A Person-Centered Approach to Master's Counseling Programs Within Accrediting

Standards

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Abstract

Counselor education has been focused on learning new techniques and strategies to improve teaching with content centered on meeting CACREP standards. The combination of these two components of master's programs has led to a reductionist view of counselor education. A person-centered approach to education is presented, culminating in a proposed design for a master's program with an underlying person-centered philosophy within the CACREP standards. Having an educational philosophy within a program can help strengthen student learning and give educators direction and intention behind their teaching, ultimately producing well-rounded learners.

Keywords: Person-centered, teaching, accreditation, master's program, training.

Person-Centered Approach to Master's Counseling Programs Within CACREP Standards

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) created standards for counselor education programs that have guided the development of counseling programs nationwide. Current teaching practices are based on utilizing various teaching techniques and ensuring alignment with CACREP standards (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011; West, Bubenzer, Cox, & McGlothlin, 2013). The proposed program provides an alternative approach to the standards with a theoretical foundation as its base to inform program development and teaching, creating a comprehensive and holistic program that continues to align with the standards. My hope in writing this article is to spark conversation and hopefully change within the academic structure, specifically when training mental health professionals. Although this paper is structured around the CACREP standards, a similar format can be employed for other accrediting bodies across disciplines.

Current Teaching Recommendations and Practices

The field of counselor education consists of many recommendations for teaching counselors and engaging students. Currently, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision

(ACES) endorses two of its more recently published books on counselor education. When considering the development of a curriculum, it is important to consider established recommendations and practices.

The most recent ACES publication by West et al. (2013) is based on the premise of engaging students in learning. Engaging students in learning is a large component of education; however, it is difficult to consistently engage students without a grounded belief of what is engaging and how students learn best. Early in the book, the authors recommend developing teaching beliefs and utilizing a personal teaching philosophy to inform teaching decisions and strategies. As the book continues, various strategies are mentioned that have conflicting philosophical beliefs, such as; solution-focused, constructivist, experiential, and other beliefs, without a comprehensive view of utilizing the techniques. Each recommendation seems to be grounded in a belief, with some being explicitly stated and others implicitly implied.

McAuliffe and Eriksen (2011) attempted to integrate theory throughout their text, promoting constructivist, developmental, and experiential approaches to developing courses aligning with CACREP standards. They provide multiple chapters on their underlying theoretical beliefs, but struggle to combine the three components as they begin to apply these concepts to the specific courses outlined in the text. They seem to concentrate on the constructivist point of view; however, they attempt to integrate experiential and developmental components as well. Recommendations, such as assigning concrete reading and lecturing, are inconsistent with all three components. Although these recommendations speak to the early development of counselors, experiential and constructivist views are contrary by not allowing for more flexibility through collaboration in learning. Educators utilizing this text to develop courses or curriculum will meet CACREP standards, but they will also be inconsistent in their teaching styles. They will lack a clear rationale for their teaching methods, hindering the ability to be spontaneous and adapt to student's needs based on a strong theoretical understanding.

Constructing recommendations around an underlying philosophical assumption would strengthen the intentions behind utilizing various techniques in teaching, and ultimately would promote stronger learning. In the current recommended texts for counselor

education, a strong theoretical presence is lacking, leaving counselor educators to pick from various techniques based on an assortment of beliefs about teaching with a lack of true integration and cohesion. With stronger matching between philosophy and the administration of the training, courses are more successful (Tudor & Lewin, 2006). Further, without having a strong belief system underlying teaching, educators are left to try to fit into a certain teaching style, discouraging authenticity or true presence in the classroom due to the concentration needed to perform the recommended practice accordingly (Combs, 1986). The proposed model of counselor education will be based on the person-centered philosophy for change in an attempt to be theoretically consistent and develop counselors in a way that promotes change from a cohesive viewpoint.

Person-Centered Philosophy

The person-centered approach is based on the understanding that people have an inherent drive towards growth and development. People's intuitive sense when in a safe and growth producing environment can be trusted (Barrett-Lennard, 1963; Rogers, 1957; Wilkins, 2010). Therefore, people operating from the person-centered approach have a deep trust in their clients' perceptions and experiences, allowing clients to express themselves in ways that clients choose. When people are in relationships characterized by the conditions, their potential can be unlocked.

