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Counselor Professional Identity Development in CACREP and Non-CACREP Accredited Programs

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Counselor Professional Identity Development in CACREP and Non-CACREP Accredited Programs

Abstract

Through increasing the strength and understanding of counselor-in-training professional identity development, the profession as a whole gains credibility and a place within mental health treatment. This study sought to determine CACREP's impact on professional identity development of counselors-in-training. Results indicate that individuals who attended a CACREP-accredited Master's program had significantly higher overall scores on the Professional Identity Scale in Counseling (PISC) (Woo & Henfield, 2015), but not in all subscales. Implications support continued promotion of CACREP involvement in the training of counselors.

Keywords

Professional development, accreditation, counselor education

Throughout the history of counseling, professional identity has been a topic of significant attention and remains of interest today (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011; Ponton & Duba, 2009; Puglia, 2008; Woo, Storlie, & Baltrinic, 2016). The field of counseling has made many strides toward a clearer understanding of professional identity development, yet still requires significant clarification, research, and decisions to be made on the road ahead to clearly define and delineate the profession (Woo, 2013). One of the most significant ways to increase professional identity is to create universal understanding and standards that can allow for more portability of licensure and a clear focus of the roles and lenses held by professional counselors (Burns & Cruikshanks, 2018). On June 5, 2017, a press release by the Association for State Counseling Boards, Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, American Mental Health Counselors Association, and National Board of Certified Counselors proposed portability of licensure in order to create a more uniform licensure endorsement process among states in turn increasing the public's access to care, and arguably, strengthening a singular professional counselor identity. This is one of many steps necessary to strengthen the identity of professional counselors across the country (American Association of State Counseling Boards, American Counselor Education and Supervision, American Mental Health Counselors Association, & National Board of Certified Counselors, 2017). Licensure portability is only possible with academic standards that are universal and governing bodies that can systematically identify basic standards required to identify as a professional counselor such as those put forward by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related and Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015).

There are many aspects of mental health care and several career paths working within the field. The need to differentiate from, and gain parity with, other mental health professions has long been a topic of discussion related to professional identity in counseling and has implications within

the legislative climate pertaining to recognition by third party payers, accreditation and license portability (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Rollins, 2012). These challenges generate much debate and confusion amongst counseling professionals, warrant significant attention in research, and reiterate the importance of pinpointing what contributes to the identity of professional counselors (Calley & Hawley, 2008).

Confusion amongst the identity of a professional counselor is further complicated by the reality that one can hold various degrees, titles, theoretical orientations, approaches, and educational backgrounds, yet refer to the job performed as “counseling.” Rollins (2012) identified this confusion as a form of counselor identity crisis stating, “If we cannot explain to the public and our legislators who we are, how we were educated and trained, and what we can do—all in a unified voice—then how can we expect the public and our legislators to embrace the counseling profession” (p. 46). The ultimate survival of the counseling profession depends on determining a single unified professional counselor identity (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Emerson, 2010; Myers, Sweeney & White, 2002).

The lack of professional identity may be considered one of the more significant issues in the field. Reconciling this issue is necessary in order to gain similar recognition among other mental health professions, such as being a social work or psychologist (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Woo, 2013). If counselors are unable to define their own roles and identity, providing a clear definition to the general public becomes increasingly difficult, it may prompt people to seek services from more well-known mental health professionals instead of from counselors (Woo, 2013).

A significant contributor to a unified professional identity is the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015). CACREP structures the

educational experience and infuses standards related to the development of a professional identity. CACREP (2018) requested more research from counselor educators to determine the impact of accreditation on professional identity. Specifically, the request for proposal listed on the CACREP (2018) website reads “CACREP believes empirical data is needed to support the belief that accreditation makes a difference in terms of quality and professional identity of counseling professionals, programs, and students” (p. 1). Currently, there is no research determining the difference in professional identity development based on CACREP’s influence on the profession, yet assumptions are made that CACREP has a positive impact on the professional identity of counselors (Prosek & Hurt, 2014). Due to the role of CACREP in graduate counseling training, it is hypothesized that counselors-in-training from CACREP accredited programs will show higher levels of professional identity than those who attended non-accredited programs as defined by higher scores on all six subscales of the Professional Identity in Scale in Counseling (PISC; Woo & Henfield, 2015).

