

COUNSELING TODAY

A pair of golden scales of justice is the central visual element. The scales are positioned vertically, with a smaller pan on the left and a larger pan on the right. The larger pan on the right contains a clear reflection of a person's face, looking upwards. The background is a soft, warm gradient, and the lighting highlights the metallic texture of the scales.

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Social justice in counseling

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Making definitive progress

20/20 delegates reach consensus on definition of counseling

Since 2005, delegates representing 30 major, diverse counseling organizations have been meeting to determine what steps need to be taken to ensure a healthy and strong future for the counseling profession. The initiative, “20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling,” first succeeded in identifying seven principles considered critical to moving the profession forward. Most recently, at the American Counseling Association’s 2010 Annual Conference & Exposition in Pittsburgh, the 20/20 delegates reached consensus on a common definition of counseling, capping off a nearly yearlong process.

Counseling Today contacted a few of the individuals participating in the ongoing 20/20 initiative, asking them to share their thoughts on this latest accomplishment and why it was such an important undertaking.

How difficult was it to arrive at the following consensus definition?

Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals.

Sam Gladding, 20/20 facilitator: Different individuals and associations emphasize various aspects of counseling. What 20/20 did that was unique was to conduct a Delphi study of what features of counseling stood out most among a host of diverse groups inside and outside the American Counseling Association. Each of the delegates in the seven teams that 20/20 is divided into gave input into the process of what features unite counseling as a profession, and the teams, in turn, brought these definitions forth. The process lasted almost a year, with individual delegates reacting to each definition that teams suggested. A factor analysis of the words most often used in the suggested definitions of counseling was done also. The goal was to reach an apolitical, objective and brief definition of counseling.

When the 20/20 delegates came together in a face-to-face meeting in Pittsburgh, the Delphi study results were tweaked to a 21-word definition. In the meeting, everyone

Compiled by Jonathan Rollins

who wished to make suggestions or comments about the definition was listened to. It was agreed that different associations might want to preface this definition with emphases that they embrace. The whole process was long, arduous and research-based. Many voices, visions and passions were heard and considered. It was not easy, but I think the result is the product of a process that worked. I think the final definition captured the essence of counseling — not all the nuances, but the essentials that make counseling counseling.

Bradley Erford, 20/20 delegate representing the Association for Assessment in Counseling and Education:

Anytime you gather 30 leaders with diverse backgrounds and passionate beliefs in a room for a limited amount of time, you are virtually certain to run out of time before you run out of excellent ideas and perspectives. It took about a year to agree on a one-sentence definition, beginning in Charlotte in March 2009 [at the ACA Conference in North Carolina] and ending in Pittsburgh in March 2010.

This definition was actually a synthesis of several definitions and represented the core of what we all do as professional counselors, regardless of our specialty area or discipline. It represents what we all share in common and captures the essence of the counseling relationship. Counseling specialties are encouraged to add to the one-sentence definition to accurately convey how each focuses or expands upon this global essence.

S. Kent Butler, 20/20 delegate representing the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development:

It was very difficult to reach consensus, as each individual, representing a participating organization, had their own unique way of formulating the definition. Some of my colleagues looked at the definition as a concise explanation of the nature of counseling — a brief elevator definition for legislators — while others found it important to embrace cultural aspects of the definition that would be inclusive of all of our constituencies. It was, for me, the start of very important

conversations surrounding multiculturalism and social justice that I believe often get overlooked because they revolve around subjects unfortunately still taboo in America. While the conversations were difficult, I believe that in our last meeting, there was a breakthrough. So perhaps now we can give ourselves permission to engage in enriching conversations that will further unify our counseling community.

We all had to compromise and see things from all angles [in reaching this definition]. There were some very compelling arguments that led to this final version.

Carol Bobby, 20/20 delegate representing the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs: Arriving at consensus can be difficult when there are just a handful of people working together, but when you consider that 20/20 involved 30 organizations bringing different perspectives and emphases to the table, you should expect difficulties in reaching consensus. I actually think the process went more smoothly than any of us should have expected.

Of course, the Delphi process that the 20/20 delegates completed prior to the meeting in Pittsburgh informed us of the necessary components that, at a minimum,

had to be included in the definition.

We also knew going into the Pittsburgh meeting that we needed a definition that could be understood by our constituents outside of the profession, meaning that we had to keep the language clear and the definition unencumbered by “counselor speak.” By counselor speak, I mean those words or phrases that are meaningful within the profession but may be misunderstood by outsiders.

Rhonda Bryant, 20/20 delegate representing Counselors for Social Justice: Difficult is not the word I would choose to describe the process. Rather, the process was intensive in that it required depth of thought, understanding and respect for others who may not share my professional worldview.

Thomas Clawson, 20/20 delegate representing the National Board for Certified Counselors: Because most of the organizations involved in this process represent differing missions, the consensus approach was tedious but elegantly handled by the Delphi voting procedure. Organizations that represent a specific type of counseling or philosophy of practice were challenged to help create a definition that didn't need to mention some part of each group's passions.

Is it the last of such definitions? I assume that the profession will make changes in our definitions over time.

Lynn Linde, ACA president and member of the 20/20 Oversight Committee: The delegates had to put to the side aspects of counseling that are specific to their practice/area of expertise or interest to get to the shared or common core. That was a bit harder for the delegates to do, but they did it.

