

International Registry of Counsellor Education Programs: CACREP's Contribution to the Development of Counseling as a Global Profession

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This article addresses the issues and challenges involved in the development of the counseling profession internationally and the role that quality assurance plays in its development. It chronicles the development of the International Registry for Counsellor Education Programs and its contributions, a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of current developments, and hopes for the future of international counselling.

Keywords: IRCEP, CACREP, accreditation, quality assurance in counseling, international counselling

The world is flat are words made famous by Thomas Friedman (2005) in his extraordinary book by the same title. Friedman used the word *flat* to mean *connected*. Billions of people across the globe are connected because of advances in technology, travel, and the lowering of trade and political barriers. It is an exciting new world with important implications for how people live and interact with one another. What are the challenges of this connectedness for the counseling profession in the United States?

In this article, I discuss some of the challenges of international connectedness and how the counseling profession has responded to these challenges. I also trace the history of the development of the International Registry for Counsellor Education Programs (IRCEP). IRCEP is an international registry created by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in response to numerous inquiries and requests for a quality assurance process for counselor education programs operating outside of the United States. The following discusses the challenges encountered by U.S. counselors and professional counseling organizations as they engage in the promotion of the profession globally.

Challenges

Counseling in the United States is more developed as a profession than it is in many other parts of the world. Over the past century, counseling in the United States has moved from being an ill-defined profession, difficult to distinguish from other helping professions, to being one with a defined and distinguishable professional identity. Counseling has developed the essential criteria of a profession including professional associations, codes of ethics and standards of practice, accreditation agencies to provide oversight of coun-

selor education, and licensure and certification of practitioners (Gale & Austen, 2003). The profession has moved beyond defining itself in terms of *who we are not* or *who we are like* to a definition based on shared values, skills, education, and contributions to society.

To promote the continued development of a clear professional identity, in 2005, the American Counseling Association (ACA), in collaboration with the American Association of State Counseling Boards, established the work group 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling. This work group involved all 30 professional counseling organizations, including all ACA divisions and regions. Members of the 20/20 work group developed principles for unifying and strengthening the profession. The principles developed by the 20/20 Workgroup have been endorsed by 29 of the 30 counseling organizations (ACA, 2011; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). At the 2010 ACA Conference, delegates of the 20/20 work group agreed on the following definition of counseling: "Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling, 2010, para. 2).

The 20/20 definition is representative of the efforts of U.S. counseling organizations to come to a common definition of counseling, but how do (or does) the concept of professional identity and the 20/20 definition transcend international boundaries? Despite great efforts toward inclusivity and strides in multicultural education within the profession in the last 50 years, counseling in the United States remains a culturally encapsulated discipline. Every word in the 20/20 work group definition is culturally bound. For example, whose definition is used for "professional relationship"? What constitutes a family? How is mental health or wellness defined?

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These questions do not mean that the definition should be discarded but rather that there is the need to examine such definitions for their relevance within other cultural contexts. Specifically, it requires that the definition be deconstructed in the context of the culture in which counseling services are provided. This deconstruction process fosters the examination of assumptions that have been made based on culturally specific values and professional training. Deconstruction allows reconsideration of goals, functions, conditions, and processes of counseling in a culturally appropriate fashion (Cheung, 2000). This sort of examination is essential when considering counseling from an international perspective.

This process of defining counseling in ways that have multicultural relevance on an international basis is not without challenges. Bochner (1999) proposed that Western nations are more successful at integration of multiculturalism within their countries than they are at multicultural integration between themselves and other countries. He cites four reasons for the difficulty: the short-term and superficial nature of international contacts, the lack of organizations and political structures and policies to promote multiculturalism on the international level, strong pressure for global assimilation by large corporations, and the inherent stress of cross-cultural contact. These forces are barriers that must be overcome to develop meaningful cross-cultural relationships internationally.

Leong and Santiago-Rivera (1999) discussed challenges to the development of global multiculturalism as they relate specifically to counseling. The first challenge they cite is that of ethnocentrism, using one's own culture as the norm for evaluating others. U.S.-based counselors and counselor educators must overcome culturally bound concepts, such as individualism, definitions of family, and mental health, and understand that these concepts may be defined differently in other cultures based on those cultures' norms and values. The second challenge is that of the inherent tendency to see one's own behaviors as typical and universal. In doing so one runs the risk of assuming that because a particular counseling intervention or theoretical approach works in one culture it will work for anyone in any culture. The third challenge is the tendency of professional organizations, over time, to become homogenous and resistant to change. This tendency can result in the retention of like-minded individuals and the attrition of those who think differently. Those with similar values and worldviews can dominate an organization and lead to difficulty in bringing about needed change. The final challenge cited by Leong and Santiago-Rivera is that of psychological reactance, a backlash against change forces aimed at restoring a sense of control and recouping perceived losses. This can contribute to the resistance to change in individuals and professional organizations.