Carl Rogers (1951, 1957, 1959) developed a theory of human development and constructive personality change. He outlined six necessary and sufficient conditions for change to occur: 1) the therapist and the client are in psychological contact, 2) the client experiences incongruence, 3) the therapist is congruent within the therapeutic relationship, 4) the therapist experiences unconditional positive regard towards the client, 5) the therapist experiences and communicates empathic understanding towards the client, and 6) the client perceives the therapists' unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding. The foundation of person-centered theory rests on these conditions as necessary and sufficient for personality change to occur. Once two people are in contact and the other conditions are present, a therapeutic relationship characterized by

growth and healing will be formed and the person can begin moving closer towards their potential.

Rogers (1959) believed that the "change in the self is one of the most marked and significant changes occurring in therapy" (Rogers, 1959, p. 202). This change of self can only occur within the context of a relationship with the core conditions present, which activates people's self-actualizing tendency. When people are operating out of their self-actualizing tendency, they tend to live more fulfilling and accepting lives characterized by openness to experience and fluidity in responding (Barrett-Lennard, 2007). Through relationships where the six necessary and sufficient conditions are present, people are given the opportunity for healing and growth (Wilkins, 2010).

Person-Centered Approach to Teaching

Person-centered theory was conceptualized as a theory of personal growth originally applied to the counseling realm, but has been broadened to other domains, including teaching. Instead of person-centered as a way of doing counseling, it can be thought of as a way of being in a relationship with others (Rogers, 1986; Wilkins, 2010). The view of the helping relationship can easily be generalized to the facilitator/learner relationship. Barrett-Lennard (1963) classified this relationship as "one person facilitates the personal development or growth of another, where he helps the other become more mature, adaptive, integrated, or open to his own experience" (p. 223). Each of these points of growth can be seen as goals of completing an educational experience.

Rogers (1969) explicitly applied his original ideas of counseling to teaching practices, demonstrating how a relationship characterized by the conditions is facilitative for all types of change and growth. Learning is focused on what is meaningful to the learner, creating more integrated experiences within the learner. When learning through self-initiated means, the learner experiences changes in behavior, attitudes, and personality. Students inherently have a wide array of responses, which are fostered through a person-centered approach to learning. Rogers (1977a) argues that personal growth produces deeper and more rapid learning and is pervasive in the life of students.

Research has supported the use of the therapeutic conditions to enhance teaching effectiveness (Aspy & Roebuck, 2002; Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Cooper, 1974; Cornelius-White 2007; Schmuck, 1963, 1966; Thomson, 1969). Cornelius-White (2007) examined 119 studies related to person-centered education, finding medium to large effect sizes on positive student outcomes. Aspy and Roebuck (2002) examined over 10 years of research and determined that students' evaluation of teachers' levels of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding produced positive results in students. Further, Barrett-Lennard (1998) reviewed student-teacher relationship studies, concluding a correlation between therapeutic conditions and positive student outcomes in education. The relationship, as perceived by students, appears to be facilitative of learning and thus will be the foundation of the proposed program.

Educator responsibilities. Educators carry the responsibility of setting the tone for the learning climate and relationships that are created within the environment. They provide enough structure to reduce the level of threat that students initially experience when given freedom in their learning, while allowing students to have freedom to grow. Learning occurs through contact, characterized by genuineness, mutual understanding, and valuing of the person, between the educator and the student and between students. Educators value students holistically, including their feelings, passion, and intellect. In order to produce this environment, educators need to have the capacity to engage in and maintain contact with students. Educators utilize reflective statements to help create an environment where students experience the sixth condition and feel safe, accepted, understood, and valued as members of the course. This environment that is developed through relationships allows students' natural tendencies to come to fruition (Rogers, 1951, 1967, 1969, 1977a, 1977b; Tudor, 2007).

Educators are active participants in the learning process along with their students, needing to be open and flexible to their experiences. They take risks and are affected and changed by the educational process with their students. Educators view themselves as flexible resources with limitations. They bring their own interests while maintaining a level of attunement to the class members' receptivity of their knowledge. They do not assume that students should be required to attend and use attendance as a measure of

interest and motivation in the course, adapting as necessary (Rogers, 1951, 1969; Tudor, 2007).

