American Counseling Association
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FACT SHEET

LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELORS

Overview

Professional counselors are master's or doctoral-level mental health service providers, licensed by states to provide assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental health and substance use disorders to individuals, families and groups[1].

A professional counselor can pursue one of two career tracks:

Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs): Clinicians who provide direct behavioral health services in community, healthcare, educational, criminal legal and private practice settings.

Counselor Educators: Doctoral-level professionals who teach, supervise, mentor and prepare future counselors in graduate counseling programs while advancing the profession through research and leadership. Counselor educators are typically required to hold a current or prior professional counseling license (LPC or equivalent) and maintain clinical experience relevant to their teaching and supervision responsibilities.

Education and Training

All states require professional counselors to complete a master's degree or higher in counseling from an accredited institution, including coursework and 2,000-4,000 hours of supervised clinical training that prepares them for professional counseling practice.

A graduate counseling program may be accredited by one of the following national accrediting bodies:

- **The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP)** is an independent agency recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to accredit master's degree programs in counseling and related education programs. CACREP accredited master's degree programs must consist of a minimum of 60 semester credit hours of coursework.
- **The Masters in Psychology and Counseling Accreditation Council (MPCAC)** is a U.S. programmatic accrediting organization that evaluates master's-level programs in psychology, counseling and related fields. MPCAC accredited master's degree programs must consist of a minimum of 60 semester credit hours of coursework.

[1] Choosing a Career in Counseling

Licensure Process

After earning a master's or doctoral degree in counseling, graduates interested in becoming a LPC must meet state licensure requirements, which typically include passing a national counseling examination and completing 2,000-4,000 hours of supervised clinical training requirements. Depending on the state, applicants may be required to pass one of the following examinations:

- **National Counselor Examination (NCE):** a standardized national exam administered by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) that assesses foundational knowledge and skills required for entry-level professional counseling practice, including counseling theory, human development, assessment, ethics and professional practice.
- **National Clinical Mental Health Counseling Examination (NCMHCE):** a clinical simulation-based exam administered by NBCC that assesses applied clinical decision-making in counseling practice. This exam evaluates competencies in assessment, diagnosis, treatment planning, interventions, and ethical practice.

After completing the licensure process, within the U.S., several different titles are used to identify professional counselors. Although the counseling profession has endorsed LPC as the recommended title, the following are the most common:

- Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)
- Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC)
- Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC)
- Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC)
- Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor (LCMHC)
- Licensed Mental Health Practitioner (LMHP)

Some states may also require obtaining an associate license, which is often required for applicants who have met the education and exam requirements but have not yet met the supervised experience requirement. Examples of such titles include Licensed Associate Counselor (LAC), Licensed Professional Counselor Associate (LPCA), Licensed Graduate Professional Counselor (LGPC), counselor-in-training and clinical resident[2].

Counseling Impact

- LPCs are the second largest group in the behavioral health workforce after licensed clinical social workers.
- LPCs' specialties include clinical mental health counseling, school counseling, career counseling, marriage and family therapy and addiction counseling.
- LPCs provide services to millions of individuals annually across the mental health continuum, in settings including Head Start and early childhood programs, P-12 schools, colleges and universities, outpatient counseling agencies, private practice, hospitals and medical centers, residential treatment centers, corrections and mobile crisis units.

[2] Licensure FAQs for Professional Counseling