Counseling at the Crossroads

By: Craig Cashwell, CACREP Chair, Fall 2009

"I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees. I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees. Asked the lord above for mercy, save me if you please." - Robert Johnson

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I am a huge Robert Johnson fan. In 27 short years, a poor man from the Mississippi Delta wrote and performed music that remains popular and has influenced many blues and rock artists, including Muddy Waters, Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, and Eric Clapton. Clapton once called Johnson the most important blues singer that ever lived.

There is a legend that when Johnson was a young man living in rural Mississippi, he longed to be a great blues musician. He took his guitar to a crossroads at midnight and met the Devil who tuned Johnson’s guitar, played a few songs, and then returned it to Johnson. The legend holds that Robert Johnson then created the greatest blues anyone had ever heard….in exchange for his soul.

I believe that the Counseling profession has gone down to the crossroads. The choices that have fragmented us as a profession are taking a toll. The choices we make over the next decade will shape the future of our profession. Have we sold our soul?

As a profession, we struggle with the fact that the term “counselor” has a generic quality, unlike “Psychology” or “Social Work”. This is a given that we must always strive to overcome by communicating a clear sense of who we are as Professional Counselors. Time and time again, however, we have gone to the crossroads as a profession and done anything but communicate this clearly, creating a weak professional identity in the eyes of other mental health disciplines, consumers, and even among ourselves!

Candidly, CACREP has historically been a part of the problem. Because of language in past Standards, CACREP has accredited programs where the program faculty clearly had professional identities in other mental health disciplines and, in many cases, acculturated students accordingly. Fortunately, the Standards Revision Committee and Board of Directors had the foresight to correct this with the implementation of the 2009 Standards. There remain a number of ways, however, in which our professional identity is unclear.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote that “To be idle requires a strong sense of personal identity.” I offer that we do not have a strong sense of personal identity, so we cannot afford to be idle. The time is now to make choices that will strengthen the profession of
counseling. Although the task requires effort from all professional counselors, I offer here a few thoughts about ways in which we can work together to strengthen the counseling profession.

- We must emphasize what unites us rather than what divides us. Of course, many professional counselors work in different settings with different client groups and have different roles and tasks. It is certainly appropriate to emphasize what makes each of these sub-groups unique, but not at the expense of the fact that we are, first and foremost, all professional counselors. When any sub-group loses sight of that fact, it becomes a “weak link” and damages the counseling profession.
- We must be clear, with ourselves and others, as to who we are. I challenge state licensing boards to review their regulations and the political climate of their state and consider how they can strengthen their regulations to promote the counseling profession. It is far too easy in some states for a professional from another discipline to become a licensed professional counselor. I respect these other disciplines immensely. At the same time, these other disciplines are not compromising their professional identity by credentialing graduates of counseling programs. How do we communicate to our public who we are when the term “licensed professional counselor” (or equivalent, if a different term is used) says little about the professional identity of a licensee?
- We must be precise in our language and challenge others to do the same. For example, the term CACREP-equivalent continues to be used in licensure regulations, program advertisements, and in communications between programs and potential students. It is a term that is deceptive in at least two ways. First, it is commonly used by programs that meet a subset of CACREP Standards (typically related to curriculum and field-experience requirements) but not all of the Standards. Second, it is a program that has not undergone the rigorous external review process conducted by CACREP. That is, CACREP-equivalent is a self-designation. The CACREP Board has adopted a position statement that holds, in essence, that CACREP-equivalent is a meaningless term that is deceptive and harmful to the profession. Use of this term should be discontinued.

I am a Professional Counselor. I hold great pride in my life’s calling and trust that you do as well. Unity is a clear message that is simple when all work together with one voice as Professional Counselors. How is your voice being heard?