual counselors must provide leadership in each state in order to resolve these difficult problems.

When counselors are restricted and not allowed to practice their profession for which they have been prepared, such restrictions have a serious negative impact on their professional identity. All restrictions on the practice of counselors that were identified above have to be addressed, either by changing the state laws that license counselors or by changing state counselor licensure board regulations. Such changes are difficult, and there are many forces that oppose such changes. However, changing laws and regulations often is accomplished by one person in a state providing leadership. Licensure board members cannot be political activists because they must focus on protecting the public rather than promoting the counseling profession. So, non-board members must be the advocates for changes to state laws and regulations. On the other hand, being willing to serve on a state licensure board and taking the steps to obtain such an appointment is a way an individual counselor can be a strong advocate for the counseling profession within a licensure board and can have a major positive impact on counselor professional identity.

Conclusion

Advocating for the counseling profession is necessary to protect the success that the counseling profession has had in creating a strong professional identity. Individual counselors have the ability to create job classifications for counselors in organizations and to change state counselor licensure laws and regulations that restrict the practice of counselors.

Advocacy Heroes and Heroines Interviews

Visit www.csi-net.org/Interviews_Advocacy to hear more from others who exemplify professional advocacy in the counseling profession.
Reiner, Dobmeier, and Hernández (2012) sought to discover the perceived impact of professional counselor identity on the advancement and recognition of the profession. The article revealed the perspectives of counselor educators (N = 378) regarding fragmentation among the counseling specialties and the negative impact that has on the profession achieving legislative and political goals.

Reiner et al. (2012), like their predecessors (Hawley & Calley, 2009; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011; Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002), called for collaboration amongst counselors and counseling organizations to develop a coherent and consistent message about counselor identity. A lack of counselor identity has been suspected as contributing to confusion amongst Congressional Medicare leaders, managed care organizations, state licensing boards, and allied professions. The authors suggested that counselor identity be concentrated on the uniqueness of the profession (e.g., service focused on wellness, human development, empowerment, and prevention of harm) and the benefits that it affords the public.

In addition to the need for an established counselor identity, Reiner et al. (2012) suggested that counselor educators play a critical role in acculturating new members to the profession. Given the critical role that counselor educators hold in the establishing a clear professional identity within the field, understanding their personal beliefs about the need for a single identity was deemed critical.

Drawing from existing literature, their survey was developed to measure respondents’ perceived need for a single professional identity (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Hawley & Calley, 2009; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Rollins, 2006) and their perceptions regarding the impact of fragmentation amongst specialty areas on securing third-party reimbursements (Myers et al., 2002) and license portability (Cashwell, Kleist, & Scofield, 2009; Kaplan & Gladding; Myers et al.; Rollins). Finally, the survey asked counselor educators to identify the groups most responsible for reducing fragmentation and engaging in legislative efforts (Bobby & Urofsky, 2011; Cashwell et al.; Hawley & Calley; Kaplan & Gladding; Myers et al.).

Of the 378 counselor educators who responded to the survey, 2.7% earned a master’s degree in addiction, 24% in career, 38.6% in clinical mental health, 12.9% in marriage and family therapy, 6.2% in rehabilitation, 29.8% in school, 8.0% in college, and 31.6% in another area. On average, respondents mildly agreed that counseling was a single profession and that it is comprised of a number of affiliated professions. When asked about specialty areas, counselor educators mildly disagreed that school counseling and mental health counseling were distinct professions. Furthermore, they strongly agreed that all specialty areas listed were professional counselors, but that fragmentation in the field hindered professional counselors in securing Medicare and third party reimbursements, and in establishing license portability. When asked about who was responsible for addressing professional advocacy issues, respondents indicated that professional counselors were more accountable than professional organizations (e.g., American Counseling Association (ACA) and its divisions).

Given that counselor educators were the sample population, they were also asked about counselor education preparation. They agreed that the eight Counseling for Accreditation Counseling Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Common Core Standards were more central to training counselors than were the specialty standards [http://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2009-Standards.pdf]. Furthermore, the participants agreed that two curricular areas need more prominence in the counseling curriculum: advocacy and use of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

While examining group differences, the authors found that respondents who earned a master’s degree in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) did not support the idea that fragmentation hindered the counseling profession nor did they agree that counselors have struggled to articulate their identity. They also found that those teaching in mental health counseling programs agreed, more frequently than respondents from other areas, that fragmentation has a negative impact on license portability and third party reimbursement.

Given the discrepancy among counselor educators on the status of counselor identity, Reiner et al. (2012) cautioned that the counseling profession could continue to experience resistance to the development of a single professional identity. If counselor educators disagree on the need for establishing a single identity, they are unlikely to encourage future counselors with consistent values, thereby leading to counselors (those identified as most responsible for creating change) advocating for divergent and potentially competing goals. In addition to focusing on identity development, Reiner et al. called upon counselor educators to establish a culture of research engagement. Counselor educators and practicing counselors should recognize their professional obligation to provide empirical evidence of counseling practice.

