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The Status of Licensed Professional Counselors in Michigan Public Universities

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This article documents the findings of a study investigating the employment status of licensed professional counselors in Michigan's 15 public universities. Structured interviews were conducted by telephone with 85 professionals working in college counseling centers, career centers, advising, admissions, financial aid, and residence life offices. The results indicated that only a very small percentage of employees in these offices are licensed as professional counselors, and a substantial number have not received training in counseling.

Key Words: Employment status, public universities, licensed counselors, advocacy

Professionals with a graduate degree in counseling work in diverse capacities in institutions of higher education providing career counseling, mental health counseling, and student personnel services (Dean & Meadows, 1995). What differentiates college counselors from other professionals with a graduate degree in counseling is their “understanding of the context in which students exist, including the stresses present and the resources available. They offer expertise related to the college environment and its effects on students” (Dean, 2000, p. 42). At a state university in 1980, professionals with a graduate degree in counseling were providing academic counseling, administrative counseling, career counseling, and personal counseling (Heins et al., 1980). In Michigan, most graduates of counselor education programs who intend to work in college counseling or career centers have elected to be licensed as professional counselors (LPCs) subsequent to the passage of the 1989 counselor licensure law. A decade ago counseling professionals were employed in college counseling centers, admissions, financial aid, academic advising, orientation, student activities, services for students with disabilities, residence life, career services, and other student services areas (Dean & Meadows) identified as student affairs divisions (Dungy, 2003).

More recently, however, professionals with a graduate degree in counseling have faced challenges on at least two fronts. A significant challenge has been posed by shrinking university and student affairs budgets (Spooner, 2000) and an increased pressure to take on additional roles (Dean, 2000; Hodges, 2001). Shrinking budgets have resulted in a large number of job cuts in university counseling centers nationwide (Hodges, 2001). Some universities have outsourced their services to local agencies as a method of dealing with limited budgets (Dean & Meadows, 1995). Others have documented job cuts in career counseling centers as a result of increasing emphasis on technology that is replacing some of the roles and responsibilities of career counselors (Behrens & Altman, 1998).

Another challenge to professionals with a graduate degree in counseling who work in higher education is one that reflects societal issues and necessitates a redefinition of roles and responsibilities. The student development model has been the philosophical foundation of college counseling from its early beginnings up to the last 15 years (Hodges, 2001). A shift has occurred

in college counseling centers away from the developmental model toward the medical model which focuses on diagnosis and treatment of various mental disorders (Gallagher, Gill, & Goldstrom, 1999). This movement toward the medical model was stimulated by an apparent increase in severity of student problems (Meadows, 2000; Tinklin, Riddell, & Wilson, 2005), though some research challenges this conclusion (Kettmann, Schoen, Moel, Cochran, Greenberg, & Corkery, 2007). The loss of the student development model as the underpinning of university counseling centers, in particular, has removed counseling from its traditional role (Ivey & Ivey, 1998) and has resulted in a paradigm shift in the profession (Nevels, Webb, & John as cited in Hodges).

In the context of all of these changes, professionals with a graduate degree in counseling appear to have made a home for themselves in small college counseling settings. Large university counseling centers are often aligned with health services (Dean, 2000) where counselors are being perceived as health care providers, a perspective which de-emphasizes or combines the traditional developmental model and focuses on the clinical model. Smaller college counseling centers are more closely aligned with other student affairs programs which espouse a developmental perspective and in these settings these counselors often hold multiple roles on campus (e.g., they may teach, offer supervision, and be involved in learning assistance and orientation) (Dean, 2000).

Professionals with a graduate degree in counseling have held jobs in various student affairs units and for many years have been employed in large university counseling centers. More recently, the shift to a clinical model has led to fewer employment opportunities for professional counselors in university counseling centers. Although the impact of these changes on counselors working in university counseling centers have been well-documented (Dean & Meadows, 1995; Hodges, 2001), little is known about the employment of professionals with a graduate degree in counseling in other student affairs units (e.g., admissions, advising, financial aid, career services, residence life, services for students with disabilities). A study conducted by Janasiewicz and Wright in 1993 indicated an increase in the number of student affairs positions (including counseling) between 1980 and 1990; however the years since then are not covered in the literature and little is known about the current status of these positions. The current study serves to fill this gap in the literature by reporting

the current employment of professionals with a graduate degree in counseling, including LPCs, who work in selected student affairs offices in Michigan's public universities.

