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## Counselor Professional Identity Development: Narratives from a Professional Event

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# Counselor Professional Identity Development: Narratives from a Professional Event

## **Abstract**

The goal of a one-day professional event was to enhance counselor professional identity (CPI) development through a panel discussion on CPI, professional and career information in sessions and booths, and networking breaks to connect Master's students, doctoral students, and counseling professionals. Narrative analysis of eight interviews with event attendees, event leaders, and event speakers (i.e., practicing counselors) revealed themes of commitment, community, defining my professional self, and ambiguity and affirmation. Implications for best practices in CPI development and future research are discussed.

## **Author's Notes**

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## **Keywords**

counselor professional identity development, counselor development, Chi Sigma Iota, research

The importance of creating an identity that is comprehensive, clear, and distinct from other mental health professionals is reiterated throughout counseling literature (Gale & Austin, 2003; Hanna & Bemak, 1997; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011). Although definitions for the counseling profession and for counselor professional identity are now established (Gale & Austin, 2003; Mellin et al., 2011), counselor professional identity development remains an ongoing initiative for the profession. Research is necessary to establish best practices in cultivating counselor professional identity (Brat, O'Hara, McGhee, & Chang, 2016).

Several published works focus on professional development (Meany-Walen, Carnes-Holt, Barrio Minton, Purswell, & Pronchenko-Jain, 2013) including activities sponsored by Chi Sigma Iota (Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Wahesh & Myers, 2014). Authors have suggested teaching practices in counselor training to enhance counselor professional identity (CPI), such as service learning and information-gathering assignments on professional organizations and member benefits (e.g., Shupe & O'Connell, 2005). However, more information is needed about which practices enhance CPI, and how they do so (Brat et al., 2016; Chang, 2012).

### **Counseling and Professional Identity**

A profession consists of standards for law and certification, ethical and professional behavior, and curriculum (Van Hesteren & Ivey, 1990). Counseling licensure often aligns with the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014), and some states have aligned licensure requirements with accreditation standards from the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. Beyond legal and ethical requirements, Ponton and Duba (2009) suggested the counseling profession should simultaneously seek to meet the needs of society and to develop and maintain professional identity.

The counseling profession struggled to define itself (Mascari & Webber, 2013; Mellin et al., 2011; Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernández, 2013) before the arrival of a consensus definition of counseling: “Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014, p. 368). Chang (2012) asserted that CPI arises from how one interprets the definition of counseling, the counseling profession’s history, and ethical standards. The consensus definition was one achievement of the 20/20 Vision for the Future of Counseling, which included a call for “a common professional identity” (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). A common identity serves to unite counselors across specialties based on shared foci such as human development, prevention, and wellness (Mellin et al., 2011; Myers, 1991).

Despite a consensus definition of counseling, defining CPI remains somewhat elusive, likely due to varying foci across specialties (Woo, Henfield, & Choi, 2014). Conceptualizations of CPI include: (a) acquisition of certifications and credentials, (b) differentiation of counseling from other mental health professions, (c) agreement with the philosophy of counseling, and (d) professional engagement and advocacy (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Mellin et al., 2011; Puglia, 2008; Reiner et al., 2013). An exploration of best practices is necessary to understand how these components contribute to CPI development and to define current needs for CPI development.

### **Professional Identity Development**

Analogous to models of human development, a counselor reaches developmental milestones critical to creating a professional identity. Professional individuation develops by mediating conflict between personal and professional selves, resulting in an “optimal therapeutic self” (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 507). Counselor development occurs in “repeated cycles of enthusiasm/experienced hardship, self-doubt, anxiety, dejection, exploration/processing (new

learning), and integration (mastery)” (p. 32). Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) concluded that professional development is a long, continuous process that can be repetitive and irregular.

Counselor professional identity (CPI) literature includes process models describing the experiences of counselors-in-training (CITs; Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Howard, Inman, & Altman, 2006), doctoral students (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Moss, 2013), professional counselors (Mellin et al., 2011), counselor educators (Calley & Hawley, 2008), and leaders (Gibson, 2016; Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Meany-Walen et al., 2013). Opportunities for counselors to engage in critical milestones and enhance CPI development exist through counselor training and organizational involvement.

**Critical moments in training.** Research suggests that professional context is critical in CPI development. Professional identity involves immersion into a professional culture and merging of personal and professional selves (Auxier et al., 2003; Reissetter et al., 2004). Researchers explored CPI in training and initial experiences of skill integration (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010; Howard et al., 2006). Awareness of self begins with external feedback from peers, instructors, supervisors, and clients (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010). Howard et al. (2006) found that CITs engaged in CPI development during critical incidents in training when their understanding of self became integrated with professional helping. CITs merged their personal identity with counselor role through recognition of new responsibilities, thoughts about their future counseling career, and viewing their CPI within the training context.

