



## A call for professional unity

**W**AKE UP! As the elected leaders of two major counseling organizations, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, that focus on counselor education, we wish to alert you to some concerns we have within the Counseling Profession, provide our perspectives on these concerns and offer a call to our colleagues to “wake up” and realize that these concerns, if not addressed, will have long and far-reaching consequences.

Because our organizations work to promote quality preparation for practicing counselors, we ardently work from the premise that there is one Profession of Counseling. Unfortunately, we cannot do this work alone; therefore, we offer a call for all Professional Counselors to “wake up” and work toward promoting a unified Counseling Profession.

At the heart of various arguments surrounding identity issues in the Counseling Profession is the failure to distinguish between the tasks of counseling (with a lower-case “c”) and the Counseling Profession (with an upper-case “C”). We agree that the delivery of mental health services incorporates multiple professions, including Counselors, Psychologists, Marriage and Family Therapists, Social Workers and Psychiatrists. That is, there is overlap in the tasks in which these professionals engage. This should not be confused, however, with an overlap in professional identity.

Professional Counselors must demonstrate clarity about their professional identity and how that identity is communicated to other mental health professions, ourselves and to the public, including legislators, trainees and consumers.

We believe strongly that Counseling is one profession and are disheartened at the frequency with which public statements to the contrary are made. Although diversity of thought and dialogue are positive,

divisive public statements are detrimental to the Counseling Profession. Of course, Professional Counselors work in a variety of settings and their practice of counseling is influenced heavily by these settings. This is true for many professions, such as law, medicine and engineering. Just because the practice of counseling may occur in different settings or with different populations, however, does not mean that each setting or client group defines a separate profession.

We would like to offer four areas where Professional Counselors can strengthen the identity of the Counseling Profession. We offer these examples as conversation-starters and will gladly participate in the ongoing dialogue in any way that we are able.

### *Strengthening identity through unity*

The 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling initiative, cosponsored by the American Association of State Counseling Boards and the American Counseling Association, has been working to promote the Counseling Profession. This work group initially was composed of 30 delegates from a broad array of professional organizations within the Counseling Profession. This is to say that 20/20 was not intended to be inclusive of all professionals who engage in the mental health delivery system, but rather intended to bring together representatives from organizations within the Counseling Profession. In their initial work, the 20/20 delegates developed the following seven guiding principles.

- I. Sharing a common professional identity is critical for counselors.
- II. Presenting ourselves as a unified profession has multiple benefits.
- III. Working together to improve the public perception of counseling and to advocate for professional issues will strengthen the profession.

- IV. Creating a portability system for licensure will benefit counselors and strengthen the counseling profession.
- V. Expanding and promoting our research base is essential to the efficacy of professional counselors and to the public perception of the profession.
- VI. Focusing on students and prospective students is necessary to ensure the ongoing health of the counseling profession.
- VII. Promoting client welfare and advocating for the populations we serve is a primary focus of the counseling profession.

With intent, these principles were broadly developed to serve as guiding principles for the subsequent work of the 20/20 delegates.

Though it is wonderful that 29 of the 30 participating organizations signed on in agreement with these principles, it is disconcerting that the American School Counselor Association, a large and vital division of ACA, chose not to sign on. The explanation provided in multiple forums by ASCA was the need to wait until the 20/20 delegates developed a definition of Professional Counseling for dissemination to the public. ASCA indicated that it would be unwise for them to sign a document asking Counselors to share a common identity and present themselves in a unified manner until a single definition of the Counseling Profession was developed.

Our respective organizations have gone to some length to work with ASCA leadership toward a public statement that School Counselors are Professional Counselors who work in the schools. We agree that the practice of school counseling is impacted by the setting, and we agree that School Counselors emphasize the educational needs of students and utilize educative interventions in service of preventative goals. We disagree, however, with any statement that distinguishes

School Counselors as Educators with specialized training in school counseling.

Are School Counselors a part of the Counseling Profession? We believe wholeheartedly that the answer is *yes*, and we believe that the majority of ASCA members — certainly those to whom we have spoken personally — would sign off on the above seven principles. We call for the elected leadership of ASCA to revisit this issue with their entire membership and make decisions that are in accord with the highest good of the Counseling Profession and reflective of the ideology of their membership. We believe this is vital to the unification of the Counseling Profession.

### ***Strengthening identity through legislation***

State licensure laws are quite varied in their regulations, particularly in relation to educational requirements. Because of this, it is quite easy in some states for a professional from another profession (Social Work, Psychology, Marriage and Family Therapy) to become a Licensed Professional Counselor. Can it be any wonder that there is confusion about the identity of Professional Counselors when people can be licensed with such inconsistency in their training or even in the discipline of their terminal degree? While acknowledging the political and historical limitations often at play in the licensure process, we encourage state licensure boards to consider ways to rewrite regulations to strengthen the professional identity of Licensed Counseling Professionals.

### ***Strengthening identity through clear communication***

Professional organizations and institutions must represent clearly who they

are (and who they are not) to constituents. For example, despite efforts from CACREP to educate constituents, there remain counselor education programs that represent themselves as “CACREP-equivalent” programs. This is a meaningless term that has the potential to confuse students and potential students. We advocate for discontinuation of the term CACREP-equivalent. CACREP is the accrediting body of the Counseling Profession, and counselor preparation programs either are accredited or are not.

### ***Strengthening identity through clear identification of members***

In some instances, it may be in the best interest of Professional Counseling organizations to allow (even encourage) membership among persons who are aligned with another mental health profession. We support such practices. At the same time, we believe that it is the professional responsibility of organizations to create membership categories that clearly indicate members who are from allied professions. Such a practice acknowledges that professionals within other professions may engage in the similar tasks promoted by the organization, yet also clearly communicates to the public at-large the professional identity of the member and whether he or she is a Professional Counselor.

This is not about semantics or exclusivity. It is about clear communication. For example, we have seen many cases over the years in which individuals used their membership in ACA and divisions to indicate their professional identity. Memberships in professional organizations, however, are much less an indicator of professional identity than such bench-

marks as terminal degree, type of credentials held and areas of professional service and leadership. For example, if a person holds a terminal degree in Psychology, is a Licensed Psychologist and attends national, regional and state Psychology conferences, he or she clearly is a member of the noble profession of Psychology. Should he or she be able to identify as a Counselor or Counselor Educator, however, simply because of membership in ACA and/or its divisions? We think not and encourage professional organizations to consider membership categories that address this issue. Such actions will more clearly communicate to our constituents who we are as Professional Counselors.

In conclusion, we believe the time is now to strengthen the Counseling Profession to continue the forward progress toward full parity with other mental health professions. This can only happen with a unified effort to put forward one voice as Professional Counselors. We are a profession that champions diversity of thought and practice, which is a hallmark of our Counseling Profession. We owe it to our chosen profession and to consumers, however, to be clearer about who we are. The time is now. Please do your part. Unity is a clear message! ♦

Craig S. Cashwell is the current chair of CACREP. David Kleist is the immediate past president of ACES, and Tom Scofield is the current president of ACES.

Letters to the editor:  
[ct@counseling.org](mailto:ct@counseling.org)