

2019-2020 CSI & CACREP Leadership Essay Contest

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Promoting Client and Community Wellness Through Servant Leadership



Professional counselors are uniquely trained and qualified to support, encourage, and promote a wellness mindset through their efforts as servant leaders. Described as the “creative sharing of one’s knowledge and insights and the contribution to the growth and development of others” (Reilly & Spears, 2018, p. 57), servant leadership creates the opportunity to transform lives. Counselors who understand the intriguing paradox of servant leadership can further maximize their professional contributions. Through altruistic service, compassion, and a commitment to serve, counselors can build a “sense of cohesiveness, collaboration, and sustainable relationships-- by understanding and addressing their [the followers’] feelings and emotions” (Jit, Sharma & Kawatra,

2017, p. 81). Counselors are aware of the need to serve others while at the same time, staying committed to their own growth, professional development, and wellness (CACREP, 2018; CSI, 2018). When truly understood, servant leadership has the potential to transform the lives of the servant leader as well as those served. Thankfully, it is an easy transition for counselors who already emphasize wellness, prevention, early intervention, and self-care to selflessly serve while utilizing their counseling knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Counselors as Servant Leaders

Counselors are privileged to have high-level training in mental health, prevention, intervention, and communication skills while also having the professional, ethical, and legal responsibilities to use their skills appropriately. Professional organizations including the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), Chi Sigma Iota (CSI), and the American Counseling Association (ACA) articulate expectations for professional identity development and an expectation of excellence through advocacy, leadership, and service. Competence and professional identity development are of utmost importance to the mission and vision of CACREP (2018) and CSI (2018) to ensure that counselors are fully versed in their identity and enthusiastically promoting wellness-based mental health services. As a result of their

training, experience, and professionalism, counselors can model wellness and excellence through selfless service within the profession, within communities, and with clients.

Promoting Client Wellness

The counseling profession, which is grounded in an ongoing quest for wellness, is committed to serving clients. Counselors who wish to become even more intentional about servant leadership could first consider the type of professional relationships in which they are engaged and then seek opportunities for selfless service. For example, counselors may serve clients as counselees, students, mentees, supervisees, or advisees among other roles depending on whether they are a counselor-in-training, counselor, counselor educator, or consultant. Regardless of and despite the type of “client”, once the relationship is established and roles are understood, the opportunity exists for the counselor to developmentally model servant leadership, advocacy, and an emphasis on wellness. Counselors firmly believe that the pursuit of wellness is essential to healthy living and that positive relationships contribute to overall mental health so some forms of servant leadership may involve counselors providing pro bono counseling, interventions, assessments, consultation, and/or any other professional opportunity they have to advocate for clients and their well-being. In each interaction, counselors need to consistently adhere to professional, ethical, and legal standards while demonstrating excellence while serving diverse clients and communities.

Promoting Community Wellness

In addition to servant leadership with clients, counselors need to seek opportunities to selflessly address the mental health needs of diverse communities by collaborating with other like-minded servant leaders invested in promoting mental health. Within most communities, there are countless organizations, non-profits, groups, schools, and businesses who are also invested in building healthy communities so counselors need to enthusiastically seek out opportunities to and exponentially increase the impact of their service. In addition to those already listed, counselors may seek to attend or gain membership in various organizations, boards, task forces, committees, national or international service groups, or grassroots efforts committed to addressing the mental health needs of diverse communities. While serving with other community leaders, counselors need to remember that they have unique clinical training and experience to help communities develop specific plans to improve services for prevention, intervention, collaboration across providers, and referrals. Once a counselor becomes active within a community, they may be called upon to consult or collaborate with specific organizations. For example, this author has served as a consultant in a depression and anxiety screening in a high school, provided inservice to school faculty about modeling a growth mindset, taught a workshop to childcare employees about self-care and boundaries, and consulted with a megachurch about how to bridge the gap for staff who may benefit from counseling--all within the past few months. As a result of a genuine interest in promoting the well-being of others, this counselor also provided pro bono consultation, coaching, training, workshops, and resources which yielded positive outcomes, improved procedures, mental health referrals, and an improved

understanding of the need for referrals to mental health services.

Professional Identity Development and Servant Leadership

Counselors are trained to prevent, intervene, respond, recommend, refer, and address challenging situations so now is the time to maximize the professional identity and serve clients and the community at large. Also, although servant leadership at the individual level is important, researchers support servant leadership at the organizational level for the greatest positive outcomes (Sahawneh & Benuto, 2018) so it is even more important for organizations like CACREP and CSI to set high standards in the profession so that excellence through service becomes the norm. Thankfully, organizations like CACREP have developed resources and procedures to provide specifically designed instruction, programming, and support so that graduates of CACREP accredited programs are competent and fully aware of their professional identity while CSI provides honor, recognition, and ongoing professional development opportunities. The emphasis on wellness, leadership, professionalism, and advocacy creates the building blocks for counselors to enthusiastically work to overcome the long-standing stigma typically associated with mental health needs and instead selflessly invest their time and energy. In conclusion, counselors-in-training, counselors, and counselor educators need to be the change agents who model, promote, encourage, and support others through their own servant leadership to inspire others to seek wellness as a life goal.

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