Why is it important to have a common definition of counseling?

Bradley Erford: This definition of counseling was developed to communicate what we do to external publics: clients, politicians, citizens, businesses and organizations. I think one representative said it best: “We need a clear, concise statement of what we do that I can communicate to a legislator in the elevator between the first and second floors.” I think we accomplished that.

Carol Bobby: If the counseling profession wants to be understood by the public, we have to find ways to communicate who we are and what we do in a consistent and unified fashion. I have been to numerous meetings over the past 20 years where legislators, in



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particular, have told us that we need to speak with a unified voice. If we are seen as a fractionalized group of professionals that compete against each other, we will be treated as such. We are stronger when we work together for recognition.

S. Kent Butler: The common definition allows our various disciplines to embrace a common vision and meaning for the work that we *all* do. The definition does not limit our ability to advocate for our own personal niches, but it empowers counselors as a whole and helps us challenge opponents who question or don't find value in the service that we, as helping professionals, provide to our constituents.

Lynn Linde: It is important for counselors to be able to speak with a unified voice and to be able to share a common vision for what we do. Otherwise, our stakeholders, the public and others become very confused about the different words that are used. We confuse the public and our supporters when we use different words to describe what we do, and from a public policy and legislation perspective, it makes it very hard to advocate.

Sam Gladding: The word *counseling* is “sexy,” and people from many different walks of life are tempted to use — and, often, abuse — the word. A common definition of counseling gives associations inside and outside of ACA a tool they can employ to clarify what counselors in various settings do. Such a definition is important for moving the profession forward. Counseling too often has been fragmented and unfocused in helping others understand what the profession does. This definition should help all of us advocate for clients and for what we do as a profession to make the culturally diverse society we live in better.

In what ways does this definition help counselors stand apart from their colleagues in other helping professions?

Carol Bobby: This definition has many important elements that acknowledge who we are apart from other professions. First, it includes the mental health and wellness components that we have emphasized. Just saying these words out loud differentiates us from professions that focus on illness and disease. Second, it acknowledges our history, because we continue to believe in the importance of examining the educational and career goal components of those who come into counseling.

Third, the word *empower* that is used in this definition is a key element, because it implies the belief that through the counseling relationship, clients will learn to be self-advocates.

Lynn Linde: This definition emphasizes wellness and the developmental nature of counseling, as well as personal, educational and career foci. Other mental health professions have more of a remediation of illness focus. The definition also encompasses the focus on empowering our clients and diversity, which is more specific to counseling than other mental health professions.

Bradley Erford: It covers all of the major influences on the professional counselor's identity: empowerment, diversity, wellness, mental health, educational and career planning. These are the cornerstones of any counselor's professional training. Other disciplines may claim some of these areas, but all professional counselors embody each of these facets.

Thomas Clawson: The definition says that we are a mental health, not a mental illness, profession. The developmental approach sets us apart from other mental health professions.

Rhonda Bryant: We actually discussed this as the definition was developed. Our definition does not explicitly address multiculturalism or the role of social justice. Unfortunately, we stand apart from other colleagues in this omission. Other helping professions address social justice and multiculturalism as inherent to the helping process.

Other thoughts

Rhonda Bryant: Getting to know the representatives of the multiple organizations participating on the 20/20 committee provided insight as to how our profession is shaped by collaboration and partnership. I hope that as we move forward, the definition will continue to engender discussions and strategies about how professional counselors can assist our clients in meeting life goals and dreams.

S. Kent Butler: Trust the process!

Thomas Clawson: The definition of counseling is a statement that allows the group of 30 organizations to proceed on to the more action-oriented part of the 20/20 process — the seven areas of action that the group has established. The signature of 20/20 will be the larger body of work, not the final definition.

Lynn Linde: I think the delegates should be very proud of the work they did. The entities represented have made this a priority and given their support over the past five years. It is truly remarkable that we were finally able to get to this point.

Sam Gladding: We will poll the delegates to see where they want to go next. We have based our work on seven agreed-upon principles that give us direction. They are as follows:

I. Sharing a common professional identity is critical for counselors.

II. Presenting ourselves as a unified profession has multiple benefits.

III. Working together to improve the public perception of counseling and to advocate for professional issues will strengthen the profession.

IV. Creating a portability system for licensure will benefit counselors and strengthen the counseling profession.

V. Expanding and promoting our research base is essential to the efficacy of professional counselors and to the public perception of the profession.

VI. Focusing on students and prospective students is necessary to ensure the ongoing health of the counseling profession.

VII. Promoting client welfare and advocating for the populations we serve is a primary focus of the counseling profession.

Whatever we do in the future will be based on these principles.

I have loved working with the 20/20 group. There is a lot of energy and constructive thinking within the group. The work of this initiative is important — indeed, essential — to the future of the profession of counseling.



At press time, a letter had been sent asking all organizations participating in the 20/20 initiative to endorse the consensus definition of counseling arrived at by the delegates. For more information on 20/20, including participating organizations and delegates, background on the initiative, the complete *Statement of Principles* and concepts for future exploration, click on the “20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling” button on the ACA home page at counseling.org. ♦

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