

There's More to Graduate School - Personal & Professional Development Resources for Graduate Students & Graduate Student Mentors

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Personal and professional growth and development are areas of concern for practicing professional counselors and educators. These areas of concern include activities related to self-awareness, understanding and overcoming biases, being open-minded, and being an effective counselor (Nugent & Jones, 2005). These are areas of concern, also, for graduate students as they prepare to enter the world of professional counseling in their fields of interest. Counselors-in-training at the master's level of graduate school have unique occasions to take advantage of personal and professional growth and development opportunities. The purpose of this article is to outline some of the unique opportunities that exist for master's level graduate students and to point readers to resources, whether for themselves as graduate students or for the graduate students they are mentoring.

One of the most abundant resources for personal and professional growth and development is professional associations. The American Counseling Association (ACA) is a "professional and educational organization that is dedicated to the growth and enhancement of the counseling profession...by providing leadership training, publications, continuing education opportunities, and advocacy services...[and] helps counseling professionals develop their skills and expand their knowledge base" (American Counseling Association, 2002, http://www.counseling.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=INSIDE_ACA). Graduate students can take advantage of discounted rates for membership into ACA and its divisions. Membership

in ACA also provides graduate students with opportunities to attend conferences at an affordable price through discounted rates and volunteer opportunities to cover the cost of registration. Graduate student mentors are encouraged to promote membership in the professional associations and attendance of association conferences as an opportunity for their protégé to access a variety personal and professional growth and development tools. As a graduate student mentor, counselor educators can be role models of professional association membership and conference attendance and therefore influence graduate student involvement.

Not only do annual conferences provide workshops and seminars to enhance one's knowledge of counseling techniques, interventions, and issues, but they also provide chances for students to network. Networking is simply "Building positive, professional relationships within your field(s) of interest" (Meredith College, 2005, <http://www.meredith.edu/career/students/findajob.htm#top>). Graduate students can network with other graduate students, professionals in their areas of interest, representatives from counseling programs at the doctoral level, and companies that can serve as future employers. Networking leads to professional contacts that can serve many purposes in the future. Furthermore, networking allows graduate students to practice and develop their communication skills, skills that will be increasingly essential to them as they enter into the profession of counseling. Graduate student mentors can serve as key bridges between graduate students and professional contacts, and as a mentor, help students connect with other professionals in the field.

In addition to networking opportunities at national conferences, graduate students have additional chances to network with other graduate students and professionals in the field through listserves which are promoted on the Student section of the ACA website. The COUNSGRADS listserv "has been developed to help graduate students from across the country communicate with one another. Students can talk about classes, internships, papers, and ideas about the profession" (American Counseling Association, 2002, <http://www.counseling.org/AM/students.htm>). Another networking and development opportunity exists through the Diversegrad-L listserv, which "is an internet mailing list providing a forum to discuss multicultural/cross-cultural and diversity issues in the counseling profession and society at large...[and] the opportunity to interact with students, counselors, counselor educators, and psychologists, etc. about diverse concerns" (American Counseling Association, 2002, <http://www.counseling.org/AM/students.htm>). Each of these listserves provides graduate students the

chance to expand their learning opportunities, get feedback from other students and professional counselors, discuss issues they are facing in their course work and internships, learn how others handle various client groups and situations, give or receive referrals, and even search for career opportunities. This interaction with others allows for additional growth and development in both the personal and professional arenas.

Graduate counseling programs require research papers, research critiques, presentations on counseling issues, and projects in a number of courses. Graduate students can use these required assignments as an opportunity to explore areas of interest, populations they desire to work with once they are practicing counselors, or issues related to groups they intend to work with in internships and post-graduation. Students can also use these assignments to strengthen any areas of bias or weakness. It is important, in order to be a competent and effective counselor, to understand one's biases and to understand the issues and populations about which a counselor lacks knowledge (Egan, 2002 & Nugent & Jones, 2005). Using course assignments in this way will allow graduate students the opportunity to turn weaknesses into strengths and will assist them in their personal and professional growth and development.

One example is of a graduate counseling student who realizes that she lacks knowledge about working with Asian clients but understands that in her particular geographic area she will work with Asian individuals often. Writing a research paper focused on working with Asian populations in counseling can serve to complete a course requirement but also to increase the student's competence and readiness for working with this population. The student has the opportunity to turn a weakness or potential weakness into an area of increased competence, a strength. Other areas of potential weakness that can be converted into strengths through completing graduate course assignments include issues in ethics, multicultural counseling competencies in general, and professional advocacy issues.