These are some of the challenges that the counseling profession and individual counselors within the United States face as they engage in efforts to promote the development of the profession globally.

■ Counseling or Counselling?

One "1" or two—differences in the spelling of the word *counseling* across the globe are perhaps a subtle metaphor for the complexities of the differences in the international practice of the profession. A more stark contrast illustrating the differences in the practice of the profession globally may be *counseling* or *psychology*. In many parts of the world, although practitioners engage in counseling-related education and practices, the word *counseling* is not part of the lexicon, whereas derivations of the word *psychology* are a part. For example, in Cuba, counseling is not a recognized profession. However bachelor's-level psychology programs train practitioners to provide those services typically provided by master's-level counselors in the United States. Educators in Cuba are working with professional organizations from across the globe to establish counseling as a profession within the country and to develop master's-level programs to train counselors. Regardless of the word used to describe the practice or the spelling of the word, those activities that "empower diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling, 2010, para. 2) exist in some form in most parts of the world.

A special section in the Winter 2010 edition of the *Journal of Counseling & Development* focused on international counseling. Authors of articles in this section described counseling in various countries around the world. Each described the history of the development of counseling in that country, the current status, and future trends. Although each of the countries represented in the special section shared the common theme of understanding the contribution of counseling to the advancement of the mental health of children and adults, there were vast differences in both the development and the current state of the profession among those countries (Hohenshil, 2010). The sample represented by the articles in the special section described a wide range of national histories, cultural values, educational systems, and delivery systems. This diversity has contributed to the differences in the development of the profession in those countries. In some countries, such as Romania, the development of the profession parallels the early history of counseling in the United States (Szilagyi & Paredes, 2010), with practitioners in primarily the educational and career/vocational sectors. In other countries, such as Italy, counselors are not employed in schools but work in private practice, government, and agencies (Remley, Bacchini, & Kreig, 2010).

■ Variations in Education, Accreditation, and Training

Education and preparation of counselors varies greatly across the world from no postsecondary training to graduate-level education. Education and training of counselors even varies within countries due to the lack of regulation of the profession.



Some countries have clearly articulated training standards and accreditation systems (e.g., Britain and Canada). Canada's accreditation body, the Council for the Accreditation of Counsellor Education Programs, accredits counselor preparation programs, whereas Britain's accreditation body, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, accredits individual counselors/psychotherapists, supervisors, counseling services, and training courses (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2010). Many other countries have neither training standards nor accreditation systems, for example, Cuba and Bhutan. Other countries such as those in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are in process of developing them. Given this diversity in cultures and in the developmental level of the profession globally, the question becomes: Are there ways in which counseling professionals in the United States can provide assistance to other cultures and countries as they develop the profession to meet the social and emotional needs of their people? Others may even question whether U.S. professionals have anything to contribute, considering the ways in which counseling across the globe differs significantly from the profession in the United States. These are legitimate questions with differences of opinion, without clear answers, and ones that have been responded to in various ways by professional counseling organizations within the United States.

Professional Organizations and International Initiatives

Various professional organizations, universities, and private consultants in the United States are working to provide assistance to other countries in the international development of counselling as a profession that will meet the needs of their citizens and within their particular social and cultural environment. These efforts cover a wide range of activities from committee work to fieldwork. Some of the efforts are aimed at simply building connections, whereas others are engaged more directly in developmental activities.

ACA has an international committee whose charge is to "build bridges and promote meaningful relationships between ACA and other organizations outside the United States" (ACA, 2010, p. 4). The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision has established an International Counseling Interest Network whose members look for opportunities to build connections with counselors and counselor educators globally. Chi Sigma Iota has international chapters and has developed a new global network website (<http://www.csi-net.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=768>) to provide a site for sharing information about the development of counseling globally. These are examples of association and division committees working to develop connections that ultimately result in strengthening counseling both in the United States and in other countries.

Other professional organizations like the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) provide more direct forms of assistance. NBCC has long been a leader within the profession in the international arena. In 2003, NBCC created

an international division, NBCC International (NBCC-I), whose mission is to strengthen the counseling profession and highlight counseling needs worldwide. For example, NBCC-I has partnered with international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to "work to empower counselors to provide counseling services as needed wherever they are needed" (NBCC-I, 2011, para. 1). NBCC-I has worked with local counseling professionals to establish certification processes and standards appropriate to the culture in a number of countries across the globe. They have established international field offices whose staffs work to promote counseling as a unique discipline. Directors of these field offices are counseling professionals native to the country, and they serve as points of contact for groups interested in national and regional counseling-related activities.

