20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling: The New Consensus Definition of Counseling

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Abstract

With the promulgation of the 20/20 consensus definition of counseling, there is finally profession-wide clarity as to what it means to engage in professional counseling. This article describes the development and discusses the implications of the definition: *Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals*. The 20/20 consensus definition of counseling has been endorsed by 29 major counseling organizations.

Keywords: counseling, definition, 20/20, consensus, professional identity

20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling: The New Consensus Definition of Counseling

For well over half a decade, the counseling profession has been actively planning its future through the initiative *20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling*. 20/20, as it is often referred to in abbreviated form, was cited as "the largest gathering of counseling organizations in history" (Kennedy, 2008, p. 42). Currently involving 31 participating organizations (a complete list is available at www.counseling.org/20-20/orgs.aspx), 20/20 promulgated the historic *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession*, which established the core set of principles that unify the various membership, certifying, accrediting, and honor society groups within the profession of counseling. Kaplan and Gladding (2011) provided a history of the development of 20/20 and detailed the development of the principles.

This article presents the second historic achievement of *20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling*: the consensus definition of counseling. We describe the Delphi process used to develop the definition and discuss the implications of having established a profession-wide description of professional counseling to be used with clients, the public, and legislators.

Background

When *20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling* first began, the delegates generated a list of 22 issues to address that would advance the future of professional counseling (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011, p. 371). The list was grouped into seven areas: strengthening identity; presenting ourselves as one profession; improving public perception/recognition and advocating for professional issues; creating licensure portability; expanding and promoting the research base of professional counseling; focusing on students and prospective students; and promoting client welfare and advocacy. These areas provided the framework for the *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession*. The first three (strengthening identity; presenting ourselves as one

profession; and improving public perception/recognition and advocating for professional issues) focused on unifying and promoting professional counseling, and the delegates identified one of the 22 issues as critical to all three of these areas: *The counseling profession should develop a clear definition of counseling for the public*. Therefore, after the promulgation of the *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession* the delegates decided that the next project would be to develop a definition of counseling that all professional counselors and counseling organizations could use with external audiences.

Although there are numerous scholarly definitions of counseling in the literature, the purpose of this initiative was not to critique or reconcile these representations that are intended to guide and communicate within the professional and scholarly communities of counseling or to develop a formal professional scope of practice statement for the counseling profession. Rather, the 20/20 delegates intended to derive a new, consensus-based definition suitable for communicating with external constituencies. As such, the focus was on developing a concise definition of counseling that could be easily understood by those without a professional background in counseling.

Process

During the development of the consensus definition of counseling, *20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling* had 30 participating organizations (a 31st organization, the National Rehabilitation Counseling Association, was added shortly after the completion of the definition). In keeping with the rules established for 20/20 (see Kaplan & Gladding, 2011, p. 368), the Oversight Committee was charged with designing a process that would result in a definition of counseling endorsed by at least 90% of voting delegates[1] and 90% of participating organizations.

[1] By the rules established for 20/20, only participating organizations that have endorsed the *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession* - and thus acknowledged that they are part of the counseling profession - have

This task presented quite a challenge for the Oversight Committee and posed the conundrum: How do you get delegates representing over two dozen counseling constituencies from different specialties, member bases, and turfs to agree on one definition of counseling? The answer lay in the Delphi method.

After observation of the extensive discussions conducted to define the principles that would be used to guide the professional development of counseling, it became clear that the nature of the process selected by the Oversight Committee to determine the definition of counseling would play a major role in the success of the project. The process selected would have to be capable of marrying opinions of diverse parties in such a manner that the process would be seen as transparent and able to capture the consensus of the group. It must also be conducted in an unbiased manner that minimized issues of dominance, group-think, or intense confrontation.

The Delphi method was identified as a method that effectively facilitates group consensus, because it allows for statistical analysis of responses to demonstrate transparency of group opinion, while permitting controlled feedback to the group in addition to providing for cycles of ongoing expert reconsideration and correction of the group opinion (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). The Delphi method was applied in a variety of contexts in the social sciences, education, and policy, particularly in instances where complex problems were addressed and expert opinion was divided (Stone Fish & Busby, 1996). Many approaches to the Delphi method were utilized in which the number of rounds, question format and rules, and structure of the panel of experts vary (Boberg & Morris Khoo, 1992). Most commonly however, the development and

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voice and may actively participate in discussions and votes on subsequent initiatives. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has not endorsed the statement of principles (see Kaplan & Gladding, p. 370). So while continuing to be a participating organization, ASCA did not have voice in developing the consensus definition of counseling.

administration of a series of three to five rounds of questionnaires based on expert responses to the important question or problem are used where the development and administration of the questionnaires are intertwined (Ludwing, 1997).