The necessity of identifying a unified counselor identity is clearly stated by researchers in the field (Cashwell, Kleist, & Scofield, 2009; Emerson, 2010; Gale & Austin, 2003; Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011); however, it has been problematic to develop an instrument that measures professional identity which encompasses all sub-specialties and diversity of populations within the counseling field (Woo & Henfield, 2015). The difficulties and complexities encountered by writers and scholars in this area have resulted in definitions and instruments that have only examined subsections of counselor professional identity instead of a comprehensive understanding of all components (Emerson, 2010). Theorizing components of counselor professional identity without empirical evidence of how those actually reflect professional identity in the field does not provide adequate information

on the topic, leaving deficits and unanswered questions regarding the true identity of the counseling profession (Woo, 2013; Woo & Henfield, 2015). For these reasons, the PISC (Woo & Henfield, 2015) was selected as the instrument to explore professional identity differences in the current study. Woo, Lu, Harris, and Cauley (2017) found significantly higher scores on the five of the six subscales of the PISC for counselor educators, followed by doctoral students and then masters's students. While the PISC is a relatively new instrument in measuring professional identity of counselors, it appeared to be effective in identifying nuances and aspects of counselor identity (Woo, 2013; Woo & Henfield, 2015).

As a result of using the PISC (Woo & Henfield, 2015) to define professional identity, adherence to the instrument's definition of professional identity was adopted; "a state of mind that categorizes an individual as a member of a selected profession and develops over time" (Woo, 2013, p. 9). This definition is derived from the literature and defines professional identity as "knowledge of the profession and its philosophy, expertise required of its members of the profession, understanding of members' professional roles, attitudes towards the profession and oneself, engagement behaviors expected of its members and interactions with other professionals (Woo, 2013, p. 9). This definition of professional identity of a counselor provides clarity regarding tasks and roles of a professional counselor.

Professional Identity Development

Consistent evolution of the counseling profession has progressed since its beginnings as public school guidance in the early 1900's and has engaged in many initiatives to advance its status to that of a profession (Feit & Lloyd, 1990; Gale & Austin, 2003; Woo & Henfield, 2015). The dedication of thousands over several decades have forged major advancements in the profession including: the development of professional associations, code of ethics and standards of practice,

accreditation of counselor education programs, licensure and certifications, and professional journals (Martin & Cannon, 2010). These developments have propelled the profession toward a stronger and more recognizable professional identity (Gale & Austin, 2003). However further research is needed to solidify counselor professional identity.

Professional Association Affiliations

The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) collaborates on projects with counseling professional organizations including the American Counseling Association (ACA), Chi Sigma Iota (CSI); Counseling Academic and Professional Honor Society International, the American Mental Health Counseling Association (AMHCA), and the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC), all who maintain a strong value of having a counseling professional identity and seek to unify the profession of counseling (Fernandez, 2013). CACREP and AMHCA presented jointly at the 2013 Conference of the American Association of State Counseling Board on the benefits of graduation from a CACREP accredited program, benefits of making graduation from a CACREP accredited program a requirement for licensure, and promotion of a singular counselor education preparation standard (Fernandez, 2013). The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) also supports CACREP standards and works toward strengthening the counselor professional through the promotion of a unified professional identity (Durham, 2008). CSI (n.d.) supports advancement in professional identity through its mission “to promote scholarship, research, professionalism, leadership, and excellence in counseling; to encourage the pursuit of personal excellence by members, and to recognize high attainment in the pursuit of academic and clinical excellence in the profession of counseling” (Our Mission, para 1). NBCC (n.d.) supports the growth and

unification of the profession by requiring new applicants after the date of January 1, 2022, to document completion of a master's degree or higher from a program accredited by CACREP.