CACREP has also participated in the international arena for many years through consultation work related to accreditation and attendance and presentations at various international counseling conferences by CACREP staff and board members. These consultation efforts and conference participation activities generated questions about and interest in accreditation from counselors in other countries. Two programs outside of the United States currently are CACREP accredited: Trinity Western University in Canada and Universidad Ibero Americana, Ciudad de Mexico. Although counselor education programs outside of the United States have always been eligible to apply for CACREP accreditation, the CACREP standards are based on the culture and the educational system in the United States, making it difficult or not appropriate for non-U.S. programs. Recognizing that this was problematic and in response to many requests from non-U.S.-based counseling programs, the CACREP Board of Directors (hereinafter referred to as CACREP Board) began examining ways in which it could respond to these requests in a culturally appropriate manner. To that end, in 2006, the CACREP Board established a task force selected from the members of the CACREP Board and staff to examine the issues and make recommendations to the Board relevant to requests for international accreditation standards and processes. This task force ultimately recommended the development of IRCEP.

IRCEP

The task force responded to the charge from the CACREP Board by continuing to discuss options among themselves, dialoguing with international counselors and consulting with NBCC and the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education. Task force members discussed and considered various structural models. Developing a structure and process for international accreditation that would be helpful across cultures was daunting because of the vast differences described earlier. After many months of exploration of the

issues, the task force settled on the structure of a registry and the development of standards and processes that could be applied across various cultures as opposed to more restrictive and culturally bound accreditation standards and processes (J. Culbreth, personal communication, November 27, 2007).

In response to the work and recommendations of the task force, in January 2009, the CACREP Board established the IRCEP steering committee and approved the nominations of eight steering committee members. The steering committee was designed as a working committee consisting of both international- and U.S.-based counselors/counselor educators who had an understanding of and commitment to quality assurance standards in the training of professional counselors. Committee members were asked to commit for a 2-year renewable term, with the understanding that they would develop registry standards, participate in review of registry applications, learn about their region, and develop resource contacts within the countries of their region.

The CACREP Board decided to have a current member of the CACREP Board act as a liaison between the IRCEP committee and the Board. It was important to have a liaison from the CACREP Board on the IRCEP steering committee to facilitate the flow of information between the two groups and to provide the CACREP Board members with the information vital to them in their role as the final authority in decisions related to inclusion on the registry. It was also decided to include a representative from NBCC/NBCC-I. The close working relationship between NBCC and CACREP and the experience of NBCC in international work seemed to make that a logical choice for inclusion on the IRCEP steering committee.

The first IRCEP steering committee meeting was held in San Isidro, Argentina, September 15–16, 2009. The agenda consisted of providing new committee members with the background and history of the initiative and tasks associated with transforming the idea into a reality. The committee spent 2 days discussing vision, mission, values, application processes, standards, registry decision processes, logos, marketing, website design and operational issues, establishment of a review process infrastructure, policies, procedures, time lines, and future directions. It was a productive meeting, and from the collective effort of a team of counselors and counselor educators, most of whom did not know each other prior to the meeting, IRCEP was born.

Vision, Mission, and Core Values

IRCEP has published a web page (www.ircep.org) that chronicles some of this history and provides visitors to the site with information relevant to the registry, including the vision, mission, and core values. IRCEP's vision, as drafted by the committee and stated on the website, is as follows:

IRCEP will promote the ongoing development and recognition of the counselling profession worldwide through the creation of a registry of approved counsellor education programs

that use common professional requirements essential to the education and training of counsellors regardless of culture, country, region, work setting, or educational system. (IRCEP, 2010, "Vision of IRCEP")

This vision drives the mission of IRCEP, which is to maintain a registry of programs that have been reviewed and deemed to meet standards that focus on common professional requirements for counselor education and training programs and to build networks of counselor educators, students, and practitioners to develop and promote excellence in counselor education and training (IRCEP, 2010). The committee chose to use two *ls* to spell *counsellor* in the IRCEP title to reflect the international focus in the endeavor.

Current Status

The structure of IRCEP is in place. IRCEP has a website, standards, application procedures and processes, and a review process. Steering committee members continue to work to develop relationships within their regions and to consult with programs interested in the registry application process. There is anecdotal information from steering committee members indicating that counselor education programs in Nigeria, Argentina, India, and Malaysia are in the process of application. However, to date, all of the programs currently listed on the registry are CACREP-accredited programs in the United States that have applied and have been approved. Applications from these U.S.-based counselor education programs provide information regarding the program's international initiatives, including student/faculty exchanges, study abroad opportunities, international student enrollment, research and teaching activities, and so on. IRCEP is working on a plan to disseminate this information, which will provide opportunities for counselors, counselor educators, and students both in the United States and abroad to engage in collaborative activities. Board members and staff of the CACREP Board and committee members of IRCEP continue to make international presentations to inform colleagues about the existence and potential benefits of a registry and to dialogue with those colleagues about the development of counseling as a profession in their country and ways in which CACREP or IRCEP may be of assistance.