Educators lack the desire to control the outcome of a course due to the belief in the capacity of the students. To engage in this process of learning, educators need to be grounded and knowledgeable in the person-centered approach. The educator needs to be able to live in uncertainty and be prepared for a variety of experiences or no experience to occur. It is up to them to facilitate meaningful learning for the students, creating an experience that is spontaneous and driven by the students (Tudor, 2007).

Student/learner responsibilities. Students or learners have more responsibility than in traditional classrooms. An assumption of traditional teaching is that what is taught is learned. In this approach, learning is seen as an active process, with students carrying the brunt of the responsibility for learning and self-evaluation, producing more applicable learning. Students will determine what is meaningful for them to learn and the best way for them to learn based on their own self-discipline (Rogers, 1969, 1977a, 1977b; Tudor, 2007). As a result of this process of learning, students begin to facilitate learning for each other. Students can serve as both a support and motivator to one another. If students feel safe and the environment and relationships have built a foundation for the classroom, students will develop the potential that exists within them (Rogers, 1969, 1977a; Schmuck, 1963, 1966).

Measuring learning in students. Evaluation of students does not come solely from the educator; however, the educator does give explicit feedback to students on academic pursuits throughout the course of learning. Educators create an environment that is open to feedback both to and from students. The feedback that is given should be objective and not focused on the worth of the person or the work. The purpose of evaluation is not to give a grade, but to create an environment that facilitates further discoveries (Rogers, 1951, 1969).

Students are encouraged to evaluate their work based on different measures of learning than traditional measures. Taking away the evaluative component from the educator allows students to feel free in their ability to learn and unleashes their creative potential. Students are encouraged to reflect on the amount of satisfaction found from the assignment, their growth throughout the experience both intellectually and personally, their openness and vulnerability in

approaching the assignment, and their thirst for more knowledge as a result of the experience. These ways of measuring learning are focused more on the growth and personal learning of the student as opposed to completion of set assignments and meeting of expectations deemed important to the educator (Rogers, 1951, 1969, 1977b).

      Results of the person-centered approach to learning. As a result of participating in the person-centered approach, significant learning is likely to occur. Significant learning typically comes with discomfort from giving up previous experiences of learning, but it brings about meaningful change for the learner. Significant learning can only occur through participating and when the learner deems it meaningful (Rogers, 1957, 1969).

      Significant learning promotes independence, creativity, and self-reliance. Students learn the value of curiosity and adaptability, with the understanding that no piece of knowledge is secure. Students are better prepared for success due to their confidence in their ability to adapt to the ever-changing world (Rogers, 1951, 1967, 1969, 1977b). Students solidify their belief systems and the reason behind their beliefs (Rogers, 1951; Tudor, 2007). These changes are crucial to students' success as they enter into the counseling field, further promoting the person-centered approach in counselor education.

Recommendations for Counselor Education

      Utilizing a person-centered approach to counselor education means a shift from emphasizing teaching, directing, and controlling to personal growth and self-discovery of meaning. Instead of helping students learn to counsel, counselor educators view their job as facilitating an individualized and personal process of becoming a counselor. This process includes focusing on students' belief systems as opposed to behaviors and techniques, generating personal meaning and awareness. Students are encouraged to examine their best ways of working instead of having teaching techniques imposed on them. Through this facilitation of learning, students can develop trustworthy belief systems that are comprehensive, true to the student, appropriate, and adaptable. When students are given the opportunity for self-directed assignments followed by self-assessment of work, meaningful learning and a safe environment between faculty and students are created (Combs, 1986; Tolan, 2012; Tudor, 2007).

Growth and learning is facilitated when students experience the same conditions through relationships with faculty members that are being taught by the same faculty members. Counselor education programs can support faculty members by encouraging student-teacher relationships characterized by the conditions. Structural changes in counselor education programs may enhance continuity of contact with faculty members and students based on mutual respect and cooperation to promote safety and allow for deeper self-exploration. Personal growth and contact opportunities through extended teacher-led group experiences is one such structural support. Additionally, including student representatives in faculty meetings to allow students to have a voice in their education is another way to send students the message that they are worthy and important in the course of their education (Combs, 1986; Rogers, 1967; Tudor, 2007).