A large array of research studies on the topic of professional identity has been conducted utilizing different populations of counselors including counselor educators, counseling students, and counseling practitioners (Busacca & Wester, 2006; Mellin et al., 2011; Woo, 2013; Woo & Henfield, 2015). Reiner, Dobmeier, and Hernandez (2013) surveyed 378 counselor educators finding strong support for unified accountability of all counseling professionals to work toward and attain recognition of the counseling profession, as well as to continue to collaborate and establish a truly unified identity. Mellin et al. (2011) examined 238 practicing counselors to determine how counselors define the counseling profession and their perceptions of how counseling is distinct from psychology and social work. Findings indicated that the counseling profession is based in a developmental, preventative, and wellness approach, and that participants appear to hold a unified professional identity across subspecialties (Mellin et al., 2011). Busacca and Wester (2006) assessed 152 counseling students in seven CACREP-accredited programs to gain an understanding of their career concerns and found that while professional development is of particular interest to graduate students, they continue to feel uncertain about establishing themselves as new professionals in counseling.

Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss (2010) highlighted that professional identity development is an important issue by their examination of experiences of students. Gibson et al. (2010) used a grounded theory methodology to describe tasks that are necessary for professional identity development; a personal definition of counseling, internalizing responsibility for professional growth, and development of a systemic type of identity. Further research, as recommended by Gibson et al. (2010) on the topic of counselor professional identity, has the potential to provide

much needed insight for counselor educators, counselors, and supervisors. These studies, along with others in counseling literature, indicate that concerns regarding professional identity are present not only in professional counselors from various backgrounds but is at the forefront of attention nationwide and impacts all professionals within the counseling field (Woo & Henfield, 2015).

American Counseling Association. The American Counseling Association (ACA) has contributed significantly to the growth and development of counseling as a profession and to the movement toward increased professionalism through many milestones including the establishment of the code of ethics and standards of practice, advocacy for inclusion of counselors in the Public Health Act, promotion of advocacy for the counseling profession, continuing education, publications and distribution of knowledge and training (Myers et al., 2002; Woo & Henfield, 2015). The ACA's publication, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, documents much of counseling's history and has emphasized counseling's unique skills, as well as the need for a collective identity (Gale & Austin, 2003). Due to concerns about the lack of unity within the counseling profession hampering efforts to develop and implement licensure portability, the American Association of State Counseling Boards (AASCB) and ACA co-sponsored the counseling initiative entitled *20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling in 2009*, which promulgated the *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession* to advance the future of professional counseling (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). As a result of this initiative, 22 issues were selected to be addressed by the group and then organized into seven areas: (a) strengthening identity, (b) presenting counseling as one profession, (c) improving public perceptions and recognition, (d) creating licensure portability, (e) expanding and promoting the research base (f)

focusing on students, and (g) promoting client welfare and advocacy (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014; Cashwell et al., 2009).

Kaplan et al. (2014) described an attempt to develop a unified definition of counseling. While 29 of the 31 participating counseling organizations agreed upon a proposed definition of counseling, complete consensus was not attained. Significantly, the American Association of School Counselors (ASCA) and Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ) both withheld endorsement of the proposed definition. As progress toward a consensual definition of counseling represents a promising step toward a unified professional identity, the lack of complete agreement highlights the difficulties faced with even codifying an acceptable definition of counseling (Kaplan et al., 2014).

Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs.

Further attempting to unify the professional identity of the counselor was the formation of an accrediting body, CACREP in 1981, which was designed to establish accreditation standards and core curriculum areas for graduate-level counseling programs (CACREP, 2015). CACREP is closely related to the ACA, but remains an independent council that continues to play a vital role in the establishment of counselor professional identity through implementing educational requirements related to professional identity development including professional orientation standards that focuses on understanding the history of the counseling profession, professional roles, ethical standards, professional responsibilities, credentialing and associations, public and private policy processes, and advocacy (Calley & Hawley, 2008; CACREP, 2015). The adoption of the 2009 CACREP Standards ushered in guidelines that addressed the need to build a strong professional identity for graduates and faculty (Davis & Gressard, 2011). In Section 1.W.2., the 2009 CACREP standards implemented a requirement that reflects the encouraged hiring of faculty

members who hold a Ph.D. in Counselor Education from CACREP accredited programs as an intention to bolster the professional identity component of educators in counseling (CACREP, 2009; Woo, 2013). Essentially, CACREP's trademark of the 2009 Standards was the development of counselor professional identity in graduates and faculty of accredited programs (Fernandez, 2013). The 2016 CACREP standards continue to support this inclusion of a strong professional identity and no significant changes in the material expected to be taught, nor the identity of those individuals doing the teaching, have emerged (CACREP, 2015). CACREP is a driving force in a unified understanding of the professional identity of counselors and is currently calling for more research on how their involvement in the profession impacts counselor professional identity (CACREP, 2018).