Challenges and Future Directions

The challenges faced by the IRCEP steering committee both in development and implementation were and continue to be no different than those outlined earlier in this article. The committee was configured of individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds and countries of origin to include multiple perspectives and counter the tendency toward ethnocentrism and assumptions about what is considered normal. The diversity of the committee was also intended to avoid homogeneity of values and worldviews. Committee members were selected based on their contributions and experience in international development.

Despite these safeguards, the development of standards that were broad enough to be culturally appropriate and rigorous enough to provide evidence of quality proved to be challenging. Most, if not all, of the committee members had been educated in the U.S. system or had interacted with it extensively, which proved to influence their worldview. However, after rich discussion, introspection, and collegial challenges, the committee was able to deconstruct the initial culturally bound standards that they proposed and to develop what are intended to be appropriate multicultural standards. To date, however, there have been no international applications, thus the appropriateness and relevance of the standards have yet to be tested.

Another challenge to the profession is the coordination and collaboration among professional counseling organizations in the United States in their international development efforts. As previously discussed, professional counseling organizations in the United States are approaching international collaboration in a variety of ways and largely in isolation of one another. Much might be learned and more might be accomplished through communication, collaboration, and coordination of efforts. An initiative that included representatives from all of the major professional organizations involved in international work would prove beneficial, and the IRCEP steering committee is committed to examining ways in which this might be accomplished.

The IRCEP steering committee continues to explore other creative ways to interact and engage with the global counseling community. One of the lessons learned has been that international work takes time and patience. Expecting immediate results is a Western cultural value that does not seem applicable to this kind of work. It also requires reaching out through a number of venues other than professional presentations. The steering committee is exploring various ideas including the development of an international society of graduate students; options for enhanced benefits for registry members, such as access to publication databases, discounted professional organization memberships, and consultation services; new ways to disseminate information about IRCEP, such as newsletters, RSS feeds, and conference sponsorship; forming alliances with other U.S.-based counseling organizations involved in international work; and developing relationships with international professional counseling organizations. All of these initiatives are intended to not only promote IRCEP but also support the development of the profession around the world.

Final Thoughts

This article has proposed that the counseling profession in the United States is more highly developed than it is in many parts of the world. That assertion is made because not only has the profession in the United States attained all of the hallmarks generally accepted to define a profession but also because it leads the world in terms of the numbers of trained counselors and counselor education programs. However, Ponton and Duba (2009) asserted that an occupation does not become a profes-

sion because its members decide it is one, by legislation, or by collecting the “hallmarks” of a profession. The authors argued that “the histories of professions demonstrate that they begin with and grow from the significant needs of a society” (p. 117). That has indeed been the evolution of the counseling profession in the United States. The counseling profession arose to fulfill the unmet mental health needs in society and to provide vocational guidance in communities and schools. Professional associations were established to meet the needs of practitioners. Codes of ethics and standards of practice were established to guide practitioners and protect the public. Accreditation bodies began to provide standards for education and training of practitioners. A body of research began to emerge to advance knowledge and improve practice. All of this has occurred over the last 100 years. We now live in a new flat world. Because of that reality, the notion of society has been expanded. Ours is now a global society. Therefore, as counseling develops as a profession in different areas of the world, the question becomes: To what extent, if any, should U.S. counseling professionals be involved in global development and, if so, how can that be done in a culturally appropriate and sensitive manner?

The fact that U.S.-based professional counseling organizations are responding on an international level is another evidentiary source or marker of the profession's maturation. NBCC-I, IRCEP, and other U.S.-based international efforts grew out of the significant needs of the global society. Each of the professional organizations is responding to the globalization of the profession within their particular scope of practice. ACA, through their international committee, is networking with other professional counseling associations. NBCC, through NBCC-I, is focusing on credentialing of practitioners. CACREP, through IRCEP, is focusing on setting education and training standards for entry into the profession and maintaining a registry. Each organization working at what they do best, in a culturally sensitive manner, will make a difference in the development of the profession in other countries around the world. All of them working together will accelerate the pace of development. Furthermore, the counseling profession in the United States is poised to gain as much or more than we counselors give through our collaboration with peers around the globe.

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