Providing instruction in response to students' needs could enhance counselor education programs. Programs can be structured to evaluate students' needs and provide experiences or resources for students to continue exploration of and meet their needs. In counselor education, students are self-motivated to seek out counseling education with a need to learn how to counsel. This need can be satisfied through actual experience of working with clients, starting "from the earliest practicable moment" (Rogers, 1951, p. 433). Being exposed to working with clients early on and throughout training programs continues the need to learn coupled with authentic encounters with clients to lay the foundation for examining the dynamic process that occurs in counseling. Having the experiential component of counseling promotes opportunities for personal involvement, including reflection and complex thinking (Combs, 1986; Rogers, 1969; Tudor, 2007). Additionally, ACA Code of Ethics (2005) promotes an integration of study and practice.

Clinical Experiences

The facilitative change agent in person-centered theory is the relationship; therefore, it is imperative for counselor educators to consistently participate in clinical experiences and provide these experiences for their students. Although not all counselor educators are person-centered, the literature supports the importance of clinical experience in the growth and development of counselors beyond

practices of knowledge and reflection (Carnell, 2007; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Lanning, 1990; Olverholser, 2010; Ray, Jayne, & Miller, 2014). Counselor educators can utilize their experiences as examples in teaching and in their way of being with students.

When viewed simultaneously, the need for clinical experiences in counselor education and the process of change from a person-centered perspective are working towards the goal of improving students' competency as future counselors. When in an environment with these conditions, students are free to grow and change. Person-centered counseling heavily focuses on the person of the therapist as opposed to what the therapist knows (Wilkins, 2010). Under this assumption, students flourish in environments that promote clinical growth experiences as they matriculate through their graduate program, enhancing their personal development and facilitating professional growth.

CACREP

The CACREP standards exist to promote high standards for counselor preparation, ensuring that students possess the knowledge and skills to practice effectively (CACREP, 2009), but many feel limited in their creativity and flexibility in developing programs (Gale & Austin, 2003). After reviewing past CACREP standards, Hansen (2003) determined that the standards are increasingly including reductive content, such as DSM training and techniques, to be included as part of training programs. He argues that the structure of counseling curriculum and the content is increasing in the prescriptive manner, diverging from the original ideals of the counseling profession.

The way some counselor education programs have adopted standards contributes to a concrete view of training counselors. Counselor education, as evidenced by the endorsed publications referenced above, has become a set of techniques and rubrics, instead of a holistic view of training with intentionality and purpose to produce meaningful learning of the counselor professionally and personally.

CACREP (2009) allows for deviation from set guidelines with evidence of rationale included in self-study of the school. This proposed model is aligned with CACREP core areas, but varies greatly

from the traditional approach to counselor education as it is theoretically driven by the person-centered approach. This model will hopefully produce counselors who are better able to handle the art of counseling with flexibility, complex cognitive thought, and a deep understanding of the process of therapy.

Basic Principles and Structure of Proposed Master's Program

The overarching goals of the proposed program are to facilitate personal development and growth, promote further seeking of learning, and create consistent experiences for students. Each component of the program has been developed with these goals in mind and continues to incorporate the person-centered philosophy. The program begins with the application process, attending to the relationships between faculty and students from the first interaction.

Application Process

The application process fosters an atmosphere of trust and safety by allowing students to express themselves freely. Applicants are not judged based on their grades or scores, but they are valued for their desire to grow and their process of becoming. The main steps in the application process are:

- Thorough screening for willingness to grow and learn based on letters of recommendation and personal statement
- Personal statement consisting of students' beliefs about humans and growth in addition to personal goals and what they are seeking from entering the program

Students who demonstrate a willingness to grow and openness to change are invited for an "interview" that is a time to determine the best matches between faculty and students. Faculty and students both try to get to know each other well, with faculty members presenting themselves congruently and openly to the students. Students and faculty members participate in both group and individual interactions, culminating in mutual decisions to be matched as student and faculty advisor. Each faculty members' students become a cohort, beginning

the journey of the development process among consistent and mutually decided relationships.