Competence built through supervised experience also contributes to CPI development (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006). Howard et al. (2006) studied CITs in practicum. Participants cited interactions with their supervisor as critical incidents that shaped their perception of the profession. Auxier et al. (2003) developed a recycling CPI development process model based on their findings

that CITs developed CPI as they gained confidence through counselor training experiences and external evaluation from supervisors and instructors. Supervisory guidance through initial counseling experiences helps CITs acculturate to the professional culture.

Gibson et al. (2010) used grounded theory and seven focus groups with a sample of 43 CITs at varying levels of training. The result was a model of CPI development across time from external validation; through coursework, experience, and commitment; to self-validation. CPI development in CITs occurs in three domains: definition of counseling, responsibility for professional growth, and transformation to systemic identity. The authors suggested “intentional community building with field counselors...encouraging panel presentations at professional conferences, and performing collaborative campus or field outcomes research” to “engender a sense of commitment to and responsibility to that professional community.” (p. 35).

Other literature on CPI development in counselor training is largely conceptual. As an example, Chang (2012) called for activities that enhance CPI, such as the development of a professional organization fact sheet, participation in a volunteer service experience, design of an advocacy project, and creation of a leadership and advocacy project at the doctoral level. It is yet unknown if and how such activities serve to enhance CPI.

**Critical milestones in counseling organizations.** Engagement with the professional counseling community is a key element of the CPI development process for counselors-in-training (Gibson et al., 2010), counselor education doctoral students (Dollarhide et al., 2013), and counselor educators (Calley & Hawley, 2008). Dollarhide et al. (2013) discovered that, similarly to Master’s trainees, doctoral students develop CPI in a lifelong process through early training experiences and external evaluation, progressing to self-validation. The students credited peer relationships for assisting their CPI development. Research with counselor educators (Calley & Hawley, 2008)

showed they value professional identity as a sense of *belongingness*, or affiliation with professional organizations and attendance at professional events. The authors concluded that organizations were influential for defining CPI and called for more research to understand exactly how organizations can enhance CPI development. Understanding how professional involvement enhances CPI will inform best practices for CPI development.

Critical incidents in counselor training inform a student's professional development and counselor educators can integrate activities into coursework and other program elements to enhance CPI development. Engagement in professional organizations can provide opportunities for CPI development during counselor training and beyond. However, more research is needed to support proactive approaches to organizational involvement that cultivate CPI. It is first necessary to describe the role of organizations and the unique opportunity for CPI development.

### **The Role of Professional Organizations**

Members of the counseling profession have placed partial responsibility for defining and enhancing CPI on professional organizations. Mellin et al. (2011) named organizations as one entity that should increase efforts to clarify counselors' scope of practice. Reiner et al. (2013) found a majority of 378 counselor educators (62%;  $n = 234$ ) endorsed the American Counseling Association (ACA) and its divisions as responsible for enhancing CPI. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2015) devoted several standards to addressing CPI. Inclusion of CPI in the standards was intended to clarify the responsibility that counselor training programs have in CPI development (Bobby, 2013; Urofsky, 2013).

Gibson (2016) called upon counseling organizations and leaders to attend to the developmental nature of CPI by knowing "supports that are required in the early stages of identity development and how to assess the readiness of the individual to engage in more counselor/leader

behaviors” (p. 35). She named ACA, ACA divisions, and Chi Sigma Iota as professional organizations that should be instrumental in enhancing CPI. Other authors (Brat et al., 2016; Burkholder, 2012; Chang, 2012; Gibson, 2016; Hansen, Speciale, & Lemberger, 2014) have highlighted Chi Sigma Iota chapters as a driving force for CPI development efforts.

**Chi Sigma Iota.** Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) is a professional honor society for students in Master’s and doctoral programs. CSI promotes professional identity development in connection with leadership and advocacy practices, encourages leaders to create change in accordance with future needs, and serves to “ promote a strong professional identity through members...who contribute to the realization of a healthy society by fostering wellness and human dignity (CSI, 2017). Chi Sigma Iota facilitated the development of a national plan for professional advocacy (<https://www.csi-net.org/?CPALC>) and aimed the goal of a cohesive professional identity toward achieving “recognition” for counselors and counselor services. In alignment with the 20/20 Vision, CSI promotes continuing professional development to address the need for a cohesive counselor professional identity and funds individual and chapter grants for related activities.

Despite Chi Sigma Iota’s role in enhancing counselor professional identity (CPI), only one publication has served to investigate the organization’s influence on CPI development. In a grounded theory study, Luke and Goodrich (2010) found chapter leadership connected to CPI development. The researchers interviewed former chapter leaders and found that the experience fostered authentic learning via practice of skills and knowledge gained in graduate training. Mentorship and networking at chapter, local, and international levels were important aspects of leaders’ experiences, as were interactions with role models, alumni, counselor educators, and peers. The authors recommended chapter leaders assist students in assimilating CPI through professional involvement.