While Reiner et al.’s (2012) findings identified professional counselors as the most responsible for advocacy, ACA and its divisions were identified as second and third most responsible. The authors suggested, however, that real change in establishing an identity and advocacy priorities must be a concerted effort on behalf of the counseling organizations, credentialing bodies, and professional counselors.
Although CACREP and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) were not identified by respondents as leader advocates, Reiner and her colleagues (2012) argued that establishing a coherent and consistent identity needs to be initiated by such credentialing groups, since they determine the curricular requirements and professional identity of counselors by signaling to the profession (counselor educators, counselors, and students), policy makers, and consumers the standards and values on which the profession is based. Leaders in the field (e.g., counselor educators, ACA leaders, ACA division leaders, Chi Sigma Iota and its Chapters’ leaders) then have a role in preparing individual counselors for their advocacy roles, arming them with coherent and consistent messages and appeals.

Some of these aforementioned groups have already initiated policies and processes for honing in on a single, clear identity. ACA has taken the lead on developing a definition of counseling in the 20/20 Vision Statement, which received strong support from counselor educators in the study. CACREP began placing significant value on counselor educators’ identity in the accrediting of programs. Chi Sigma Iota and NBCC have each developed journals focused on leadership and preventing harm. Divergence of views among counselor educators as to whether the profession has a single identity, and about leadership from credentialing bodies, is likely to generate more ambiguity about professional identity. Thus, there continues to be a need to engage in professional dialogue that addresses and resolves these underlying complex problems. Furthermore, given the central role counselor educators have in forming future generations of counselors, they need to be accountable for their responsibility of instilling the standards of the field.

In closing, to substantiate the vision of a single professional identity it behooves professional counselors, counselor educators, and counseling organizations to work together to provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the counseling paradigm of wellness and empowerment, human development, and prevention of harm. Divergence of views among counselor educators as to whether the profession has a single identity, and about leadership from credentialing bodies, is likely to generate more ambiguity about professional identity. Thus, there continues to be a need to engage in professional dialogue that addresses and resolves these underlying complex problems. Furthermore, given the central role counselor educators have in forming future generations of counselors, they need to be accountable for their responsibility of instilling the standards of the field.

References


Identifying and Advancing Counseling’s Unique Professional Identity
by Jason King, Omega Zeta Chapter, Walden University

The counseling profession contains a rich centennial history (Savickas, 2011) shaped by the convergence of several forces including counselor education programs, state licensure, professional associations, ethical codes, accreditation standards, multicultural maturity, and social justice principles (Protivnak, 2009). At the same time, the counseling profession is experiencing an identity crisis as it passes through Erikson’s adolescent stage of development by asking, “Who are we?” (Hendricks, 2008; Lopez-Baez & Barclay, 2012) and “How does our identity converge with and diverge from that of other mental health professionals?” (Myers et al., 2002, p. 399).

Erikson identified eight psychosocial developmental stages of lifespan human development (Feldman, 2008). During the fifth stage of development, adolescents ask, “Who am I?” to discover their particular strengths and weaknesses and the roles in which they can participate in society (Erikson, 1994). Through a process of elimination, adolescents seek to understand who they are by narrowing and making choices about personal, occupational, and political commitments (Feldman). In Erikson’s view, adolescents who stumble in their efforts to find a suitable identity may go off course in several ways. They may adopt socially unacceptable roles as a way of expressing what they do not want to be, or they may have difficulty forming and maintaining long-lasting close personal relationships. In general, the sense of self becomes diffuse, failing to organize around a central, unified core identity (Feldman; Solomon, 2007). Erikson’s self-identity theory is applicable to the counseling profession. While Gale and Austin (2003) argued that counseling lacks a unified core identity, numerous researchers (Cashwell, 2010; Hendricks, 2008; Swickert, 1997) have questioned if counseling is going through Erikson’s psychosocial stage of adolescent development. Like developing adolescents, counselors are asking, “Who am I?” “What is my place in the world?” (Guindon, 2010), and “Who are we?” (Hendricks; Lopez-Baez & Barclay, 2012).

In a discussion about counselor professional identity, former American Counseling Association (ACA) President Lynn Linde contended that a strong identity is essential for interprofessional distinction to promote marketing, public relations, certification, accreditation, public policy, and outreach (Linde, 2007). She further shared her traveling experiences as representative of the ACA and the counseling profession in which public citizens and government officials frequently asked her, “What are counselors and what do they accomplish?” Multiple authors (Gillig & White, 2009; Hendricks, 2008; Pope, 2006) have shared similar experiences of public inquiry about counselor professional identity in comparison to closely related professions, such as psychology, marriage and family therapy, and social work.

