

Suggested APA style reference:

McCarthy, J., Thompson, A. J., & Fernandes, T. E. (2007, October). *Promoting professional development among students and professional counselors*. Paper based on a program presented at the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, Columbus, OH.

Promoting Professional Development Among Students and Professional Counselors

Paper based on a program presented at the 2007 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, October 11-14, Columbus, Ohio.

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Background

Continuing education and professional development are a necessity for mental health professionals. In particular, during the past few years, continuing education requirements have increased significantly (Rubel, Sobell, & Miller, 2000). In its Code of Ethics, the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2005) cited the need for continuing education for counselors. This section is due to the obligation of counselors to remain aware of current practices in their field (ACA, 2005; see also Rubel et al., 2000). Although distinct from counseling, the American Psychological Association (APA; APA Continuing Education Sponsor Approval System, 2005) shares this view of continuing education. Vitulano and Copeland (1980) spoke of “professional obsolescence,” which they believed would occur in the absence of continuing education (p. 891). Similarly, Hodgins, Murray, Donoghue, Judd, and Petts (2004) studied the professional development of mental health services (specifically for mood disorders) in rural areas of Australia, and noted that a lack of professional development can negatively affect such services provided to the public.

Furthermore, professional development is of particular interest to graduate students about to enter the profession. Busacca and Wester (2006) examined overall concerns of Master’s-level students going into Community and School Counseling and found that 83% of students labeled “professional development” as having considerable to great importance to them. Although the authors studied other concerns besides professional development, they concluded that, while academics and skills are dominant in graduate programs, many graduate students still feel uncertain about entering into the

work world.

Overall, professionals who have addressed professional development and continuing education in the literature have emphasized its significance. However, despite its apparent importance, research in this area has been scant. Of the literature available, even less is specifically devoted to the counseling profession, as the majority of the literature has centered on psychology.

Some of this literature has focused on the need for continuing education and professional development in the field of psychology (Cooper, Monarch, Serviss, Gordick, & Leonard, 2007; Lewinsohn & Pearlman, 1972; VandeCreek, Knapp, & Brace, 1990). Other articles focused on the need for continuing education for therapists in general (Jameson, Stadter, & Poulton, 2007). One article discussed the effects of continuing education training for professionals specific to a mental health facility (Wolkon, Peterson, & Gongla, 1982). Other articles pertained to the success of particular continuing education programs, such as ethics (Johnson, Brems, Warner, & Roberts, 2006) and practice with older adults (Qualls, Segal, Norman, Niederehe, & Gallagher-Thompson, 2002). Finally, the attitudes of psychologists concerning mandatory continuing education in Pennsylvania has also been examined (Sharkin & Plageman, 2003).

The literature is limited in regard to professional development and continuing education in other mental health fields, even though many professional counselors and psychologists are required to obtain continuing education credits to maintain licensure (Jameson et al., 2007; Rubel et al., 2000). Therefore, increased attention on the professional development and continuing education opportunities for counselors may be beneficial. With this point in mind, the purpose of this article is to outline the development of a center specific to the continuing education of professional counselors. This center—the Center for Counselor Training and Services of Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP)—offers continuing education and professional development workshops for professional school and community counselors, counselor educators, and graduate students. With the importance of continuing education and professional development in mind, this paper looks to increase the literature available for the counseling profession, particularly in assisting counselor educators in the development of a similar center in their respective department.

History and Development

The Center for Counselor Training and Services (CCTS) was created in the summer of 2005 after a series of seven successful one-day workshops starting in 2002. Topics from these initial workshops included play therapy, impact therapy, Motivational Interviewing, school safety, and reality therapy, and the attendance of these workshops ranged from 39 to 100 participants, with an average attendance of 64 participants. Since its formal inception, CCTS has organized three primary types of professional activities: one-day workshops solely organized by CCTS; co-sponsored events which involved collaboration with both university and area school and mental health associations; and, to a lesser extent, consultation presentations geared for specific school districts. Since 2002,

over 1,080 professional counselors and counselors-in-training have attended CCTS workshops.

The primary aim of CCTS is to “advance the knowledge base of undergraduate and graduate students as well as mental health professionals through the promotion and creation of professional trainings” (McCarthy, 2005). Its major audiences are area professional school and community counselors, counselor educators, Department of Counseling alumni, practicum/internship supervisors, and counseling students (both at IUP and surrounding institutions). Workshops are offered on campus and in the vicinity of the town in which the university is located as well as the Pittsburgh suburbs, where the University has a professional graduate center that offers school and community counseling programs. It is also of note that the location of the University is in a rural area where limited other mental health trainings are held.

CCTS is directed by a full-time faculty member in the Department of Counseling, and a graduate assistant primarily dedicated to CCTS is instrumental in coordinating its activities. CCTS receives no outside funding, unless the event is being financially co-sponsored by another university or outside entity, and this limitation has led to the cancellation of some planned workshops when the break-even financial mark was not reached.

A nine-person advisory board, consisting of area mental health professionals, Department alumni, University professionals, and a current Counseling student, meets once each semester to offer input regarding CCTS offerings and issues. CCTS is an approved continuing education provider for NBCC and therefore is able to offer such continuing education credit to workshop participants.

To determine possible workshop topics, a needs assessment was administered in 2007. The purpose of this study was to assess the professional development needs of graduate counseling students, directors of mental health agencies and clinics, counselor educators, and professional school and community counselors. This assessment was designed to determine how CCTS could better serve its constituents through subsequent professional trainings and was conducted both in Counseling classes on the main campus and its satellite campus in the Pittsburgh suburbs as well as via a mailing to approximately 1,200 area professional school and community counselors and community counseling/mental health agency directors throughout western and central Pennsylvania.

