Preparing Counselors for Telemental Health in a Pandemic through Wellness, Social Connection, and Telemental Health Training

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COVID-19 is a global health pandemic more severe than we have ever seen before, and after eight months of lockdowns and safety protocols, the U.S. still continues to set new records for most cases per day with over 184,000 cases recorded daily (Pengelly & Bekiempis, 2020). One of the many deleterious effects of COVID is the increased mental health needs due to rising cases of anxiety, depression, and PTSD which necessitates a greater need for counseling services (Xiong et al., 2020). It is incumbent on counselor education programs with support from Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) and CACREP to meet this need by preparing current and future counselors for the changing landscape of the counseling profession. There has been a fundamental shift in the delivery of mental health services and counselor education and supervision from in-person to online and hybrid formats. The CSI Principles and Practices of Leadership Excellence (PPLEs) and CACREP 2016 Standards to fulfill its mission statement offer guidance for how these three entities can work together through servant leadership and rise to the occasion (CACREP, 2016;2018 & CSI, 1999;2011). In addition to greater client needs, counselors are also impacted by the pandemic, and as organizations that promote counselor training, CSI, CACREP, and counseling programs must focus on wellness, social connection, and training for telemental health to fulfill their obligations to students, practitioners, and clients.

The need for counselor self-care is heightened during globally stressful times. According to the American Counseling Associations (ACA) code of ethics, counselors have a responsibility

for self-care (ACA, 2014). Counselor education programs must promote student wellness by responding with empathy to the difficult circumstances students face. I currently work as a teaching assistant, and role-modeling empathy for students is how I show that I deserve to be a counselor and an educator. Courses should also incorporate additional time for students to process their feelings and experiences to avoid burnout and promote wellness. Our CSI chapter (which I am the Operations Director for and coordinate our advocacy efforts) has advocated for increased mental health resources for students (PPLE 5: Long-Range Perspective & 7: Respect for Membership). We also organized a workshop series on anxiety and stress management and a self-care event to help students cope with the additional stress they faced during the pandemic. An increased focus on wellness is crucial to help students manage stress and prepare them to help their clients manage their increased stress.

Interconnected with wellness is the need for social connection which is more difficult when in-person social activities are discouraged. Our CSI chapter focused on expanding our mentorship program this year to ensure that all new students had a mentor to help guide them through the difficulties they are facing and serve as an extra social support (PPLE 8: Mentoring, Encouragement, and Empowerment). We conducted orientation trainings for mentors and mentees, and we have seen 29% growth in mentee sign-ups and 123% growth in mentor sign-ups as a result of these efforts (PPLE 3: Preservation of History & 4: Vision of the Future). Moreover, 91% of our mentorship pairs met which shows the need and desire for connection and mentorship during this challenging time. We also developed an incoming student connection document where 22 students filled out their interests and contact information to arrange meet-ups and watch parties to foster connections with their new classmates. The social aspect of a

counseling program is integral, and as a student organization, CSI is key to ensuring students can form necessary social connections during remote learning.

The main change to the mental health landscape due to the pandemic is providing the majority of services through telemental health, and CSI, CACREP, and counseling programs must meet this need through training and supervision in an ethically and culturally responsive way. Our CSI board conducted a holistic needs assessment of the student body and advocated for increased training and supervision for telemental health. (PPLE 10: Feedback and Self-Reflection). We presented these results to our program and school leadership. This feedback enabled our program to realize an increased desire and need to provide telemental health training and resources to students in field experience so that they are prepared for internship and to navigate the future landscape of telemental health as practitioners. In addition to ensuring students were able to deliver services safely, our program worked with site supervisors to assist students in receiving telemental health training. Practicum and internship courses also continuously focus on how to provide effective services through this new modality. CACREP also has a role to play in understanding how the pandemic adversely affected people from marginalized groups which necessitates incorporating racial justice into its 2023 standards to promote optimal human development to fulfill its mission (CACREP, 2018). Between the pandemic and social movement, this year has laid bare the racial injustices in our country. As an accrediting body, CACREP can work to help programs incorporate racial justice themes throughout curriculums to promote culturally aware counseling. With advocacy from CSI, culturally responsive training from counseling programs, and updated standards that reflect the current cultural and ethical climate from CACREP, future counselors will be better prepared to face the telemental health challenges the future entails.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the polarization and marginalization in the U.S. because of the adverse impact on ethnic minorities and low-income individuals (Selden & Berdahl, 2020). As counselors, we have the privilege and responsibility to rise to this challenge and meet the increased mental health needs stemming from the pandemic (Xiong et al., 2020). In order to support and facilitate counselors' and clients' needs, CSI, CACREP, and counseling programs have an ethical obligation to promote wellness, increase social connection, and train students for increased telemental health delivery in an ethical and culturally responsive manner.

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