## **Understanding Identity Development through Chi Sigma Iota Involvement**

Much of the CPI literature highlights involvement with organizations such as Chi Sigma Iota with ideas for activities to enhance CPI (Brat et al., 2016; Burkholder, 2012; Chang, 2012; Gibson, 2016; Hansen et al., 2014). As an example, Brat et al. (2016) called for best practices to foster CPI development aligned with Chi Sigma Iota advocacy themes. They offered a Professional Identity Expression model: (1) application; (2) discovery; (3) teaching; and (4) integration. Integration entails collaboration among counselors, supervisors, and clinical coordinators to facilitate students' self-awareness and interprofessional experiences.

Authors have called for more research about professional involvement for CPI development (Brat et al., 2016; Gibson, Dooley, Kelchner, Moss, & Vacchio, 2012; Prosek & Hurt, 2014). The literature is largely conceptual or targeted to subpopulations of the counseling field (Mellin et al., 2011), leaving gaps in information about CPI in Master's and doctoral students and professionals (Meany-Walen et al., 2013) and the impact of involvement in professional events. No published study offers findings from a Chi Sigma Iota event about CPI.

The counseling profession needs best practices for developing CPI in counseling students and counselors (Brat et al., 2016). Field leaders can use research to inform academic and professional practices to enhance CPI. Without such research, the need for these efforts remains arguable. Current efforts may proceed with little guidance on precise elements that contribute to CPI development. Counseling programs, CSI and local chapters, and other organizations spend substantial time and money on efforts with little known about their impact on CPI development.

The current study served to explore a Chi Sigma Iota event from the perspective of those involved: event leaders, attendees, and presenters. A narrative inquiry investigated participants' perceptions of their CPI development via event involvement. Our purpose was to help fill the gap

in the literature about if and how such involvement can foster CPI development in counseling students and counselors. Unlike previous CPI research, this study's sample included Master's and doctoral students as well as practicing counselors with shared experience of a specific phenomenon: a professional event for the counseling community.

### **Method**

The research team selected a qualitative methodology to understand experiences of counselors and counselors-in-training involved in this professional event, particularly how each participant viewed their CPI related to their event experience (how they spent time and interacted with others and how their individual contexts impacted their experience). The research questions were: (1) How do participants describe the experience of a professional event as connected to their counselor professional identity (CPI)? (2) What elements of CPI were emphasized through the event? and (3) How were the elements emphasized? Constructivist epistemology served to acknowledge that each participant's story had a unique and independent meaning (Crotty, 1998).

A narrative inquiry was fitting to situate participants' experiences of CPI development within their specific contexts and cultures (Riessman, 2008). A narrative approach supported the exploration and telling the story of those involved (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and honored the fluid nature of identity development which is often captured best through story (Riessman, 2008). Gibson et al.'s (2010) grounded theory of CPI, explained above, served as the study's theoretical framework. Their findings about CPI development over time from external validation to self-validation and via actions that enhance CPI, such as coursework and professional experiences, inspired the study's creation and positioned this model as a relevant framework.

### **The Event**

Counseling Forum was an all-day, on-campus event offered by a Chi Sigma Iota chapter

and partially funded by a Chapter Development grant. The event's aim was to support CPI development through professional information and connections between current and prospective members, graduates, and other counselors. A six-member planning committee coordinated logistics, support, and marketing. Marketing to current and prospective chapter members and members of other state chapters resulted in an attendance of 53 and \$250 for the chapter.

The event addressed topics resulting from a member survey and involved a keynote speaker on private practice, a panel on CPI, and breakout sessions on internship/job search strategies and do's and don'ts for interns and new employees. The CPI panel occurred twice and consisted of four counseling professionals with post-Master's experience from less than five years to over ten years representing a variety of specialties and settings (i.e., school, college, clinical mental health, private practice, and agency). Panelists introduced themselves, then responded to the following prompts and audience questions: 1) Why did you decide to pursue a profession as a counselor? 2) What stands out to you as memorable moment that impacted your identity as a counselor? 3) What do you think and feel about the term *counselor identity*?

### **Researcher Stance**

The first two authors conducted the study as doctoral students in a Counselor Education and Supervision Ph.D. program and Chi Sigma Iota chapter executive board members. We reflected on our perspectives of CPI during planning and implementation of the event and the study. The first author holds Bachelor's degrees in Communication and in Spanish and a Master's degree from a CACREP-accredited program that operated as a counselor education department independent from other departments in mental health. Almost all faculty members teaching and supervising in the department had degrees in counseling and counselor education, and all internship site supervisors had the state designation of licensed counselor supervisor. The result of

this educational background was that she developed her CPI by learning almost exclusively from other counselors and not in comparison to other mental health professionals.

