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Article 24

A Comparison of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Master's Degree Programs: Are They Really Different?

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Counselor education and counseling psychology have historically had much in common. For example, both claim luminaries in the field of counseling, such as Carl Rogers and Rollo May, as theorists who have had an impact on the profession. While the two have had similarities in many areas, differences exist and have appeared at times to widen. For instance, since the 1970s, the terminal degree for psychology, including counseling psychology, has been the doctorate, while the terminal degree for counseling and those enrolled in counselor education programs has been the master's.

The two programs of study also differ in their accreditation standards. Since the 1980s, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) has certified counselor education programs on the master's and doctoral level, while the American Psychological Association (APA) has certified counseling psychology doctoral programs (Altekruse, 1991). There has been no accreditation for master's programs in counseling psychology by APA or any other accreditation body or professional association.

In addition, programs that are CACREP accredited are required to offer course work in eight content areas: Professional Identity, Social and Cultural Diversity, Human Growth and Development, Career Development, Helping Relationships, Group Work, Assessment, and Research and Program Evaluation (CACREP, 2009). CACREP accredited master's programs must also have between 48 and 60 semester hours of coursework depending on the track (e.g., school, clinical mental health, marriage and family). There are no such parallel requirements for courses or tracks for counseling psychology master's degree programs, although some of these programs specialize in certain areas such as marriage and family counseling.

Despite not being accredited by the American Psychological Association or having standardized course requirements, counseling psychology master's degrees continue to be offered. The APA lists 73 terminal master's degree programs in counseling psychology in its most recent publication, *Graduate Study in Psychology* (2008).

Graduates from master's programs in counseling psychology usually go on to obtain their doctorate or seek employment in agencies and therapeutic settings. Some apply for licensure as professional counselors like individuals who graduate from counselor education programs. While licensure requirements differ in various states, one overriding question is how similar are counseling psychology programs at the master's level to master's level counselor education programs?

While there have been comparisons between graduates of counseling psychology and counselor education programs on the doctorate level (Poidevant, Loesch, & Wittmer, 1991; Zimpfer, 1993), no comparisons have been made between counselor education and counseling psychology on the master's level. This research focused on three areas of comparison using the eight core course offerings CACREP requires for accreditation. It also examined the number of required hours for graduation from master's counseling psychology programs when compared to CACREP accredited counselor education programs. Career opportunities for graduates of counseling psychology master's degree programs were also explored. The overall emphasis of the study was to determine if there were really differences, outside of accreditation, between these two types of programs.

Method

Participants

Seventeen master's of counseling psychology programs were selected at random out of a total of the 73 programs identified by the APA in their publication, *Graduate Study in Psychology* (2008). Programs chosen were: Adler School of Professional Psychology (ASPP), Angelo State University (ASU), Avila University, California Lutheran University (CLU), California State University, Sacramento (CSU-S), University of Central Oklahoma (UCOk), Frostburg State University (FSU), Immaculata University (IU), Lesley University (LU), Louisiana State University, Shreveport (OSU-S), Loyola College (LC), University of North Florida (UNF), Santa Clara University (SCU), Temple University (TU), University of Texas, Tyler (UTT), Walla Walla College (WWC), and University of West Florida (UWF). Specific information on these programs was found by searching their web sites. Only programs that were identified by *Graduate Study in Psychology* as terminal master's of counseling psychology were selected. Programs that had doctoral level programs in addition to their master's program were not included. Stand alone doctoral programs were excluded also. The rationale for eliminating these two latter types of programs was that their dynamics and requirements would differ from stand alone master's programs.

Procedure

In making our selection of terminal master's degree programs, each of the 73 master's only counseling psychology programs in *Graduate Study in Psychology* (2008) was given a number and then drawn at random. The 17 programs selected represented approximately 25% of the total programs in counseling psychology at the master's only level listed by APA.

Findings

The results of our comparison of these two types of programs were made in the areas of mandatory courses, total hours of course work, and career opportunities.

Mandatory Course

Of the 17 programs investigated, four were found to not meet CACREP standards at the master's level. They lacked required coursework in at least one of the eight areas mandated by CACREP and gave no indication on their web site that they infused materials from these areas in a systematic and comprehensive way in other courses. These four programs were at Angelo State University, Avila, California State University, Sacramento, and Frostburg State University. Courses or course offerings in these programs that were omitted were in: Professional Identity, Social and Cultural Diversity, Group Work, and Career Development. See Table 1.1 for the course or course area each was lacking.

Table 1.1: Eight CACREP Core Competency Areas Found in 17 Counseling Psychology Programs Offering Only Master's Degrees

CACREP Area	ASU	Avila	CSU-S	UC Ok	FSU	IU	LSU-S	UNF	UT T	WW U	UWF	SCU	AU	CL U	L U	L C	T U
Prof. Identity		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
Social and Cultural Diversity	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Human Growth and Dev.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Career Dev.	•	•		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•
Helping Rel.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Group Work	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•
Assessment	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Research and Program Evaluation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Total Number of Semester/Quarter Hours in Programs

Depending on the CACREP track, master's degree programs must have between 48 and 60 semester hours or 72 to 90 quarter credit hours. CACREP programs requiring 48 semester hours include school counseling, career counseling, and student affairs and college counseling. Clinical mental health counseling tracks require 54 semester hours for graduation, or 81 quarter credit hours. Programs requiring 60 semester hours include addictions counseling and marriage and family counseling. Even though there are no guidelines at the master's level for counseling psychology programs, none of the programs in our sample of 17 had less than 48 semester hours of required coursework.

