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Moving toward Counselor Licensure: A Statewide Survey

In 1975 the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) formally endorsed counselor licensure and established its licensure commission. Since then the counselor licensure issue has continued to grow at an accelerated pace. This year Texas has joined Virginia, Arkansas, and Alabama as states having achieved counselor licensure. Over 20 other states have written draft bills. Currently over 40 states have their own licensure committees and have begun educational efforts to acquaint their members with licensure and related credentialing issues. This article is addressed primarily to counselors in those states that are in the beginning, educational stages of their licensure campaigns.

As part of its educational campaign, the Oregon Licensure Committee of the Oregon Personnel and Guidance Association (OPGA) recently completed a statewide survey of Oregon counselors on the counselor licensure issue. What follows is a report of the findings of the Oregon survey and a discussion of the implications for other states in using the survey approach.

The only previous licensure survey reported in the literature was conducted by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), a nationwide survey of its membership (Carroll, Halligan, & Griggs, 1977). The ACES survey represents the first documentation of professional opinion on counselor licensure. The findings of the study provided strong evidence to the profession that counselor licensure was in fact a major issue of nationwide importance. But while its findings were very important at the national level, the study provided only minimal indication of the importance of counselor licensure at the state level. In Oregon, for example, only 20 counselors were sampled. Also, since the survey was limited to ACES members, it was not representative of the counseling profession as a whole. Thus the Oregon survey represents the first comprehensive documentation of professional opinion on counselor licensure at the statewide level.

METHOD

The questionnaire for this study was developed with the assistance of the Survey Research Center at Oregon State University. The ACES licensure questionnaire used in the Carroll,

Halligan, and Griggs report (1977) was examined as a beginning resource. Items were edited for clarity and potential bias. The questionnaire was field tested with a small sample of counselors before being put in its final form. The questionnaire was brief, consisting of 18 items most of which could be answered simply by checking a box indicating a Yes/No or Agree/Disagree response.¹

In the winter of 1979, 2,000 questionnaires were distributed to counselors in a variety of settings throughout the state of Oregon. The sample population comprised school counselors at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, community college and university counselors, counselor educators, graduate students in counseling, rehabilitation counselors, public agency counselors, and counselors in private practice. Table 1 presents the sample size for each of these groups. An attempt was made to send questionnaires to all Oregon counselors in these groups. State directories were obtained for all groups except private practitioners who were identified by telephone directory listings and students who were reached through the directors of their counselor training programs. In more populous states this procedure would probably not be feasible, and a stratified random sampling procedure would be needed.

A limitation of the study that affected the response rate of the survey was the lack of a follow-up notice or second mailing of the survey. Completed questionnaires were received from 436 respondents for a 22% response rate. Unfortunately, there is no way to correct for the potentially biasing effects of non-response to the questionnaire.

The sample population was not restricted to OPGA members. Almost two-thirds (64%) of the respondents were not members of OPGA. The sample was "well educated." Over 75% of the respondents had achieved a masters degree level of training or higher.

RESULTS

The results of the survey are organized according to the research questions addressed in this report.

Is Licensure an Important Professional Issue to Oregon Counselors? Yes. According to 87% of the responding counselors, licensure is an important issue.

Do Oregon Counselors Favor Licensure? Responses to three survey questions indicate a strong yes to this question. The idea of having licensure for counselors was supported by 77% of the respondents. General support for a licensure bill was indicated by 78% of those surveyed. And, an interest in becoming licensed was expressed by 73% of the responding counselors.

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TABLE 1
Which Counselors Support Licensure?

Questionnaire Item: In general would you support a bill to establish counselor licensure?

Counseling Group Surveyed	Percentage of YES Responses	N
Agency Counselors	78%	86
Community College Counselors	94%	21
Private Practice Counselors	58%	22
School Counselors	78%	189
Students	85%	59
University Counselors and Educators	75%	25
Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors	62%	34

Do Oregon Counselors Favor Being Licensed as "Counselors," Maintaining Their Identity Separate from Psychology? Yes, as indicated by the responses to several items on the questionnaire. The statement, "Oregon counselors should have the option to become licensed 'psychologists' but not 'counselors,'" was disagreed with by 78% of the respondents. Agreement that "helping professionals who are trained outside of university departments of psychology should be able to become licensed" was expressed by 85% of the responding counselors. Of those surveyed, the first choice of preferred title (ranked from a list of 12 titles) was "counselor" for 127 respondents; second was "school counselor," selected by 89 respondents as their top choice; third was "counseling psychologist," selected by 66 respondents; while "psychologist" ranked sixth with 21, or 5% of those sampled, selecting it as their top choice.