The second author developed her CPI in contrast to others in related fields. The training program she attended for her Master's degree had a diverse group of mental health professionals working in collaboration. Learning alongside school psychologists, counseling psychologists, and couples and family therapists, she saw how vital it was for counselors to have a consistent answer to the question, "What unique attributes do professional counselors bring to the case consultation table?" Having a strong sense of professional identity seemed very important, and she felt it was vital to focus on what counselors uniquely contribute to the field.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

Data collection began after approval from the university's Institutional Review Board and research aligned with the ACA Code of Ethics (2014). To achieve maximum variation (Hays & Singh, 2012), eight participants spanned event roles: three attendees, two panel members, and three planning committee members. Participants were at various stages of their counseling careers: four Master's students, two doctoral students, and two Master's-level counselors. Recruitment occurred via emails to panelists and planning committee members and in attendee evaluations distributed at the event.

Primary data collection occurred in hour-long, semi-structured interviews with each participant; all were face-to-face with one exception that via phone. The goal of the interview protocol was to encourage "extended narration [that] requires investigators to give up control" (Riessman, 2008, p. 24). Table 1 displays the interview questions which included the use of a diagram of CPI development (Gibson et al., 2010) to elicit narratives. Other data (i.e., event evaluations, advertising, and panel transcriptions served to triangulate findings (Creswell, 2013).

The event evaluation contained standard questions about attendee satisfaction with location, check-in, and content, along with two open-ended professional development questions: “Did the Counseling Forum contribute to your counselor identity development? If so, how?” and “Did the event help prepare you for tasks you may encounter during your counseling career? If so, how?”

Table 1

*Interview Questions*

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1. When you consider the term *counselor identity*, what comes to your mind?
  2. How do you feel about that phrase?
  3. Is there something that you own or want to own that might represent your counselor identity? Please explain the metaphor.
  4. Please review this figure (Gibson et al., 2010) and circle the concepts that seem connected to your experiences with Counseling Forum (CF). I see you circled \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. Could you tell me more about that connection?
  5. Could you take me through what CF was like for you?
  6. Was there a moment during the event that something shifted for you in terms of your counselor identity?
  7. What about before the event?
  8. What about since then?
  9. Would you like to share anything else about your counselor professional identity and/or your involvement in Counseling Forum?
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**Data Analysis**

Interviews and panel discussions were transcribed verbatim following guidelines from Poland (1995). The first and second author used NVivo 10 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2012) to analyze transcripts independently, then together, meeting between coding rounds to discuss emergent themes and challenge each other on assumptions, enhancing reflexivity. The first of three coding rounds involved open coding to identify salient statements and concepts in the data

(Saldana, 2013). Then thematic coding focused on “the content of the text, ‘what’ is said more than ‘how’ it is said” (Riessman, 2003, p. 2) involved highlighting data that illuminated themes of the participants’ stories. Finally, codes were organized by narrative element, denoting (1) what occurred within participants (inward), between participants and their environment (outward), experiences prior to the event (backward) or future planning (forward) and (2) interactions, timeline, and situation/location of the participants’ experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Trustworthiness**

A variety of methods served to establish trustworthiness. Prolonged engagement with participants involved immersion in event planning and execution, enhancing researchers’ ability to gather meaningful data. Maximum variation in the sample (Creswell, 2013) involved recruiting participants in various event roles and with diverse personal and professional demographics. Triangulation involved identifying themes across data types, such as interviews, panel discussions, survey results, and artifacts (Creswell, 2013). For example, analysts compared emerging codes from research interviews with panelists’ comments, attendees’ event evaluations, and event marketing materials. Recurring content across data served to validate the final themes as an indication that multiple parties had similar experiences of the event. Reflexivity involved ongoing journaling by each researcher, yielding the above stances (Merriam, 2009) and independent coding followed by consensual validation aligned with an overall stance of “wakefulness” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 184). The goal of the design and the findings section was to provide a rich, thick narrative description (Merriam, 2009).

### **Findings**

Four themes and related subthemes emerged in the analysis. They represent ways in which event involvement enhanced CPI development. Table 2 contains the themes, subthemes, and

representative quotes. Event evaluations showed that 88% of attendees found the panel on CPI informative and interesting and 94% were satisfied or very satisfied with Counseling Forum.

Descriptions of themes appear next, along with illustrative vignettes as part of Riessman's (2003) recommendations for narrative thematic analysis. Pseudonyms serve to mask participant identity. The vignettes represent a conversation among three people after the Counseling Forum as if a planning committee member (Carlie – doctoral student), a panel member (Lisa – practicing counselor), and an attendee (Marco – Master’s student) engaged in a reflective discussion with each other about their experiences. Participant quotes appear throughout the narrative: almost all words in the vignettes are the exact language of the participants.

