

What Shall We Do About Credentialing?

Jerald R. Forster

Many members of the counseling profession are seriously concerned about credentialing. Others question the concern and wonder whether it is important. This paper will define and clarify the problem, trace the etiology of the problem, and identify some issues that demand serious attention.

What Is the Problem?

The problem is that the counseling profession currently lacks an effective credentialing process, and, as a result, its practitioners are restricted in their opportunities for practicing their profession. An inkling of the problem can be grasped when we start defining terms, for the lack of shared meanings lies at the core of the matter.

The unabridged edition of the Random House dictionary defines a credential as "anything that provides the basis for confidence, belief, credit, etc." It would follow that a credential is not really a credential unless it leads to, or at least contributes to, a sense of confidence in the counselor. If a credential is to do that, it must be based on a shared meaning of what a counselor is and does. There must also be evidence or experience that indicates effectiveness and value of what counselors do. These are the ingredients that lead to confidence in the credentialed person. It is therefore proposed that counseling cannot deal effectively with the credentialing problem unless the profession and the public can achieve reasonable agreement on the shared meaning of counseling.

Before the problem is identified by

descriptions that are more specific and concrete, it would be useful to define some of the common methods used to credential practitioners of a profession such as counseling.

Certification: This is a process of recognizing the competence of practitioners of a profession by officially authorizing them to use the title adopted by the profession. Certification can be awarded by voluntary associations, agencies, or by governmental bodies, some of which are recognized by state laws. In school counseling, certification is usually handled by an office within the state government's department of education or its branch for executing public instruction matters. Certification officials commonly check transcripts for evidence that the applicant has completed required courses from preparation programs that are known to be acceptable.

Licensure: This is a process authorized by state legislation that regulates the practice and the title of the profession. Because of its legislative base, licensure subjects violators to greater legal sanctions than does certification. Licensure is generally considered to be more desirable when a substantial proportion of a profession's practitioners are in private practice because of the broader coverage and greater potential for using sanctions against violators. Licensure boards are usually established with quasi-legislative power to make rules and examine applicants who seek licenses.

Accreditation: This is a process whereby an association or agency grants public recognition to a school, institute, college, university, or specialized program of study that has met certain

established qualifications of standards as determined through initial and periodic evaluations. "Program approval" is another name for accreditation. In some professions, graduates of accredited preparation programs are considered credentialed. Sometimes a registry is used by a profession to list graduates of accredited programs.

A more detailed description of the problem that the counseling profession has with respect to credentialing focuses attention on the lack of credentials for counselors practicing outside of the elementary and secondary schools where certification provides an effective credential. It is commonly stated that more than half of the graduate students currently preparing to become counselors do not plan to practice their profession in the schools. It has become commonplace that counselors practice in nearly all institutions of our society, and many engage in private practice. As the range of counseling services has expanded to fit a wider range of clientele in a diversity of settings, greater overlap with other social service professions has occurred. Well-trained counselors with substantial experience have found themselves serving the same people as psychologists, social workers, and other professionals serve. Since counseling has drawn heavily on the theory, research, and methods of psychology, psychiatry, and related behavioral sciences, it has become difficult to distinguish between professionals trained and credentialed by these closely related disciplines. Also, as our society has become more complex, bureaucratized, and legalistic, legislation has been formulated to control many practices

having potential for exploitation and danger of malpractice. Many professional organizations have increased efforts for licensure, accreditation, and other means of defining and controlling professional practices. For example, more counselors providing services that overlap with psychologists are having difficulty qualifying for psychologist licensing, and legal suits have been brought against counselors for practicing psychology without a license. Sweeney and Sturdevant (1974) sounded an early warning, and many of their concerns were validated by subsequent events.

From this writer's perspective, it now appears as if the expansion of credentialing practices by various professional groups will have direct effects not only on employment practices but also on the preparation institutions and the types of social services offered to all elements of our population. The problem may be especially serious for the counseling profession because counseling has been characterized by flexible standards and somewhat undefined practices. While flexibility has permitted greater creativity and experimentation, it has resulted in an identity which is less clear-cut and well known than that of social work or psychology. This fuzziness of identity provides a weaker base for competition when job qualifications are specified or legislation is proposed. In effect, the societal movement towards institutionalization and legalistic practices encourages increased descriptions of practices, including practitioner preparation and performance standards. Part of the problem, then, is the cross-pressures of remaining flexible and open while competing with other social service professions in a climate that encourages and may even come to demand fixed definitions and practices.

How Did We Get Here?

