

Invited Article 3

The Now and Future Counselor: Insights for Counseling Professionals

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In this contribution to the VISTAS project, I've been asked to comment on the special insights and skills that a person needs to perform well while pursuing a professional counseling path. Further, I have been asked to add some thoughts about the role of counselor educators, supervisors, and mentors that can promote this professional behavior. And finally, I have been asked to make some observations of VISTAS and its role in influencing the development of counselors, counselor educators and supervisors, and counseling mentors. What special background do I bring to this task?

I've worked in various roles as a counselor for nearly a half century. I've been fortunate to be employed in the field in a variety of ways: as a juvenile hall counselor and senior counselor, Veterans Administration hospital psychology intern, career counselor, college counselor, counselor educator, department chair, and private practitioner. I've also been a writer, researcher, reviewer, editor, consultant, American Counseling Association division president (NECA), board member to associations and foundations, keynote speaker, and radio, television, and social media guest on over 200 programs, including a weekly series in Korea. And I have been involved with the American Counseling Association VISTAS project as a writer, speaker, and reviewer since VISTAS' emergence from the ERIC Counseling and Student Services Clearing House (ERIC/CASS) a decade ago. I used to enjoy saying that I've seen it all; but the world passes by at breakneck speed and each day that I enter my counseling office on Market Street in the financial district of San Francisco, I am surprised and thrilled by the new and impending challenges that unwittingly await me.

Special Insights and Skills of the Counselor

Not surprisingly, I believe the primary ingredient in becoming a successful counselor is having a passion and sense of excitement for the work that is to be accomplished. After all these years, I find that “being in the chair” is not simply familiar and comfortable but is also immensely rewarding while being intellectually and emotionally stimulating. The day my work as a counselor becomes pedestrian or my internal reaction to a client’s vicissitudes of life or symptoms of distress become dull is the day that I will finally refrain from practicing.

The contributions that I and other counselors and counselor educators have made to VISTAS over the years have been reflective of my passion and the passion that other people have for the counseling profession. The VISTAS entries whether in print publications or on the online web site (www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas) allow professional counselors to share their passion with others. VISTAS contributions indicate the multifaceted ways that counselors impact our society through their counseling interventions, training, research, supervision and coaching, multicultural competency, and advocacy for the clients and communities who experience disenfranchisement.

I believe, and the articles in VISTAS suggest, that a counselor must be able to feel and to respond with a natural ease that reflects a personality which embodies humane kindness coupled with a fascination for the complicated circumstances of people’s lives. A counselor must also be unafraid to take risks, to issue an interpretation regarding a client’s behavior or decision making process, and to accept the process of being skillfully influential while making the work be only about the client’s issues and his or her relationship with the counselor. Moreover, it probably is nothing new to add that a professional counselor should be verbally fluent, empathic, and able to facilitate the development of a therapeutic alliance with the client. It is also essential for counselors to have well defined boundaries and to know their personal and professional limits.

Finally, it is an unfortunate truism that we live in a troubled world and stressful events, trauma, and terrorist activity are now a part of our social fabric and as such have appropriately become a part of the counseling process. Whether it is a pernicious attack like 9-11 or the more recent terrorist bombings at the 2013 Boston Marathon, counselors must have the skills and training to respond quickly to unthinkable crises. Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina and the shootings at Columbine and Sandy Hook remind us that disasters are ubiquitous and pertinacious and provide challenging new roles for counselors.

Counselors are now regularly called upon to respond to traumatic events, help with the development of coping skills, calm family members, protect campus members in times of turmoil, alleviate tensions, and assist large groups of people who are apprehensive and functioning on alert twenty-four/seven. It has become a tall order for our profession and all of us are learning new ways of serving the public.

Have a Professional Identity

As my own professional history suggests, counselors function in a variety of settings: schools and colleges, family practice centers, rehabilitation facilities, prisons,

social service agencies, private offices, and military and veterans services, to name a few. But those counselors who have a well developed sense of their own professional identity amidst all of the counseling contexts have something special.

Toward this end, a while ago I prepared a mildly tongue-in-cheek contribution to VISTAS discussing what I had learned about counseling from my late Golden Retriever Coby (Chope, 2012). What I suggested is that like my dog, counselors need to be clear about who they are, understand their particular roles, know what they are trying to accomplish, and most importantly not pretend to be something they are not.

Coby was a dog and he knew it. He had a magnificent stride, a lovely golden coat and the cheery friendliness of, well, a golden retriever. He was also proud of his clearly articulated identity reflected by the joy he experienced hanging out with other dogs at various dog parks. He experienced me as different from him and he kept his boundaries, as did I.