Table 2

*Narrative Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Quotes*

Themes and Subthemes	Representative Quotes
Commitment	“To be the best that you can be, always explore and never
Commitment to others	accept where you’re at. It’s a responsibility to clients and some to ourselves.”
Commitment to my own growth	“It was a commitment to help others in the field gain knowledge.” “Choosing to go is a commitment to search out knowledge, maybe learn something new. But I wanted to grow.”
Community	“I was really trying to create a community to have a
Community via networking	support network to help me. That’s the counseling profession to me: connecting to people in a gentle, natural kind of way.”
Shared sense of pride or accomplishment	“Wow, <i>this</i> is counselor identity development. This is the community that I'm involved with. These are fellow counselors. This is the kind of thing we can do together.”

Unity through individuality	“It was a shift in contemplating the idea of counselor identity more than I ever had before: I’m one of many different kinds of professional counselors.”
Defining my professional self	“...hearing [the panelists’] experiences then self-reflecting, ‘Okay, I wouldn’t do that. It’s not a good fit or something that’ll work for me’.”
My (unique) counselor identity	“...something shifted in my counselor identity just being on the planning committee, thinking of me as more of a leader
My role as a leader	being able to help put on this event.”
Ambiguity and affirmation	<p>“A good reminder that a lot of my counselor identity development is unpredictable and that was my unpredictable moment that day.”</p> <p>“It was useful seeing what was consistent with my identity and what wasn’t consistent. It gave me an opportunity to clarify it, to internalize it.”</p>

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## **Commitment**

One theme that arose from participants’ narratives about their CPI development through involvement with Counseling Forum was a sense of commitment. Participants described feeling committed to others and to themselves. Attending and contributing to the event expressed the commitment counselors make to practice ethically by maintaining updated knowledge from the field and to model altruistic behavior such as supporting others’ continuing education. Participants also explained that event involvement required they commit their time and energy to their growth as counselors, counselors-in-training, and/or leaders. Event evaluation results included such statements as “[the event] helped me figure out what I’ll need to do in the future.”

*Lisa* (panel member): I just want to say “Thank you” for putting on something like that!

*Marco* (attendee): Yeah, you guys did a good job. And the panel was great too.

*Carlie* (planning committee): Good! I was invested in making sure everyone was satisfied, people enjoyed it, I spent the money wisely, and it was a good all-around experience. I really cared and wanted it to be good. It was a commitment to help others in the field gain knowledge. There were a lot of decisions to make and I spearheaded some, which is not usually like me. I put a lot of pressure on myself, so I wanted to make sure it worked out.

*Marco*: Yeah, it's like how counselors are supposed to continue to learn and explore and attend things like Counseling Forum. To be the best that you can be, always explore and never accept where you're at. It's a responsibility to clients and some to ourselves. Practicing ethically is being able to practice in competence. If you never put yourself out there to explore, you rob yourself and your clients of knowledge you could have. So it was great to have that experience.

*Carlie*: I don't know about you, but the Forum provided me amazing opportunities for growth. It was my choice to be that engaged as a member of the planning committee, so I was really taking responsibility to grow professionally. It was actually a big commitment to go every other week to planning meetings, and email people, set up the program, make flyers and all that.

*Marco*: I think just choosing to go is a commitment to search out knowledge, maybe learn something new. But I wanted to grow. It wasn't required for the program or to become a good counselor. That was our responsibility. You can always go to those things and not pay attention. But students like me came on our own time on a Sunday, spent most of the day there, for what was not for academics or checking a box, but purely for our own professional growth.

## **Community**

Another theme from the narratives was community. Participants described networking with their professional community, feeling a shared pride or accomplishment, and experiencing unity

through individuality. Involvement allowed them to connect with other counseling students and professionals. Participants noted pride in the profession and a seeing the event as a shared accomplishment. They commented on feeling united by recognizing the uniqueness of each counselor's professional standing, specialty, and other factors. Attendee evaluations included statements such as, "it was an opportunity to interact and connect with other counselors."

*Carlie:* Yeah, it especially got me to know lots of different people I may not have gotten to know. Because I had to connect out into the community, talk to the different panel members. It was a time where I could talk to people that I don't always talk to as much and get to know them.

*Marco:* Right. Counseling Forum was a dialogue to engage in. Talking to people in my cohort; and those conversations were much different than we have in our classrooms. Then with presenters. I met tons of new people in the program and students already in Internship. I had all these new conversations. I was really trying to create a community to have a support network to help me. That may sound selfish, but there is mutual benefit just getting to know each other and using a venue. We're already there and got the time, so we might as well. That's the counseling profession to me: connecting to people in a gentle, natural kind of way. It's an expression of what was going on for you. That's why I liked the panel a lot. It gave people time to dialogue.

