Leading from Within: The Power of Example

You must be careful how you walk, and where you go, for there are those following you who will set their feet where yours are set.” -Robert E. Lee

Understanding ourselves is a critical foundation that must be built before we can expect others to understand who we are. Counseling has been working hard to solidify our unique place among the helping professions. Adopting a consensus definition of counseling is a strong step toward a clearly organized and coherent professionalization agenda (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2013, 371). Another step is the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Education Programs (CACREP) ensuring that accredited programs are taught by faculty who hold a doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision (CACREP, 2009). Closing the door to other professions teaching in counseling programs helps establish our distinctiveness amid other mental health fields.

Strong professional identity develops over time and counselor education programs provide a starting point for students to learn counseling skills, master techniques, and gain knowledge. Simply regurgitating information read in textbooks to pass preparation exams does not challenge students to think critically about the profession. It is imperative counselors-in-training develop skills to clearly articulate the unique perspective counseling brings to the helping professions. Counselor education programs and professional organizations can offer valuable opportunities for students to begin thinking beyond the classroom, dialogue about critical issues, and develop a professional network.

One way this could be addressed is by Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) chapters being intentional about creating events that offer students a chance to dialogue about their role in the counseling field with experienced clinicians. These connections can be invaluable to students trying to navigate the complexities of a new professional role. Programs can only go so far, yet meaningful collaborative relationships can last long into a new career providing outlets for support, feedback, and consultation. Creating space for conversation, providing practical information, and opening dialogue to students not eligible for membership could create momentum in helping solidify professional identity. Programs and events allow opportunities for students to be immersed into their new professional role and values of counseling.
Consciously and unconsciously, we learn from observing, watching, and listening to other people. Counselors-in-training are socialized into the counseling profession by absorbing ways of thinking and behaviors from counselor educators, supervisors, and mentors. Just as in the counseling room, one of the most powerful instruments is the person we are, and one of our most powerful techniques; the ability to practice what we preach. As we explore who we are as counselors, promote growth in our identity, and explore our failures, our awareness of professional identity grows and is strengthened. Creating space to developing professional relationships and opportunities for students to synergize could go far in strengthening counseling as a profession.

References