The Delphi method was developed in the 1940s by the RAND Corporation as a systematic means for gathering expert opinions about complex issues or problems where there are not verifiable, evidenced based solutions and initially was used to provide technical forecasts on such matters as the impact of potential nuclear war on the United States (Dalkey, Rourke, Lewis & Snyder, 1972; Sackman, 1975; Vazquez-Ramos, Leahy & Estrada-Hernandez, 2007). In essence, it provides for "informed group judgments…that are more reliable than individual judgment" (Adler & Ziglio, 1996, p. 15). Thus the characteristics of the Delphi method for permitting converging consensus was a good fit with the need of *20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling*.

The promulgation of the 20/20 consensus definition of counseling utilized a two-round Delphi study to identify conceptual elements through gathering and organizing the opinions of the delegates to the 20/20 initiative. These delegates were defined as experts on the topic of professionalization in the profession of counseling by virtue of their appointment to the 20/20 initiative by the 31 20/20 participating organizations.

Delphi Rounds

First round. To begin the Delphi process, the delegates organized into the same seven workgroups utilized for promulgating the *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession* (see Kaplan & Gladding, 2011, p. 369). Each workgroup was asked to use their expertise to develop a concise definition of counseling specifically geared for the public and

legislators. Two of the workgroups chose to submit an additional definition, so the Delphi process began with nine first round entries (see Table 1).

The delegates were then asked to use a five point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 2=*disagree*, 3=*neutral*, 4=*agree*, 5=*strongly agree*) to rate each of the nine first round definitions on six dimensions: the definition is brief; the definition is clear; the definition generalizes to all counseling specialties; the definition is geared toward the public; the definition is geared toward legislative advocacy; and the definition captures the imagination. All 29 of the delegates with voice submitted first round ratings, and Table 1 lists the resultant ranking, aggregated scores, means, and standard deviations for each first round entry.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

In addition to rating the nine first round entries, delegates were asked to list the most common terms that they viewed as occurring across all first round definitions. Eighteen terms were identified with *wellness*, *empower*, and *professional* cited most frequently (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Second round. For round two of the Delphi, each of the seven workgroups was asked to create a completely new definition of counseling utilizing the most highly ranked definitions from round one (the three listed in Table 1 with means greater than 19) and the most frequently cited common terms across the round one definitions (the five listed in Table 2 with a frequency count of 16 or greater). Each delegate then rated the second round definitions. The five point Likert scale utilized in the first round was used to assess seven dimensions: the six dimensions rated in round one plus an extra dimension – whether the definition adequately incorporated the most frequently occurring words identified in round one (wellness, empower, professional, lifespan, and relationship). Twenty-seven of the delegates with voice (93%) submitted second

round ratings and Table 3 lists the resultant ranking, aggregated scores, means, and standard deviations. Interestingly, the three top ranked definitions in the second round were all composed of 21 words or less.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Finalizing the Definition

After the second round Delphi ratings, one definition stood out as the most highly ranked: Counseling involves professional relationships designed to assist individuals, families and groups toward mental health, wellness, educational and career goals. Table 3 shows that this definition was a full 30 aggregate points above the next most highly rated entry and had an elevated mean that placed it well above the other six definitions.

A delegate meeting was then held on March 19, 2010 at the ACA conference in Pittsburgh to finalize the consensus definition of counseling. Twenty-four of the 29 delegates with voice (83%) were in attendance. Delegates were informed by the facilitator, Sam Gladding, that the Delphi process had led to a definition that stood out above the others (the definition in the paragraph above). As a result, they could either accept the definition or make discrete modifications; they could not make wholesale changes or start over again. After two hours of discussion, the delegates decided to add “empowers” and “diverse” to the definition in order to speak to the importance of diversity and social justice in the counseling profession. The delegates then adjusted the wording to finalize the definition: *Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.* A formal vote was held and all delegates present voted unanimously to approve this consensus definition of counseling. The delegates also unanimously approved sending the definition to all participating organizations with a request for

endorsement, “with the understanding that this definition provides a basic statement and that all of the participating organizations are welcome to add statements clarifying the role of their particular specialty or area” (Kaplan, 2010, p. 2). The Appendix lists all voting delegates present at the March 19, 2010 meeting.