*Lisa:* I felt a sense of community there too, which is really important. It was cool to be back on campus; I don't go there very often. It's neat what the program is doing; we can do more of that in our field. We tend to be isolated as counselors especially once you're out of school, so it reinforced the community aspect of our field as useful for future generations of counselors.

*Carlie:* Watching all the work come to fruition increased my counselor professional identity: seeing it in action - the involvement of planning committee, speakers, and participants together; in our CSI meeting at the end, with audience suggestions and hearing goals of future exec

members. Like, “Wow, *this* is counselor identity development. This is the community that I'm involved with. These are fellow counselors. This is the kind of thing we can do together.” I really began to feel this is the community I belong in and feel at home. Part of my work was soliciting donations from local organizations for our raffle. At first I was afraid people would turn their nose up since it was related to mental health; but when they were more interested than I expected, it made me realize people don't have as bad of a view of counselors as we talk about.

*Marco:* I had that too. Remember the keynote speaker about *the imposter phenomenon*? Feeling that you don't fit in and people are going to realize you're not fit for this. That's what I worried about before I got there: “If I go to Counseling Forum, people will know I have no idea what's going on.” Then we were in workshops. I was feeling like a little tiny person in a room of big people. It took me a bit to get courage to ask my question, but it was more comfortable in that setting because most were students: all at the same level of uncertainty so there's cohesion. I saw people I knew. The co-presenter was a classmate who has always embraced everyone, which helped. That was the moment I felt most, “I have a community.” The speaker responded, “I totally appreciate you have a family and a life outside the program” and I need to find a place that understands. Hearing that and the panel talk about the importance of self-care in counseling and accepting yourself let me realize I don't have to put on this façade or be someone I'm not.

*Lisa:* There are such unique experiences because there's a lot of diversity in our experiences as professional counselors, so that's always invaluable to hear. It was a shift in contemplating the idea of counselor identity more than I ever had before: I'm one of many different kinds of professional counselors.

*Marco:* Yeah, usually panels I've seen have three to four people in distinct areas, but I think that bringing them together is like this idea of diversity coming together. It was exciting

because you had a school counselor, a man in community mental health, and one in private practice, etc. and they said a lot of things that I didn't know. It was a nice, round experience.

### **Defining My Professional Self**

Another theme that arose about CPI and the event was defining one's professional self. Event involvement helped participants develop their distinctive CPI, clarify their role as a leader in the profession, and actively define their CPI distinguished by specialties, approaches, and accomplishments. An attendee evaluation stated that the event was a prompt to "figuring out my place in the field." Participants explained that service in counseling organizations and events helps CPI develop by playing a role and honing skills to lead the counseling community.

*Carlie:* I'm starting to integrate what works for me and what I think is important but am still developing my individual skills. I'd thought about private practice but was so scared before, since I don't understand business and legal things. But planning this event was pretty business-like. During the keynote I was thinking, "I can do a lot of this and shouldn't be afraid to."

*Marco:* Yeah, she offered her expert opinions on practical things. It was more concrete tips, so I felt exposed to someone's ideas I could mirror. She talked about finding your niche and the community you fit into. So I get to define my area of competence and be broadly competent to meet my clients' needs.

*Lisa:* It doesn't necessarily stop. I mean, developing your counselor identity is a constant evolving process for me in how I view things. Just the process of talking about this stuff – our values – and thinking about them evolves my view on professional identity.

*Marco:* Now I want to ask every counselor I interact with, "Explain your counselor identity to me" to compare with my journey. The Forum was an opportunity to get different perspectives from people in the field. We get some of that from professors but there's still an aura of, "They're

a professor; it's not what they're currently experiencing." So then self-reflecting, "Okay, I wouldn't do that. It's not a good fit or something that'll work for me" was an additional way to gain information not just about counseling, but about how we fit into it.

*Carlie:* It's like shopping for clothes - watching others, trying it on "Oh, is that me?" "Is this one me?" "Is the way they do it also for me?" I'm realizing I will probably have to design my own outfit. The Forum increased my counselor identity because I saw it in action. Hearing how the panel developed in their careers: went to school, had different experiences, then shifted to one area or switched to another. That made me think about my identity. I'm developing right now, but pretty soon I'll be deciding to be part of the field somewhere. I'm going to be there too.

*Lisa:* That's cool. Until that point of being on the panel, I think I got most of my counselor identity because I was a leader in counseling organizations.

*Carlie:* Yeah, something shifted in my counselor identity being on the planning committee, thinking as more of a leader being able to help on this event: "Look at what we did as a team. We did all this together. And I was part of that." I can do that in the future: be part of these committees, put on great events for other people in the field to gain knowledge, step up to contribute taking a leadership role. It's easy to let things go by, "Oh, I'm busy. Someone else can do it." But taking this on and making sure it got done helped me develop as a leader in my field for the future. I developed skills to be more of a leader in the community.

