

## The National Board for Certified Counselors: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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*The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) was a good idea whose time has come and gone. It no longer makes sense to promote the National Certified Counselor (NCC) credential when most states now have counselor licensure. It has yet to be established that the National Counselor Examination (NCE) differentiates between good and bad counselors, nor are there any data that suggest that NCCs are any better counselors than are non NCCs. For probably most of the current 16,020 NCCs, NCC status is redundant and useless; for everyone, it is costly. If NBCC is as great as its proponents would like us to believe, how come only 8% of American Counseling Association (ACA) members are also NCCs? Included are suggestions as to how counselors could better spend the money they would save by not becoming or renewing their certification.*

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If the Federal Trade Commission had jurisdiction, it might require the National Board for Certified Counselors, Inc. (NBCC), to place a disclaimer on its application, tests, and renewal bills to the effect that "there is no scientific evidence that being a National Certified Counselor (NCC) has any advantages whatsoever, although some counselors have reported feeling better after writing NCC after their names." NBCC was incorporated as a free-standing, not-for-profit corporation on June 28, 1982, and was established to do the following:

Promote professional counselor accountability, to identify to public and professional peers those counselors who have met specific standards, to advance cooperation among groups and agencies involved in professional credentialing, and to encourage the continuing professional growth and development of national certified counselors. (Stone, 1985, p. 606)

NBCC was created in large part to attain recognition for counselors at a level parallel with that of other board-certified professionals. In this article we examine the extent to which NBCC has been successful in meeting its objectives and discuss the role, if any, NBCC, as currently constituted, should play in the future development of counseling professionals.

### NBCC'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Admittedly, NBCC has had its successes. As counselor certification bodies go, NBCC often has taken the high road. For example, unlike the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC), NBCC wavered only temporarily about requiring a master's degree. It has been highly successful in lobbying state legislatures on behalf of counselor licensure. Its National Counselor Examination (NCE) is currently being used by many states, and more are likely to contract for its use. A majority of state "licensure boards accept the NCC in lieu of testing and that's important to many NCCs especially those who have recently relocated" (personal communication, Thomas W. Clawson, October 18, 1989). Counselors in states where there is no licensure requirement at this time could take the NCE and hope that it would be

accepted in lieu of any future state testing requirement. In addition, NBCC has provided a means by which counselors can derive personal and professional satisfaction by participating in a voluntary credentialing program.

NBCC's renewal requirement of 100 hours of continuing education units (CEUs) across each 5-year period on the face of it appears impressive. Its recent revision of the documentation requirements for renewal is sensitive to the need to conserve both natural and human resources. Any mechanism that encourages professionals to maintain their skills can't be all bad. In addition, one of the hallmarks of a profession is the establishment of professional registries for its practitioners (personal communication, Martin Gerstein, March 13, 1992).

### NBCC'S LIMITATIONS

#### A Good Idea Whose Time Has Come and Gone

The aforementioned accomplishments notwithstanding, serious questions remain about the current and future status of NBCC. It no longer makes sense to promote the NCC credential when 35 states now have counselor licensure as of July 1991 (personal communication, Sylvia Nisenoff, March 16, 1992). NBCC affords no proven protection for clients and offers relatively little if anything to the counselor who already has appropriate educational credentials, a state license, or both.

Six years ago, one of us (Thomas, 1987) criticized the counselor certification process, primarily in relation to problems created by the Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) credential. Many philosophical and practical issues were raised regarding the counselor-certification concept, among them (a) whether certified counselors were really more competent than were other counselors, (b) whether the commissioners on certification boards truly reflect the views of professional associations, (c) whether the monies spent on certification could be put to better use (e.g., lobbying, research, information distribution), (d) whether counselors were opting for certification instead of professional association membership, (e) whether the certification bodies had wrested from the universities and professional associations the power

of credentialing, (f) whether the existence of the certification credential was reinforcing the use of somewhat arbitrary (and probably meaningless) criteria upon which universities and other employers were basing their hires, (g) whether the fixed criteria for certification restricted the development of the counseling profession and the menu of courses that professors and students could offer and take, (h) whether the creation of certification mechanisms was really motivated by a concern for client welfare, and (i) whether certification bodies afforded any protection, legal or otherwise, for clients. In virtually all of these areas the certification process was found to be suspect.