Organizational Endorsements

Following the Pittsburgh meeting, the consensus definition of counseling was sent to the participating organizations with a request for endorsement. Endorsement was received from 29 (94%) of the 31 entities:

- American Association of State Counseling Boards (AASCB)
- American College Counseling Association (ACCA)
- American Counseling Association (ACA)
- ACA Midwest Region (ACAMR)
- ACA North Atlantic Region (ACANAR)
- ACA Southern Region (ACASR)
- ACA Western Region (ACAWR)
- American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA)
- American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA)
- Association for Adult Development and Aging (AADA)
- Association for Assessment in Counseling and Education (AACE)
- Association for Counselors and Educators in Government (ACEG)
- Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES)
- Association for Creativity in Counseling (ACC)

- Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC)
- Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD)
- Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW)
- Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC)
- Chi Sigma Iota (CSI)
- Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC)
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)
- Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE)
- Counseling Association for Humanistic Education and Development (C-AHEAD) - now the Association for Humanistic Counseling (AHC)
- International Association of Addictions and Offender Counselors (IAAOC)
- International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC)
- National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC)
- National Career Development Association (NCDA)
- National Employment Counseling Association (NECA)
- National Rehabilitation Counseling Association (NRCA)

Two of the 31 entities involved in 20/20 (constituting 6% of participating organizations), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ), declined to endorse the consensus definition of counseling. In a December 10, 2010 letter from President Brian Law, ASCA stated three reasons for its lack of endorsement. First, ASCA felt that a major shortcoming of the definition was that it did not explain how the practice of

counseling is unique and distinct from other mental health professions. Second, ASCA took the position that, "there is no research to substantiate or support this definition." Finally, President Law stated that ASCA had its own definition of school counseling that the organization preferred and would continue to use.

Counselors for Social Justice declined to endorse the consensus definition of counseling because it felt that despite the inclusion of "empowers" and "diverse" in the definition, there was an inadequate focus on social justice. In an e-mail from CSJ President-Elect Michael D'Andrea, Counselors for Social Justice expressed, "strong disappointment and frustration that the 20/20 [definition] did not explicitly include statements about multicultural competence, social justice, and advocacy." (M. D'Andrea, personal communication, July 7, 2010).

Dissemination

After approval of the consensus definition of counseling by the participating organizations, all 20/20 entities were asked to post the definition on their website and to promote it on an ongoing basis. In addition, the definition was sent to all 53 counselor licensure boards with a request to adopt and endorse the definition of counseling for their particular state or jurisdiction. The definition also was sent out to more than 250 counselor education programs listed in *Counselor Preparation: Programs, Faculty, Trends* (Schweiger, Henderson, McCaskill, Clawson, & Collins, 2012) for use in classes; graduate counseling programs were asked to infuse the new consensus definition of counseling throughout their curriculum.

Finally, the consensus definition of counseling was sent to over three dozen book and test publishers with the announcement that *Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals* is now the consensus definition of the counseling profession and should be used as

such in all books, journals, and test manuals. The focus of all of the dissemination efforts listed above was to standardize the profession of counseling by presenting a consensus definition of counseling as was the original intent of the 20/20 initiative.

Implications

As can be seen from reading the process section of this article, formulating a consensus definition of counseling from the major organizations in the counseling profession was both an empirically-based and arduous endeavor. Delegates worked for almost two years to come up with a definition with a number of months passing for executive councils of these groups to discuss and endorse the proposed definition. The result of this endeavor has significant implications.

First, having 29 out of 31 major counseling associations agree on the definition of counseling is historic. Counseling associations traditionally were divided in their views of the profession and have worked more as a confederation than a federation (Sheeley, 2002, 2008). The shift of associations working together to advance the counseling profession is notable and unparalleled in the recent history of the profession of counseling (Bradley & Cox, 2001).

