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Leadership through Mentorship: Reflections from a New Counselor Educator

In my training and development, two professional counselor role models have inspired me and contributed to my leadership competence - Dr. Sherry Shamblin and Dr. Christine Suniti Bhat. As my doctoral internship supervisor, Dr. Shamblin led by example and exhibited genuine compassion toward the professional counselors on her Early Childhood Mental Health team. Dr. Shamblin consistently maintained appropriate personal and professional boundaries and was objective in her evaluations, although we were classmates. Opportunities for clinical experiences in rural Appalachia were somewhat limited and the resulting dual relationship did not pose an issue. As a leader in the region, Dr. Shamblin embodied the following Principles and Practices of Leadership Excellence (PPLE) (Chi Sigma Iota [CSI], 1999). Dr. Shamblin personified Principle #8 (Mentoring, Encouragement, & Empowerment) by providing us with the necessary skills to become successful professional counselors. She encouraged creativity and flexibility by providing space to build on our individual interests and areas of expertise. As Dr. Shamblin’s supervisee, I was able to obtain clinical experience in safety and sexuality training, which was the focus of my dissertation. In relation to Principle #10 (Feedback and Self-Reflection), Dr. Shamblin solicited ongoing feedback through formal and informal evaluation methods and fostered an environment where team members felt comfortable speaking to her leadership style and techniques. Over time, as we developed a friendship, Dr. Shamblin shared her experiences related to self-reflection, which included consultation with colleagues and mentors, along with a host of self-care strategies to manage personal wellness.

As the Chapter Faculty Advisor (CFA) for the Alpha Chapter of CSI, Dr. Christine Suniti Bhat exemplified several qualities that continue to inspire me as a counselor educator. During my tenure as President, Dr. Bhat contributed to my leadership competence, specifically related to the first four PPLE (CSI, 1999). Within our chapter, Dr. Bhat promoted a legacy of service, showed commitment to the mission and respect for the
history, and instilled within us a vision for the future. Dr. Bhat’s commitment to the mission of CSI was grounded in a genuine interest in promoting the highest academic and clinical standards in counselor preparation and in the field. Dr. Bhat provided gentle guidance to members to ensure the chapter’s established activities continued from year to year. Dr. Bhat’s unique global perspective also informed her mentorship as she often encouraged counselor education students to participate in Education Abroad programs. As a result, my colleagues and I facilitated a CSI-Sponsored Poster Session at the American Counseling Association 2012 Conference and Exposition, documenting our experiences in South Africa and Botswana. Dr. Bhat encouraged us to explore a vision for the future by creating lasting legacies of leadership through service. As a postdoctoral research fellow at Langston University’s federally funded Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, I assisted with advisory activities within the Lambda Upsilon Chapter of CSI. As a new Assistant Professor at Jackson State University, I will serve as Co-CFA for the Beta Omicron Chapter. I credit Dr. Bhat with instilling a sense of personal and professional competence through her selfless mentorship and enduring leadership example.

As I reflect on my personal and professional leadership development, I am careful to applaud the above-mentioned mentors; however, I can identify specific institutional structures that also played a significant role. The expectation for me to serve as a mentor is a direct result of personal relationships, in addition to formal educational experiences. In our field, the need for mentorship of professional counselors is undeniable: graduate students, new professionals, and even established counselors can benefit from ongoing relationships with leaders in the field (Stanley, 2000). In order to maintain a steady pipeline of seasoned experts to serve in these leadership roles, there is a similarly undeniable expectation for professional counselors to eventually become mentors. Principle #8 and Practice #10 of the PPLE (CSI, 1999) address the topic of mentoring directly. As such, leaders in our field are expected to “mentor, encourage, and empower others” and solicit feedback and consultation from mentors, throughout the course of our careers (CSI, 1999). This cyclical process - giving and receiving mentorship - is one of my favorite aspects of the counseling profession. Not only do we dedicate our lives to enhancing the well-being of our clients, students, and supervisees; professional counselors and counselor educators also develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with individuals who provide us with similar guidance and support.

As a new counselor educator, I see myself meeting these expectations by first, increasing my competence as a mentor, and a recent study shows that I am not alone. The CSI PPLE Survey (Wahesh & Myers, 2012) yields interesting findings related to differences between experiences and competence, related to Principle and Practice #8. While all respondents indicated some level of experience related to the principle and practice of mentoring, ranging from "once in a while" to "all the time", responses to the question of competence ranged the full scale from "low competence" to "highly competent". The fact that even one of the 52 CSI Chapter Leaders surveyed indicated a
low level of competence with mentoring serves as evidence of the ongoing need for mentorship training in our field, and counselor education programs are the most appropriate spaces for such training.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs Standards (CACREP, 2015) clearly identify leadership preparation as a key component of doctoral-level programs. Although not explicitly stated in the Standards, our leadership-related courses at Ohio University heavily emphasized mentorship as a fundamental part of our training. For entry-level programs, advocacy for clients and on behalf of the profession is an identified aspect of professional counseling identity development. However, considering only a small fraction of professional counselors pursue the doctorate, entry-level programs can help develop mentors by infusing leadership and mentorship training throughout the counseling curriculum. This training, at the master's level, would not only increase the pool of competent leaders in our profession, but would also propel the cycle of mentorship - giving and receiving guidance and support - long after formal preparation experiences have ended.

References