### **Ambiguity and Affirmation**

Lastly, ambiguity and affirmation arose as a theme about CPI development via event involvement. Participants asserted that attending, leading, and/or presenting at Counseling Forum affirmed their counselor identity. They noted moments before, during, and continuing after the event of remaining ambiguity about their CPI and about the concept in general.

*Lisa:* It's funny, I told another therapist I was going to be on a panel on counselor identity and he goes, "What is that?" I even looked it up online and didn't really glean much; there wasn't much specifically about the concept. Beforehand I was kind of, "I don't know what this is really about so how am I going to be on this panel when I'm not really sure? But I'll go talk about my experiences." During the event was what really helped me think about and understand it more from questions to us as panelists and hearing others' experiences and thoughts.

*Carlie:* I'm still very much developing my counselor identity. It's like surfing: there's a lot of fear there and unknowns. You just have to go for it: stand up and attempt. Eventually with practice, you'll be able to stand up, ride the wave, and hopefully do it smoothly and more confidently, and do it again. At the Forum there was this moment during a break where I was talking to another student who had an emotional reaction about something and those counselor tendencies in me jumped to reflecting her feelings and helping her feel safe, but with appropriate boundaries in the middle of a big group. It was an interesting moment to happen during a forum about professional identity. Something I wasn't necessarily expecting. It's a metaphor for counseling: things happen when you're not really expecting them. You can never expect what a client's going to bring in or what's going to come up for you. A good reminder that a lot of my counselor identity development is unpredictable and that was my unpredictable moment that day.

*Marco:* The main shift was seeing the panel are out there doing meaningful work. It gives me hope in my counselor identity that this is what I'm going to do, I have chosen it. I don't know if I felt that way before. So that's a huge change. Plus it was useful seeing what was consistent with my identity and what wasn't. It gave me an opportunity to clarify it, to internalize it.

*Lisa:* Being on the panel and in leadership roles in professional organizations is really validating as a counselor. I wasn't quite sure how my experiences or my identity would fit or flow

with others on the panel. But there's so many different things a counselor can do and feeling confident in myself, it was nice to hear other people's experiences and go, "Yeah, I'm one of these professionals who happens to have *this* experience." Plus, it was nice to be as seen somebody positive and cooperative who is willing to help out: recognized as a professional. It validates where I am to be able to share my experiences with other people. I'm pretty confident about who I am as a counselor and the experiences I've had, so it was also self-validating.

*Carlie:* Listening to the panel was confirming. I had a moment that took me by surprise. I realized I wasn't thinking about questions to ask, but how I would answer the audience about my own counselor identity and even "How would I encourage students to grow their counselor identity?" when I become a professor or supervisor. It was a sense of reconfirmation that I want to go down that path and don't need to be worried how it's going to go. I didn't expect that from myself. The panel members were answering similar to what I imagined I would.

*Lisa:* I remember thinking, "Wow! If I'd had an event like this when I was contemplating what to do for the rest of my life, I would have really valued that." Just to help me solidify what I'm good at, what I want, and what direction to go in. I appreciated it and hope it happens again.

### **Discussion**

Involvement in Counseling Forum enhanced CPI development in four ways: through commitment, community, defining one's professional self, and ambiguity and affirmation. Event participants (i.e., attendees, panel members, and planning committee members) experienced commitment to others and to their own development and a sense of community through networking, shared accomplishments, and unification via diversity. Their involvement prompted them to define their professional selves uniquely and as leaders. Despite a remaining ambiguity, event involvement also served to affirm their CPI.

The research questions were (1) How do participants describe the experience of a professional event as connected to their counselor professional identity (CPI)? (2) What elements of CPI were emphasized through the event? and (3) How were those elements emphasized? Participants recounted experiences from before, during, and after the event. Moments during the event seemed particularly impactful on CPI, and planning and presenting added meaning to their experiences. CPI elements emphasized through involvement echoed existing conceptual literature about CPI development through professional engagement. Participants shared how involvement invited them to take risks and to intentionally reflect, which enhanced their CPI.

The CPI elements that event involvement emphasized were commitment to self and others, connection to a professional community, and definition of one's unique place in a unified profession. Their role in the event prompted them to question, define, and clarify their CPI. All participants pointed to the commitment they made to themselves by attending and/or contributing to the event. Commitment to growth has emerged as an element of CPI in this and other studies (Mellin et al., 2011; Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014; Nelson & Jackson, 2003). It appears that involvement in a professional event may enhance CPI as an act of fulfilling a counselor's ethical obligation (ACA, 2014) for ongoing development. Planning committee and panel members mentioned commitment to others through service that their event roles entailed. This finding extends the CPID literature to include an altruistic element of serving colleagues, not just clients.