Second, for the first time ever diverse counseling associations came to a consensus over what counseling is; that is, what counselors do. Prior to the 20/20 effort, definitions of counseling were constructed in political arenas or were simply formulated by authors of textbooks or articles (Nassar-McMillan & Niles, 2011; Sweeney, 2001). The result was often wordy, unwieldy descriptions of counseling that reflected the perspective of a particular group. In addition, the characterizations of counseling were often inaccurate, and many needed substantial explanation.

Third, the 20/20 definition of counseling was significant in that it came from the aggregate leadership in the profession of counseling and not from external parties who wished to define or limit the activities of counselors. While there may not have been any ill intent of other groups - such as online dictionaries or related helping professions - it is important that the counseling profession is seen as the central authority in articulating the essence of what it is that professional counselors do.

Finally, by creating a 21 word definition of counseling, counseling associations demonstrated to their constituents and the public that what they do is understandable and comprehensive. The definition, while pithy, is also inclusive. From reading the 20/20 definition, consumers as well as professionals can get a sense that counseling is a professional relationship that is meant to empower diverse individuals throughout the lifespan to live meaningful and healthy lives.

The adoption of a consensus definition of counseling is a critical event for the professional counseling community. However, it is only a first step toward a clearly organized and coherent professionalization agenda. In terms of defining the profession, this general consensus definition was not intended to be a formal professional scope of practice statement for counseling. Such a more specific and technical definition is utilized within professional and regulatory operations, such as by licensure boards and managed care organizations. The 20/20 group made an active distinction between this consensus definition intended for the general public and the technical professional definition such as contained in a scope of practice. The consensus definition is a strong foundation for future efforts to better determine the full range of elements, such as a unified scope of practice statement, necessary to address such critical professionalization issues such as licensure portability.

The 20/20 consensus definition of counseling gained visibility in the relatively short period since its promulgation. The definition appeared on the websites of professional counselors (e.g., http://figtreecounseling.com/2010/06/02/defnining-our-profession/ https://www.davidashburner.com/FAQs.html#What_is_Counseling http://www.cedarridgecounselling.ca/counselling.htm); professional counseling organization websites (e.g. http://www.ohiocounseling.org & http://www.csi-net.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=1143); commercial websites (e.g. http://www.allpsychologyschools.com/psychology-careers/counseling/counseling-career & http://www.ehow.com); and university websites (e.g. http://education.ua.edu/departments/esprmc/counselor-education). It is being written about and promoted by counseling organizations (e.g. Francis, 2011); used in state legislative advocacy efforts (H. Tustison, President, Idaho Counseling Association, personal communication, June 26, 2012); and included in state licensing board public presentations (A. Thomas, Executive Director, Arkansas Board of Examiners in Counseling, personal communication, February 2, 2012). Critically, the 20/20 consensus definition of counseling is now appearing as a standard in counseling textbooks (e.g. Erford, 2013, Gladding, 2013).

There is evidence that the definition is being accepted by the counseling profession. A survey of 1,334 counselor educators published in the *Journal of Counseling & Development* found strong support for the 20/20 consensus definition of counseling (Reiner, Dobmeier, & Hernández, 2013). Reiner et al. concluded, "the consensus definition of counseling carr[ies] a strong message urging unified accountability of everyone in the profession to achieve recognition of professional counseling" (p.175).

Summary

One of the initial projects of *20/20: The Future of Counseling* was to craft a succinct yet comprehensive definition of counseling. The rationale behind this effort was based on the fact that if professional counselors, in a non-political atmosphere, did not come to a consensus on what counseling was then others outside the profession would define counseling most likely in limiting terms and to the detriment of counselors. In addition, counselors needed to unite in regard to legislative and consumer initiatives and attract bright and caring individuals into the field.

Over a two-year span, the delegates from the most representative 30 counseling association in the United States worked together to formulate a 21 word definition of counseling that 28 (and later a 29th) of the associations accepted. The effort was unprecedented and moved the profession of counseling forward. For "*counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals."*