In 1987, one of us (Weinrach) also expressed serious reservations about NBCC by asking the following:

Is it worth being certified in terms of the cost? Where is all of the money going? Why does it cost a total of \$75 over a 5-year renewal period just to maintain one's membership in addition to ACA dues? Are those who choose not to join at some real disadvantage? Is the proliferation of specialization examinations anything more than a veiled attempt at reducing the competition from otherwise qualified professionals? How many job openings listed in the *Guidepost* specify NBCC-certified applicants only, much less preferred? (p. 396)

As we look toward the year 2000, it seems that NBCC was a good idea whose time has come and gone. It has largely done what it set out to do.

### Dubious Benefits

Early proponents of NBCC envisioned a day when employers would require NCC status of all new hires. Images of advertisements in *Guidepost* that stated "Only NCCs need apply" danced in their heads. If NCC status did matter to employers, we would be seeing such ads. Ten years and millions of dollars later, no such demand exists for NCCs. Having NCC status is all but useless in the marketplace.

The fact that 35 states now have counselor licensure laws obviates the need for most counselors to maintain their NCC status and meet the certification and licensure requirements of the states in which they work. It is just plain redundant. Indeed, it has minimal value even in states where there is no licensure requirement. It is interesting to note that to some extent even NBCC's executive director Thomas W. Clawson agrees with us. In 1991 he stated:

NBCC governing boards recognized early that attainment of universal counselor legislation could mean the end of a national standard and NBCC itself. . . . the continued adoption of the NCE has promulgated a commonality among most counselor legislation bills . . . . While universal state legislation theoretically threatens NBCC, it in fact makes it stronger. Since most states adopt regulations similar to NBCC's, gaining state licensure has encouraged many to go on to national voluntary certification. (p. 2)

Clawson is largely correct, but to the extent that the NCE is adopted by the various states, NBCC's future role may be limited largely to test construction. We would be more comfortable if an independent commercial test developer or publisher were hired to develop and administer an examination that would protect the public by differentiating between competent and incompetent counselors. The current NCE largely measures only cognitive mastery in eight content areas created by the Council on the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 1988) and perpetuated by NBCC.

### Self-Perpetuating Cabal

In preparing this article, we began by collecting, (or trying to collect) data about NBCC from NBCC. We asked its executive director to provide us with answers to 19 questions that were divided into the following categories: finances, governance, research, "the test," demographic data about NCCs, and publications. In response, NBCC's executive director replied:

Since you are forthright that the position you will take in the article is that NBCC has aspects which "warrant being changed" before you do the basic research, I believe it is not in my best interest to act without Board directive. (personal communication, Thomas W. Clawson, September 12, 1991)

After consulting with his board, Clawson subsequently replied:

The NBCC Board of Directors reviewed your request for NBCC staff to compile background data for your use in writing an article about NBCC. The Board reiterated that the best source of information for much of the data you seek is the NBCC newsletter. (personal communication, Thomas W. Clawson, December 10, 1991)

Virtually none of what we asked for was contained in the back issues of the newsletter that NBCC graciously provided. For example, we asked for but were not given "copies of any unpublished research conducted by NBCC or conducted by others about NBCC."

NBCC is allowed to be clandestine because it is answerable only to itself. Its board elects its replacement board members ("NBCC seeking," 1991). Neither General Motors (which is answerable to its stockholders) nor the United Auto Workers (which is accountable to its members) is as imperialistic. What is particularly troubling about this arrangement is that the 10 women and men who serve on NBCC's board have absolute control over the certification process. The board, according to the NBCC Bylaws (NBCC, 1989) has no obligation to consult its constituents or provide for the election of board members by direct ballot of current NCCs. (Any NCC may be nominated, though.) That is what makes it a cabal: no open elections, just a coronation. We would not tolerate such arrogance from our government; why should we tolerate it from NBCC? As a consequence of NBCC's decision not to cooperate, some of the figures cited in this article, out of necessity, are approximations. The information reported herein was accurate as of February 1992, when we conducted our research.

### The National Counselor Examination

It has yet to be established that the NCE differentiates between those individuals who are good at helping clients versus those who are not. Rather, it tends to measure cognitive mastery of CACREP's eight core content areas. The NCE probably would be better used as a comprehensive examination at the end of CACREP-approved master's-degree programs than as a measure of alleged professional competence. Brooks and Gerstein (1990) believed that the NCE "is not intended . . . as a measure of an applicant's clinical skill" (p. 483). There are no data of which we are aware that suggest that NCCs are any better counselors than are non NCCs. We do not know that non NCCs attend any fewer continuing education functions or read fewer journals or books. It could be that non NCCs are just less inclined than are NCCs to waste their money, which suggests to us that non NCCs are smarter than NCCs.