Program Format

Students meet with their advisors to develop their educational plan based on students' goals. The students and faculty members use the Degree Plan Form (see Appendix A) to collaboratively discuss their program. The degree plan is a fluid document, utilized as a guide to be constantly revisited to collaboratively assess students' personal and professional growth goals throughout their program.. The degree plan is a contract between faculty and students, allowing students to graduate once it is completed.

Students are in their cohort with their advisor for their clinical experience class throughout their program to promote safety, relationships, and growth. When conflicts arise between student(s) and faculty, they are worked through and are viewed as opportunities of growth for both students and faculty. Students begin seeing clients as soon as they feel ready, with encouragement from faculty to begin as quickly as possible. The clinical course operates like a group in addition to topics being discussed as students deem them relevant to their clinical work. Although not specifically didactic, theories, skills, ethics, diversity, and other related topics will be encompassed due to the nature of clinical work. The flexibility of the course and group format facilitates individual learning and personal growth at the same time.

Concurrently with the clinical experience class, students take two month classes that address the eight CACREP core areas and may be taken as many times as possible, but need to be cycled through at least once. Faculty members who have an interest in the area view themselves as a resource, while students determine what is significant learning to them. Faculty encourage students to critically examine their rationale for each subjects' application to their learning. Students will have the ability to bring their real life clinical experiences and challenges to each of these areas. Courses will be conducted in open group discussions so each course is unique to the students and their concerns and interests. Sequencing for these courses will be based on students' desire and motivation. Instructors' main goals are to facilitate student's curiosity in these areas and promote an atmosphere that can

help students grow through allowing students' freedom to create assignments and course content. See Appendix B for an example syllabus for one CACREP area.

Evaluation and Gatekeeping

Assessment will be based on student's self-evaluation or reflections coupled with faculty input. Faculty members give concrete feedback to help students develop an accurate internal sense of evaluation. Instead of rubrics, students decide how to evaluate their personal change in self and views on each CACREP area, allowing them to demonstrate learning that is truly meaningful to them. Although some may view this way of evaluating as problematic, the person-centered philosophy supports the perspective that all students will grow and develop in their own time under the conditions (Rogers, 1951, 1959).

Implications of this approach to assessment are that students have an individualized program that may extend beyond the standard curricular experience. Students and faculty collaboratively agree upon students' readiness for graduation based on their individualized goals. This view of students as unique promotes a multicultural attitude geared towards the best interest of the students in addition to facilitating ethical gatekeeping. As a result, it is expected that students will have a well-developed sense of self that allows for excellence in clinical work and continued learning due to improved flexibility and enhanced self-confidence (Rogers, 1951, 1959).

Conclusion

Currently, counselor education is focused on performing techniques in teaching without strong theoretical grounding. The lack of importance placed on theory in teaching lends many counseling programs to adopt CACREP standards in a way that limits the creativity of its students and professors. Creating a program that is both theoretically consistent and aligns with CACREP standards will promote a more intentional program geared towards holistically developing counselors.

The proposed format of a master's program is theoretically grounded in the person-centered approach. All components of the

program work towards personal and professional growth of students, instead of working towards meeting specific CACREP areas, potentially fragmenting students' learning. This program is also presented as a suggestion to begin working within the confines outlined in accrediting bodies and existing university systems. I do not claim to know the best ways to educate students, but I do think that more discussion is warranted regarding training future mental health professionals in a way that truly facilitates growth and knowledge seeking experiences while maintaining the rigor intended by CACREP and other accrediting associations.

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Appendix A
University Name
College Name

Degree Sought with Specialization

Student Name: _____ ID: _____

Address:

_____
Street   City   State   Zip

E-mail: _____

Master's Advisor: _____

The following questions serve as a guide for the remainder of the discussion of this form. Faculty helps facilitate a discussion with students where they are able to determine goals for growth. The purpose of this form is to document and track progress, but it is not meant to be completed quickly and then left unexamined until graduation. This document is the beginning of many discussions between faculty and students and is a joint process that can be revised many times.