Using ethnographic content analysis, I sought to understand how ethical codes define counselor professional identity (Hendricks, 2008). Using conventional and inductive ethnographic content analysis, I analyzed the ethical codes of the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

Professional Identity Model

After achieving thematic saturation from reviewing the data and the corresponding themes, I conducted data integration by linking concepts and themes. Results from this methodology yielded development of a conceptual model of how ethical codes define professional identity for counselors, psychologists, marriage and family therapists, and social workers. Figure 1 presents this conceptualization. These data, corroborated by the analyses of interviews and the meeting minutes, suggest that the ACA, the APA, the AAMFT, and the NASW ethical codes share many similarities related to advancing general therapeutic competence and ethical professional conduct, promoting client welfare and avoiding actions that cause harm, ensuring clients have proper informed consent and are able to exercise full autonomy, respecting client privacy and retaining strict confidentiality, and developing inter-professional collaborative relationships to maximize positive client outcomes. The model further illuminates the role that these themes have in defining professional identity for these respective professions. Indeed, it reveals their differing philosophical orientations to enhancing the quality of life and respecting human dignity for individuals, couples, families, groups, and communities.

Professional Identity Comparisons

In addition to the five core themes of general competence and professional conduct; promote welfare and avoid harm; informed consent and self-determination; privacy and confidentiality; and collaborative professional relationships, unique themes were identified from the ACA, the APA, the AAMFT, and the NASW ethical codes and from the qualitative interviews. While these unique themes are relatively low in weighted coverage compared to the previously discussed five core themes, they attest to values, beliefs, and language promoted by each profession, especially the counseling profession.

Professional Growth, Development, and Wellness

The unique theme from the ACA ethical code indicates that counselors are “dedicated to the enhancement of human development throughout the life span” and they “encourage client growth...
and development in ways that foster the interest and welfare of clients.” Counselors also “work toward removal of systemic barriers or obstacles that inhibit client access, growth, and development” and they create relationships that are “conducive to the growth and development of clients.” Counselors also foster career development by striving to “reach agreement with employers as to acceptable standards of conduct that allow for changes in institutional policy conducive to the growth and development of clients.”

Family Systems and Relationship Well-being

This unique theme from the AAMFT ethical code directs marriage and family therapists to “advance the welfare of families.” This code recognizes that more than one person is the client and client units consist of minors, adults, couples, and families interacting in mutual relationships. For example, marriage and family therapists work with “relationships such as cohabitation, marriage, divorce, separation, reconciliation, custody, and visitation” and “to avoid a conflict of interests, marriage and family therapists who treat minors or adults involved in custody or visitation actions may not also perform forensic evaluations for custody, residence, or visitation of the minor.”

Social Justice and Community Forces

This unique theme from the NASW ethical code specifies that “an historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society” and that “fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.” Moreover, “social worker’s primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems” and to attend to the “broader society’s interests.” They also “promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments” and social workers “promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients.”

Conclusion

These results indicated that many counselor roles, values, and beliefs converge with psychologists, marriage and family therapists, and social workers. Yet, the results also clarified counselor professional roles and a core set of values and beliefs that diverge from other helping professions—specifically personal growth, development, and wellness. These findings promote the unique aspects of counseling and position counselors to resolve their adolescent developmental identity crises and move into Erikson’s early adulthood stage of development as core providers by championing personal growth, development, and wellness to address societal issues such as school dropout, poverty, discrimination, substance abuse, chronic illness, disability (Mellin et al., 2011), and crises, disasters, and other trauma causing-events on persons of all ages (CACREP, 2009).

Note: For more information about this model and references in this article, Dr. King’s webinar “Defining Counselor Professional Identity: What Makes Us Unique Among the Mental Health Professions?” is available at https://www.csi-net.org/Webinars_Recorded
Transformational Tasks of Professional Counselor Identity Development: Research and Implications

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The process of “becoming” can seem somewhat mysterious and riddled with unknown factors and experiences. “What” you become and “how” you become are a few of the questions that may be asked in this process. For such a young profession, counseling has debated these questions and is still debating aspects of it. Fortunately, we have the answer to “what” we are becoming—professional counselors. Until recently, counseling professionals were not too concerned with how this happened. It became an issue when the training standards came under scrutiny beginning in the 2000s. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) began the revision process to implement new standards in 2009. In those standards, a new requirement, that core counselor education faculty would need to have doctorates in counselor education, was phased in over a period of time. This revision process birthed strong debates about professional identity of counselor educators, counselors, and counselors-in-training. Who are we? What is our influence on students? How does our professional identity develop? These were some of the direct and indirect questions being asked at the time. In an effort to answer some of these, we decided to look at professional identity development through research. In this article, we will provide highlights of the results we found when examining the professional identity development of counselors-in-training and practicing counselors.