Resolving the many controversies over standardized testing is well beyond the scope of this article. We take strong exception, however, to

the underlying premise of the NCE. According to Loesch and Vacc (1988):

The generic intent of the NBCC certification process is reflected in the NCE, which is conceptually related to the core curriculum section of the CACREP Standards of Preparation. The latter stipulates that all persons aspiring to become counselors must successfully complete academic preparation in the eight core curriculum areas included in the NCE. (p. 17)

NBCC and CACREP are two peas in a pod, each perpetuating the other's existence, yet support for CACREP is far from universal. There are somewhere between 360 and 500 counselor preparation programs in the United States. Depending on which figure one selects, between 15% and 20% have CACREP program approval (Weinrach, 1991). This low rate of program approval can be explained in part because many counselor educators believe that surrendering the decision-making process about their curriculum to CACREP's board is tantamount to abrogating professional responsibility to the counseling field, their students, their employers, and ultimately the public.

Programs that seek and attain CACREP approval must cover thoroughly CACREP's eight core areas, and as a consequence, these programs look pretty much alike. NBCC's adoption of CACREP's eight core areas as the basis for the NCE is a further attempt at imposing CACREP's agenda on the counseling curriculum nationwide. The relationship between NBCC and CACREP is incestuous and is at odds with the public interest. Furthermore, we do not believe that any cabal, including NBCC and CACREP, has the right to determine master's-degree program content across the United States. Local autonomy over curriculum has given way to decision making behind closed doors by 10 self-coronated "experts."

### Specialization Frenzy

Recently, there has been a trend toward NBCC's adding "specialization certifications" such as certifications for career counselors (NCCC), school counselors (NCSC), and gerontological counselors (NCGC). It also maintains a close relationship with the National Academy of Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors (NACCMHC) and the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC). Both of these certification bodies also offer specialization certification—the first in mental health counseling (CCMHC) and the second in rehabilitation counseling (CRC).

The specialty model was probably borrowed from medicine, where, after becoming a physician, one could become certified to practice in one of several specialties (e.g., cardiology, psychiatry, pediatrics). In medicine, however, specialization certification invariably reflects an extended period of intensive postdoctoral study and practice. Such is obviously not the case in counseling. For example, one can become a certified rehabilitation counselor (CRC) or school counselor (NCSC) with virtually no post-master's study at all. In fact, it was possible until the end of 1992 to become a certified rehabilitation counselor without even a master's degree. Although several employers, particularly in the private-for-profit rehabilitation sector, require that their employees obtain and maintain the CRC credential, one wonders what, if any, advantage there is for school counselors to be nationally certified. Because school counselors are typically certified or licensed by various state departments of instruction or education, it escapes us completely why such a national certification process is necessary. NBCC's existence does not begin to solve the occasional problem of some states unevenly enforcing their own standards.

Even if it may be assumed that a sufficiently distinct and robust knowledge base exists to justify all of these specialty certifications, we have reservations about the ramifications of these certifications, not only for counselors but for clients as well. We can envision other American Counseling Association (ACA) divisions wanting separate specialty certification in areas such as groups, values, testing, and cross-cultural counseling. What do all these specialty certifications mean for counselors who hold only the NCC credential? Does it mean that a school counselor who conducts a group comprising culturally diverse children during which career awareness exercises and psychometric instruments are used to explore the students' values needs six separate certifications? What if two of the students in the group are substance abusers or have a physical disability? Does that mean they may not participate unless their counselor is a certified rehabilitation or substance abuse counselor? What if a client mentions leisure time activities and the counselor does not have a specialty certification in career counseling? Are NCCs now unqualified to do mental health, school, rehabilitation, gerontological, or career counseling? If so, then just what exactly is the advantage of becoming an NCC?

### A Fistful of Cash

Although Clawson refused to provide us with the information we requested, when a graduate student who was working on a term paper at the time called on February 10, 1992, Ms. Katie Borkowski, an NBCC staff member, graciously released to him its statistics as of January 1, 1992, and explained the fee structure and the new renewal system. Since 1982 when NBCC began, more than 20,000 individuals have applied, taken the NCE, and been certified. The application fee and the examination fee, which were originally \$60 each have now risen to \$75 each. In addition, there is a \$50 application fee for any of the three specialization areas and an additional \$50 fee for the career counseling specialty (NCCC) examination. There are no examinations for specialty certification as a school or gerontological counselor.

