



## The Preparation and Role of College Counselors

Brian Van Brunt, Ed.D. and the ACCA PAPA Committee

### Why Do College Students Need Counseling?

Students come to counseling for a variety of reasons. They may be experiencing trouble with their appetite or sleep, adjustment to a new environment, or concentration problems. They may experience mood swings, difficulty with motivation, or trouble interacting appropriately with others. College is a time of new experiences and testing limits; often it is also a time when students may experience difficulties with alcohol or drug abuse (American College Health Association, 2009; Center for the Study of Collegiate Mental Health, 2009; Gallagher, 2008, 2009; Kadison & Digeronimo, 2004; Rando & Barr, 2009).

Most counseling services that college students receive are short term in nature. Some students come in to talk about their problems and immediately feel better. They are able to return to their relationships and coursework with a new sense of vitality and energy. Other students remain connected to counseling centers for a longer period of time to help manage larger mental health disorders (such as anxiety or depression). Some universities limit sessions and encourage counselors to refer students to an outpatient provider for extended services.

### Why Are Counselors on Campus Important?

College is a very unique time in a person's life. Some students are young and away from home for the first time. Other students are going back to school with familial responsibilities. Regardless of students' reasons for attending college, lessons learned and obstacles overcome can provide opportunities for emotional growth and maturity. The college experience can also include issues and events that bring about overwhelming stress and psychological problems that affect the personal life and academic performance of the student. Counseling services are designed to assist students with both addressing difficulties encountered and promoting greater overall wellness.

### Who Can Be a College Counselor?

There are many different academic and clinical backgrounds for college counselors. Graduate counseling programs require a bachelor's degree with an emphasis in the behavioral sciences. The following summary covers some of the major academic areas. Most college counselors also pursue state licensure although some are able to work under appropriate supervision.

#### Education Credentials

The most common college counseling programs are housed in psychology departments, but others are included in social work, student affairs, and religious studies departments. Departments award different degrees.

*M.A., M.Ed., M.S. (Master of Arts, Master of Education, or Master of Science, etc.), Ed.S. (Education Specialist).* Master's degrees in counseling will reflect one of these credentials depending on the university (department) attended.

Most master's counseling programs require 50-60 credit hours, an internship of one or two semesters, and can be

completed in two years. During this internship, students meet with clients under the supervision of an experienced licensed professional counselor (LPC). The Education Specialist degree (Ed.S.) is awarded after the completion of a master's degree and requires advanced training and coursework in the field.

*M.S.W. (Master of Science in Social Work).* Some college counseling centers employ social workers. Generally they have a master's degree in social work and have done an internship before earning their M.S.W. Social workers provide both clinical and case management services.

*Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), Ed.D. (Doctor of Education), Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology).* These credentials are often possessed by professional counselors, licensed counseling psychologists, and in some cases, clinical psychologists. A doctorate degree requires the completion of 70-100 credit hours and a dissertation. A doctoral degree offers increased opportunities for greater salary, increased administrative responsibility, and prestige.

Both psychology and professional counseling doctoral students are required to complete an internship in a university or college counseling center to gain practical knowledge about college students and the general operations of a counseling center. Professional counselors and psychologists are required to be licensed in their state of employment; however, if they are not yet licensed, they can still see clients if they are supervised by a licensed professional. Supervision required for counselors and psychologists lasts for 1-2 years beyond the earning of their doctorate degree. The Doctor of Psychology is a practitioner's psychology doctorate degree that emphasizes training in counseling skills and assessment above conducting research.

#### Program Accreditation: CACREP

Many counseling programs are accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; [www.cacrep.org](http://www.cacrep.org)). CACREP standards are implemented to insure the highest quality counselor preparation.

#### Licenses and Certification

*LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor), LPCC (Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor).* These credentials are granted by the state where the professional resides. Although the requirements to obtain an LPC or LPCC (these designations are the same in meaning, states have adopted different letters) differ from state to state, most licensure boards require a specified number of direct and indirect client contact hours and supervision hours. An advanced degree in counseling or counseling psychology is required.