Coby helped me ponder the professional identities of my students and some of my colleagues. I query my students and colleagues by asking, “How do you identify yourself in your profession and how do you represent yourself to the public?” Many counselors who are not clearly engaged in psychotherapy practice have told me how they struggle with professional identification. Indeed many who stand under the rubric of titles like career counselor use another title: career consultant, career counselor educator, career trainer, college advisor, college career counselor, global career development facilitator, human resources professional, job search specialist, and outplacement provider to name just a few. In addition, there’s a host of allied counseling professionals who may identify themselves as counselors but call themselves coaches, employment counselors, and professional resume writers.

The Importance of Professional Identity

The creation of one’s own professional counselor identity is indeed challenging for many of my students and colleagues. With the 2009 passage of the California Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC) Licensing Law (AB788: Wyland, Steinberg), all 50 states have some regulation of professional counselor licensure. However, even with the passage of the different state laws, there continues to be great difficulty and some confusion among counselors in articulating who they are and how they are similar to but individually different from other licensed professional counselors. This was quite noticeable in California when the Board of Behavioral Science (BBS) and various counselor education programs worked to implement the new law and make coherent the necessary educational requirements for the new licensees.

It is also worth noting that the American Counseling Association (ACA) created the 20/20 Committee to assist in the construction of a vision for the future of counseling while giving a greater common identity to the counseling profession. I was a member of this committee from its onset until 2012. It has been a very demanding process to ask that counselors share a common identity, represent themselves with some degree of unity, and at the same time align themselves with the often narrower views of counseling held by the different ACA divisions. There has been more than a trifle bit of disagreement as to what counseling is, and at least one division of ACA did not originally sign on to the fledgling guiding principles of the committee.

I am convinced there are potentially terrific benefits for creating a professional counseling identity even though it may feel cumbersome. Our professional identity allows us to be differentiated from other professionals and communicate who we are to public consumers of counseling services as well as to the state boards and legislatures who regulate us. When testifying over a five year period and through three iterations of the California Licensed Professional Counseling Law, I was regularly questioned by state legislators and association lobbyists about the similarities and differences among professional counselors. These inquiries suggested to me that a clear and well articulated professional identity is necessary for success. Having a professional identity serves the purpose of assisting us as we seek new employment and engage in meaningful work activities. It is an especially important element to explain what we do while serving the public. It also gives us a vision of our own success and increases our professional maneuverability, especially in the face of habitually changing counseling challenges.

In my attempts to further expand upon the meaning of professional identity, I have suggested it is the “Kernel of all that you hope to be or become, the nucleus of your workplace confidence. It represents the accrual and integration of your experience, skills, interests, values, and personality characteristics” (Chope, 2000, p. 58). Establishing a professional identity also fosters exploration toward appropriate jobs and career experiences, and it elicits a commitment to and a passion for the professionally related choices that are made. A professional identity can serve as the equation for defining oneself and influencing others.

Continuous self exploration is an important ingredient for establishing a professional identity. Committing to a professional identity with little self exploration often creates a greater diffusion in interests and a loss of focus. But increased self exploration can provide direction to new learning or continuing education and training can reinforce or enhance professional identity. More importantly, it can lead to greater imaginative risk-taking as counselors beef up their confidence in who they are and what they believe they can do.

Summarizing the Special Insights and Skills That Influential Counselors Need

- Counselors should have a sense of excitement along with a passion for the work they are doing.
- Counselors should have an understanding of individual differences and should be knowledgeable of the implementation and evaluation of the assessment resources and online tools that can assist them in understanding individual differences. They should be able to help their clients consider the ways in which they are similar to and different from others.
- Counselors must be especially responsive to cultural and gender issues in both the counseling process and the larger life of the world in understanding individual differences. The continuous transitioning of the planet’s population has created a patchwork of cultural pluralism that must be understood by counselors. ACA has focused upon the need for professionals to have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to work with an increasingly diversified population.
- Counselors need to be kind which includes being empathic, warm, engaging, and honest with themselves, their clients and other members of their communities.

- Counselors need to be fascinated with the process of assisting clients in the resolution of their problems. They should be as earnest as a bioengineer trying to find a cure for a lethal virus.
- Counselors need to have clear boundaries and especially keep from having their own personal needs met in the counseling process. The work should always be about the client.
- Counselors should not be afraid to take risks in their questions, interpretations or summaries and accept the fact that they are enormously influential. They should be enthusiastic about developing new techniques and reconsidering counseling theories in a changing world.
- Counselors should have the skills, special training, and wherewithal to be a first responder when crises erupt.
- Counselors should know their limits and have an understanding of the scope of their practice.

What Should Counseling Training Programs Offer?

