Moving Beyond Debate: Support for CACREP's Standard Requiring 60 Credit Hours for School Counseling Programs

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Clare Merlin, Timothy Pagano, Amanda George, Cassandra Zanone, Benjamin Newman

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) recently released its 2016 standards. Included in these standards is a requirement for school counseling master's programs to have a minimum of 60 credit hours by the year 2020. This credit hour requirement is an increase from the previous 48-hour requirement and has caused considerable debate in the counselor education field. In this article, the authors assert that the credit hour increase will lead to positive or neutral effects for school counseling programs and benefit the field of school counseling as a whole. This claim is supported by historical examples, anticipated benefits to school counseling, and findings from a pilot study with school counseling programs that previously transitioned to 60 credit hours (*N* = 22).

Keywords: **CACREP, accreditation, school counseling, counselor education, credit hours**

The unification of the counseling profession is an aspiration long held within the field (American Counseling Association, 2009; Bobby, 2013; Simmons, 2003). However, historic differences in Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards for completion of a counseling degree complicate a singular identity for the profession. Without a unified expectation of degree requirements, professionals who identify as "counselors" struggle to find a consentient definition for the counseling role. In order to reach unification in the field, it is necessary for counseling organizations and professionals to agree on the minimum credit requirements needed to obtain a counseling degree (Bobby, 2013; Williams, Milsom, Nassar-McMillan, & Pope, 2012).

Minimum credit requirements for a school counseling degree gained recent attention as CACREP released updated standards in 2016, including a new standard (1.J.) requiring 60 semester credit hours for all counseling specializations, including school counseling, rather than the previous 48-credit hour requirement (CACREP, 2015). CACREP designed this standard to create unity among program specialties so that all specialties—addictions counseling, career counseling, clinical mental health counseling, clinical rehabilitation counseling, college counseling and student affairs, marriage, couple, and family counseling, and school counseling—require the same number of credit hours (CACREP, 2015; Williams et al., 2012).

The publication of standard 1.J. has implications for numerous counselor education programs. In 2014, the authors researched the 229 CACREP-accredited school counseling programs in existence at the time and found that 170 programs, or 74%, required less than 60 credit hours for program completion. Similarly, in a study examining school counselor education programs (*N* = 126), Perusse, Poynton, Parzych, and Goodnough (2015) found that programs ranged in credit hour requirements from 30 to 67 semester credit hours, with an average of 49.6 credit hours. Sixty-one percent of program coordinators surveyed indicated that they required between 48 and 59 credit hours, whereas only 18% required 60 to 67 credit hours, and 14% required 36 to 45 credit hours. Although only 57% of the sample surveyed was CACREP-accredited, the percentage of participants requiring less than 60 credit hours

Clare Merlin, NCC, is an Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Timothy Pagano, NCC, is a doctoral candidate at the University of North Dakota. Amanda George, NCC, is a Professional School Counselor for Loudon County Public Schools in Sterling, VA. Cassandra Zanone, NCC, is a J.D. candidate at the University of California at Los Angeles. Benjamin Newman, NCC, is a doctoral student at the College of William and Mary. Correspondence can be addressed to Clare Merlin, 9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC, 28223, cmerlin1@uncc.edu.

in their programs in 2015 (75%) indicates that for these programs to become CACREP-accredited or reaccredited, many program coordinators will need to increase credit hours to 60 to meet standard 1.J.

Despite CACREP's intentions for unification via standard 1.J., the standard's implications for school counseling programs across the country have led to debate among counselor educators. In this article, the authors acknowledge concerns over the standard's implications but suggest that an increase in required credit hours for CACREP-accredited school counseling programs will ultimately benefit school counseling programs and the school counseling field as a whole. The authors support this claim with a review of the history of CACREP and credit hour increases, prior research on the topic, results of a pilot study with programs that previously transitioned to 60 credit hours, and anticipated benefits for the school counseling field.

History

CACREP began in 1981 as a partnership between the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) and the American Personnel and Guidance Association, now known as the American Counseling Association (ACA; Bobby, 2013; Urofsky, Bobby, & Ritchie, 2013). This formation resulted when leaders from ACES, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the American College Personnel Association, and American Personnel and Guidance Association created comprehensive accreditation standards for counseling programs (Urofsky et al., 2013). Prior to the formation of CACREP in 1981, the only accreditation for counseling programs was provided by ACES on a voluntary basis (CACREP, 2017).

CACREP was formed to address three purposes: (a) to create guidelines reflecting expectations of the counseling profession, (b) to promote professionalism in counseling, and (c) to increase credibility in the profession (Adams, 2006; Bobby, 1992). More than 30 years later, the central mission of CACREP remains promoting the profession of counseling and related fields via "the development of preparation standards; the encouragement of excellence in program development; and the accreditation of professional preparation programs" (CACREP, 2017, para. 54). Through this process, CACREP provides accreditation to individual programs at the master's and doctoral levels (CACREP, 2014).

