



The fallacy of equivalency

“Ladies and gentlemen: The story you are about to hear is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.” — *Dragnet*

It was Friday afternoon in the CACREP office when the call came in. The staffer who picked up the call sighed heavily when he heard the question. The stranger on the other end had an all-too-familiar request.

Sam (CACREP): Hello. Thank you for calling CACREP. How can I help?

Velma (graduate of Wannabe University): Ummm, I was wondering ... Ummm, could you tell me if my program is accredited by CACREP? I think it is, but it's not listed on your website.

Sam sat back in his chair, knowing without even looking at the *CACREP Directory of Accredited Programs* that this university was not on the list. Scratching his head, he wondered sadly why this person would think that Wannabe had an accredited program. Blowing out his breath, he returned to the call.

Sam: No, I'm sorry. That program has never been accredited by CACREP.

Velma: Are you sure? I mean, uh, the program indicated it was.

Sam: What did they tell you?

Velma: Well, I was told that the program met CACREP Standards. Here, wait ... I have the information from the student handbook I received. Let me read it to you.

Although the above scenario may be a poor imitation of a Raymond Chandler story, unfortunately, calls such as this are an all-too-common phenomena in the CACREP office. Callers often reveal that they entered a non-accredited program thinking it was a CACREP program because the program marketed itself with statements that focused on CACREP equivalency in some way, shape or form. For example, callers such as Velma have

told CACREP, “But the school's brochure said the program *followed* requirements set by CACREP.” Other callers have indicated that their programs' websites stated that the program *reflected* the CACREP Standards. Still other callers have exclaimed in dismay, “But every syllabus lists how the course meets the CACREP Standards!”

In each of these situations, students have been duped into thinking they were attending a CACREP program. They are extremely disappointed to learn that their program is not currently, or never has been, accredited by CACREP. If one dissects the statements made by these programs, an argument could be made that they never explicitly *say* they are accredited. These are fine distinctions to the average consumer, however, and small comfort to the person who just spent a great deal of money to attend a program he or she understood to be accredited.

When a program states that it “is based upon,” “follows” or “reflects” the CACREP Standards, this generally refers only to the curricular requirements within the CACREP Standards. This is an unspoken reference. However, to the average reader of such a statement, there is an unspoken expression of equivalency. A person who has only a very basic understanding of the accreditation process may look at such a statement and think, “*Based upon* ... Must be a good thing.”

This problem is compounded by the fact that many licensing boards, when they include CACREP accreditation requirements within their regulations, also include an *or* statement concerning equivalency. For example, a state's regulations might require “a master's degree or higher in professional counseling from a CACREP-accredited program *or* equivalent program from a regionally accredited college or

university.” But let's look at this a little closer. What does it mean to determine a program is CACREP equivalent?

The 2009 CACREP Standards include 57 core curricular standards. This number stands in stark contrast to the fact that there are a total of 156 standards (including these core curricular standards) that master's-degree programs must meet to achieve CACREP-accredited status. These non-curricular standards cover areas such as institutional support for the program, learning support and resources, student-to-faculty ratios, faculty and supervisor qualifications, and clinical instruction requirements. Beyond these 156 standards, each accredited program must document compliance with an additional 60-plus program area standards that define specialization requirements for practicing as a clinical mental health counselor, marriage and family counselor, addiction counselor and so forth. So just how equivalent are non-accredited programs when their “equivalency” is based solely on curricular requirements?

Programs that are CACREP accredited have undergone an extensive self-study and review process covering more than 200 standards. The faculty in these programs have expended considerable time and energy engaging in self-study to determine where they meet standards and where they don't, and then engaging in the necessary work to come into compliance. The institutions in which these programs are located have expended considerable resource allocations and financial expenditures in their efforts to obtain accreditation for their programs.

Beyond engaging in self-study, program faculty also create a report that undergoes one or possibly two initial reviews by CACREP reviewers. Programs that successfully make it through this level of review then host a site visit review, during

which peer reviewers come to campus for an extensive three-day review to verify information in the self-study report. During the on-site visit, site visitors meet with administrators, program faculty, adjunct and affiliate faculty, students, site supervisors and program alumni. Site visitors tour facilities and review records and syllabi. Programs are reviewed against *every* CACREP Standard. Then, when the visit is over, the CACREP Board reviews materials from the initial review, the site visit and the program rejoinders one more time before an accreditation decision is made. Once accredited, the program continues to be reviewed periodically through submission of a series of required reports to CACREP. After being accredited for eight years, programs must go through the entire review process all over again to remain accredited. So again, the question may be asked, exactly how equivalent is equivalent?

Faculty in CACREP-accredited programs have committed to building and delivering programs that meet the highest standards set by the counseling profession. Graduates of these programs

have completed the highest standards set by the profession. These are significant achievements and should not be diminished by a non-accredited program's specious claims of equivalency. CACREP believes the 2009 Standards will further differentiate accredited programs from non-accredited programs because of a greater emphasis on the professional counseling identity of the programs and their faculties and the requirement that accredited programs document and assess student learning outcomes. For these reasons, at the January 2009 CACREP Board meeting, the following motion was unanimously passed: "CACREP asserts that there is no appropriate use of the term *CACREP equivalent*."

Unfortunately, for callers such as Velma, learning that CACREP-equivalent programs do not really exist is of little help. For these graduates, there is no going back and starting over. Velma has now learned that she is not immediately eligible for national certification by the National Board for Certified Counselors, that she may have more difficulty getting into her doctoral program of choice and that she will encounter a more intensive

transcript review as part of the review process for licensure than she would have had she attended a CACREP-accredited program.

CACREP believes that students such as Velma want to be good consumers. Unfortunately, accreditation is not an easily understood topic in the United States. CACREP also believes that programs have an ethical responsibility to present their accredited or non-accredited status clearly and accurately. Misleading or easily misunderstood statements regarding CACREP equivalency create confusion and are a disservice to the profession and the public. ♦

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