While several organizations and professionals believe in the unification of the profession through shared counseling roles, education and practice requirements, adherence to professional organizations, and an all-encompassing definition of counseling, there are also many dissenting voices that advocate for variety and inclusiveness of many approaches and ideologies within the profession of counseling. Before one can begin to debate the relevance of multiple or singular voices, one must first identify if the shared realities of educational standards do, in fact, promote professional identity development. Research that supports an adherence to a unified set of standards will increase counselor professional identity development and be instrumental in developing a singular professional identity.

Purpose of this Study

Performing an exploratory analysis measuring professional identity development via reliable and valid measures to assess any potential differences between CACREP and non-CACREP programs will allow for a better understanding of the ways in which governing bodies

promote or hinder such development; potentially validating continued focus on accrediting bodies for professional development and shared identity. Gibson, Dollarhide, and Moss (2010) previously identified that professional identity development differs among neophyte and seasoned counselors. Similarly, Prosek and Hurt (2014) found that advanced counselors-in-training demonstrated higher professional development than those just entering the profession. Bryant (2018) found no significant difference between professional identity measured using the PISC and leadership skills among school counselors in various levels of development (master's level in-training, practicing school counselors, and counselor educators). The current study takes into account the identity development difference based on training level and years of experience in the field (Gibson et al., 2010; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003) and further attempts to identify if accreditation has influence on professional identity development. The primary research questions are as follows: Is there a difference in professional identity development of counselors based on previous attendance to a CACREP-accredited vs. non-CACREP accredited program? Are the total scores or scores on various subscales of the Professional Identity Scale in Counseling (PISC) different among graduates of CACREP versus non-CACREP programs?

It is hypothesized that students who attended a CACREP accredited program will have significantly higher scores of professional identity in all subscales identified on the PISC than those who attended non-accredited programs. In general, it is the researchers' assertion that the formal training and approach used by CACREP influences later professional identity development of a counselor.

Method

This study was an exploratory quantitative analysis comparing two groups of individuals: those who graduated from a CACREP-accredited program and those who graduated from a non-

CACREP-accredited program. Mean scores on all subscales of the PISC of participants were compared to determine if there is a difference in professional identity between the two groups. Analysis of variance was used to determine the significance of the difference in mean scores between the two groups of participants.

Participants

Convenience sampling (Mills & Gay, 2016) was used in an attempt to explore this topic, allowing authors to ensure access to higher numbers of participants from non-CACREP accredited programs. The participants (N=115) were identified as having graduated from either a CACREP accredited or non-CACREP accredited program. Participants were recruited through two primary means: alumni from two universities and through a mailing list of current members of an ACA state division in the West. First, participants were recruited through alumni lists at two universities. Due to an insufficient sample and desire for more generalizability of the data, participants were then recruited through a listserv for an ACA state-division. There was limited diversity represented within the sample: 87% (n=102) identified as Caucasian, 2.6% (n=3) as Black/African American, 6.0% (n=7) as Latino/Hispanic, .8% (n=1) as Asian, and 1.7 % (n=2) other not specified. Participants identified as male 33.9% (n=39) and female 66.1% (n=76). The majority of participants (44.3%), had been working in the field for less than five years, 19.1% from five to 10 years, 16.8 % from 10 to 15, and 14.5% greater than 15 years of work in the profession. Similarly, 48% graduated zero to five years ago, 17.6% graduated five to 10 years ago, 16.8% for 10 to 15 years ago, and 12.2% graduated more than 15 years ago. The median age was 40. Participants represent two groups: those who reported that they attended a masters CACREP program (n=87) and those who reported attending a non-CACREP program (n=28). At inception, two programs alumni lists were solicited, one CACREP-accredited and one not CACREP accredited. Once the

sample was opened to include an ACA state division mailing list, the number of programs participants attended could not be gathered as this variable was not gathered in the initial assessment.