*NCC (National Certified Counselor).* The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC; [www.nbcc.org](http://www.nbcc.org)), an affiliate of the American Counseling Association (ACA; [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org)), awards this credential. This national certification is earned after the counselor meets specified requirements, provides proof of

counseling hours completed, and passes the National Counselor Exam (NCE).

The American College Counseling Association (ACCA; [www.collegecounseling.org](http://www.collegecounseling.org)) is an organization of diverse mental health professionals from the fields of counseling, psychology, and social work who work primarily in college counseling centers. Our common focus is helping students within higher education settings. A growing number of community college counseling professionals comprise the second largest group within ACCA. Counselor educators and supervisors are also included. Members hold primarily a master's or doctoral degree.

## What Do College Counselors Do?

### Counseling

Counselor is a common title for student affairs professionals. However, this title does not necessarily mean that the individual is qualified to help students with personal, career, or academic issues. Counselors who offer financial aid advice or work in admissions offices are generally not associated with ACCA.

The definition of counseling and psychotherapy is difficult and changing. Some argue for a diagnostic-based approach focused on a problem/illness and offering treatment. Others argue for a mentoring/guidance role to help individuals grow and develop. As defined by ACA (2010), "counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals."

### Consulting and Prevention Programming

College counselors engage in consulting and prevention programming. The degree to which they offer these services varies by college or university.

Consulting services are offered to help faculty, staff, administrators, and parents better understand developmental and mental health issues and how they impact the college and students. These services are often provided without the knowledge of a specific student's name, as the person asking for the consultation often is concerned about the student being "reported" or angry about being discussed.

Staffing for prevention services varies. Some counseling centers have a full time person dedicated to outreach and prevention while others share the load among staff. Prevention programming can involve screening days on issues related to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and alcohol dependence. Counselors often present to various faculty groups and classes on issues related to mental illness, wellness, or how to refer a student to counseling services. Prevention training is also offered by many counseling centers. This includes specific training to police officers, resident advisors, orientation leaders, and student leaders (e.g., athletic, Greek life, activities).

### Assessing Risk

In recent years, college counselors have also been asked to assist in assessing students for suicidal intent or for potential threat to the greater college community. Counselors are most commonly asked to assess students for suicide risk based on their behavior. This may come as a referral from a Dean of Students, residential life staff member, or from a campus Behavioral

Intervention Team (BIT; Deisinger, Randazzo, O'Neil, Savage, 2008; Sokolow et al., 2009).

A more controversial issue for college counselors is assessing a student's potential to harm others. Some counseling centers have dedicated resources and increased training in this specialized assessment area, while others have asserted that these referrals go beyond their scope of practice and are therefore referred to forensic counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists.

Information sharing is another controversial area. In the years following campus shootings, counselors are increasingly asked to participate on their campus BITs and share private and confidential information about their clients in order to protect the greater community. Administrators feel this level of information sharing will help them identify campus threats earlier. Clinicians express concern that this will make students less likely to share with them in session if there is no guarantee of privacy.

## What Are the Benefits of ACCA Membership

ACCA members receive the *Journal of College Counseling* biannually, the ability to apply for research grants and awards offered by the organization, and access to continuing education credit opportunities. Membership also includes admission to the ACCA-listserv which provides resources and discussion on a variety of college counseling topics from "what are best approaches to working with students engaged in self-injury" to "I have to present tomorrow on stress management--does anyone have a template I can start from?" Listserv responses are fast and provide diverse perspectives from around the country. An ACCA membership also includes access to our discussion forum containing handouts and presentations on a wide variety of topics. ACCA continues to grow offering yearly conferences starting in 2012 (Orlando; New Orleans in 2013).

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**Brian Van Brunt, EdD, is President of ACCA and Director of the Counseling and Testing Center at Western Kentucky University. ACCA Professional Advocacy & Public Awareness (PAPA) seeks to raise awareness of the value of counseling services on college campuses and promotes enhanced professionalism for college counselors (e.g., state/national certification/licensure, continuing education, and ethical practices).**

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