As can be seen in Table 1.2, master's degree programs in counseling psychology varied with the number of required hours for completion of a degree. The range was between 48 and 61 semester hours with one program requiring 78 units (with "units" not being described but most likely being quarter hours).

Table 1.2: Seventeen Counseling Psychology Master's Degree Programs' Required Hours for Graduation

Counseling Psychology Master's Degree Programs	Number of Required Hours for Graduation
Adler School of Professional Psychology	55
Angelo State University	48
Avila University	60
Cal State Sacramento	58-61
California Lutheran University	50
Frostburg State Univeristy	49
Immaculata University	48
Lesley University	48
Louisiana State Univ-Shreveport	48
Loyola College In Maryland	45
Santa Clara University	78 units
Temple University	60
The University of West Florida	60
University of Central Oklahoma	60
University of North Florida	60
University of Texas-Tyler	60
Walla Walla University	72 quarter units

Employment After Graduation

A final finding from this study was the types of employment available for graduates with master's degrees in counseling psychology. Lists of possibilities that were described ranged depending on the program from an extensive list of post-graduate employment opportunities to a bare minimum of options. Jobs that programs described their graduates obtaining included those in clinical mental health agencies and in typical mental health specialties such as marriage and family therapy. Eligibility for licensure also varied depending on the program. Some programs noted that they met CACREP

standards and state licensure standards for counselors. Others did not include this kind of information.

Discussion

From our research, it appears that there are both similarities and differences in CACREP accredited counselor education master's degree programs and counseling psychology master's degree programs. CACREP programs require specific courses or infusion of course content. The minimum number of hours required depends on the counseling specialty. Master's degree programs in counseling psychology, which are not accredited by any agency or professional, are less consistent as a group in what they require and how many hours they mandate for graduation. For instance, four of the 17 master's programs in counseling psychology in our sample did not require all of the eight core courses mandated in CACREP accredited programs.

Furthermore, the number of hours required to complete degrees in master's level counseling psychology programs varied for no apparent reason other than apparent faculty or institutional preference. Likewise, some of the counseling psychology programs in our sample were not set up for the graduates to become licensed as professional counselors, although some did specify that students could work towards licensure as professional counselors. Employment opportunities described by these programs also differed with some institutions explaining job options in great detail while others barely mentioned them. Overall, counseling psychology master's only programs in our sample fluctuated in their adherence to the requirements and standards of CACREP accredited counselor education programs.

Implications

The histories of counseling psychology and counselor education were initially tied closely to career and vocational development and to working with normal populations experiencing situational difficulties. While there is still considerable overlap, the two specialties have drifted apart, specifically due to accreditation requirements and the recognition by professional associations as to the terminal degree in counseling and in psychology. CACREP counselor education master's degree programs now stress course work in eight specific areas while counseling psychology programs on the master's level do not.

Thus, master's degree programs in counseling psychology vary in the courses they require, the number of hours they require, and the way they describe what their graduates are qualified to do. Some counseling psychology master's programs mirror CACREP standards and offer the same courses mandated by CACREP. Their graduates are eligible to apply for specific types of licensure and certification offered at the state and national levels as counselors. These programs imitate accredited counselor education master's degrees.

On the other hand, some counseling psychology master's degrees have not been as greatly influenced by CACREP standards and their offerings and number of hours required for graduation from these programs differ. Their graduates are thus not readily eligible for certification and licensure as counselors at the state and national levels and in some situations may not be eligible for certification and licensure at all. These programs

are less structured and provide their graduates with fewer opportunities for employment and certification/licensure.

Limitations

It is hard to identify counseling psychology programs at the master's level on any consistent basis using the APA's text *Graduate Study in Psychology* (2008). The comprehensive list of terminal master's programs in counseling psychology provided by APA in this publication of psychology graduate programs is at times inaccurate, since on further investigation of web sites, some of these programs described as master's in counseling psychology turned out to be counselor education master's programs, master's of psychology with a counseling focus, or clinical psychology master's degree programs. Therefore, getting a truly representative random sample of counseling psychology master's only programs for this study was difficult. However, only graduate programs that identified themselves to be terminal master's degrees in counseling psychology were included in this study. Another limitation of this study was that programs that did not select to be in APA's *Graduate Study in Psychology* as counseling psychology master's degrees were not included in our sampling.

Doctoral programs with a master's degree in counseling psychology or stand alone doctoral programs in counseling psychology were not included in this research either. Their curricula offerings and emphasis differed from terminal master's only programs in counseling psychology.

Conclusion

Graduate programs in counselor education and counseling psychology have both similarities and differences. One similarity is that it appears many counseling psychology master's only programs are aligning themselves with the standards of CACREP and preparing their graduates to be certified and licensed as counselors instead of psychologists. These counseling psychology programs are following the lead of counselor education accredited CACREP programs. On the other hand, some counseling psychology programs are continuing to set themselves up so that their graduates are not easily eligible for certification and licensure as counselors. These programs are most likely being driven by either the interests of their faculty or university regardless of other national norms.

The unaccredited nature of counseling psychology at the master's level appears to be problematic for some students who matriculate in such programs. The reason is the lack of a clear career path. Graduates of some of these programs are not eligible to become counselors or psychologists without further study. Thus, their master's degree is not as valuable as it might be. Terminal counseling psychology master's degree programs that do not follow CACREP standards may ultimately find they are attracting fewer and less qualified applicants in the future because of this limitation. Research in this area is needed.

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