

Professional identity and the 2009 CACREP Standards

With the adoption of the 2009 CACREP Standards, our profession ushered in a framework of preparation guidelines that, at their core, speak to building a strong professional identity for graduates of accredited programs. Perhaps the most profound example of this emphasis is the organization of the standards.

Section I of the standards, "The Learning Environment: Structure and Evaluation," addresses the institution, the academic unit, faculty and staff, and evaluation. These four elements provide guidelines as to where and how learning will take place. The institution and academic unit standards address the fundamental expectations for minimal learning environments. In addition, they address a crucial point of professional identity development, that being the identity of program faculty members. This section contains standards for the "core faculty," which is one of the most substantive changes from the 2001 standards. Finally, this section addresses the expectation of a continuous systematic program evaluation and one of the most substantive changes in the standards: a requirement calling for student learning outcomes to be measured.

Section II, titled "Professional Identity," contains eight common core curricular experiences that were both validated and refined through the standards revision process. This section title was intentional and emphasizes the notion that this common curricular experience is the framework for the development of our profession's knowledge base.

Section III, titled "Professional Practice," includes practicum and internship standards and therefore addresses the experiential component of counselor education programs.

One of the fundamental concepts underlying these three sections is the development of a strong professional identity among counseling students. Some of these standards have been controversial, however. Two of the most controversial

standards are Section I. AA, which addresses student learning outcomes, and Section I. W.2, which specifies that core faculty members have earned doctoral degrees in counselor education and supervision, preferably from a CACREP-accredited program, or have been employed as full-time faculty members in a counselor education program for a minimum of one full academic year before July 1, 2013.

The requirement that programs offer evidence of student learning was simply one of following best practice in professional accreditation. Measuring learning outcomes is a standard practice for most higher education accreditation bodies and needed to be infused into our professional standards. It represents a substantive transition for many programs. However, as challenging as the implementation of learning outcome measures are, these standards will provide programs with an opportunity to continuously improve their programs and will eventually lead to improvements and innovations in educating counselors.

Perhaps at the heart of much of the controversy surrounding the 2009 standards are the "core faculty" requirements. These standards call for core faculty members to hold an earned doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision. This is indeed a bold position for the CACREP Board to have adopted. The discussion around these standards during the revision process was exhaustive on the part of the Standards Revision Committee and in the many feedback sessions.

We recognized the contributions made to our profession by individuals holding degrees from fields other than counselor education and supervision. In fact, it is not a stretch to say that some of the giants who have contributed to our profession are individuals holding psychology, social work or other degrees. However, as with most professions, there comes a time to clearly establish our own identity. This stand does not denigrate the historic contributions of those from other professions but rather

marks a time in our history when we must establish our claim as an equal profession. This stand is essential if we are to effectively advocate for our profession. Any confusion as to who we are would undermine these efforts.

With that said, the members of the Standards Revision Committee considered a host of issues that led us to the standard that was ultimately adopted. A look outside our own profession informed us that few (if any) counselor educators are hired in psychology programs or social work programs. As a result, there is a strong likelihood that graduates of doctoral programs within those disciplines will be the ones teaching within their own disciplines and contributing to their professions' advancement of knowledge. We place our doctoral graduates in a very challenging situation if they must compete not only against graduates from our own profession but also against graduates from other related helping disciplines as well.

Another significant and relevant issue surrounding this standard was who taught in counseling programs and what students learned about professional identity from those outside the counseling profession. When one holds a degree and/or licensure from another profession, how can we be assured that counseling students will not experience role confusion or, in some cases, be told that they are somehow "less than" as professionals? This is certainly not to suggest that this scenario is the norm for those outside the counseling profession, but faculty members who are counselors will be far more consistent in their advocacy of a counselor professional identity than those outside the profession.

The Standards Revision Committee was intentional about establishing a date of implementation that would provide programs and those who plan to teach in counselor education programs ample time to plan for the transition. It also ensured that no faculty members holding a terminal degree from a related profession would be ineligible to continue working in the

profession beyond July 1, 2013.

It is important to emphasize some specifics in order to clear up some confusion regarding the core faculty standards. First, the counselor education degree does not have to come from a CACREP-approved doctoral program; a CACREP program is only recommended. Second, counselor educators with related degrees who have taught full time in a counselor education program for a year may then be a core faculty member in any CACREP-approved program. They are not limited to teaching only in the program in which they gained

their experience. And third, the standards do not preclude an individual with a related degree without prior teaching experience in a counseling program from teaching in a CACREP-approved counselor education program, but rather from being a core faculty member.

We acknowledge that the standards for core faculty are rigorous and specific. We believe that making this move will allow for the enhancement of our doctoral programs, while strengthening the professional identity of our entry-level students. Time will be the judge of these efforts. ♦

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