In Lewis Carroll’s whimsical story *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice encounters many memorable characters. One of those characters is the Dodo bird. The Dodo proposes that everyone run in a Caucus race or, in simpler terms, a race with no rules. Thus the race starts, and the participants run in every direction for whatever distance they want. At the end of the race, a confused Alice asks who won. The Dodo replies, “Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.”

Thirty years ago, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs was established to advance counselor education by promoting and administering an accreditation process for graduate-level programs in the field. When it created CACREP, the profession understood that in order to grow and be recognized as legitimate, it had to develop national training standards that clearly articulated the knowledge and skill sets that every counselor should possess before entering into professional practice. Having a set of national counselor preparation standards was considered an important step in protecting the health, safety and welfare of the public.

CACREP owes much to the visionary thinkers of the 1970s who laid the groundwork for its creation. Members of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision formed a national committee to develop the first standards. Individuals such as Robert Stripling, George Hill, Pete Havens, Jerald Forster and Tom Sweeney, to name just a few, realized that if states were going to recognize counselors for licensure, they had to be able to rely on some minimal standards of training to ensure the competence of practitioners and to protect the public. These individuals understood that standards had to be set high enough that these goals would be accomplished and, simultaneously, low enough that most preparation programs could meet them. They also knew the standards would need to be adopted nationally to ensure some uniformity across programs if licensure reciprocity was ever to be considered.

Thus, the first CACREP Standards were adopted by ACES and, subsequently, by the American Personnel and Guidance Association (as the American Counseling Association was then known). From the very beginning, the CACREP Standards were seen as minimal national standards, and this has remained the case with each of the four revisions to the standards. Each revision has represented an effort, with input from counselors and counselor educators, to set standards that continue to ensure minimal competencies commensurate with changes in the profession and recognized best practices. The 2009 CACREP Standards are, therefore, the recognized national standards for the preparation of counselors in the United States. In addition, CACREP’s accreditation process has received national recognition from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). This external recognition was sought as soon as CACREP came into existence, with members of CACREP’s original board of directors applying for review and recognition from CHEA’s predecessor, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA). That recognition was attained in 1987 and has been maintained continuously since that time.

Because the standards were new in 1981, the accreditation process offered by CACREP was voluntary. The hope was that programs that met the standards would seek accreditation, while programs that did not meet the standards would make the necessary modifications to meet them in the near future. In the early years of CACREP, there was no way to know whether the standards would be accepted by counselor preparation programs and supported by institutional administrators. Either programs would recognize the importance of minimal national standards and apply for accreditation or they would not. If an increasing number of programs sought initial accreditation and maintained accreditation, it would count as clear evidence of the acceptance of the standards.

As evidenced by the accompanying graph, an unceasing, steadily increasing number of programs have attained CACREP-accredited status. Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of counselor education preparation programs in the United States (not including counseling psychology programs or marriage and family therapy programs that fall under the American Psychological Association and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, respectively), by conservative estimates, the 252 institutions with programs currently accredited by CACREP represent more than one-half of all such programs. Despite the evidence, some still depict CACREP as an exclusive club of elite programs that are not representative of counselor education today. CACREP often hears comments about the many excellent programs that are not CACREP accredited. Which programs might these be, and by whose standards are they considered excellent? CACREP is not an exclusive country club with invitation-only membership. The CACREP Standards are readily available to anyone, and CACREP’s staff is on call to answer questions and assist programs in meeting the standards. CACREP also hears comments that the standards are out of the reach of some programs and, therefore, not relevant or necessary. These comments are easily challenged when one simply takes the time to look at the actual programs listed in CACREP’s Directory of Accredited Programs. If you go to CACREP.org and click on “Find CACREP Programs,” you will see accredited programs of all kinds — large, small, doctoral, master’s-only, public,
private, faith-based and online. Programs accredited by CACREP are truly representative of counselor preparation programs nationwide.

So, what is the goal of CACREP? Is CACREP seeking a monopoly on accreditation? World domination? Hardly.

In describing the Dodo bird’s race, Lewis Carroll was showing his disdain for the political caucus system’s lack of clear rules and its inability to make decisions based on clear and understandable information. CACREP’s goal is to not only understand the rules of the race but to help set them for the good of the public. CACREP believes that when minimal standards are established at a national level, public understanding of who counselors are, what they know and what they can do is increased. Knowing the minimal requirements for entry into the counseling profession furthers recognition of the profession and opens doors for practicing professionals. It has already led to counselor licensure in all 50 states, with some of those states regarding graduation from a CACREP-accredited program as evidence of meeting most or all of the educational requirements for licensure eligibility.

Both the American Association of State Counseling Boards and ACA have recognized that a lack of common standards hinders the goal of license portability and fragments the profession. Thus, the 20/20 initiative, cosponsored by these two organizations, has identified licensure portability as its No. 1 priority and is looking at establishing a common title, scope of practice and training standards.

Why not look at CACREP? Adopting the CACREP Standards for this purpose would greatly enhance reciprocity and portability for counselor licensure and further unite and strengthen the profession. Most other health-related licensure boards — pharmacy, dentistry, physical therapy, medicine and others — already require graduation from an accredited program for licensure eligibility. Perhaps it is time for the profession to embrace the utility of recognizing the CACREP Standards.

Recently, the Department of Veterans Affairs saw the value of recognizing CACREP Standards as the minimal training requirements by including graduation from a CACREP program as a requirement for hiring eligibility for counselors. In the future, the CACREP Standards might also be recognized as the necessary training standards for practitioners in the TRICARE system.

The race is happening all around us. It’s important to know how to move toward the finish line rather than wasting our time running around in circles. Perhaps it is time to consider the value of CACREP accreditation.

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