Considered collectively, these data indicate that NBCC has collected somewhere between \$2.4 and more than \$3 million from those individuals who are or once were NCCs. Since its inception, there has been attrition due to violations of ethical standards, death, retirement, failure to meet the continuing education requirements, dissatisfaction with NBCC, and so forth. As of January 1, 1992, there were 16,020 NCCs who, since 1988, have paid an annual renewal fee of \$25, which yields more than \$400,000 annually. Over the next 5 years, NBCC could collect more than \$2 million in renewal fees alone. For every 1,000 additional applicants who take the NCE and renew yearly for 5 years, NBCC will collect another \$275,000. NBCC's 10-year attrition rate, however, is now at 20%. There were more NCCs in 1987 (Loesch & Vacc, 1988) than there were in January 1992 (personal communication, Katie Borkowski, February 10, 1992).

Until recently, NBCC required its NCCs to provide evidence of continuing education units on a yearly basis and charged an annual review fee of \$15. As it grew, NBCC allegedly found itself overwhelmed with paper work, so it has switched to a new reporting system. Now, once every 5 years, NCCs are responsible for signing a statement to the effect that they have attained at least 100 hours of CEUs, which qualify according to NBCC standards. To maintain the system's integrity, NBCC will audit 10% of those whose 5-year certification is about to expire and ask them to provide full documentation. One skeptical colleague, however, suggested that the change was motivated by NBCC's attempt to slow the attrition rate because the new system offers a 9:1 chance that NCCs will not get caught if they exaggerate the nature or quantity of their continuing education experiences. The continuing

education feature of the certification process is also tainted by commercialism and the absence of quality control in continuing education offerings. Moreover, for the most part, counselor educators, rather than practitioners, are on the receiving end of the vast amounts of money.

It is reasonable to assume that approximately one fifth of the current NCCs certification expires each year. That means that every year 3,200 individuals must apply for renewal. Of this number, 320 will be audited. NBCC is collecting more than \$400,000 a year in renewal fees but will audit only 320 files. Put another way, NBCC is being paid \$1,250 for each of its audits now, whereas a few years ago it was being paid \$75 for doing the same thing (at \$15 per year for 5 years). How long do you think it takes an NBCC staff member to audit 100 hours of CEUs? If it takes 2 hours, NBCC is getting paid more than \$600 an hour. If renewal fees are being used to support other NBCC activities, NBCC has not announced it.

Certainly, NBCC has expenses, but the writing and validating of the NCE did not cost \$1 million, much less \$2 or \$3 million. Our estimates of income are low because presumably those states that use the NCE pay NBCC for it. Expenses do add up when operating an office, generating a newsletter, publishing a registry, and auditing a few hundred files a year. But where is all the rest of the money going? If nobody is getting rich, then is the money being wasted? Judge for yourself.

In May 1992, when NBCC moved its offices from Alexandria, VA, to Greensboro, NC, ostensibly in an effort to save money, it mailed to all NCCs a plastic-coated picture postcard in color of its new office building. Because the building had no sign outside designating it as NBCC headquarters, the picture looked more like an advertisement for a condominium that a realtor was trying to sell than an occupied professional building. The postcard was perforated so that the center could be easily removed and used as a fancy rolodex card, which included the aforementioned picture and NBCC's new address, telephone, and FAX numbers. The printing of the cards cost slightly less than 10 cents each (personal communication, Harper and Co., May 27, 1992), and the postage was 19 cents each. The total cost of printing and mailing for 16,020 NCCs exceeded \$4,500. A notice in their newsletter would have served the same purpose and cost nothing, whereas expenditures such as this merely provide concrete evidence of blatant waste and fiduciary irresponsibility. Until NBCC opens its records to the public, it does not deserve the confidence of the 16,020 NCCs who are asked each year to send in renewal fees.

### BETTER WAYS TO SPEND MONEY

For the most part NBCC has outlived its usefulness, promises more than it delivers (such as protecting the public), and is a waste of money. There are better ways for counselors to allocate their limited resources than by wasting it on NBCC. Those who are already NCCs could save \$125 across a 5-year period by not renewing. The savings are greatest for those who never sign up, because they will be spared the \$150 combined registration and examination fees. Across a 5-year period, such individuals would save a total of \$275. Those who pay extra for specialty certification would save even more.

