

The mini-conference: Teaching professionalism through student involvement

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Abstract:

Professional orientation courses typically provide important knowledge about professional organizations, standards, credentials, and roles. Knowledge alone, however, may not instill a sense of professionalism in counseling students. This article describes one teaching method that seems to foster behaviors and attitudes that characterize professionalism.

Keywords: professionalism | counselor education | professional development

Article:

"Professional orientation" is one of the eight core curricular areas outlined in the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 1988) preparation standards. Studies in this area are to include professional organizations, standards, credentials, and roles. Vacc and Loesch (1987), however, also defined professional orientation as "the attitudes and perspectives that professional counselors hold about their work and their careers" (p. 196). This perspective also has been referred to as "professionalism" (e.g., Peterson & Nisenholz, 1987; VanZandt, 1990). According to these writers, professional orientation course work should help students develop an internalized, personal commitment to professional standards and ideals, along with a sense of responsibility for promoting or maintaining the image of the profession. Goals may include active membership in professional organizations, pursuit of counseling credentials, and ongoing professional development activities.

Although the goal of professionalism is certainly desirable, few guidelines currently exist to help counseling students — or counselors — develop the requisite traits that characterize a professional life (VanZandt, 1990). Modeling by faculty members is probably critical. But Peterson and Nisenholz (1987) asserted that "total involvement in the field should begin with the first course" (p. 164) so that "the content and the processes ... become a part of your being rather

than as something to be forgotten after examinations" (p. 168). Such involvement can be difficult, however, because students must devote most of their time and energy to course requirements and the exigencies of daily life.

Developing a sense of professionalism in students is a central goal of the Counselor Education Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). This goal is especially emphasized in our Professional Orientation course, a three-credit-hour offering required during a student's first semester in the master's-level program. In particular, professionalism is primarily addressed through a "mini-conference" project in which students participate as both conference planners and presenters. In the following sections, we give a brief overview of the mini-conference and discuss its benefits to our students and program. For interested readers, more detailed information may be obtained from the authors.

MINI-CONFERENCE PLANNING

The Professional Orientation course is offered during the fall semester and typically has an enrollment of 30 to 40 students. Early in the semester, students are introduced to the project by asking them to consider the tasks and committees needed to put together the mini-conference. Students are remarkably thorough in thinking through the process and organizing themselves into conference committees (e.g., publicity, arrangements, hospitality) based on their individual interests and talents. With the instructors serving as consultants, students are encouraged to assume full responsibility and leadership for the mini-conference.

Each year the instructors choose a general idea (e.g., ethical and legal issues) for the mini-conference, which is then developed by the planning committees. The committees choose a specific conference theme (e.g., "Straight Answers to Knotty Questions"), create a logo, and design promotional materials that are distributed in the university and local communities. During planning meetings, committee members grapple with typical conference problems, such as on-campus parking for participants and a severely limited budget. Through this planning process, students are introduced to the realities of "behind the scenes" work necessary to put together a professional conference.

POSTER SESSIONS

As conference presenters, students self-select into poster session groups of three to five students each, identify topics of interest related to the mini-conference theme, and submit written American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) style program proposals that are critiqued by the instructors. Students are encouraged to develop creative approaches for presenting their poster sessions and to consult a variety of information sources, including journals and local professionals. Poster sessions have covered a variety of topics and typically feature displays and handouts containing facts and resources. Some students also have created highly informative booklets and audio and videotapes on such pertinent topics as reporting suspected child abuse, responding to a colleague's unethical behavior, dealing with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in a college residence hall, and promoting counselor licensure in our state. Although students often are concerned with trying to produce poster

sessions that will be sufficiently professional and "expert," we have found that many of their presentations equal or surpass those presented at professional meetings.

MINI-CONFERENCE PRESENTATION AT THE UNIVERSITY

The mini-conference is held in a large classroom during a class period near the end of the semester. In their dual roles as conference planners and presenters, students typically must juggle presentation of their poster session and committee responsibilities. They also spend some time as conference participants, viewing and discussing each others' poster sessions.

As instructors, we critique the poster sessions and give students feedback and reinforcement about all aspects of their presentation, both during the mini-conference and in the subsequent class meeting. We also encourage the student presenters to actively engage the participants, which include current and prospective counseling students, undergraduates, faculty, university administrators, and helping professionals from the community. Although students are initially anxious about being questioned and "judged" by those with more experience and training, they typically are surprised to realize that they really have developed in-depth knowledge about their topic area.

PRESENTATION AT THE STATE BRANCH CONFERENCE

For the last 3 years, our proposals to present the poster sessions as a theme session at the North Carolina Association for Counseling and Development conference have been accepted. In preparation, students revise their poster sessions based on feedback at the mini-conference. The state-level presentations, typically set up in a large conference room, have been well attended and have received positive responses from participants and state branch leadership.

BENEFITS OF THE MINI-CONFERENCE

The mini-conference project has been a positive experience for the students and the counselor education program. Although we lack quantitative outcome data on students' attitudes toward "professionalism," qualitative indicators suggest several benefits. First, the mini-conference helps students integrate and synthesize classroom learning. Abstract ethical, legal, and professional issues studied in the classroom now have direct relevance to students' own future professional practice.

Students also seem to build confidence in several ways. These beginning counselors-in-training typically are unsure of their counseling skills and, sometimes, even their decision to return to school, enter the profession, or both. Through the mini-conference project, students can experience success early on as they apply their talents and previous work experience in their new career field. They also can develop expertise about one topic, gain confidence in their abilities to make a presentation and coordinate a professional conference, and begin relating with colleagues as knowledgeable professionals. As a concrete example of confidence building, several students have expanded their poster sessions to full program proposals for other state or national conferences.

Presenting at the state branch convention has opened up other beneficial opportunities. There is, of course, the professional growth and excitement students can experience from attending what is typically their first counseling conference. They are introduced to current professional issues and learn first hand about the work of the state association. Students also report making contacts concerning internship sites, employment possibilities, or both. For some, the opportunity to meet state branch leaders has presented openings on state-level committees and invitations to make presentations to other counselor groups within the state. We hope these opportunities help facilitate transition to an active professional life after graduation.

An additional, unexpected benefit of the mini-conference has been the opportunity to educate university administrators about the varied roles of counselors, our standards for preparation and practice, and the many issues that confront counselors. In a sense, then, the mini-conference serves as an effective means for promoting our program and our profession among our own university colleagues. Moreover, we believe that the high quality of the students' work also has reflected well on the program.

CONCLUSION

The mini-conference project is designed to take students out of passive roles, both in the classroom and at conferences, and to help them move toward the more proactive, contributing attitudes reflected by professionalism. From the very beginning of students' graduate study, we want to set the expectation for an active professional life. The mini-conference project seems to challenge students, on many levels, to don the cloak of professionalism and begin involvements that we hope will last throughout their careers.

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