Background

This project was initiated at the request of the Michigan College Counseling Association (MCCA). A previous study supported by MCCA documented that in Michigan's community colleges LPCs were losing their jobs and were being replaced with individuals with fewer professional and academic credentials (Goheen, 2003). MCCA approached the authors and requested that they document the status of these professionals and LPCs at Michigan's public universities, to determine if the erosion of counseling and student affairs jobs noted at the community college level was also occurring at the public university level.

This study aimed to identify the following in selected student affairs offices: (1) what are the licenses and credentials of professional staff; (2) what are the degrees and majors of professional staff; (3) how many professional staff have the term "counselor" in their job titles; (4) how present are LPCs in counseling and career offices in comparison to other offices, and (5) what changes have been noted and are anticipated in the employment of LPCs.

For the purposes of this article, licensed professional counselor is used to designate those individuals who hold a graduate degree in the counseling field (e.g., master's degree or doctorate in counseling, counseling in higher education, student affairs in higher education, or a related field) and are licensed as counselors in the state of Michigan. Graduate degree counselors have a graduate degree in counseling; they may or may not be licensed professional counselors. A counselor (by title) is an individual who holds a position which includes the title of "counselor" and who may or may not have training in counseling.

Student affairs is defined as the profession with a primary emphasis on development of the whole person, involved in supporting the academic mission of institutions of higher education (Nuss, 2003). Some student affairs offices or units (which vary from one institution to another) are academic advising; admissions; athletics; career services; counseling and psychological services; food services; financial aid; Greek affairs; health services; international student services; judicial affairs; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student

services; multicultural student services; orientation and new student programs; recreation and fitness; religious programs and services; registration; residence life and housing; services for students with disabilities; and student activities (Dungy, 2003).

Method

Participants and Procedure

The Michigan Education Directory (2005) and university web pages were used as resources for identifying Michigan's 15 public universities, along with the student affairs offices within these universities that had the greatest potential to employ LPCs. The 15 public universities included in this study were Central Michigan University, Eastern Michigan University, Ferris State University, Grand Valley State University, Lake Superior State University, Michigan State University, Michigan Technological University, Northern Michigan University, Oakland University, Saginaw Valley State University, University of Michigan-

Ann Arbor, University of Michigan-Dearborn, University of Michigan-Flint, Wayne State University, and Western Michigan University. The offices that were contacted at each of Michigan's 15 universities included: counseling centers, career services, financial aid, residence life, admissions, and academic advising. These are all student affairs units where professional counselors historically have been employed (Dean & Meadows, 1995; Heins et al., 1980), although it is likely that additional LPCs were employed at student affairs offices not considered in the present study.

The offices listed above were contacted via telephone over an eight-month period. A maximum of eight attempts were made to contact each office. The study had the potential to include 90 offices (6 student affairs offices in 15 universities). The actual total of student

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affairs offices was 85 since two universities did not have a residence life office, two universities combined career and counseling services in one office, and one university had no advising office. Due to the repeated attempts made to collect data, we were successful in collecting data from all 85 possible units, for a response rate of 100%.

The researchers requested to speak with the director or assistant director of each of the offices surveyed. If these individuals were unavailable, input from other staff members was considered acceptable if they had knowledge of the information requested.

Instrument

A structured interview was used as the primary tool for data gathering in this study. The interviews were conducted via telephone, taking an average of ten minutes per phone interview. The researchers developed the interview script, containing seven closed-ended

questions and four open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions covered the following areas: (a) number of professional staff employed in the particular unit; (b) number of professional staff titled counselor or something similar; (c) other job titles represented in the office; (d) number of professional staff licensed as a professional counselor; (e) number of LPCs employed full time and part time; (f) number of professional staff at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels; and (g) academic majors and licenses (other than LPC) of staff.