Although my career has had its share of zigs and zags, I was imbued with a strong sense of identity from my training in the graduate psychology department of the University of Minnesota. My advisor, David P. Campbell, advised me from the onset that upon achieving my Ph.D., I would be identified as a Minnesota psychologist. That fact forced me to look at the history of my department and the roles and functions of the many distinguished graduates. It helped set my goals and imbued me with a sense of confidence.

More recently, it seems to me that counselor educators, supervisors, and mentors, may have fallen down on the job by not assisting students and new professionals in the development and affirmation of a clear professional identity. The following provides suggestions for what I believe should be added to counseling education programs and should also be a part of a counseling supervisors and mentors playbook. In helping to firm up the establishment of a professional identity, counselor educators, supervisors, and senior counselors might work to mentor students and early counseling professionals so that they have the confidence to take risks to provide new and different services in our ever changing world of professional counseling.

A graduate professional seminar. Training programs should absolutely be required to have a professional seminar that assists future counselors in identifying with the type of professional they hope to be. In this seminar, they should be required to read the news and social media relentlessly. They should be more than familiar with the counseling related problems in their community along with the issues in the larger segments of society. They should learn the rudiments of service provision for these issues in part because all of the opportunities for counseling service, private or public, are readily available everyday. From this smorgasbord of information, students can create a vision for themselves. The leader of the professional seminar can help to create exercises to better inform the students. One possibility is to have the students enumerate the most crucial services needs in their communities and then use their collective imaginations to address these needs and view them as potential future opportunities.

Mentoring. Trainers really are obligated to make it easier for students to experience and understand the power of the mentoring process. I've had terrific mentors in my professional life and I have found that the best way for anyone to learn how to be a good mentor is to previously have had an influential mentor. So professionals, or members of a professional seminar should assist students in learning how to surround themselves with people who give them confidence and pepper them with both ideas and searching questions.

To be sure, a professional seminar should hold visits with program graduates who can be role models. Counselor education programs can invite colleagues in the community and former graduates to be mentors. A professional seminar should facilitate the students understanding of how to get the most from their mentors. To be blunt, students and new professionals should learn to respectfully use people to enrich themselves. Students can also give back to a mentor by suggesting a writing project (perhaps for VISTAS) or other opportunity to contribute that a current mentor may have been unaware of. Students and new professionals can receive guidance from mentors regarding the selection of professional organizations at the state and national levels. Mentors and students can stimulate each other to become more active and more political in the professional organizations. Training programs should also have students develop a clear vision of what they will do as professionals, where they will do it, when they will do it, and also evaluate the worth of their contributions. That can even assist students in making an independent estimate of what they think their services are worth in dollars and cents. With that vision, students and new professionals will be able to chart both a professional and entrepreneurial course.

Exposure to unusual opportunities. As an emeritus faculty member, I am called upon regularly by my former students, who unfortunately did not have a professional seminar during my tenure, to assist with the development of their professional careers. I find that many have little focus beyond being a career counselor or psychotherapist or school counselor or rehabilitation counselor. When I suggest simple approaches for them to receive well focused training and new information, they are flabbergasted that they had not thought about it. For the family therapists, I suggest a tour through the family court services or child custody evaluations; highly risky, demanding but thoroughly challenging work for a fledgling therapist trying to learn some of the demanding intricacies of family therapy conflicts. Rehabilitation students would do well to spend time in a VA hospital while career counselors could learn a lot by serving at an employment development department or working with the long term unemployed in a social service agency.

Development of the portfolio career path. I also think that the training programs should assist students who want to develop portfolio careers for maximum professional and financial maneuverability. Let me give an example. The practice of career counseling has changed from three tests and a cloud of dust to outplacement services, the creation of job clubs, career and life coaching, executive coaching, internal corporate coaching, vocational psychotherapy, integrating work and emotional issues, work and family issues, work and family spillover, starting a business, working with a family business, consultation with business partners, employee selection, executive selection, evaluating police and fire fighting and other first responder candidates, consulting on the hiring of women into jobs formerly held by all males, sexual and ethnic

discrimination, sexual harassment, spousal support determinations, accommodating learning disabilities in the workplace, rehabilitation assessment, and interviewing practice. Students and new professionals can learn to cherry pick from these opportunities and develop an expertise in a few. Thus they will not just be generic career counselors; they are counselors who have a portfolio of clear offerings to the public with several possible income streams.

Learn to take risks and gain support for new ideas. A professional seminar should help students to take risks. They should be given ideas about how to respond to community disasters or terrorist attacks. They should be given opportunities to develop big ideas for new and different forms of intervention. They should learn to listen to the ideas of others, and learn techniques for adding to a colleague's new ideas without the colleague feeling personally threatened. In my classroom experience as a professor, there was often too much eye rolling at new ideas and tactless put downs of innovative thinkers. That needs to be discouraged.