How Much Training Do Oregon Counselors Feel Should Be Minimally Required for Licensure? The Oregon survey results regarding requirements for counselor licensure are in accordance with those recommended by APGA (American Personnel and Guidance Association, 1979). With regard to educational requirements, 66 respondents indicated BA or no degree at all; 168 indicated a master's level degree; and 182 indicated a master's degree plus additional supervised experience and post-master's credit hours, or doctorate. Thus, "master's plus" was the preferred level of educational training recommended by Oregon counselors. A licensure bill should specify continuing education requirements, according to 75% of the respondents. This finding supports the APGA licensure committee recommendation that continuing education requirements be included in a licensure bill. Also agreeing with APGA recommendations, 76% of the respondents felt that professional supervision of one's counseling should be required.

How Do School Counselors Compare with the Other Types of Counselors Surveyed? A common assumption made by many counselors involved in the counselor licensure issue is that licensure is primarily an issue for private practitioners and that school counselors already certified by state boards of education will be less likely to be supportive. The findings of this study do not support this assumption. School counselors were among licensure's strongest supporters, with 78% favoring counselor licensure—a higher percentage than the private practitioners. Licensure was not unfavorable to any counselor group, with all groups having over 50% in favor (see Table 1).

Do Oregon Counselors Favor National Registry? A national registry of qualified counselors was favored by 75% of the responding counselors. Slightly more of the respondents (77%) indicated that they would want to be included in a national registry.

Is the Rapidly Expanding National Issue of Counselor Licensure Relevant at the Grassroots Level to the Many Counselors in Positions throughout Each of the States? In Oregon, the answer seems to be a strong yes, based on the overall results of this survey.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of a statewide licensure survey helped the Oregon licensure committee achieve some of the important objectives and procedures that are recommended by the American Personnel and Guidance Association's (1979) *Action Packet*. Along with an informational brochure and newsletter articles, the OPGA licensure survey was an important part of the recommended statewide licensure educational campaign. In responding to the survey questionnaire, many Oregon counselors were asked to think about and express their opinions on many of the important licensure issues. The educational value of the survey was supported by the fact that 87% of the respondents felt that licensure workshops should be conducted to inform counselors about licensure and that 82% of the respondents indicated that they would participate.

The *Action Packet* also recommends conducting a study of licensure and related credentialing issues as they pertain to the practice of counseling in the state. The survey is one way of gathering important data relevant to counselor licensure. When approaching the Oregon legislature for counselor licensure, Oregon counselors will have documentation clearly indicating that Oregon counselors support licensure.

The survey also provided the Oregon licensure leadership with feedback from counseling professionals on what should be included in a draft counselor licensure bill. The survey supported "master's plus" degree requirements, supervision requirements, and continuing education requirements to be included in a counselor licensure bill. Using the findings of the Oregon survey, the Oregon licensure committee was able to draft a counselor licensure bill that was responsive to the recommendations of counselors throughout the state.

The *Action Packet* also recommends the development of a statewide licensure communications network. At the end of our survey, space was provided for people to write in their names, addresses, and telephone numbers if they wanted to be a part of an OPGA licensure communications network. This strategy resulted in a list of over 200 counselors.

SUMMARY

The statewide survey is an important tool that counselors can use to stimulate movement toward counselor licensure at the state level. The survey can be used to generate interest and involvement in counselor licensure as part of a general counselor educational campaign, to study the status of counselor licensure and related credentialing issues in a state, to provide feedback on what provisions should be included in a counselor licensure bill, and to assist in the development of a statewide licensure communications network. The results of the Oregon licensure survey indicate that there is strong support at the grassroots level for the licensure of counseling professionals.

REFERENCES

- American Personnel and Guidance Association. *APGA licensure committee action packet* 1979. Washington, D.C.: APGA, 1979.
- Carroll, M. R.; Halligan, F. G.; & Griggs, S. A. The licensure issue: How real is it? *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 1977, 55, 577-580.

¹Copies of the OPGA Counselor Licensure Survey Questionnaire can be obtained by sending a self-addressed stamped envelope to: John L. Swanson, 460 SW Madison #12, Corvallis, OR 97330.

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