Procedures

After IRB approval, researchers accessed the list of alumni at two different universities, one having CACREP-accreditation and the other being non-CACREP-aligned, asserting the educational requirements held by this University follows most protocol and standards addressed within CACREP but have not applied for, or received CACREP approval at the time of the study. Both institutions accessed are small, private, non-secular Universities in the West and South. After an email was distributed to 340 alumni from both universities, a state ACA division was contacted, and the survey link was sent to all counselors who were registered members of that states ACA division. The ACA state-division was accessed due to low response rates and to avoid conflating the data. Roughly half of responses (n=65) were gathered after the link was sent to the ACA state division, although it is difficult to determine how many participants came from each source. All participants in the study received an email link to an online survey containing a demographic form and the PISC (Woo & Henfield, 2015). A reminder email containing the link was sent to all groups of participants one month after they received the initial email.

Measures

Demographics. General demographic information such as, age, race/ethnicity, and gender was collected via the online survey. Information regarding self-reported identity in the field (licensure[s], certifications, education level, specialties, years in the field, and program accreditation) was also collected in the demographic portion of the survey. Demographic information was used to categorize participants according to accreditation status of their graduating institution, as well as years in the field.

The Professional Identity Scale in Counseling (PISC). The PISC (Woo & Henfield, 2015) was selected as a result of the instrument's ability to measure multiple aspects of professional counselor identity. While there are other measures that can be used to evaluate counselor professional identity, the PISC allowed the authors to explore nuances in differences and similarities based on robust subscales embedded within the instrument (Woo & Henfield, 2015). The PISC contains 53 questions divided into six subscales labeled (1) engagement behaviors, (2) knowledge of the profession, (3) professional roles and expertise, (4) attitude, (5) philosophy of the profession, and (6) professional values (Woo, 2013, p. 79). According to Woo and Henfield (2015) overall reliability of PISC using Cronbach's alpha demonstrated a value of .92 for the total score and .89 for engagement behaviors, .88 for knowledge of the profession, .80 for attitude and for professional roles and expertise, .72 for philosophy of the profession, and .48 for professional values (p. 106). Pearson's correlations were calculated by Woo and Henfield (2015) on each subscale of the PISC with the subscales of the Professional Identity and Values Scale (PIVS) developed by Healey and Hays (2012) to assess the development of professional identity between genders. Overall positive correlations were found between PISC total scores and PIVS-professional orientation values (POV) ($r = 0.50, p < 0.01$) and between the PISC total scores and

PIVS- professional development (PD) ($r = 0.62, p < 0.01$). These results demonstrate the PISC subscales to be a highly valid measure of overall counselor professional identity.

Results

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 24. Preliminary visual examination of data generally indicated normal distributions among both CACREP accredited and non-CACREP samples utilized in the study with respect to PISC subscales and totals. Shapiro-Wilk was calculated as a test of normality for the PISC subscales and total for the smaller, non-CACREP sample ($n = 28$). Shapiro-Wilk was not calculated for the larger CACREP group ($n = 87$). While an assumption for t tests is normality of variance, a t test is robust for sample sizes greater than 50 (Howell, 2010). The Shapiro-Wilk statistic reflected a violation of assumption of normality for PISC subscales for the smaller non-CACREP group on subscales Attitude and Expertise. Homogeneity of variance between mean distributions was determined using Levene's test for equality of variances. T-tests for independent samples was used to evaluate mean differences. Cohen's d estimations were used in evaluating effect size. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was not met on subscales Engagement, $F(113) = 5.701, p = .018$ Knowledge $F(113) = 6.969, p = .009$, and PISC total score $F(113) = 4.010, p = .048$. Accordingly, Welch-Satterthwaite adjustments were applied to the interpretation of these t-tests.

An independent-samples t test was conducted for mean differences between the CACREP and non-CACREP groups on the dependent variables of PISC subscale and total scores. Mean and standard deviations of the groups are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for PISC subscales and PISC total score

PISC	CACREP		Non-CACREP	
	n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)
Engagement	87	61.79 (11.05)	28	55.11 (17.25)
Knowledge	87	49.71(6.91)	28	47.29 (8.11)
Attitude	87	48.61 (4.52)	28	47.39 (6.40)
Roles	87	51.14 (3.05)	28	48.89 (4.91)
Philosophy	87	36.54 (2.89)	28	36.82 (3.57)
Orientation	87	18.14 (3.34)	28	18.04 (2.89)
Total	87	267.92 (22.68)	28	253.54 (32.00)

Table 2 lists results of the independent samples t-tests and associated Cohen's d statistics. Results reflect significant mean differences between CACREP and non-CACREP samples on PISC subscale, Roles and Philosophy, but more reliably, on the PISC total scale, suggesting that graduates of CACREP accredited programs have a higher level of professional identity than graduates of non-CACREP accredited programs. Cohen's d is considered medium for the subscales which reflected mean differences. Cohen's d is considered medium for the PISC total score.