Research on professional identity and professional identity development has been conducted for many different professions. According to Nugent and Jones (2009), professional identity is an integration of professional training and personal attributes within the context of a professional community. For professional counselors, how each person learns and applies their training in a professional community (i.e., professional organizations and licensure) will influence his or her own professional identity development. Reisetter et al. (2004) added that professional identity is how an individual not only views self as a professional but also how he or she perceives competence as a professional.

Because there were elements of personal attributes and professional community, the development of professional identity of counselors indicated a need to examine both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes through our research. In essence, the influence of self and the influence of others needed to be explored. This led us to the participants of our first study that included 23 counselors-in-training (Masters-level) (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). Utilizing cross-sections of students across programs (i.e., beginning, pre-practicum, internship, and graduation) and from both CACREP and non-CACREP accredited programs, we were able to ask questions to elicit both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that influenced their professional identity development. However, an important note needs to be made about the faculty that delivered the programs in the CACREP and non-CACREP accredited programs. The majority of the faculty held doctorates in counselor education, affiliated with the American Counseling Association, and were licensed professional counselors and/or professional school counselors.

Through the use of a grounded theory qualitative research method, three specific developmental tasks that transformed the identity of counselors-in-training evolved (See Figure 1): definition of counseling, responsibility for professional growth, and transformation to systemic identity. Through a transformational process across time and experience, there was movement from a reliance on external validation to more self-validation that comes from clinical and professional development experiences. Evidence of this process came from the specific transformational tasks that evolved from the participants.


Across time, the participants defined counseling differently. For counselors-in-training at the beginning and pre-practicum stages of their program, there was an over reliance on expert definitions of counseling. However, more personalized definitions of counseling emerged for those pre-internship and near graduation. Those definitions reflected more of an internalized and personalized meaning of counseling for the counselors-in-training.

A second task that emerged from the data was a sense of responsibility for professional growth. Essentially, this task represents “who” is responsible for the counselor-in-training in “becoming” a professional counselor. Similar to the first task, students who are in the earlier stages of their counselor education program reported a strong reliance on experts (i.e., textbook authors, professors) to provide learning experiences and knowledge. As counselors-in-
training experienced working with clients in practicum and internship, the responsibility for gathering resources, seeking additional supervision, and attending conferences shifted, and students indicated that they were taking more ownership of their professional development.

In exploring elements of the professional community that may influence professional identity development in the counselors-in-training participants, the third task of a transformation to systemic identity emerged. How did they define their professional identity? From the new and pre-practicum students, this definition focused on individual skills and qualities that are outlined through training standards, certification, and licensure laws and requirements. This represented the need for external validation as a counselor that is typical in the early stages of training. However, pre-internship and graduating students expressed who they were in language that represented more systemic thinking. Recognizing the importance of their formal training, continued and future work with clients, and contributions to the profession were elements of their definitions of self as professional counselor.

Developmentally, it makes sense that counselors-in-training who are in the early stages of their training programs and experiences will rely on experts, textbooks, and external validation as a way to identify as a professional counselor. Over time, through counseling clients, receiving supervision, attending conferences and workshops outside of the program environment, and interacting with those in professional counseling organizations and the professional community, counselors-in-training learn to self-validate and integrate these elements into their sense of self as a professional counselor. Understanding these transformational processes and tasks help counselor educators and supervisors know how to support counselors-in-training in their professional identity development. It also underscores the importance of promoting professional organization and community involvement. Because of this last factor, we became curious about the continued professional identity development of practicing counselors outside of higher education.

In our second grounded theory study of 26 practicing counselors (Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014), a similar approach to examining the interpersonal and intrapersonal elements of professional identity development was taken. Using Ronnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) stratified and purposeful sampling method, school and community-based counselors (i.e., LPC) were invited to participate and were divided into focus groups based on years of experience (i.e., 1-2, 5-15, and 20+ years). Three transformational tasks, representing six themes, contributed to the counselors’ professional identity development: attitude toward work, energy of work, and integrated person (see Figure 2).


The task of attitude toward work represented how counselors, through years of experience, had to adjust to the expectations of their work. For those entering into their careers as professional counselors, a sense of idealism was countered with aspects of reality. For example, the administrative aspects of counseling practice were not unexpected entirely, but the reality of it could be frustrating. Early-career counselors also reverted to a need for external validation and guidance (as seen with early counselors-in-training). Over time, for counselors with more experience, realities of the job were still frustrating but were reported to interfere more with how the counselors perceived they were hampered in helping clients and contributing to the profession.

The frustrations reported by counselors through the realistic aspects of their job led counselors to the point of burnout. The participants in the 5-15 years of experience range expressed...
ideas about burnout more than any other group. However, movement through this process came from continuous learning through professional development and involvement in professional organizations, counseling clients, and being supervised and/or mentored by an experienced “guide.” These experiences helped counselors navigate burnout. With the 20+ years participants, themes of rejuvenation emerged from the data that reflected how they felt like they were contributing to the profession and helping themselves as well as clients.