The response included 102 students and 182 professionals. Students indicated that the best way for them to receive CCTS information was through classroom announcements, the distribution of flyers, and email notifications. They also related that many obstacles, including a lack of knowledge about workshops, scheduling conflicts, location, and the day of the week, impeded their attendance. Only 8% of the students who participated had actually attended a CCTS training. Nearly all students (96%) expressed that a \$25 registration fee for CCTS workshops was reasonable. Of those student participants who had attended a CCTS workshop, the majority indicated that it was of excellent quality. Over half of responding students (55%) related that professional development was of great importance in their graduate training, and the vast majority of student participants (95%) believed that CCTS should continue to offer trainings.

The findings from area professionals were similar. They indicated that lack of knowledge and scheduling conflicts were the primary reasons for not attending CCTS workshops. Though nearly three-quarters of the professionals (70%) were aware of CCTS workshops, only 10% of professional participants had attended a CCTS event in the previous year. Many of those who had attended a CCTS workshop rated it as excellent in overall quality. The means by which they receive notification of CCTS events is different than students, and area professionals expressed that the Departmental alumni newsletter and brochures mailed to them were the better ways to learn of workshops. However, one item of constructive feedback did arise, as some participants related that cancellation of some CCTS workshops was a factor in not attending subsequent seminars. Nearly half (45%) related that a half-day—not a full-day—workshop format was more conducive to their schedules. Miscellaneous suggestions were also offered, and these ideas included more advance notice of workshops, offering more school-related workshops, and presenting CCTS events on weekends or during weekday evenings. Finally, in the assessment instrument, participants were given a list of possible workshop topics that they would like to have offered by CCTS. The top four choices, in order, were mental health issues; ethical and legal issues; adolescent issues; and family issues.

Collaborative events with University and non-University groups have also served as effective ways to increase awareness of both CCTS and its workshops. One such example is the “School Counselor Professional Development Day,” an annual event for professional school counselors throughout the region that has been coordinated by CCTS for the past three years. This day-long event has been free to participants and has offered a morning keynote speaker, followed by breakout sessions in the afternoon. Often funded by college deans or the office of enrollment management, the event has been held in the University’s student union and has featured a luncheon talk by the University president or a member of the senior management team. Participants have been able to gain state-level, continuing education credits for educators (Act 48), and evaluations from the event have been positive. In the past three years, 312 area professional school counselors have attended this event.

Other similar, co-sponsored professional development activities have transpired, in part due to the increased awareness and growth of CCTS. The Center has worked with the local counseling association, the Greater Pittsburgh Counseling Association, to co-sponsor and host its meetings. In a similar vein, CCTS has handled the coordination of the University’s sponsorship of meetings of the Allegheny County Counselors Association, which represents professional school counselors throughout the Pittsburgh area. In doing so, Department of Counseling faculty members have conducted presentations on a range of school-related topics. In the Spring of 2008, CCTS worked with the University’s alumni association to offer a lecture by the president of a national non-profit organization who was also being honored as a distinguished alumnus that weekend. Finally, for two years, CCTS has served as a host site for a videoconference series offered by a psychiatric hospital. In addition, CCTS has been contacted by two school districts to offer in-service workshops on trauma and bullying, respectively, which were conducted by Departmental faculty.

As CCTS has grown, its direction has both narrowed and expanded. On the one hand, the focus has become more on training than services. That is, its workshops continue to feature both nationally known speakers as well as Departmental faculty. Because of its success in this area, CCTS has established financial stability to a certain extent and is periodically able to offer its activities even when the break-even point is not realized. Upcoming workshops on adolescent counseling and on autism are expected to draw audiences of significant numbers, and workshops are already planned for the 2009-2010 academic year. In addition, the marketing and advertising of its offerings have also grown. By virtue of its past workshop participants and those professionals desiring notification of CCTS activities, its mailing list is approximately 1,100, and its email distribution list is about 350. The expansion segment is one where more services are being sought as the awareness factor is heightened: Both community organizations and area school and community counselors have contacted CCTS about possible co-sponsorship and in regard to developing workshops on topics of their expertise. Given the limited number of CCTS staff, the challenge reflects time requirements for the project and evaluating the degree to which a proposed workshop would be successful.

The Center is the only one of its kind of which we are aware in the nation. While similar ventures exist, they often operate from a continuing education division and/or are geared toward a range of mental health professionals instead of solely counselors. Since 2002, a total of 2,156 participants—predominantly students, alumni, professional counselors, and counselor educators—have received training from pre-CCTS and CCTS workshops or co-sponsored events. While impressive in some respects, this number speaks to the need for professional development within the Counseling profession, and it is through the creation and development of such opportunities that advantages to the Department, University, alumni, and area professionals are realized.

Conclusion

Several benefits are realized through the existence of CCTS. Area professional counselors and counselors-in-training receive professional training by nationally known experts in the Counseling profession at a reasonable registration rate. The same holds true for alumni of the Department. In addition, counselor educators in the Department as well as practicum and internship supervisors may attend CCTS events at no charge. The Department and the University also gain from the regional attention given to CCTS activities both through newspaper articles and collaboration with area counseling associations.

Given the paucity of literature on professional development and continuing education for professional counselors, the counseling profession can be enhanced by examining this topic more fully. It is hoped that, through this article, counselor educators may consider the development of a similar venture that is affiliated or a part of their respective department. In its relatively short period of existence, CCTS has provided numerous opportunities for a variety of counseling constituents and has proved to be a beneficial entity to the department and institution.

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