



## Maturation of a profession

Although social variations exist, adolescence is generally considered a transitional stage of development between childhood and adulthood. The end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood, in particular, varies substantially by culture and function. It is, in short, a fascinating developmental period in a person's life and, hopefully, a developmental period in which many foundations are laid for adult development. At the same time, adolescence is a period in which rebellion is developmentally normal and a necessary precursor in the process of living an authentic, personal and integrated adult life. Throughout the 20-plus years I have been a professional counselor and counselor educator, I have had the strong sense that Counseling, as a profession, was in an adolescent phase. Over the years, I have watched and, at times, participated in the professional *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) so characteristic of adolescence. This "struggle" for identity formation has been healthy and necessary. Perhaps, though, we are nearing adulthood as a profession.

There are, I believe, many benchmarks that indicate our profession is indeed maturing. Among them:

- The passage of California Senate Bill 788, resulting in California becoming the 50th U.S. state with counselor licensure
- Regulations implementing the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008, essentially mandating that insurance companies use the same limits and cost-sharing requirements for mental health and addiction services as are used for other services
- Results of the Institute of Medicine's TRICARE study, which recommended removing physician referral and supervision requirements for counselors' services, ultimately paving the way for

independent practice for professional counselors under the Department of Defense's TRICARE program

The TRICARE study is directly related to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. The study recommends that counselors must be graduates of CACREP-accredited mental health counseling or clinical mental health programs to be eligible. In so doing, the study's authors have recognized that standards for counselor preparation are vital. Although I do realize that this recommendation would limit access for some counselors to provide these services, I also know that if this recommendation is followed, it will encourage more students to attend these accredited programs and more programs to become accredited, thereby enhancing the quality of counselor preparation in the United States.

In addition to these recent legislative actions, the Counseling profession has long-standing roots in its credentialing and accreditation. Thirty-four years ago, the first state counselor licensure law was enacted in Virginia. Soon after, a fledgling organization named CACREP was founded. Today, the number of CACREP-accredited programs is rapidly approaching 600, with CACREP now integrated into the language of many state licensure laws. The number of new applications (programs applying for initial accreditation) remains steady, and CACREP continues to grow. By strengthening the professional identity of counselor educators and implementing requirements for measurement of student learning outcomes, the 2009 CACREP Standards represent a maturation of the accreditation process.

Further, in spite of the "developmentally normal" factions and fragmentation that have been a part of our history, there is tremendous unity within our profession. To wit:

- There is *one* organization, the American Counseling Association, that serves as our professional membership organization.
- There is *one* accrediting body, CACREP, that serves to promote professional counselor preparation.
- There is *one* organization, the American Association of State Counseling Boards, involved in the organization of state licensure boards, which regulate the practice of counseling.
- There is *one* national credentialing body, the National Board for Certified Counselors, that monitors voluntary national certification of counselors.

Each of these groups serves the Counseling profession well. What, then, is required for our profession to more fully evolve into adulthood and obtain full parity with other mental health professions? Although this is a complicated issue with many facets, I'll offer a couple of starting points.

- Far too few professional counselors are members of ACA. Counselor educators should encourage ACA membership among students as a commitment to lifelong learning and professional growth, not as a short-term requirement or a way to get liability insurance.
- Licensure regulations, often initially written in ways necessary to glean passage of laws in the face of oppositional lobbying, should be reviewed by state boards with a focus on strengthening professional identity. In many states, it is far too easy for people with professional identities other than that of counselor to become licensed. Licensure regulations that ensure that licensees are trained and identify as professional counselors will greatly strengthen the Counseling profession.

If we do not know who we are, we cannot possibly communicate this to our constituents. How easy do we make it for groups to lobby against us when we continue to struggle with our identity by licensing people who come from a range of educational backgrounds and accredit training programs without a clear counseling identity? I value all of the mental health professions and see their worth in the service delivery system. I champion diversity both within and across these disciplines. At the same time, we *must* grow up and state clearly who we are as a profession.

Otherwise, we will be terminally trapped in a state of identity confusion. ♦

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