The congruence of self-fulfillment through the counselor identity that emerged with the 20+ years participants reflected an integrated sense of identity, which is the third transformational task. Seeing the identity of counselor as “who you are” and not just “what you do” came from the years of work they had done with clients, being mentored and mentoring others, and personal life experiences. In essence, their professional and personal selves had merged into one. With early career counselors, they struggled with an internal need to keep the personal “self” separate from the professional “self.” Those with 5-15 years of experience reported more personal and professional satisfaction in the work they did with clients and other professionals. Confidence as a professional counselor emerges as counselors merge their professional and personal selves and serve the larger helping professions community.

Confidence in the role of counselor and as counselors merge their professional and personal selves and serve the larger helping professions community. Professional organizations, such as Chi Sigma Iota International and the American Counseling Association and its divisions, unite counselors in their goals, orientations, and identity. Confidence as a professional counselor emerges as counselors merge their professional and personal selves and serve the larger helping professions community.

The CSI Experience

Dr. Jane E. Myers

1948-2014

As a faculty member teaching rehabilitation counselor education in the early 1980s, I became active in a newly formed national honor society for rehabilitation students. Being a chapter leader and Chapter Faculty Advisor for Rho Chi Sigma brought me into contact with students in a new way. Members of the honor society were encouraged to pursue excellence through academics, clinical practice, professional advocacy, and lifelong learning. Social activities provided networking opportunities that led to professional activities in related state and national associations.

When CSI was formed in 1985, what I had learned about the benefits of a student honor society and professional membership association came alive with new meaning. No longer were we talking about a small specialty within the counseling profession and 70-80 training programs. Now, the focus was on the counseling profession as a whole, with hundreds of training programs. I watched in awe as Tom Sweeney, CSI’s first president and Executive Director, sent one letter to counselor education programs telling about the establishment of CSI, and never again has there been a need to “advertise,” “market,” or “recruit” for the Society. Over the years, I have had many occasions to ask how and why CSI is different than any other professional member association. It boils down to a core mission and values: its support for professional identity, its support for professional advocacy, and its unwavering support for me and each of you as professional counselors.

In 1990, as President of the American Counseling Association (then the Association for Counseling and Development), I went with Ted Remley, Ph.D., J.D., then ACA Executive Director, to a meeting at the national headquarters of American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) in Washington, D.C. We met with AAMFTs Executive Director, Director of Professional Services, and legal counsel. At that time, AAMFT was supporting legislative lobbying in each state to oppose the licensure of professional counselors and to limit our scope of practice.
much less than was commensurate with our training and experience. We pled our case well. They listened, then said what they wanted in return for acquiescing to our request: “We want you to ask your members to take their ACA membership certificates off their wall and stop claiming it means something. It does not. AAMFT membership is a credential. Anyone with a check can join your professional association and be ‘a member of ACA.’”

Though ACA now has membership categories, it remains true that “individuals whose interest and activities are consistent with those of ACA, but who are not qualified for professional membership” may join as “regular” members, and enjoy the rights and benefits of professional members including listing of membership on their vita. Membership in ACA does not otherwise denote professional counselor preparation, credentialing or professional identity.

What students found in CSI was validation for their beliefs, their philosophy, and their uniqueness, and both support and pride in being recognized for their commitment to excellence as professional counselors.—Dr. Jane Myers

By the early 1990s, I found myself beginning service as a Chi Sigma Iota Chapter Faculty Advisor at a new institution, my third for that role. I was noticing the difference a CSI chapter created in a counselor education department. In two of the institutions where I served, the inception of CSI rapidly led to the students’ decision to terminate the “CESA” group. It was not that students did not like social events. What was clear was that students were looking for more, something outside their regular coursework that supported them in their new professional choice and career. Counselor educators were increasingly telling counseling students that they were different from other mental health care providers, that our philosophy and goals of wellness set us apart. What students found in CSI was validation for their beliefs, their philosophy, and their uniqueness, and both support and pride in being recognized for their commitment to excellence as professional counselors.

From my recent position as CSI’s Executive Director for two years, it is easy to see that the majority of what happens in this Society happens at the chapter level, where students, faculty, and alumni share common core values in support of our profession. The work of CSI chapters increasingly occurs as an essential co-curricular aspect of counselor education programs, particularly focusing on leadership and advocacy competencies. For example, in its program reviews, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) formally acknowledges the importance of the work of our volunteer Chapter Faculty Advisors. This is because, in addition to social events, students find meaningful ways as counselors to engage in service to the community, support professional advocacy initiatives, and build an identity as professional counselors.

During a recent gap in office staff that gave me an opportunity to answer the CSI Headquarters phone for a few weeks, I realized that the most frequent statement I heard from our members was “I love CSI!” I have reflected often on that statement, always enthusiastically offered, without prompting. CSI’s mission has not changed substantially in 30 years, nor have our criteria for membership for students, faculty, and alumni. As an organization, CSI’s commitment to professional identity and advocacy has had, and continues to have, tangible positive outcomes for the profession as a whole. Mentoring and support from chapter leaders and leaders in CSI International plays a role in the continued growth of the Society.