Furthermore, a graduate counseling student is interested in working with college students upon graduation. In many of his classes he has the opportunity to write research papers and projects so he focuses his research on a variety of issues related to college counseling and special college student populations. Not only does the graduate student complete the assignments, but he also increases his awareness and preparedness for working in an area of counseling that interests him. Presenting assignments in class also assists the graduate student in developing needed communication skills.

Mentors can encourage graduate students to use course assignments to address biases or weaknesses, and to explore possible interests or specialties within the counseling field.

Seeking out and developing mentoring relationships with professional counselors and counselor educators is another way for graduate students to actively get involved in personal and professional growth and development while they are still in their graduate program. Mentoring is praised as a valuable and essential tool for student success (Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005) and has been defined as

a nurturing, complex, long-term, developmental process in which a more skilled and experienced person serves as a role model, teacher, sponsor, and coach who encourages, counsels, befriends a less skilled person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development (Black, Suarez, & Medina, 2004, p. 46).

When seeking a mentoring relationship, graduate students should consider their expectations and goals, what they seek in an mentor, what they can offer a mentor, and their knowledge of mentoring (Rose, 2003; Black, Suarez, & Medina, 2004; & Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005). Various resources outline guidelines for seeking out and developing mentoring relationships, as well as maintaining mentoring relationships. These resources also include information to assist graduate students in better understanding mentoring, and are listed below:

- Black, L.L., Suarez, E.C., & Medina, S. (2004). Helping students help themselves: Strategies for successful mentoring relationships. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, 44, p. 44-54.
- Casto, C., Caldwell, C. & Salazar, C.F. (2005). Creating mentoring relationships between female faculty and students in counselor education: Guidelines for potential mentees and mentors. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 83, p. 331-336.
- Rose, G.L. (2003). Enhancement of mentor selection using the ideal mentor scale. *Research in Higher Education*, 44, p. 473-494.

Mentoring relationships can exist within academics as well as in professional arenas. Graduate students can also have a mentor in both the academic and professional worlds. Since mentoring relationships are beneficial to both the mentor and mentee or protégé, graduate students can also serve as mentors to other graduate students who are new to the counseling program or even to undergraduate students in counseling related disciplines. This provides an additional opportunity for role modeling and growth. Mentoring is another unique opportunity available to graduate students to shape their personal and professional growth and development.

Advocacy is another area that provides graduate students opportunities for personal and professional growth and development. Through membership in professional associations, graduate students have the chance to actively participate in the advocacy efforts of those associations. These advocacy efforts and areas of focus vary depending on the association or division, as well as the current issues at stake in the field of counseling. In addition to professional advocacy, students can find opportunities for growth and development through self-advocacy. Self-advocacy allows individuals to express their needs and their beliefs (Muir, A., 2005) and specifically allows graduate students to share their concerns, needs, and beliefs related to course requirements, aspects of their graduate program, the need or desire for mentoring relationships, and their roles within professional associations. Self-advocacy empowers students and assists them in developing and carrying out action plans and developing self-awareness, and graduate student mentors can encourage self-advocacy among their protégés (American Counseling Association, 2002, <http://www.counseling.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=RESOURCES>, through role modeling, by providing advocacy opportunities in coursework, or by collaborating in advocacy efforts of professional associations. Advocacy opportunities provide a multifaceted approach to personal and professional growth and development for graduate students.

Graduate students in master's level counseling programs have many opportunities available to them to pursue personal and professional growth and development, as well as ample resources for these pursuits. Graduate student mentors have a responsibility to their protégés to encourage the students' growth and development in the personal and professional arenas, as well as resources to assist them in this responsibility. Professional association memberships, conferences for networking, listserves for electronic networking, opportunities to explore areas of interest through graduate course work, as well as the chance to develop biases or weaknesses into counseling strengths through graduate course work, mentor relationships, and advocacy are all areas available to graduate students through which they can concentrate on personal and professional growth and development activities. Taking advantage of the unique opportunities within each of these venues at an early point in their counseling career will allow the master's level graduate student to build a solid foundation for further growth and development in both personal and professional areas once he or she is practicing and serving within in the discipline of counseling. Graduate students are encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities available to them and mentors are challenged to promote and model personal and professional growth and development to graduate students through the unique avenues that exist for them.

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American Counseling Association (2002). *Advocacy Competencies*. Retrieved May 31, 2005, from <http://www.counseling.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=RESOURCES>.

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