While many excellent histories of the counseling movement can be found in the textbooks, few capture the subtle interactions between economic pressures, world events, changing human needs, and professional developments. The blending of two books, *Counseling and Guidance in the Twentieth Century* (1970), edited by Van Hoose and Pietrofesa, and *Counseling: A Growing Profession* (1965), edited by Loughary, Stripling, and Fitzgerald, provides some interesting perspectives on the profession's developments before the '70s. The reader can see that the counseling movement has evolved in response to important needs of individuals in our

complex, pluralistic society. Although other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, education, and anthropology, have evolved to study and influence individual and institutional behavioral patterns, none has focused its efforts on facilitating individual human development and adjustment so much as counseling and guidance.

The creation of the APGA from a looser affiliation of related organizations strengthened the professional aspects about 25 years ago, and several societal conditions sparked a concomitant growth. Sputnik and the responsive NDEA legislation helped cause the movement to expand dramatically in the '60s. Most of this growth was focused in secondary schools, and counseling became one of the fastest-growing professions in the human services field. Counselor preparation programs grew rapidly, and little attention was directed toward quality control or credentialing. As the field expanded rapidly, new approaches flourished, and leaders warned against premature definitions and restrictions (Hill 1967).

While the professional organization did address itself to personnel preparation standards and certification, no great urgency was noted. The APGA Professional Preparation and Standards Committee was active in 1960, and standards for the preparation of secondary school counselors were developed in 1964. Yet a spirit of serious concern seemed to be missing, as no vehicle was developed to accredit preparation programs. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the official accrediting body for teacher preparation programs, has served as the primary structure for accreditation, although the practices evolving from this structure have had little impact on the quality of programs. The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), a division of the APGA, continued to spearhead the development of preparation standards, and in 1973 its membership approved a revised, expanded set of standards that had been carefully formulated by an *ad hoc* commission. These standards are included in this special feature. The problems of credentialing may have seemed relatively minor as long as most counselors worked in the K-12 schools. Public education personnel practices are handled adequately by state departments of education offices using certification formats. Such formats usually require the joint efforts of preparation programs' faculty working hand-in-hand with state

officials. An unpublished study by Vogel in 1967 indicated that school counselor certification procedures had evolved in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Dudley and Ruff (1970) reported certification requirements, and it appeared that the process was working satisfactorily.

While the '60s were a period of great growth, the '70s were accompanied by a different political and economic climate, and public support of education and social services decreased. Meanwhile, counselor preparation programs had developed into active and productive units of higher education. Counselor education was a popular graduate major, and applicants continued to arrive even as positions in public schools declined. During the past few years a greater proportion of graduates from counselor preparation programs has sought positions outside the public schools. During the same period of the early '70s, psychologists were achieving sufficient status to receive insurance payments without the necessity of supervision by the medical profession. With the possibility of national health insurance in the future, psychologists became more conscious of their licensing practices and started to tighten their control over the "psychological" field. This tightening of control over the field has caused a restriction of activities commonly practiced by counselors just at a time when more counselors are seeking positions in community settings that also employ social workers, psychologists, and other personnel who are not in the counseling profession. Thus, counselors are seeking positions in a broader array of settings at a time when closely related professions are becoming more restrictive in defining territory. Further complications in the already complex mixture of structures and influences are caused by the close ties between counselor educators and the doctoral specialization of counseling psychology. A high proportion of counselor educators describe themselves as counseling psychologists who are active in the American Psychological Association's Division of Counseling Psychology (Division 17). My own history is rather typical:

I received a doctorate from an APA-approved counseling psychology program in the University of Minnesota's Educational Psychology Department. I was also licensed as a psychologist in the state of Minnesota. I then joined a counselor education staff at the University of Washington whose primary mission is the preparation of master's-

level counselors for schools and rehabilitation settings. This program, located in the College of Education, also prepares doctoral candidates, many of whom become licensed psychologists after graduation. A high proportion of our program's master's-degreed counselors takes jobs in community agencies, including community mental health centers. In many cases our master's-level graduates compete for jobs with those holding a master's of social work degree (MSW) and doctoral-level psychologists, many of whom are graduates of our doctoral program. While many of these master's-level counselors have the preparation and experience to function in many of the field positions, they lack a credential that carries the weight of those of the social worker and licensed psychologist. Added to this problem that is experienced by our noncredentialed master's graduates is the threat that our doctoral graduates may have greater difficulty qualifying for the psychologist license as licensure boards across the country become more restrictive in their policies.

While a substantial part of the recent increase in interest in licensing seems to be in reaction to threat from the psychologists' licensing practices, the renewed interest also flows from a sense of strength within the counseling profession. This strength is based on the realization that the counseling movement has met real needs that are not met by other professions. The movement's growth-oriented approach, designed to facilitate the individual's developmental process, does not form the foundation for other professions in the human services field. Counseling is the one profession whose primary purpose is the facilitation of an individual's development. The counselor's methods or processes, most of which have been heavily influenced by a combination of humanistic and behavioral philosophy, are based on a belief that each individual has the capacity and potential for growth and self-control. A large number of practitioners and recipients has experienced the counseling process and recognizes its unique value. Thus, there is a desire among practitioners to define the process more carefully and to legitimize it as society becomes more complex, institutionalized, and legalistic in character.

