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Suggested APA style reference:

D'Andrea, L. M., & Liu, L. (2009, March). *The CACREP standards: How much do students know?* Paper based on a program presented at the American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, Charlotte, NC.

The CACREP Standards: How Much Do Students Know?

Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, March 19-23, Charlotte, North Carolina.

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The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredits graduate level counseling and educational programs. CACREP's stated goal is to "provide leadership and to promote excellence in professional preparation through... (1) encouraging and promoting the continuing development and improvement of preparation programs, and (2) preparing counseling and related professionals to provide service consistent with the ideal of optimal human development (www.CACREP.org). CACREP has been in existence for the past 28 years and currently accredits over 500 programs (Culbreth, 2008).

Members of the CACREP board work diligently to keep the accreditation standards high and to keep them current with the changing conditions in our society. For example, they have recently developed a new set of standards (to take effect in 2009) to include emergency preparedness as one of the areas of competency for accredited programs. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, counselors held about 635,000 jobs in 2006 and project a 21% increase in counselor employment between 2006 and 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Keeping abreast of the changing needs of our society for counselor competence is crucial to the success of both CACREP accreditation and to the field of counseling.

Benefits of graduating from a CACREP accredited program, among others, include preference from employers to hire applicants from accredited programs (WorldWideLearn, n.d.); state requirements for graduation from an accredited program before granting licensure; more defined professional identity (Urofsky, 2008); and higher ethical standards.

Having established the need for more and more qualified counselors, the dedication of CACREP to the counseling field over the past 28 years, and the benefit to students of graduating from CACREP accredited programs, the question arises, do students apply to counseling programs with any of this in mind? Do students consider accreditation standards when they apply and do the standards and the students' professional goals match? To date, little attention has been given to accreditation from the students' perspective. Do the efforts of accreditation bodies such as CACREP benefit programs

and the field of counseling independent of students' knowledge about accreditation or what it means for them? In times of shrinking budgets and the increasing need for counselors, it seems a fair question to ask. If students have no knowledge of the standards a program has for ensuring the quality of their education, what role does accreditation play in drawing students to programs that set quality standards?

In an attempt to answer these questions, 87 personal statements of applicants to one CACREP counseling program were studied for mention of language contained in the eight core areas of the CACREP standards. The purpose of this analysis was to assess to what extent applicants to the program were aware of CACREP accreditation and the accompanying standards in order to evaluate the fit between the goals of CACREP and the goals of the applicants.

Method

The student-letters were written by applicants from the 2005-06 and 2007-08 academic years. Text analysis was done to determine the presence and frequency of words and concepts contained in the CACREP standards as a way of gauging the extent to which students applying to a counseling program are aware of the core competencies of the counseling profession (Carley, 1993).

The majority of applicants were female (77%) and were applying to the Marriage and Family Therapy program (68%). The remaining applicants were to the school counseling program and the community-counseling program (30% and 2% respectively). Of the applicants that responded to the ethnicity question on the application, the majority described themselves as white (86%). Thirty-six percent described themselves as African American (4%), Native American (2%), Hispanic (2%), or other (2%), and 4% declined to answer. The mean Quantitative GRE score for the sample was 487.27, the mean verbal GRE score was 451.52, and the average undergraduate GPA was 3.4.

Procedure

Eighty-seven letters of intent served as the sample for the present study. These letters are required from each student upon application to the department. All identifying information was removed prior to analysis. Each letter was photocopied, then scanned into a word processing program and merged into a single document. The letters were then loaded into MAXQDA, a text analysis program, and served as the corpus for analysis. Each major word in each of the eight CACREP standards was entered as the search code and the frequency of occurrence was recorded as the number of "hits." For example, for standard VIII, Human Growth and Development, item b, the following words, indicated by underline, were used as search criteria: "... theories of learning and personality development, including current understandings about neurobiological behavior...."

Additional analysis consisted of reading through each letter to identify words and sentences that represented accreditation in order to verify the classification of the words into specific standards (O'Dell & Weideman, 1993).

Results

The lexical search for CACREP-related language revealed that no applicants specifically mentioned CACREP, but that the language associated with some of the standards fit well with student expectations (see Table I).

Table I. Lexical Word Search Results

CACREP Core Foundation Area	No. of Hits	Lexical Search Words Found and Frequency
I. Professional Orientation and Ethical Practice	23	advocate (9), licensure (6), certification (5), collaboration (1), client success (1), ethics (1)
II. Social and Cultural Diversity	17	multicultural beliefs (15), multicultural issues (1), cultural diversity (1)
III. Human Growth and Development	109	treatment (43), crisis (18), prevention (14), intervention (13), disability (7), addictions (4), human behavior (4), addictive behavior (2), lifespan (1), trauma (1), psychopathology (1), abnormal behavior (1)
IV. Career Development	7	career counseling (3), career planning (2), career decision (1), career development (1)
V. Helping Relationships	16	private practice (6), counseling skills (5), crisis intervention (3), interviewing (1), suicide prevention (1)
VI. Group Work	23	leadership (13), group counseling (6), group dynamics (2), evaluation (2)
VII. Assessment	11	assessment (10), standardized test (1)
VIII. Research and Program Evaluation	3	program evaluation (2), needs assessment (1)