As we celebrate 30 years of CSI’s existence, we pass a milestone with over 100,000 initiated members. We also have passed another milestone, with more than $1,000,000 contributed directly to counselor education programs through chapter rebates - currently at over $100,000 per year. What makes CSI a singular and successful organization? Here are some of the main things that stand out to me:

- A clear and unchanging mission.
- A well-articulated vision.
- A strong consensus set of Core Values.
- Educational standards that require matriculation in a counselor education degree program, CACREP-accredited or in the process of accreditation within five years.
- Membership criteria that require identification as a professional counselor or counselor educator.
- Counselor education department support for CSI chapters by ensuring that at least two full-time faculty have terminal degrees in counselor education and supervision.
- Counselor educators who serve as Chapter Faculty Advisors and mentor students and new professionals in the meaning of professional identity.
- Members who dedicate their lives to advocacy and support for a strong professional counselor identity.
- Successful coalitions with the major credentialing, accreditation, and membership organizations in the counseling profession.

Finally, CSI is nationally certified by the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS) the accreditation agency for honor societies on college campuses. As a consequence, CSI chapters are recognized as official student organizations and therefore eligible for student association funds, students are able to apply for funds to support conferences and travel, and CSI members are listed in university conventions programs as honors graduates.

As a CSI member, you are encouraged to frame your membership certificate and display it proudly in your office. Membership in CSI has always had a unique meaning. Being a part of CSI is a statement about your professional identity. It means you are a professional counselor. I am as well. I cannot imagine a finer or nobler career of which to be a part.

Dr. Jane Myers “feeling” the spirit of fun while announcing door prize winners at 2014 CSI DayS in Honolulu, HI.
Established in 1985 as the international academic and professional honor society for the field of counseling (Chi Sigma Iota [CSI], 2009b), CSI has inducted over 90,000 counseling students, professional counselors, and counselor educators as members into more than 350 CSI chapters housed in counselor education programs across the globe (Wahesh & Myers, 2014). Throughout the past 30 years, CSI’s core mission has been to promote excellence in counseling through “scholarship, research, professionalism, leadership, [and] advocacy” (CSI, 2009a). At the international level, CSI provides annual leadership training and learning institutes at conferences; hosts an extensive web page with resources for chapter and member development; and sponsors research grants, scholarship, and webinar training that aim to develop and expand members’ professional identity, leadership, and advocacy competencies (Chang, Barrio Minton, Dix-

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) has established specific programmatic and curricular requirements related to professional identity, leadership, and advocacy. Although the second draft of the 2016 CACREP Standards (2014) continues to endorse these needs, counselor education programs are offered wide latitude as to how and where to accomplish this. Although CSI has developed and endorsed many publications that have been included as required resources in counselor education classrooms, such as Professional Counseling Excellence through Leadership and Advocacy (Chang et al., 2012), it can be challenging to impart the skills necessary to enact professional identity, advocacy, and leadership in an exclusively didactic classroom setting (Fulton & Shannnonhouse, 2014; Pelsma & Neufeld, 2002). Therefore it is not surprising that professional identity, advocacy, and leadership skills are often only indirectly addressed within master’s-level and doctoral-level counseling curricula (Chang et al., 2012). Accordingly, CSI chapters can have a unique and influential role in providing ongoing, experiential opportunities for students and professional members to enact and reinforce their academic learning related to professional identity, advocacy, and leadership.

Professional Identity

The importance of developing a clear sense of professional identity has been documented (Woo, Henfield, & Choi, 2014). Remley and Herlihy (2014) outlined six components of counselor professional identity, including knowledge and understanding of history, of philosophical foundations, of roles and functions, of counselor ethics and an engagement in professional organizations, as well as a sense of pride in being part of the counseling profession. While some of these components can be addressed in the classroom, counselor or professional identity historically has been socialized through interpersonal professional communication, practice, supervision, and networking (Auxier, Hughes, & Klein, 2003). More recently, research has identified transforma-

Advocacy

Having a strong professional identity has been linked to engaging in both client and professional advocacy (Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002). The American Counseling Association’s Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003) recognize that advocacy occurs at multiple levels, and counselors have the ability to work to change public opinion, both at the service of clients and the profession. As client and professional advocacy share a grounding in social justice (Lee, 2012) and require a differentiated skill set from that of direct counseling, scholars have acknowledged the importance of mentoring in the develop-
Leadership