The second part of the interview included the following questions: (a) What changes (if any) have you noticed in the last three years regarding the employment of LPCs in your office (or in the university)? (b) What changes do you anticipate regarding the employment of LPCs in the next two to three years (in your office or

in the university)? (c) What else do you think I should know about counselors/LPCs at your university? and (d) What additional offices on your campus typically hire LPCs?

Data Analysis

The data collected from the first part of the interview were analyzed to determine the number of professional staff employed in these offices, the number of staff with a counselor title, the number of LPCs, and the numbers of staff at various degree levels. Relevant percentages were then calculated.

Interviewees' responses to the questions from the second part of the interview were recorded in writing by each of the three researchers. Following data collection, a list was compiled of participants' responses to these questions. Formal qualitative analysis procedures were not deemed appropriate for the very brief comments made, typically only a few words or a sentence. For each question asked, similar responses were noted. Responses were arranged in descending order by frequency, along with the office of the interviewee.

Survey Results

The primary results of this study are summarized in Table 1. Eighty-five individuals were interviewed representing 921 professionals working in the six student affairs offices of interest in Michigan's 15 public universities. Results indicated that LPCs accounted for 6% ($n = 56$) of the total staff. Of the 56 LPCs identified, 50 (89%) were full-time employees and 6 (11%) were part-time. LPCs were employed in the counseling centers of 10 of Michigan's 15 universities. They were also frequently found in career and advising offices (8 universities each), and less frequently in financial aid and residence life offices.

Professionals with graduate degrees in counseling and who hold the LPC credential are not the only staff called counselor in Michigan universities. In fact, 229 of the professionals included in the study (approximately 25%) held the title counselor. Counseling centers and admissions offices referred to their professional staff as counselor more often than the other offices surveyed. In addition to counselor, other titles represented in all the offices surveyed included advisors, financial aid specialists, admissions officers, hall directors, and psychologists.

Of the 921 professionals identified in this study, the majority had degrees beyond the bachelor's degree: 492 (53%) had master's degrees (including MA, MSW, and EdS), and 86 (9%) had doctoral degrees (including PhD, EdD, MD, and JD). In addition, 304 (33%) had a bachelor's degree, and 23 (3%) had less than a bachelor's degree. The degree status of 16 (2%) was not determined. The academic backgrounds of staff who were not LPCs or other licensed mental health professionals varied greatly, from social sciences to business, English, biology, communication, history, and theater majors.

While most credentialed mental health professionals worked in counseling centers ($n = 100$), several worked in other student affairs offices. LPCs were more likely to be found in a variety of offices than other credentialed professionals (career centers, $n = 21$; advising, $n = 8$, admissions, $n = 1$; financial aid, $n = 1$, residence life, $n = 1$). Only one licensed psychologist (LP) was employed outside the counseling center (in advising), while limited licensed psychologists (LLPs) were found in advising ($n = 1$) and financial aid ($n = 1$). Social workers (Master's of Social Work [MSW]) were also present in advising ($n = 3$) and residence life ($n = 1$).

Counseling center professional staff. Of Michigan's 15 public universities, LPs (all of whom have doctoral degrees) worked in 11 counseling centers, LPCs were employed in 10, social workers worked in 6, and LLPs were in 4 counseling centers. Of the 105 mental health professionals employed in university counseling centers, 67 (64%) were called counselors.

By law, persons providing counseling and psychological services at university counseling centers (and elsewhere) must be licensed as professional counselors or hold another mental health credential. The present study found that 95% of the 105 professionals working in counseling centers held a mental health credential (see Table 2). The majority (55%) of professionals employed in university counseling centers in Michigan were LPs ($n = 58$); an additional 17 counseling center staff were licensed as professional counselors (16%). The remaining 30 employees (29%) held other mental health credentials (including MSWs, $n = 17$, and LLPs, $n = 7$) or held no mental health credential ($n = 6$).