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Table 1

First Round Delphi Results

Entry	Rank	Aggregate Score[a,b]	M[a,c]	SD
Counseling: a profession assisting people toward lifelong mental health, educational, and career goals.	1	563	19.4	5.7
Counseling - helping people deal with life's challenges throughout the lifespan!	2	562	19.4	5.4
Professional counselors create purposeful relationships designed to assist and empower individuals, families, and groups to address life challenges.	3	557	19.2	4.9
Using evidence-based practices, counseling helps people via prevention, education, and treatment, promoting wellness throughout the lifespan.	4	514	17.7	4.7
Counseling is a process that utilizes a professional relationship to empower others, while promoting wellness.	5	494	17.0	3.7
A professional counselor is a graduate degreed professional trained to work with individuals, groups, and families in various settings. Professional counselors assist clients of all ages with normal developmental, career, and relational concerns as well as those who suffer from serious mental health problems using evidence-based and best practices to provide ethical, multiculturally sensitive care.	6	487	16.8	4.9
Counseling is a professional relationship through which credentialed and regulated counselors assist and empower individuals, families, and groups, and communities to prevent and/or address life challenges; foster human development; and advocate for wellness, human dignity, and social justice in a healthy society.	7	481	16.6	5.7
Professional counseling is a humanistic and ethical practice that occurs in the context of relationships that promote human development.	8	442	15.2	4.1

Counseling is the application of mental health, psychological, human development, or family systems principles and interventions to help clients adjust their thoughts, feelings, or actions in order to address issues of personal growth, wellness, career development, or pathology.	9	403	13.9	5.4

Note. [a]Higher aggregate scores and means reflect more positive ratings. [b] Possible range = 174 to 870. [c] Possible range = 6 to 30. $n = 29$.

Table 2

First Round Term Frequency Counts

Term	Frequency[a]
Wellness	20
Empower	20
Professional	19
Lifespan	16
Relationship	16
Develop	14
Challenge	10
Human	10
Family	9
Group	9
Individual	8
Mental Health	7
Prevent	6
Help	6
Evidence	5
Educate	5
Career	4
Culture	3

Note. [a]The number of delegates listing the term as commonly occurring within the first round definitions.

Table 3

Second Round Delphi Results

Entry	Rank	Aggregate Score[a,b]	M[a,c]	SD
Counseling involves professional relationships designed to assist individuals, families and groups toward mental health, wellness, educational and career goals.	1	651	24.1	6.8
Counseling — a profession that empowers people to make healthy choices when dealing with life's challenges.	2	618	22.9	6.4
An educational and/or therapeutic process empowering and assisting people toward well-being and lifelong mental health, academic, and career goals.	3	611	22.6	5.5
Counseling is a professional relationship, established by professional counselors, with individuals, families, and groups, to assist and empower others to address challenges in education, career development, mental health, and wellness across the lifespan.	4	609	22.6	6.5
Professional counseling is the process through which purposeful relationships are created which assist and empower people to address life challenges, attain mental health, achieve educational and career goals, and establish and maintain wellness throughout the lifespan.	5	598	22.1	4.7
Counseling: a professional relationship with individuals, groups, or families, from diverse cultures that advocates for mental health and wellness by fostering	6	578	21.4	6.3

their development through education, clinical counseling, and career guidance across the lifespan.				
Professional counseling is a process that advocates for and empowers others to deal successfully with life's decisions in a society that fosters human dignity and wellness for all.	7	541	20.0	5.9

Note. [a]Higher aggregate scores and means reflect more positive ratings. [b]Possible range = 189 to 945. [c] Possible range = 7 to 35. $n = 27$.

Appendix

Voting Organizational Delegates in Attendance at the March, 2010 Approval Meeting

Organization	Delegate
AACE	Brad Erford
AADA	Chris Moll
AASCB	Barry Mascari
ACA	Francene Haymon
ACAMR	Jean Underfer-Babalis
ACANAR	John Parkman
ACASR	Adriana McEachern
ACC	Shane Haberstroh
ACCA	Perry Francis
ALGBTIC	Ed Cannon
AMCD	Kent Butler
AMHCA	Linda Barclay
ARCA	Caroline Wilde
ASERVIC	Mike Robinson
ASGW	Burt Bertram
CACREP	Carol Bobby
C-AHEAD	Cathy Malchiodi
CORE	Linda Shaw
CRCC	Cindy Chapman

CSJ	Rhonda M. Bryant
IAAOC	Laura Veach
NBCC	Thomas Clawson
NCDA	Judith Hoppin
NECA	Cheryl Sessions (substituting for Robert Chope)

Note. Oversight committee members at the time of the unanimous affirmative delegate vote were: Marcheta Evans, Samuel Gladding (Facilitator), Chris Greene, David Kaplan (Administrative Coordinator), Lynn Linde, Colleen Logan, Barry Mascari, and Vilia Tarvydas.