One of the outcomes of these influences has been a rather active movement to establish licensure legislation for counselors. The APGA Commission on Counselor Licensure, chaired during

its first year by Tom Sweeney and Carl Swanson, has been a very active and publicized commission, and their January 1976 report, *Model for State Legislation Concerning the Practice of Counseling, 1976, Rough Draft #14*, has been one of the most sought-after reports ever distributed by the APGA. The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), a division of the APGA, also had an active Licensure Commission, chaired by Edward Barnette. One subcommittee of that Commission, chaired by Dick Warner, produced an articulate *Rationale for Counselor Licensure*, while another surveyed all ACES members with a questionnaire. The results of the latter are presented by Carroll, Halligan, and Griggs in an article published in this special feature issue. The responses to these commission activities, plus the numerous articles and letters in the APGA newspaper, *Guidepost*, attest to the interest of the APGA membership in this topic. While there is little doubt that credentialing issues are important to counselors at this time, there appears to be no strongly supported plan available for dealing with these issues.

Although the licensure movement has dominated the attention of the profession during the past year, preparation standards and preparation program approval may have more basic relevance to the credentialing problem in counseling. Credentialing in any profession is almost invariably tied to completion of an approved program. While the counseling profession has given attention to the ingredients of a satisfactory preparation program, no satisfactory plan for approving preparation programs exists. Attempts have been made to approve programs through the NCATE structure, but few would say that this approach has been successful. Ninety percent of the respondents to the recent ACES licensure survey called for program-approval action. Jones's (1975) study of the characteristics of counselor education programs documented the wide range of quality in preparation programs. His results highlighted the diversity of programs and the fact that adopted standards were not being met by many preparation programs. Despite the lack of a program to enforce them, the standards for use in a program-approval enterprise were revised in 1973 and adopted first by the ACES membership and then by the APGA Board of Directors. While the 1973 standards have been strongly endorsed, they have never been widely publicized, and their inclusion in this

special feature will permit many APGA members to see them for the first time. The primary problems in setting up a method of approving programs are the expense and the difficulties in receiving official approval from the umbrella organization coordinating accreditation, the Council on Post-Secondary Accreditation (COPA). Naturally such a body would tend to discourage a proliferation of accreditation bodies for various professional groups, especially if they are not clearly distinguishable from other groups. It is noteworthy, however, that rehabilitation counselors, considered by most to be a subdivision of the counseling profession, successfully established their own preparation program-approval process (McAlees & Schumacher 1975), and their program has been officially recognized by COPA. The rehabilitation counselors were aided in the establishment of their accreditation program by a grant from the federal government's Rehabilitation Services Administration, which had special interest in program accreditation because of the availability of federal funds for rehabilitation counselor preparation programs.

The problem related to credentialing in the counseling profession has been described as one brought about by increased demands for credentialing in our society. As contiguous professions tighten up their credentialing methods, counselors find their rights and opportunities to practice their profession more restricted. Improved credentialing methods appear to be needed in the counseling profession. Before action can occur, certain issues need clarification and debate. Four of these issues are identified in the next section and addressed in the other articles included in this special feature.

What Do We Do Next?

The licensing movement has spurred considerable activity within the counseling profession. Pressures to enhance credentialing practices have been noticed, although no general plan of action has been adopted. Four issues, phrased in the form of questions, are suggested for further resolution before a plan of action is implemented.

1. **Is there broad support for additional credentialing practices within the counseling profession?** Despite the strong voices of counselor educators and APGA officials (as identified in the survey reported in the article by Carroll, et al.) there are also signs of resistance within the counseling field. Gross, in an

article included in this feature, captures some of the contrary reactions often heard during discussions with counselors. A common philosophical undercurrent runs through the counseling profession that encourages self-responsibility and individualization. Such an undercurrent also undercuts many institutional structures and those practices that tend to hinder individual freedom and self-control. Credentialing practices can easily be construed as forces blocking the freedom of individuals to seek and provide services without institutional restriction. Similarly, governmental and institutional controls often protect the status quo and restrict minorities from moving into established fields that stress majority values. On the other hand, proponents of more rigorous credentialing practices warn us that the right to practice any part of our specialty may be restricted by other professions over which we have no control. An airing of the issues may help to elicit a mandate to act on credentialing practices, but that mandate has not been strongly in evidence as yet.