Table 2

Independent Sample t test and Cohen's d

PISC	df	t	Sig (2-tailed)	Cohen's d
Engagement*	34.405	-1.924	.063	.461
Knowledge*	40.368	-1.425	.162	.322
Attitude	113	-1.112	.268	.219
Roles	113	-2.882	.005**	.549
Philosophy	113	-2.578	.011**	.529
Orientation	113	-.145	.885	.033
Total*	35.575	-2.149	.039**	.508

*Equal variances not assumed

** p > .05

Discussion

Professional identity as measured by the PISC (Woo & Henfield, 2015) was significantly higher in total score for those who attended CACREP programs as compared to those who did not. Those who identified as having attended a CACREP-accredited program also had higher scores on the subscales of roles and philosophy. The findings of the present study confirm that shared educational standards related to counselor development promote a professional identity that is supported by the CACREP accrediting body.

As defined by Woo and Henfield (2015), the subscale of Roles measures counselor knowledge of various professional roles (counselor, educator, supervisor, and consultant) in diverse settings, as well as expertise to provide appropriate services within each of these roles. Results of the current study indicate that counselors who attended CACREP-accredited

universities have clearer understanding of role distinctions and ability to understand the expertise needed to perform the identified roles. It appears that those who attended an accredited program are more able to identify what roles they play and can distinguish amongst roles better those who come from a non-accredited program. The subscale of Philosophy, as defined by Woo (2013) measures counselor belief systems that underlies the counseling profession and distinguishes it from other mental health professions. The subscale of Philosophy rests on the assumption that the counseling philosophy is characterized by five perspectives: developmental approach, wellness, prevention, empowerment, and advocacy. Counselors who previously attended a CACREP-accredited program scored significantly higher on adoption of the above-mentioned philosophies; arguably the foundational assumptions of the counseling profession.

While those who attended a CACREP-accredited program were more likely to identify themselves as adopting the philosophies associated with the profession of counseling and able to distinguish counseling from other professions, there were not significant differences in other subscales such as Orientation and Attitudes. It is possible that the subscales that did not show significant differences between those attending CACREP and non-CACREP-accredited program have more influence through the process of supervision and other forms of continued professional identity development, therefore allowing for more growth as a factor of post-graduate experience. Identifying those graduating from CACREP programs as having higher scores on Roles, Philosophy, and the overall PISC seems to be an indication that the aim of CACREP to continue unifying professional identity not only through professional organizations and the process of supervision, but also through accrediting bodies that provide direction, intention, and assessment in the development of a counselor is being met.

It may be the case that programs adhering to CACREP standards are encouraged to find unique ways to increase professional identity development in attempting to fulfill the standards requirements. Programs who meet CACREP professional identity standards through experiential means such as attendance of ACA division or related conferences, membership in organizations, and leadership roles in national and local counseling associations may provide experiences for students that further promote leadership roles once they have graduated, potentially increasing professional identity post-graduation. Therefore, it is relevant to continue the conversation of promoting professional identity development of counselors through requirements related to program accreditation. These findings are consistent with assumptions made in previous research that those who attend CACREP programs will show higher levels of professional identity (Prosek & Hurt, 2014).

Membership in state and local ACA chapters yielded similar statistical results, when isolated, as those who attended CACREP-accredited programs. Holding memberships in local and state ACA chapters increased participant scores on the overall PISC, indicating other ways of strengthening professional identity, outside of CACREP and educational standards. It is important to note that experiences outside of the educational programs, such as memberships in professional organizations and participation in continued education experiences may have a substantial impact on professional identity development. While this study factored in time since graduation, there was little focus on the experiences the participants joined in following graduation from a Master's program. It is also important to note CACREP's (2018) continued urging of student involvement in professional organizations through membership and leadership opportunities.