Learn to ask the right questions. A professional seminar should teach students how to be experts. They don't always need to know all of the answers but they should be able to be guided to ask the right questions. I have found that by asking the right questions, people will provide answers and will learn from them. For example, by asking the right questions, I can engage a potential client when responding to a new caller from my answering service.

Potential clients aren't really sure how to make an initial contact with a counselor so they usually say something like, "Can you tell me your approach to counseling." Answering a question as simple as that really serves very little usefulness and goes nowhere. The counselor needs to realize that what the client is trying to do is develop a connection. So rather than answering that question the counselor can simply ask, "Why don't you tell me about your concerns?" The client will be thrilled to answer that question and in just a few moments, the counselor will have the beginning rudiments of a therapeutic relationship. More often than not by having the client express troubling information, the client will become more interested in making an appointment with the counselor.

The same is true for counselors at an agency or corporation board room. Pertinent inquiries offered by a counselor or consultant should be able to unleash a debate, moving members of an organization into a new dynamic. With the right questions, a group will become more than the sum of its parts in answering questions and actually solving problems. I have found as a consultant that I am most pleased when the people who hired me believed that they solved their own problems. In fact they have, but they were often not asking the right questions. Philosophers have mused that we are able to solve most of our problems by simply rearranging what it is that we know. Counselors should realize that with new questions, answers can be solicited and the information can be rearranged.

Inform the public. Counselors need to help the public be able to see and appreciate "counseling." There are local, state, and national organizations related to counseling that try to inform the public. But to me, the people best equipped to provide information to the public are the counselors themselves. Counselors are not trained in how to market themselves and how to describe what it is that they do. I think that a professional seminar should help practitioners learn to articulate what they do and engage in a social networking process to promote themselves. Ultimately this process should

generate a greater interest in counseling services by the general public. Through collaboration with others in a seminar, students can learn to create their own web pages. They can also learn to create blogs on particular interest areas. And, of course they can learn from other students how to create a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube.

With skills like these in place, students can learn to market themselves for their own entrepreneurial endeavors. They can learn how to create innovative and impressive business cards and they can learn to create vitae that enumerate their accomplishments while also boosting their confidence. The seminar can help them to carve their own niche.

Learn different roles for counselors in public service and advocacy. In searching for internships and later appointments in the work world, I have been struck by students' lack of creativity. I would like to see my students and program graduates consider internships and their first jobs differently. They should more seriously consider what experience and benefits the internships offer them. A professional seminar can help them to check out county civil service offices for counseling jobs in juvenile halls, probation services, adoption services, family court services, child and adult protective services. These types of positions can prepare all counselors for roles and consultancies in public service that they may not have previously considered. They can also view new roles in state and federal agencies as parole agents and counselors in prison services. Parole outpatient clinics are not familiar to many counselors but they are fascinating agencies to provide counseling service.

With a focus upon these work arenas, counselors can be exposed to the raw material that can produce an exciting role of advocacy in their lives. Positions like these allow counselors to tune into the social milieu and to see change as related to both intrapsychic phenomena as well as the dynamic of oppression in society. Counselors can be tuned into changing the social context and environments that address social injustice. That would allow counselors to be real change agents.

Assist with volunteering. All counseling students already know that they engage in a large proportion of free services. Still there are more opportunities for free services. In San Francisco, projects like Homeless Connect have regular all day service provision experiences. Counselors can look to these to provide service but to also engage in their own networking process. Graduate program leaders should be in a position to assist their students in securing these opportunities. In a sense the students are getting a tryout in a service area that they may have never considered.

Utilize transferable skills. Not everyone is cut out to be a counselor either by interest, skills level, or passion for the field. But there are a variety of activities that graduates of counseling programs can do to influence the profession. I have had the opportunity to know two counseling graduates who have become very successful developing continuing education programs for counselors. Others have gone into communications fields like lobbying and advocating for counseling through the legislative process. While the goal of counseling education is to produce counselors, not every graduate will become a counselor. But that doesn't mean that they can't be successful in counseling in other ways. Our training programs should assist with opening graduates to these opportunities.

Using VISTAS

I have had the opportunity to give a number of presentations about the impact of VISTAS on counselors and counselor educators. I think of VISTAS as a fertile marshland, filled with potential ideas set to multiply. VISTAS is a terrific breeding ground. I have recommended to my students over the years that if they have a new idea and want to see how it might catch on, they could try the following. Make a presentation of the idea at a professional convention like ACA or NCDA. If the presentation goes well, consider writing about it for VISTAS to get the idea into print. Refine the idea and engage in research to determine its efficacy. Then prepare the result of the research and analysis for entry into VISTAS again or to a journal more specifically related to the topic.

VISTAS will be around for a long time and I am confident that it will propel new thinkers into contributing to their profession in creative ways based upon passion and experience.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm