

## Making a case for CACREP curriculum standards

“The trial of a case is a three-legged stool — a judge and two advocates.”  
*Warren E. Burger, 15th chief justice of the United States*

Throughout the history of the counseling profession, several key developmental and situational crises have challenged our resolve to construct a unified, unique professional identity while establishing a trustworthy and credible discipline: embracing multicultural competencies, assimilating specialty credentials, advocating for mental health parity and licensure portability, performing gatekeeping functions, addressing counselor impairment and developing accountability practices, among others. Many of these issues challenge us currently and will continue to do so well into the 21st century.

One essential dispute related to deciding who we are, what we do and

how well we do it has historically been framed as a question: Are graduates of counselor education programs competent to fulfill the duties of professional counseling with knowledge, skill and integrity? Intimately connected with such a question about counselor competence and professionalism is the reality that training and licensure requirements vary among counselor education programs, state licensing boards and counseling specialties.

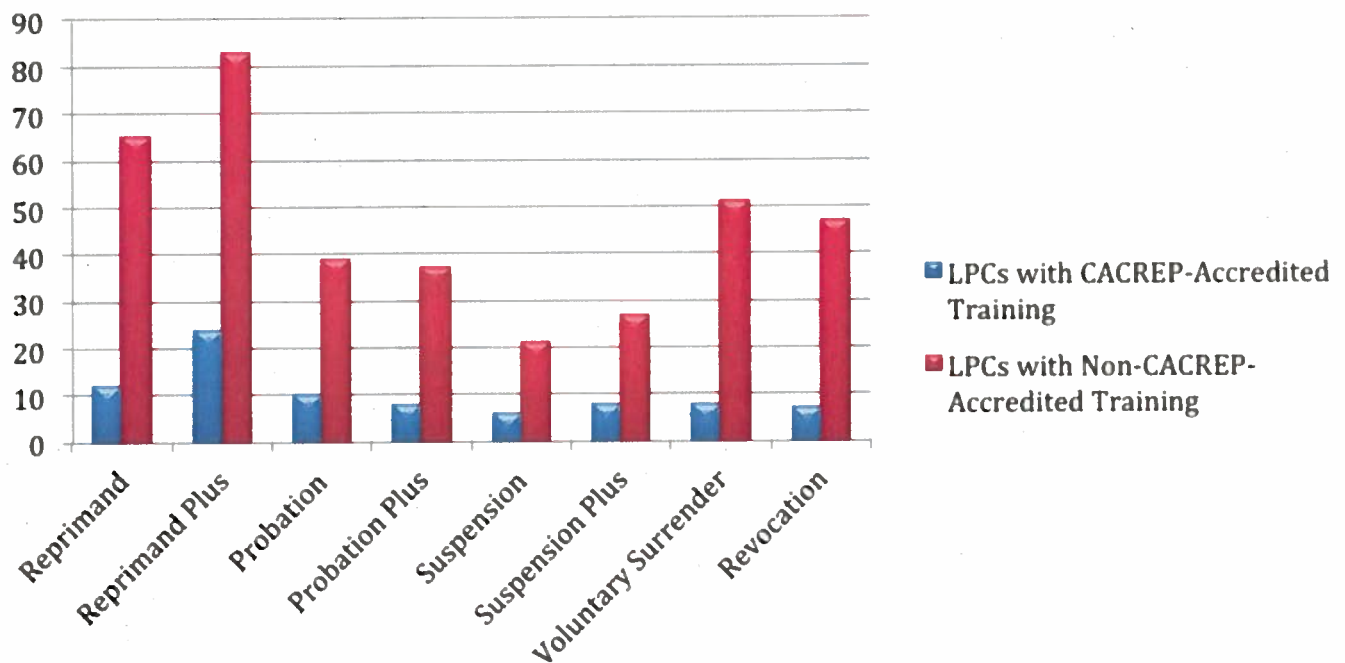
More than 30 years ago, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs began operationalizing the ideals of the profession into core curriculum and training program standards. Throughout CACREP’s history, these standards have been viewed as being favorable to the profession and sufficient for training counselors. Strong perceptions of CACREP standards and their positive impact on counselor preparation

function as an encouragement for retaining and increasing program receipt of CACREP accreditation. However, the dissenting opinion — based in part on commentary that some programs and state licensure boards perceive CACREP curriculum standards as being unnecessary or unattainable — functions against universal adoption of CACREP standards.

At this point in our development as a profession, the case for embracing the ideals reflected in CACREP curriculum standards while advocating for state licensure regulations that mirror these standards must be judged by empirical data. Although surveys and perceptions of CACREP standards are informative and necessary for comprehensive program evaluation, in this age of accountability, they prove insufficient in meeting the demand for empirical evidence.

To judge the case for CACREP curriculum standards, empirical data

### Sanctions for Ethical Misconduct



must be assessed to determine whether graduates of CACREP-accredited programs are more or less knowledgeable, competent, skilled or proficient than graduates of other counselor training programs. One example of this line of critical empirical inquiry is the finding that graduates of CACREP-accredited programs have performed significantly better on the National Counselor Exam (Susan A. Adams, 2006). Acquired knowledge in the CACREP core curriculum content areas is an important element for evaluating the impact of counselor education programs. However, to judge the impact of the counselor education curriculum, particularly the grand effect of a CACREP-accredited curriculum, we must investigate functional attributes of competence: the behaviors and skills counselors actually display. The study described briefly below investigated the differences between fully licensed graduates of CACREP-accredited and non-CACREP-accredited programs concerning the frequency and type of ethical misconduct.

For this study, archived data were secured on the type of ethics or licensure violation and sanctions from state licensing boards and publicly accessible databases. A national sample of fully licensed professional counselors (LPC or equivalent) represented all U.S. geographic regions and approximately two-thirds of all state licensing boards. Data were collected from state licensing boards dating as far back as board inception, a span in some cases of 30 years or more.

Demographically, the counselors represented in the final sample for this study had an average of 7.5 years of fully

licensed professional service. Nineteen percent of counselors in this study completed a doctorate in counseling or a closely related field, and all received ethics training as part of their curriculum requirements. The most common violations were related to competence and impairment, boundary violations, professional practices, billing and breaches of confidentiality, in that order.

More than 80 percent of counselors in this sample who were sanctioned by state licensing boards graduated from non-CACREP-accredited counselor education programs. In addition, the accreditation factor — specifically, having graduated from a non-CACREP-accredited program — was found to be a significant and important predictor of ethical misconduct frequencies. These findings provide empirical support for the CACREP standards. LPCs who graduated from CACREP-accredited counselor education programs committed ethical misconduct significantly less frequently than those who graduated from non-CACREP-accredited programs.

Externally, counseling is evaluated by public consumers, legislative bodies and other mental health service professions, particularly when the professional conduct of a small percentage of our membership raises questions about how counselors are trained and socialized into the profession. Internally, the counseling profession has lacked empirical validation of its training standards. As we continue strengthening our professional identity and the competence of our members, we must judge accreditation and training standards by their effect on the behaviors and skills that practicing counselors display. Judging from the data on

sanctions for ethical misconduct, it's clear that CACREP makes a positive impact on counselor preparation. ♦

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