

2014-2015 CSI & CACREP Leadership Essay Contest

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Professional Identity in Counseling: Setting Sail with 20/20

“Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.” - 20/20 Vision for the Future of Counseling

Professional identity may be viewed as a unifying force among counselors, differentiating them from other helping professionals and bringing clarity to their practice (Kern, 2014). In 2010, the 20/20 definition of counseling was created to standardize and strengthen counselor identity. The consensus of this definition was the first step in unifying and re-branding the profession (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014). Born out of an identity crisis, this initiative spoke with a voice of empowerment and ignited a movement in exploration of professional identity (King & Stretch, 2013). As a growth oriented profession, it is imperative that counselors take this opportunity to establish and solidify their professional identities in setting their course for the future.

As reflected in Chi Sigma Iota’s (1998) six advocacy themes and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards, studies repeatedly emphasize the value and importance of professional identity development in counselor education (Gibson, Dollahide, & Moss, 2010; Luke & Goodrich, 2010; CACREP, 2009). To be effective counselors, students and professional alike, must work through the dissonances of personal and professional identity to establish internal congruence and authenticity (Kern, 2014; Gibson, et al., 2010). Developing a strong professional identity strengthens advocacy, promotes personal congruence and wellness, and reduces burnout and compassion fatigue among counselors (Gibson, 2014).

A lack of unity and cohesion among professionals is at the forefront of barriers that challenge the development of professional identity among students (Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernandez, 2013). It is reported that most counseling professionals are not active members within organizations and operate in isolation rather than cohesion (Gibson, 2014). As a result, efforts to solidify and establish an identity have been undermined, and the legitimacy of the profession has been questioned (Davis & Gressard, 2011; King & Stretch, 2013).

Both Chi Sigma Iota and CACREP, have equipped counselor educators and raised standards to enhance the development of strong counselor identities among students. In addition to this, King and Stretch (2013) proposed a series of efforts that would further build and protect the integrity of counselors' professional identity. Such efforts included: unifying ethical codes, training programs, supervision requirements and further developing the 20/20 counseling definition. Furthermore, research suggests that involvement in leadership roles in professional organizations has tremendous influence on one's professional identity (Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Wester & Lewis, 2005; Reiner, et al., 2013). Such involvement works to strengthen and enhance not only the collective identity of the profession but the individual identities of members as well.

It is time for the counseling profession to face these discrepancies and work together to achieve congruence their identities. A strong professional identity serves as a grounding point for counseling professionals and in order to achieve this, time must be taken to align identities, and set a unified course with one another before setting sail.

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