The evolution of the counselor educator

Counselor educators have a long history of redefining their identity, influenced by factors such as market forces and competing expectations pertaining to educator versus practitioner functions. The 2009 CACREP (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs) Standards established the doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision as the preferred terminal degree for faculty in CACREP-accredited programs after 2013.

As a prelude to future discussions that will occur concerning the doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision during the next round of CACREP Standards revision, this article explores four issues that have influenced the current identity of counselor educators: government funding during the 1950s and 1960s, the development of counselor education within colleges of education, the debate between counselor education and counseling psychology, and accreditation’s role in codifying the counselor educator.

Show me the money

The late 1950s through the 1960s represents a significant era in the development of counselor education doctoral programs. The passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 and, subsequently, the Education Professions Development Act in 1967 created vehicles for counselors to work in high schools. This increased demand for counselors naturally led to an increased demand for both counselor educators and counselor preparation programs, thereby dramatically increasing the number of counselor educators.

The funding these governmental programs provided allowed early counselor education programs considerable leeway in terms of revising curriculum, hiring faculty and staff, purchasing resources and even building some facilities. Thus, thanks to government funding, counselor education programs went from having minor roles in many teacher education programs to becoming major players in many schools of education.

There’s no place like home

Because many of the early doctoral-level counselor education programs were housed in colleges of education and many of the master’s-level programs were training school counselors, it was considered logical at the time for the counselor education doctoral programs to require teaching experience and certification for admission. This was problematic, however, for faculty applicants from other disciplines such as psychology and sociology whose doctorates did not generally require prior teaching experience. Furthermore, over time, programs hired more counselor educators without teaching backgrounds.

Some of the early school guidance programs evolved to encompass specializations in noneducation majors such as community counseling or marriage and family counseling. These programs began looking less like teacher education programs because school counseling was now just one of the program’s offerings. Furthermore, the counselor education faculty’s differing worldviews set them apart from their teacher education peers. Consequently, many of the previously “accepting” colleges of education began to toss out their counselor education programs when college administrators realigned programs on the basis of perceived fit. The need to find new administrative homes for some counseling programs had a definite influence on the identity evolution of counselor education programs.

Can’t we all just get along?

The counselor education versus counseling psychology identity debate has been a major factor in the history of counselor education and the evolution of the counselor educator. Without question, the discipline of counseling psychology has taken an interest in and given advice to the counselor education field. American Psychological Association (APA) Division 17 (Counseling Psychology) took an early interest in the preparation of school counselors, disagreeing with an educational focus in the training of school counselors, supporting legislation for the training and employment of school counselors and advocating for doctoral-level, rather than master’s-level, preparation.

The 1990s saw a heated exchange concerning the relative merits of the counselor education and counseling psychology doctorates. Counseling psychology proponents such as Dan Randolph proposed that the counselor education doctorate transition to a counseling psychology degree because that degree purportedly held more perceived professional credibility. In contrast, Joe Wittmer, Larry Loesch and Mike Altkruze argued in favor of the counselor education doctoral degree and for the establishment of clear and distinct identities for the two disciplines. Rodney Goodyear noted that in the 1970s, tensions increased between counselor education and counseling psychology as the two disciplines sought to establish distinct identities and respond to changes in the marketplace. This distinction was hampered, however, by the existing overlap in membership between the two disciplines.

One area in which this overlap was seen was in relation to the question of who should “control” publications in the counselor education field. In the 1990s,
questions arose concerning the influence that journal editors’ and editorial board members' graduate degrees might have on a journal such as Counselor Education and Supervision and, thereby, on the profession. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, an increasing proportion of articles published in the Personnel and Guidance Journal and the Journal of Counseling & Development (JCD) were written by psychologists, not counselors. Furthermore, there was a period when six sequential editors of JCD were APA fellows.

Ongoing tensions related to who should teach in counseling programs and who should manage counselor publications have had a distinct effect both on the development of counselor education doctoral programs and how counselor educators view themselves.

Now we have our own bible
The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision had established standards that were used in program planning during the 1960s and earlier, long before CACREP accreditation. Discussions concerning these standards reached back into the 1950s and took various written forms in the 1960s and 1970s. Through the years, many within the counseling profession have realized the important role the doctorate in counselor education has played in the ongoing professionalization of counseling, particularly in terms of how these programs prepare and encourage future leaders. CACREP has codified its preference for the counselor education and supervision doctoral degree in its 2009 standards.

Look into my crystal ball
The counselor educator of today is different than, yet similar to, the counselor educator of the 1950s and later. New graduates have had to grow and diversify. Consequently, they have also needed to learn new skills and areas of study. For those counselor educators who have lived through the professional changes outlined in this article, it has been an exciting ride. New generations of counselor educators must go through their own process of defining themselves. They may not live through another government handout or see conflicts with degree and major choices, but during the course of their careers, they will be subject to influences that the current professoriate cannot anticipate.

What will the future bring? The future will likely be influenced by the new core faculty requirements in the 2009 CACREP Standards that established the doctoral degree in counselor education as the preferred terminal degree for the profession. A related issue is whether existing doctoral-level counselor education programs will be able to meet the personnel needs of the hundreds of master's-level training programs. Our belief is that the answer to this question is yes. What a great time to be in the business of preparing counselor educators.

The crystal ball also recommends that counselors and counselor educators reinvest in the serious production of research. Counseling education programs generally are master's-degree-only programs, which may not exercise a strong push for the production of research. This needs to change. Counselor educators and counselors need to produce research that will become a part of our professional identity and behavior, even as it informs others of our practice and encourages others to use our best practice models.

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