The finding that CPI is enhanced through a sense of community (Gibson et al., 2010; Nelson & Jackson, 2003) and definition of one's unique place in the field (Mellin et al., 2011) extends the previous literature by offering research evidence on the impact of a professional event. The concept of unity through diversity in relation to CPI has existed in the counseling field for some time (Woo et al., 2014) with conference themes (i.e., ACA 2002 and ACES 2013) and efforts

to unify the profession through definitions, accreditation standards, advocacy, and other methods (Kaplan et al., 2014; Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002). It is important to note that the narratives in this study highlight another aspect of inclusive unification: that the very presence of professional diversity seems to allow counselors to feel welcomed and accepted. This finding serves to corroborate observations that a humanistic framework surrounds the CPI development process (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Dollarhide & Oliver, 2014) and offers evidence that even a one-day workshop can provide opportunities to enhance these values inherent to CPI.

Participants who served on the planning committee and panel described impacts to their CPI in their roles as leaders. These findings extend the CPI research on Chi Sigma Iota chapter leaders (Luke & Goodrich, 2010) and provide evidence that organizations offering events like Counseling Forum can achieve the goal “to help counselors-in-training and new counselors build confidence in their roles as counselor and leader that will lead to enhanced professional identity and leader identity development” (Gibson, 2016. p. 36).

A sense of shared accomplishment emerged as an impactful CPI experience of the event. This community-based sense of pride seems connected but distinct from Nelson and Jackson's (2003) findings that Hispanic student interns experienced CPI development as separately as teamwork and personal accomplishment. It is plausible that the success of a collaborative event such as Counseling Forum evokes a feeling of group accomplishment, which enhances CPI.

Invitations to take risks appear a notable way that event involvement can enhance CPI. Participants experienced some questioning prior to the event, wondering what the event would entail and how successful it would be. One worried she was not committed enough to the counseling field; others questioned the adequacy of their contributions as planning committee and panel members. This finding extends the literature on risk-taking and CPI. Researchers have found

that CPI is enhanced through applied experiences as counseling students and interns and as counseling professionals in new roles (Auxier et al., 2003; Nelson & Jackson, 2003). Weatherford, Brooks, and Allred (2016) argued that understanding the critical issue of clinical risk-taking can impact CPI. It appears that nonclinical risk-taking may also enhance CPI.

Another way in which involvement in Counseling Forum enhanced participants' CPI was via prompted reflection. Attendees, planning committee members, and panel members alike named opportunities in presentations, breaks, and after the event to reflect on their CPI. Two aspects particularly salient in their reflections were the internalization process (Auxier et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2010) and a sustained ambiguity about CPI. An interesting addition to CPI research is participants' positive and accepting reactions to such ambiguity.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study represents a significant contribution to the literature in that it contributes evidence supporting several authors' claims that activities such as professional involvement in conference events can enhance CPID among counseling students and professionals. Due to the study's selective focus, findings offer a snapshot of this singular experience for eight participants affiliated with programs at the same university. These individuals may have experienced CPI development via Counseling Forum differently from others involved in the event or in similar events elsewhere. It is unknown what any sustained reflection on the experience would reveal.

Despite the limitations, many directions exist for future research. The event was primarily aimed at Master's and doctoral students enrolled in CACREP-affiliated programs in a Western state. Though event marketing involved dissemination to all Chi Sigma Iota chapters across the state, the location at one university likely limited attendance from multiple programs. Future studies of events targeting both students and professional counselors or held at neutral locations

could expand the scope of the research. The findings of this qualitative study revealed themes about how a professional event can serve to enhance CPI in attendees and contributors. A quantitative study involving data collection pre- and post-event could reveal how much CPI develops and/or any differences between types of individuals involved in the event.

### **Conclusion**

The current findings support previous conceptualizations about ways that Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) involvement can enhance CPID (Brat et al., 2016; Burkholder, 2012; Chang, 2012; Gibson, 2016; Hansen, Speciale, & Lemberger, 2014). Furthermore, there is now evidence that CPID-enhancing involvement can 1) include a critical incident as small as a one-day workshop, 2) span event roles from attendee to leader/volunteer, and 3) result in CPID affirmation along with lingering professional identity/role ambiguity. These findings can inform current and future efforts within counseling programs, CSI and local chapters, and other organizations.

The implications of this study signify the promising impact that a one-day professional event can have on CPI development among event attendees (members and non-members, Master's and doctoral students) and contributors (planning committee members and professional speakers). An overall implication is that leaders of programs, CSI chapters, and other organizations should consider a one-day professional event as a valuable investment of time and money. Such an event may be particularly CPID-enhancing when 1) opportunities exist for members to serve each other in various capacities; 2) representation and conversations among speakers, leaders, and attendees involve both intra-professional diversity and unity; 3) involvement supports risk-taking and celebration of shared accomplishments; and 4) moments of prompted reflection appear during planning and implementation. The results also add to the research support for Chi Sigma Iota's significant impact on the counseling field.

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