Additional savings could be realized by NCCs no longer being forced to rack up expensive CEUs just for the sake of maintaining certification. Some low-cost or free continuing education experiences that may not qualify under NBCC's guidelines could be equally worthwhile. The silliness of having to ask a convention presenter or an ACA official to verify one's attendance at a program would be obviated. Convention-goers would no longer be forced to endure a potentially boring large-group presentation and would now be free to brainstorm in the corridors of convention centers with colleagues from around the

country as to how they deal with similar professional concerns. Being free from guessing what counts toward NBCC-approved CEUs will enable conscientious professionals to devote themselves to directing their own learning as opposed to second guessing NBCC ("How to pass," 1990; Weissman, 1991). With these potential savings in mind, we include the following partial list of suggestions on how the money could be better spent.

### Short-Term Expenditures

Those inclined to spend their annual savings each year may wish to consider the following: Join an additional division in ACA, because most cost less than \$25 per year. Membership benefits include at least one and sometimes two journals and a newsletter, or just subscribe to an extra divisional journal, which in one case costs as little as \$6 per year. Clearly, clients benefit more from their counselor's reading journals than they do by having counselors who place "NCC" after their name. Moreover, one's money is being put directly into continuing education rather than supporting NBCC's bureaucracy. We suggest the following: Buy a few paperback books or one hardback book for your professional library; buy low-cost shareware (software that one pays a nominal fee for the privilege of using) for your computer; buy books or materials for clients to use; spruce up your office with art work or posters; or give the money away to a charity that feeds the homeless.

### Long-Term Expenditures

Those inclined to amass their annual savings might select among the following: Attend an ACA, state, or local convention; buy several audio or video tapes for your own professional development or for client use; buy software for your own or clients' use; or buy a color monitor and install a screen saver, which produces soothing random patterns in color when your computer is on but not in use as means of providing a cathartic visual image for yourself and clients.

### CONCLUSION

Of the 16,020 current NCCs, only about one third, or 5,246, are also members of ACA (personal communication, Kerry Hoggard, February 19, 1992). It is paradoxical that approximately two thirds of the NCCs (more than 10,000 counselors) show no interest in membership in the world's largest professional counseling organization. Of greater interest is the fact that of the 60,000-plus members of ACA, only about 8% have chosen both ACA and NBCC. If only 8% of ACA members have deemed NBCC worth the cost, NBCC surely has not had the enormous impact its leaders would like us to believe it has. Admittedly, NBCC is intended for practitioners, and there are many members of ACA who are not practitioners and would therefore have little interest in NBCC. On the other hand, there are many counselor educators who are not practitioners but are NCCs because they believe being an NCC serves as a positive role model of professionalism for their graduate students.

It should come as no surprise to the reader that we believe that there is virtually no value in being an NCC, a contention that is also supported by the 92% of ACA members who have chosen not to participate in NBCC, of whom many are practitioners. NBCC is a multimillion-dollar self-serving business run by a self-perpetuating 10-member cabal. For probably most current NCCs, it is redundant and useless; for everyone, it is costly. It offers the public the illusion that they are somehow better off with a certified professional when in fact we have no evidence that this is the case. ACA's Governing Council seems to concur with our assessment that being an NCC does not protect the public. It chose not

to include NCC status as a requirement for "qualified service providers," which is the designation for those who work on a fee-for-service basis and wish to qualify for third-party payment (Sacks, 1992). There are no disadvantages in not being an NCC. The leaders behind credentialing have created a guild system that serves neither the practitioner nor the public.

We have intentionally avoided discussing whether counseling is a profession separate from psychology, its parent discipline (Weinrach, 1987), or whether it is appropriate for ACA, NBCC, or any other body to endorse private-practice counseling by master's-level practitioners. It must be understood, however, that it is implicit in the creation of master's-level counseling certification bodies that a significant professional and philosophical stance has been taken on both of these issues. Whether this stance will ultimately benefit the professional and scientific development of counseling and the welfare of clients is still an open question. Our reservations about NBCC notwithstanding, counseling professionals need to determine which licenses and certificates are in their clients' and their own best interests. Well-informed professionals are in a better position to make good decisions. We deeply regret the NBCC board's decision to withhold critical data that we believe would assist counselors in making an important professional decision. Moreover, had the NBCC board elected to accept our invitation to respond to a pre-publication version of this article, the readership would have had the opportunity to consider arguments on both sides of this important issue.

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