Counseling centers were more likely to employ persons with higher degrees than other student affairs offices. In fact, 60 of the 86 doctoral degreed professionals in the study were employed in counseling centers. One person serving on the professional staff of a university counseling center held only a bachelor's degree; all others held a master's degree (42%) or higher (57%).

Career center professional staff. Another office likely to employ LPCs in Michigan's public universities was the career center. Of the 91 career center professional employees, 21 (23%) were LPCs (see Table 2). No other licensed professionals were employed in the 15 universities' career centers. The remaining 70 career center staff held no counseling or mental health credentials. Most professional staff in career centers held graduate degrees ($n = 76$, 84%); 15 (16%) held a bachelor's degree or less. The educational background of non-counselors included degrees in business, communication, curriculum, higher education administration, library science, English, engineering, and public administration.

Serendipitous findings. Although the intent of this study was to survey the status of employment of LPCs in Michigan's universities, the researchers became aware of another group of counseling professionals that merited some attention. We noted that there were a number of professionals working in the student affairs offices being surveyed who had obtained graduate degrees in counseling but were not LPCs. Consequently, we collected data regarding the employment of non-LPC master's degreed counselors (see Table 1). Career centers employed more of the 55 persons in this category ($n = 18$) than other student affairs offices. Only 2 were employed by counseling centers. The remaining staff with graduate degrees in counseling and who were not LPCs were employed in the other student affairs offices (advising, $n = 16$; admissions, $n = 9$; residence life, $n = 8$; and financial aid, $n = 2$).

Open-ended Question Results

Of the 85 offices included in this study, 51 (60%) provided brief responses to the four open-ended questions. The majority of the responses came from counseling centers (32%), followed by career and advising (16% each), residence life (14%), admissions (12%), and financial aid offices (10%). Interviewees from offices that hired professional counselors and who were knowledgeable about the nature of the work of LPCs tended to contribute more in their responses to the open-ended questions than interviewees from work settings that did

not hire LPCs.

The most frequent response (occurred six times) to the question "What changes (if any) have you noticed in the last three years regarding the employment of LPCs in your office (or in the university)?" was provided by professionals in counseling centers, who noticed job losses experienced by LPCs in counseling centers caused by budget cuts. The most frequent response (occurred seven times) to the question "What changes do you anticipate regarding the employment of LPCs in the next two to three years (in your office or in the university)?" was provided by professionals working in residence life, who indicated their intention to hire more LPCs in the next two to three years to coordinate mental health services in residence halls. Two professionals, one from a counseling center and another from a career center, anticipated more job cuts in their offices in the next two to three years due to shrinking budgets. Professionals from two of the career offices expressed their intention to hire more LPCs in the near future, if the budget allows.

The most frequent response (occurred five times) to the question "What else do you think I should know about counselors/LPCs at your university?" was provided by three professionals in financial aid, one in advising, and one in admissions, who indicated that a counseling degree and an LPC are not job requirements. Professionals from two financial aid offices and one counseling center noted a trend towards replacing "qualified personnel" with people with fewer academic credentials, because of budget cuts. Professionals in two counseling centers and one career center indicated a preference for LPCs with prior training in assessment and diagnosis. The typical response to the question "What additional offices on your campus typically hire LPCs?" named the counseling and career centers.

Discussion

Although university settings (particularly student affairs offices) traditionally welcomed professionals with a graduate degree in counseling (Dean & Meadows, 1995; Heins et al., 1980), the findings of this study reveal a rather small percentage of these professionals working in the student affairs arena in Michigan public universities. Of the 921 professional positions identified, approximately 25% had a counselor title, and only 6% were LPCs. Of the LPCs identified in this study, most worked in counseling centers (30%) or career offices (38%).

The results of this study support the current literature suggesting fewer employment opportunities for licensed professional counselors in counseling centers (including career centers) and job losses experienced as a result of budget cuts. It appears that the preferred mental health credential in counseling centers is the LP, with the majority of counseling center staff in Michigan universities holding licensure as doctoral degreed psychologists. Even though LPCs were employed at the counseling centers of 10 universities, their numbers were few in comparison to the presence of LPs. Three interviewees suggested that LPCs with a background in assessment and diagnosis are more desirable candidates for positions in counseling centers than ones without training in these areas.