Discussion

Applicants seemed to address the specific standards to a degree, even if they did not specifically mention CACREP or accreditation. For example, it appears that standards related to the area of human growth and development, Standard III, fit students' ideas about what is required to become a counselor as evidenced by it having the most hits. This suggests that the standard matches student expectations well and that they expect to learn about the critical areas of human development in their program. The same appeared to be true for Standard I, Professional Orientation and Ethical Practice and Standard VI, Group Work. In describing their professional goals, applicants mentioned leadership and

the importance of advocating for their clients, which is consistent with the intent of the standards. They seemed to be aware of the importance of leadership and counseling skills to their practice, however, research, literature, theories, and stages related to group process were not mentioned. The fact that only one applicant mentioned ethics was also concerning.

Both Career Development, Standard IV, and Social and Cultural Diversity, Standard II, were disappointingly low in terms of how few references there were to the language of multiculturalism as it relates to understanding career development, prejudice, discrimination, and social justice. Giving students the benefit of the doubt, perhaps beginning students see the counseling process as an isolated activity rather than in a wider societal context. If this is the case, then the standards take on even more importance in terms of ensuring that accredited programs include these topics in the curriculum.

Language related to Standard V, Helping Relationships, was present, but not as prevalent; expected given that virtually all applicants indicated they wanted to become professional counselors.

Overall, students did refer to language contained in the standards that address direct client contact, but did not include references to standards that address supporting activity related to counseling, namely Assessment, Standard VII, and Research and Program Evaluation, Standard VIII. Only one person mentioned needs assessment or standardized testing and very few used language related to program evaluation. This is puzzling and disturbing in light of the heavy emphasis on standardized testing that school counselors will encounter, the increasing demand for accountability, and the required diagnostic justification for insurance reimbursement.

In addition to specific language related to the standards, the words *CACREP*, *standards*, *professional standards*, and *accreditation*, were added to the lexical search list. The only word mentioned was *standards* (6 hits). In all cases, the word standard(s) was used in a context other than accreditation (e.g., athletic or academic standards). More interestingly, when students indicated in their letter that they had researched different counseling programs before selecting the current one, they still did not mention accreditation. The following paragraph is typical:

I am applying to this specific program because I am familiar with and value the philosophy of the [program]. More specifically, I am confident that with the high standards and exemplary practices in the [program] I will gain a holistic and sound foundation of knowledge in the area of Counseling.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings of this study are limited to one institution, but it seems reasonable to assume that students applying to most CACREP accredited programs have the same unfamiliarity with the specific standards. The question of how much students know about CACREP and its standards has not been raised before, perhaps because the focus of accreditation has been on requiring programs, faculty, and institutions to create high

standards rather than educating students about what to expect from professional counseling programs. If CACREP accreditation and the esteem that has come to be associated with it is to continue to grow, both the accrediting body and the institutions that it accredits must work to inform potential students, as well as current students, about the benefits of graduating from an accredited counseling program.

Admission committees generally evaluate transcripts, GRE scores, GPAs, letters of intent, and letters of reference when making admission decisions (Midgett, 2005). The cognitive attributes of students are relatively easy to assess with test scores and grades; however, it might be important to the growth and sustainability of CACREP to require prospective students to demonstrate understanding of the standards that govern the program to which they are applying.

Students say in their application letters that they want to be counselors, but appear to have little awareness, beyond their desire to help people, about the specific knowledge and skills that make a quality, ethical counselor. Perhaps students believe that professional counseling involves little else than being a good listener. In the interest of good counselor education, it might be time to require that students demonstrate knowledge about the standards and competencies that will be required of them. CACREP board members have worked hard to delineate these specific areas of competence and students should know about them.

Future research should focus on ways to inform both prospective and current students, the academic community, and other stakeholders about accreditation and the standards that make accreditation so valuable. Some ideas that might be studied in the future include the following:

- Increase student familiarity with specific areas of focus by including the language of the 8 standards in all recruitment materials.
- Emphasize program commitment to each core area by asking faculty to tie course assignments to specific CACREP standards.
- Raise attention to the ancillary standards such as research and assessment by creating course assignments that reflect positive learning outcomes related to these specific standards.
- Increase student buy-in by requesting program applicants to demonstrate knowledge about accreditation prior to admittance.
- Create a culture of high standards by requiring incoming faculty to demonstrate knowledge of CACREP standards and how they will address them in coursework.
- Boost public confidence in accredited programs by informing schools and local agencies about the high standards being used to train the counselors they hire.
- Increase institutional commitment to accreditation by tracking student placement in high-quality jobs upon graduation.

In order to maintain the desire for accreditation and the high standards that CACREP has set, the dialogue between the accrediting bodies and institutions must include students. The amount of time and expense required to prepare for accreditation visits can

remove accreditation as an option for some programs. Educating students and prospective students about the value of selecting an accredited program, and the dangers of not selecting one, might make students demand the high standards that CACREP accreditation requires and help to continue the process of graduating quality professional counselors in a time when they are needed more than ever.

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