Leadership in counseling has been defined as actions that “contribute to the realization of our individual and collective capacity to serve others competently, ethically, and justly” (Sweeney, 2012, p. 5). Scholars have explored leadership development among counseling experts (Wahesh & Myers, 2014; Woo et al., 2014) and novices (Gibson et al., 2010; Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Meany-Walen, Carnes-Holt, Barrio Minton, Purwell, & Pronchenko-Jain, 2013). Although evidence of leadership skills is understood as essential for counselors across developmental levels (Chang et al., 2012), scholars have continued to struggle to deconstruct the requisite facets of leadership into distinct or objective behaviors (Dixon & Dew, 2012). However, CSI’s Principles and Practices of Leadership Excellence (PPLE; CSI Academy of Leaders, 1999) significantly contributed to the literature by outlining 10 principles that describe the characteristics of exemplary leaders (Wahesh & Myers, 2013). Wahesh and Myers (2014) surveyed CSI Chapter Presidents and found that most had other leadership experience beyond the chapter level, and that CSI’s PPLE influenced their experiences of leadership across the different contexts of their professional experience. Accordingly, the literature includes a wide variety of experiential strategies to augment the leadership training within counselor education (Barrio Minton & Watcher Morris, 2012; Paradise, Ceballos, & Hall, 2010). As co-curricular partners, CSI chapters could enact the servant-leader philosophy (Go- odrich et al., 2014) and endeavor to develop and expand members’ leadership skills in a variety of ways, not exclusive of novice leadership training, professional development for professional members and program site supervisors, targeted training integrated into specific counseling core or specialty area courses within the curriculum, leadership-themed readings, assignments, and activities integrated across curriculum, as well as the promotion of “leadership days” within the counselor education program, to facilitate CSI, and promote, member participation in ongoing local leadership activities related to the counseling profession or client service.

Conclusion

CSI has grown over the past 30 years, expanding its resources and influence within the training and professional development of members. In addition to incorporating the CSI developed materials related to professional identity, advocacy, and leadership into training and activities at the chapter level (Wahesh & Myers, 2014), chapters can expand their ongoing, experiential activities and programming to facilitate systemic professional curricular interventions with professional members and supervisors. The addition of these experiences may support and facilitate ongoing, developmental professional identity and leadership experiences across curricular and experiential coursework, and provide a consistent voice and vision to further the profession of counseling, both locally and within the national arena.

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Incorporating Professional Identity into Counselor Education Classes: Curricular Activities for Fostering a Positive Professional Counselor Identity

by Elizabeth A. Mellin, Rho Alpha Mu Chapter

As a relatively young helping profession, counseling has struggled to articulate a clear professional identity (Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002), and these challenges have been amplified by difficulties clearly distinguishing the tasks associated with specific counseling specializations from the profession of counseling (Cashwell, Kleist, & Scofield, 2009). Simultaneously, interprofessional collaboration with related helping professions is increasingly supported as a best practice strategy for addressing some of our nation’s most critical social problems such as poverty, substance abuse, and access to mental health care (Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011). Yet, these approaches are often jeopardized by the inability of collaborators to articulate clear professional identities which often result in confusion about roles and responsibilities, conflicts related to power and status, as well as the proliferation of stereotypes that diminish the potential of interprofessional practice (King & Ross, 2003). New counselors may especially struggle in these collaborations that necessitate a positive professional identity to support understandings of roles and responsibilities (Mellin et al., 2011).

As a counselor educator and interdisciplinary researcher who studies collaboration, I am committed to helping students articulate a clear and positive professional identity. At both the master’s and doctoral levels of preparation, I have created specific curricular activities to help students develop and critically evaluate their professional identity. Below are brief descriptions of three curricular activities I have found productive for fostering a positive professional counselor identity:

1. The first activity, titled Why Counseling?, is a problem-based learning scenario that engages students in helping a local mental health agency decide whether they should hire a counselor, psychologist, or social worker. As the scenario prescribes, the agency can only hire one of these professionals in helping a local mental health agency decide whether they should hire a counselor, psychologist, or social worker. Students in this activity are challenged to define and differentiate CACREP-accreditation from professional and state certification, as well as from state licensure, and to describe how each relates to counselor employment. This scenario helps support student learning about the professionalization of counseling and how accreditation, certification, and licensure all contribute to a positive professional identity.

2. The second activity I have developed, Accreditation, Certification, Licensure, Oh My!, is a follow-up to the exercise described above. In this problem-based learning scenario, students have recommended that the local agency hire a counselor and the agency is now asking for their help in developing a set of guidelines and considerations for hiring a counselor. Students in this activity are challenged to determine what factors might influence their decision, such as the qualifications of the applicant, the agency’s mission and values, and the needs of the clients. This activity challenges students to critically evaluate their professional identity and to consider the ethical implications of their decisions. This activity also helps students develop a deeper understanding of their own professional identity as well as the identities of psychologists and social workers.