The findings related to professionals who work in career centers are also of interest. In addition to counseling centers, career centers are offices in which counseling licensure would be most relevant. While Michigan law includes career counseling within the purview of counseling licensure, thus requiring LPCs for career center staff engaged in career counseling, the majority of staff in career centers (77%) are not licensed as counselors (nor do they hold other credentials). More people with a graduate degree in counseling but who are not LPCs are employed in career centers than any other student affairs office. Of the 91 professionals in career centers, 39 are either LPCs or persons with a graduate degree in counseling without the LPC. Thus, 43% of career center staff have a counseling background, though only 23% are LPCs. It seems that many career center staff may be breaching the counseling licensure law.

It is also noteworthy that a considerable number of professionals with a graduate degree in counseling ($n = 55$) are not LPCs. The characteristics of the specific student affairs offices in which many of the staff work likely influence their need for graduate level training in counseling. Some of the interviewees' responses to the open-ended questions suggest that many professionals working in financial aid, admissions, and advising need neither a license, nor training and background in counseling to perform their job functions. Obtaining licensure becomes less of a priority when the work environment does not require a counseling background or licensure, and when it does not recognize or reward the value of counseling training and credentialing. Furthermore, administrators in these offices need further education about the benefits of graduate training and credentialing in counseling.

A surprisingly large number of professionals ($n = 229$) were titled counselor. However, of the total professional staff ($n = 921$), there were only 55 who had backgrounds in counseling and 56 who were licensed as professional counselors. Counseling centers, career centers, and admissions offices most frequently used the counselor title; two of these offices (counseling and career) also employed the highest percentages of LPCs among the six student affairs offices examined in this study. Admissions offices, however, titled 40% of the staff "counselor," yet employed only one LPC (<1%), and had a majority of professional staff (53%) with a bachelor's degree or less. It appears that many professionals working in higher education use the counselor title; however, this title may have no correlation with the traditional meaning of the word, which designates those individuals who engage in the practice of counseling. Although Michigan's LPC law does not prohibit use of the title "counselor" (as long as the title does not include such words as "licensed counselor" or "professional counselor"), use of the counselor title by such a large number of university staff without background or training in counseling may be confusing to the public and to students. The counselor title used by employees working in some student affairs offices may not reflect the professionalism and graduate training of professional counselors.

It is also important to note that, of the 921 professionals working in these offices, 304 (33%) had a bachelor's degree and 23 (2.5%) had less than a bachelor's degree. In fact, the majority of staff in two offices (financial aid and admissions) held a bachelor's degree or no degree. Two financial aid interviewees reported a move towards replacing master's level professionals with bachelor's level personnel. The broad range of academic backgrounds of the staff in these student affairs offices also suggests an acceptance of training that has little or nothing to do with counseling. These findings seem to support the results of a previous study (Goheen, 2003) which indicated a trend towards replacing professional counselors working in Michigan community colleges with staff with fewer academic credentials. On the other hand, some of the responses to the open-ended questions portray a somewhat optimistic future for the employment of LPCs in higher education settings. Respondents from seven residence life offices expressed the need for more licensed professional counselors (LPCs) to work in residence halls, and some of the participants interviewed expressed their intention to hire more LPCs in the next few years.

Limitations

The study provides some important information regarding the current status of LPCs in selected student affairs offices in Michigan's universities. As with all research, limitations are noted. Data were collected from six student affairs offices; other offices were not contacted. Thus, it is likely that additional LPCs worked in student affairs offices not considered in the present study. A further limitation is that the responses to the open-ended questions were recorded and compiled according to response similarity. Responses reported by frequency were not dealt with using formal qualitative methodology.

The generalizability of the findings is limited. Although similar trends involving LPCs may be taking place nationwide, the study reflects only the state of affairs in Michigan public universities. Moreover, no previous data were available which could be used to compare current employment status of LPCs in Michigan universities with previous employment figures. Most of the findings regarding the employment status of LPCs and others working in selected student affairs offices were based on the verbal reports of interviewees, with no quantitative data from institutional personnel offices to confirm or verify the information provided.