2. Does the counseling profession need a clearer identity with a clear philosophical base and the designation of specific functions? In a paper included in this feature, Arbuckle suggests the need for the determination of professional functions. The ACES Licensure Commission subcommittee prepared a rationale for counselor licensure that provides a strong case for emphasizing an identity that stresses the facilitation of human growth and development. They say, "Counseling services are designed to help individuals to achieve optimal fulfillment of their potential; focus is placed on individuals' strengths and potentials, not on their weaknesses and past." Such an emphasis is built on a philosophical base that encourages self-responsibility and individualization.

Opponents of a more focused philosophical base and more specific definition of functions advise counselors to keep their definitions and roles as broad as possible to keep from unnecessarily restricting the range of services that may be provided. Such self-restriction may not result in the recognition by overlapping professions that the claimed functions belong to counseling. Also, they argue, such self-declared restrictions could be used to narrow the territory defined as belonging to counselors. It can also be said that neither psychology nor social work has identified a focused philosophical base or defined their professional functions so as to claim a narrow range of territory.

3. Does the counseling profession want to stress licensure as its main credentialing thrust? Primarily, the case for licensure has been advanced because it is said to have the greatest protection against restrictions imposed by licensure legislation developed for contiguous professions. In other words, they can't legislate our functions if we do it ourselves. Licensing, however, is a cumbersome process that is also expensive to implement and maintain. In another paper in this feature, Sweeney and Wittmer describe other ways to credential professionals. In a different article, Gross proposes a method of public disclosure. Social work has controlled the quality of master's-degree recipients by a comprehensive program-approval method so that an MSW degree has shared meaning in the community. The pathway to licensure laws in every state is long and strewn with pitfalls. Less risky and less expensive options may be available.

4. How should the counseling profession develop and implement a method of approving preparation programs? Since most credentialing methods use completion of a training program as a basic component, a plan for approving preparation programs is an important consideration. The survey reported by Carroll, et al., in this issue identifies a very strong desire for a program-approval method. There are many barriers to this accreditation process, as one would surmise from the fact that the profession currently lacks a satisfactory program-approval method, even though the achievement of an accreditation process is broadly supported. Robert Stripling, a leader in the development of standards during the past 15 years, presented at the 1976 APGA convention a paper that cited the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) as the primary accrediting agency for counselor education. Stripling observed that 95 percent of the counselor education programs are under the control of colleges, schools, or departments of education. Although he recognizes a problem, in that more than half of the graduates of counselor education intend to take positions outside of elementary and secondary schools, Stripling says we must accept the reality that deans of education, NCATE, and the newly organized Council of Post-Secondary Accreditation (COPA) control accreditation in counselor education.

Others are not optimistic about accreditation via the NCATE structure, in that APGA and ACES have been

exploring this approach for several years with limited results. While an NCATE accreditation team will consider the APGA standards when the institution is visited to accredit the teacher education program, little attention has been given to disciplines ancillary to teaching. In addition, neither recognition procedures for counselor education programs that are approved nor sanctions for those that are below standards have been articulated by NCATE policies. It is hypothesized that a vote of counselor educators would urge the development of preparation program-approval methods that do not tie them to the NCATE structure. Accreditation procedures are expensive and time consuming, however, which probably explains the counseling profession's lack of a satisfactory method up to this time.

In summary, this article has identified a problem: counselors lack credentialing methods that meet their needs for gaining credence outside of the schools. It is suggested that the lack of a clear identity, including a focused philosophical base and the clear designation of functions, underlies the problem of establishing effective credentialing processes. While this fuzzy identity may have facilitated change and adaptive characteristics during the period of high societal demand, it is inadequate for establishing solid credentialing practices during periods of limited resources and greater competition. Exposure of the issues and active debate within the profession may result in a plan of action that will clarify the identity and enhance the credentialing process.

P&G

References

- Dudley, G., & Ruff, E. School counselor certification: A study of current requirements. *School Counselor*, 1970, 17, 304-311.
- Hill, G. E. The profession and standards for counselor education. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 1967, 6, 130-136.
- Jones, L. K. A national survey of the program and enrollment characteristics of counselor education programs. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 1976, 15, 166-176.
- Loughary, J.; Stripling, R.; & Fitzgerald, P. (Eds.). *Counseling, a growing profession*. Washington, D.C.: APGA, 1965.
- McAlees, D., & Schumacher, B. Toward a new professionalism: Certification and accreditation. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 1975, 18, 160-165.
- Sweeney, T. J., & Sturdevant, A. D. Licensure in the helping professions: Anatomy of an issue. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 1974, 52, 575-580.
- Van Hoose, W. H., & Pietrofesa, J. J. (Eds.). *Counseling and guidance in the twentieth century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.

Copyright of Personnel & Guidance Journal is the property of American Counseling Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.