Implications

The results of this study lead the researchers to two implications for counselor educators and supervisors: (1) students who attend CACREP programs tend to have a better understanding of the roles of a professional counselor and adopt the basic philosophical approach that underscores the field of professional counseling as defined by the American Counseling Association and (2) support for increasing overall professional identity development through educational, practice, and dispositional standards found within CACREP. While post-graduation supervision and involvement in the profession is important in the development of the counselor, it appears that the foundation of the educational experiences begins shaping the path long before the process of supervision begins. The preparatory experiences of the counselor are provided through graduate education and begin molding the counselor, and in some instances, limiting the lens through which to see the profession. When a counselor-in-training attends a CACREP-accredited program, a shared professional identity is promoted, thus strengthening the identity of the profession at the expense of the potential loss of multiple lenses. Those attending non- CACREP accredited programs may find themselves indoctrinated in psychology, social work, or behavioral intervention, which have the potential to be markedly different than the philosophy, roles, knowledge, and engagement found in the field of professional counseling. Individuals attending programs that are non-CACREP may find themselves experiencing more of an identity crisis as they begin their professional careers and attempt to engage in leadership opportunities through divisions within organizations such as ACA.

The current authors find that students who attended a CACREP program have higher rates of professional identity at various points post-graduation than those who attended non-CACREP programs. This finding supports the idea that program accreditation and affiliation requirements

towards licensure may further promote the professional identity of a counselor in general. The profession of counseling will continue to gain parity from other professions and increase public perception of the actual role of a counselor with increased professional identity fostered through CACREP-accredited programs. While CACREP may not be the only means of promoting professional identity, the current study findings support efforts to continue the path towards CACREP-accreditation being the means to a strong and unified professional identity.

Supervision is a vital component of counselor professional identity development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). It is becoming standard practice among many states to increasingly tighten requirements of supervisors in the field of counseling. These requirements are often attempts by the counseling profession to solidify the roles and functions of the counselor, in turn, strengthening professional identity and parity from other mental health professions. Support for increased requirements in supervision are often championed by a multitude of counseling programs across the nation. The current research provides support for the notion that the graduate training experience lays vital groundwork in the lifetime professional identity and should be supported to meet these ends through shared perceptions of the field of counseling provided through unifying bodies such as CACREP.

Limitations

One significant limitation of this study was the limited number of participants who attended non-CACREP accredited programs. Numerous attempts were made to strengthen the results through increasing the sample of this groups with no success. Increasing the sample size would continue to provide clarity into how CACREP does and does not impact professional identity as defined by the PISC. Power analysis was negatively impacted by the limited number of participants in general, with particular attention to the individuals who attended a non-accredited program. In

addition to the limited number of participants, those individuals solicited were from a small geographic area, further compounding issues of generalizability.

Another limitation of the current study was the participant self-reports of the program they attended, as well as the PISC being a self-report instrument. If participants wanted to make themselves appear more involved than they were, the result of the research would be skewed. Additionally, there was a lack of diversity of participants found within the sample. While the researchers recognize the racial and gender disparity of the present study, Shin, Smith, Goodrich, and LaRosa (2011) suggest that culturally diverse groups are underrepresented in the field of counseling. In addition, a final limitation was the non-CACREP accredited institution was working towards accreditation, potentially impacting curriculum and educational processes.

Conclusion

The field of counseling will continue, as it has for the past seventy years, to forge its place in the mental health world through producing knowledgeable, compassionate, and masterful counselors. This process is aided through a system that provides structure, an arena for dialogue and growth, and standards of knowledge, skill, and dispositions. While the supervisory experience should not be discounted as an important contributor to professional counselor identity development, the foundational work provided within the individual's graduate training experience cannot be understated. The profession of counseling from the perspective of entities such as ACA, NBCC, and AMHCA is conceived and strengthened during graduate training when that training is provided by faculty who share in that perspective and provide educational experiences that afford students the opportunity to develop a firm understanding of the field they are entering. The present research demonstrates the notion that accredited programs may be more intentional and clear in laying this framework for professional identity. The vitality of the profession of counseling is

dependent upon continued efforts to unify the identity of the professional counselor and provide a clear understanding of a profession that is unique, whole, and effective.

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