Implications and Research Recommendations

Student retention in higher education is a priority. Studies done on retention of students indicate a direct link between the quality of services provided and decision of students to maintain enrollment (Kerka, 1995; Patti, Tarpley, Goree, & Tice, 1993). However, the current study illustrates a disturbing trend. For example, financial aid interviewees noted that in their units, master's level personnel were recently replaced with bachelor's level staff. These decisions were motivated by financial constraints, possibly compromising the quality of services provided to students. Also, very few of the career counseling centers included in this study employ licensed professionals with background and training in counseling. With more than one-third of all professional staff holding a bachelor's degree or less, and with the wide range of academic backgrounds that are not counseling and student affairs related, the question must be raised as to how the quality of student services has been compromised, likely impacting retention figures. Given the available data on student retention (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), the arrangements of hiring bachelor's degree persons not trained in counseling or student affairs, although financially justifiable in the short term, could be detrimental to the student enrollment rate and the long-term success of the university.

The findings of this study also signal the need for leaders in the counseling profession to advocate for LPCs and others with graduate degrees in counseling who are losing their jobs, either to professionals with less training and fewer academic credentials or to professionals whose credentials have attracted more recognition and privileges within the mental health professions. To be successful in higher education settings, counselors in training need to have a variety of training experiences that could increase their hiring potential. Counselor education programs should include courses in assessment and diagnosis as mandatory parts of their curriculum to keep up with the current employment trends and increase chances of employability of their graduates who wish to work in counseling centers in higher education.

Findings from this study suggest that residence halls constitute potential employment settings for LPCs and others with graduate degrees in counseling who are seeking employment in higher education settings. Professional counselors should create connections and work closely with residence halls, where there seems to be an expressed need for professional counseling help. Further research related to the qualifications of professional student affairs staff is needed. A replication of this study involving public universities at the national level would assist in determining if there are similar trends in student affairs offices across the U.S. If the hiring of professionals with fewer academic credentials is a national trend, then it is important to document the effectiveness of these staff. To what extent are they able to provide quality student services that meet student needs and positively impact retention? Likewise, further studies are needed to demonstrate the effectiveness of LPCs in university settings.

To continue providing services in the context of ongoing financial difficulties, LPCs and others with graduate degrees in counseling who work in higher education settings need to document the positive impact they have on the academic success of students and student retention. Documentation of positive impact on academic success and retention would benefit the counseling profession in general by gaining more recognition within the mental health professions, and could result in noted gains to institutions of higher education.

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Appendix

Table 1
Summary of Data

	Number of Staff	Staff titled "counselor"	Bachelor's or less ^a	Number of LPCs	Counseling degree not LPC
Counseling Center	105	67 (64%)	1 (<1%)	17 (16%)	2 (2%)
Career Center	91	26 (29%)	15 (16%)	21 (23%)	18 (20%)
Admissions	230	92 (40%)	22 (10%)	1 (<1%)	9 (4%)
Advising	121	3 (2%)	15 (12%)	12 (10%)	6 (5%)
Financial Aid	158	33 (21%)	103 (65%)	1 (<1%)	2 (1%)
Residence Life	216	8 (4%)	71 (33%)	4 (2%)	8 (4%)
Total	921	229 (25%)	327 (36%)	56 (6%)	55 (6%)

Note. ^aDegree percentages computed for total staff; degree data not available for 16.

Appendix

Table 2
 Credentials of Counseling and Career Offices Professional Staff

	Counseling Center (<i>N</i> = 105)	Career Office (<i>N</i> = 91)
Licensed Psychologist	58 (55%)	0
Licensed Professional Counselor	17 (16%)	21 (23%)
Master's of Social Work	17 (16%)	0
Limited Licensed Psychologist	7 (7%)	0
M.D.	1 (1%)	0
No Credentials	5 (5%)	70 (77%)