3. At the doctoral level, I help students think about their professional identity in terms of training and research through facilitating a crucial conversation in a seminar class. After reading a chapter on interdisciplinarity, students are guided through four prompts that guide them to react to statements within the reading that ignite deeper thinking about their identities as counselor educators and scholars. Each prompt is designed to help students directly address the tension between interdisciplinarity as a threat and/or a complement to professional fields and to think about how they will engage with scholars outside of counselor education to advance counseling or training and social science research. For example, in one prompt, I share a scenario from a colleague in social work and ask students to respond as counselor educators. In this (authentic) scenario, a faculty member is looking for a group counseling course for one of her students. As she looks across the institution she finds five courses across different professions (counseling, social work, psychology, nursing, and human development). To dig deeper, she asks each faculty for their syllabus and finds that each is using the same textbook which is written by a counselor educator. I ask students to respond to this scenario in the context of professional identity and interdisciplinary training. Is this common? What are the pros, cons, and comments of offering courses with the same knowledge base to five different professions? To doing so in professional silos versus interprofessional courses? How does all of this contribute to the complicated process of professional identity development? To interprofessional collaboration? Like the scenarios described above, these prompts begin to help doctoral students develop professional identity in the context of the academy and in their roles as counselor educators and researchers.

These activities provide space for careful examination and development of positive professional identities among counselors in training. At each level of education, these activities encourage students to strengthen their own professional identity as well as develop a more accurate understanding of the identities of other related helping professions. For additional information about these curricular activities, please email emellin@binghamton.edu.

References
A Counselor Abroad: The Challenges to Exporting a Professional Identity
by Courtland C. Lee and Vivian V. Lee
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Counseling as a profession is growing throughout the world. More countries are exploring ways to establish the profession of counseling as a viable way to help people solve problems and make decisions. As the profession develops internationally, there is a growing need for competent individuals to fill newly emerging positions as counselors. Given this, many professional counselors throughout the United States are becoming intrigued at the possibility of exporting their expertise to countries where counseling is beginning to emerge. While this is certainly a noble ambition, it can be fraught with a number of misconceptions that could interfere with a positive experience for an American counselor attempting to work in a different country and cultural context. Therefore, this article will highlight some important realities that must be carefully considered when one is thinking about venturing abroad as a professional counselor.

Professional Counseling in the USA: A Privileged Position

When considering working abroad, a counselor needs to first understand and appreciate his or her professional context here in the United States. It is important to understand that the U.S. professional counseling paradigm is well established in a country with considerable social, cultural and economic privilege. The counseling profession in this country has a tradition that is 100+ years old and that has been bolstered by professional credentialing, professional training standards, a strong professional counseling association, and growing professional recognition through legislative mandates which have allowed counselors to become increasingly competitive in the mental health marketplace (e.g. third-party insurance reimbursements). Significantly, all of these things are now taken for granted as the markers of the counseling profession in this country.

A Counselor Abroad: Having Your Assumptions Challenged

Within the context of the professional markers and privilege we take for granted as counselors in the United States, going abroad often presents a unique set of issues and challenges. It is important to understand that one’s professional identity and assumptions about counseling will often be challenged upon entering another country. In many instances, the nature of counseling as both a process and a profession will often be significantly different than they are in the United States. For example, while the helping process may be well established in the form of centuries old indigenous helping practices, the professional artifacts we take for granted as baseline requirements in the U.S., such as master’s level counselor training, a knowledge base, a code of ethics, professional associations or counselor credentialing, may not exist or be in their nascent stages.

It is important, therefore, that a counselor abroad realize that cultural differences in how counseling is perceived and practiced across countries and cultures must be understood as different and not as deficient or lacking in some fashion. It is crucial that counselors recognize that the profession of counseling must take place within a unique cultural, social, economic and historical context. Given this recognition, therefore, issues of training, ethics, and credentialing may need to be culturally specific and not necessarily mirror an American professional paradigm. It is crucial that one exercise caution to avoid engaging in “professional imperialism” – the wholesale imposition of the U.S. counseling profession on a country at the expense of its autonomy and self-determination about how to best address the wellbeing of its people through the establishment of a counseling profession.

The Professional Counseling Abroad: Being a Global Citizen

As stated earlier, a counselor abroad will no doubt have his or her professional assumptions challenged. In assessing these assumptions, it is important to reflect on one’s own identity and consider some important questions about the personal and professional impact of an international experience. The questions to be asked include: “Am I a global citizen?” “Can I tolerate the ambiguity of learning to see the world from another’s perspective while being in a different cultural context?” “Can I be both professionally and personally humble and open to learning about the nature of counseling in a new country and culture?” “Can I expand my understanding about the nature of training, ethics, and credentialing to include diverse perspectives on the nature of professional counseling?”

A counselor abroad, therefore, must embrace professional and personal humility, strive to become a global citizen, and have a commitment to learning about diverse cultural realities. He or she must also respect and honor the work and helping traditions of professional colleagues in different countries. In this way, U.S. counselors can begin to appreciate the helping traditions of other countries and their potential to enhance counseling practice in the United States. A counselor who is open to addressing these challenges will promote the profession of counseling, in whatever fashion, both at home and abroad.
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