Overall Goals of Program:

Personal: _____
Professional: _____
How will you know when you are ready to graduate? _____

_____

Subsets of Goals

Specialty Areas? _____

Preference of Learning in 8 Core Areas: List 1-8 in order of preference for completing core requirements based on information obtained above. The order of courses may be changed due to students' interests; however, all eight courses must be completed at least once. Indicate preliminary preferences for taking a course more than once: Professional Orientation and Ethics, Social and Cultural Diversity, Human Growth and Development, Career Development, Helping Relationships, Group, Assessment, and Research and Program Evaluation. Each core course is equivalent to three credit hours.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.

Sequencing

First Semester:
Clinical Experience Course (3 credit hours, with advisor throughout)
Student Selected CACREP area(s):

Second Semester:
Clinical Experience Course
Student Selected CACREP area(s):

Third Semester:
Clinical Experience Course
Student Selected CACREP area(s):

Continued Semesters (Fill in as many as needed):
Clinical Experience Course
Student Selected CACREP area(s):

Approval Signatures:

_____	_____
Student	Date
_____	_____
Advisor	Date
_____	_____
Department Chair	Date

University
College
Program

COUN 5000 – Helping Relationships
Fall 2015

Instructor:
Course Schedule:
Phone:
Email:

DESCRIPTION

Through participation in this course, students will have a stronger sense of helping relationships. They will develop an understanding as to what helping relationships mean to them personally and professionally. Students will develop individualized meaning for helping relationships within the context of the outlined parameters. Students will grow in their curiosity of learning regarding helping relationships, applying their experiences and determining future applications for the learning that occurs in the course.

METHODS OF INSTRUCTION

This course is designed to be highly interactive, and students are encouraged to participate in numerous ways. Course time will be spent in ways that the students themselves decide. Lecture, discussion, videos, or many other possibilities exist regarding how the time is spent in class. At the beginning of each class, the instructor will ask how our time will be best spent for the day. At the end of class, if any requests for next class arise in the students, they voice their concerns and plan for the class, with the understanding that the schedule is always tentative due to the current concerns of the class each week.

OVERVIEW OF REQUIREMENTS

This core course, as is the case with other core courses, is focused on helping facilitate students' learning. Therefore, the requirements vary according to the class members. Within the first two weeks of the semester, students will meet with the instructor to develop a plan that both parties agree to in order to meet the requirements for the course. The instructor may periodically check in with students regarding their assignments. Plans may be altered if both student and professor agree. The level of creativity for meeting the requirements is up to the students. Assignments can vary from writing papers to conducting interviews, to creating songs, and anything else in between. Students may work in groups as long as all members are working towards goals that are beneficial to them. The instructor will provide resources to the students throughout the semester as well as encourage sharing among students.

ATTENDANCE

Unless otherwise noted in the agreement between faculty and student, student attendance in class is not mandatory. If students do not feel as if class time is a meaningful use of their time for learning, they will not be pressured to attend.

METHODS OF EVALUATION

Students will self-evaluate their agreed upon "assignments" for this course. Students may evaluate themselves through a reflection paper, self-created rubric, or other method that is determined when the initial plan is created. Methods of evaluation will be incorporated as part of the plan for the course; however, flexibility can be used if needed and agreed upon by student and teacher. The instructor will give feedback throughout the course to students in addition to students' self-evaluation for the purpose of furthering the development of students.

Plan and Evaluation Form:

Core Curricular Experience	CACREP	Plan	Evaluation
1. An orientation to wellness and prevention as desired counseling goals	II.G.5.a		
2. Counselor characteristics and behaviors that influence helping processes	II.G.5.b		
3. Essential interviewing and counseling skills	II.G.5.c		
4. Counseling theories that provide the student with models to conceptualize client presentation and that help the student select appropriate counseling interventions. Students will be exposed to models of counseling that are consistent with current professional research and practice in the field so they begin to develop a personal model of counseling	II.G.5.d		
5. A systems perspective that provides an understanding of family and other systems theories and major models of family and related interventions	II.G.5.e		

Core Curricular Experience	CACREP	Plan	Evaluation
6. A general framework for understanding and practicing consultation	II.G.5.f		
7. Crisis intervention and suicide prevention models, including the use of psychological first aid strategies	II.G.5.g		