Each area of CACREP accreditation maintains different programmatic standards in addition to a core set of general standards required of all counseling programs. CACREP designed the school counseling standards to prepare graduates to work with K–12 students to effectively address their personal/social, academic and career concerns (CACREP, 2015). CACREP standards appear increasingly valuable as leaders in the counseling profession seek a unified professional identity, particularly in light of the widely varying state licensing standards for counselors (Mascari & Webber, 2013). The CACREP standards serve as universal guidelines of best practices in educating future counselors. Moreover, researched benefits of attending a CACREP-accredited counseling program instead of a non-accredited program may include "increased internship and job opportunities, improved student quality, helpfulness in private practice, increased faculty professional involvement and publishing, and acceptance into a counselor education doctoral program" (Mascari & Webber, 2013, p. 20).

CACREP standards appear particularly relevant in the school counseling profession. In a study of 187 school counselors, on average, participants rated the CACREP school counseling standards as "highly" or "very highly" important to school counseling (Holcomb-McCoy, Bryan, & Rahill, 2002). This finding indicates support for the value of CACREP school counseling standards to the field of school counseling (Branthoover, Desmond, & Bruno, 2010), which is important, given that school counseling programs are the most represented master's counseling specialty among CACREP-

accredited programs. School counseling programs comprise 36% of all CACREP-accredited programs, nearly 10% more than clinical mental health counseling programs (CACREP, 2016a).

Standards Changes

Despite research on the perceived value and benefits of CACREP standards, multiple facets of CACREP have proven controversial within the counseling profession. These controversies serve as proverbial lightning rods, creating conversation among leaders in the field (Schmidt, 1999). Historically, debate emerged in counselor education due to standards revisions. As in most professions, CACREP regularly modifies its standards to account for changes in the field of counseling (Adams, 2006). To modify the standards, a CACREP standards Revisions Committee formulates revised standards, releases the standards to the public for a comment period, and revises standards according to public feedback. They then release a second draft of revised standards, allow for public comment, and revise the standards accordingly before releasing a final set of revised standards (Williams et al., 2012). Periodic revisions of CACREP standards help counseling leaders address the current and future training needs of professional counselors (Bobby & Urofsky, 2008). These modifications are integral to the development of the counseling profession and parallel other helping professions that regularly revise training standards (Adams, 2006).

2009 Standards changes. One standards change controversy stems from the counseling profession developing a professional identity independent from counseling psychology and other counseling-related fields. CACREP 2009 standard I.W.2. indicated that core faculty members preferably are trained in Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral programs (CACREP, 2009).

Research conducted shortly after the standard was published in 2009 demonstrated mixed opinions on the standards change—55% of the 180 counselor educators surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the standard and 45% disagreed or strongly disagreed with it (Cannon & Cooper, 2010). Although counseling leaders may be attempting to move the field toward unification with standards like I.W.2., standards changes will not transpire without debate in the field.

Around the same time, a second debate emerged when proposed 2009 CACREP standards required community counseling programs to become *clinical mental health counseling* programs with 60 credit hours, rather than the previous 48-hour community counseling requirement, in order to become accredited (CACREP, 2009). This standard eventually became part of the 2009 CACREP standards, but not before raising fractured dialogue among counselor educators (Henriksen, Van Wiesner, & Kinsworthy, 2008). Henriksen et al. (2008) found opinions among 51 counselor educators in the state of Texas were nearly evenly divided about the issue—49% preferred to keep a 48-credit hour minimum, and 51% preferred a switch to a 60-hour minimum.

Similarly, Cannon and Cooper (2010) surveyed 295 CACREP counselor educators and found that attitudes toward the 2009 standards changes were mixed. They found attitudes toward the credit hour increase differed between community counseling counselor educators and clinical mental health counselor educators. Twenty-seven percent of community counselor educators agreed or strongly agreed with the 48-credit hour requirement, whereas only 4% of clinical mental health counselor educators agreed with the same requirement. Across all participants, 31% indicated satisfaction with the 2009 standard revisions, 38% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were satisfied with the revisions, and 31% reported indecision. Similar disagreement over standards changes emerged six years later around the 2016 CACREP standards.

2016 Standards changes. On May 12, 2015, CACREP released the 2016 Standards, effective July 1, 2016. These standards are the product of a review process in which a Standards Revision Committee comprised of counselor educators from across the country examined if and how the CACREP Standards needed to be changed to meet the shifting needs of the counseling profession. They also focused on "simplifying, clarifying, and consolidating the existing standards" in their revisions (CACREP, 2012, para. 1). CACREP released the first draft of the 2016 Standards in September 2012 and allowed for public comment. They revised the Standards according to feedback, released the revised draft for further public comment, and revised the standards once more (Williams et al., 2012). The Standards Revision Committee then submitted a final Standards draft to the CACREP Board of Directors for adoption. It was adopted and released in May 2015 (CACREP, 2016b).

The 2016 CACREP standards suggest more equitable education among the different counseling specializations with regard to the required number of credits a student must accrue in order to graduate (CACREP, 2015). For example, although the 2009 CACREP standards required that the addictions counseling, clinical mental health counseling, and marriage, couple, and family counseling programs had a minimum of 60 semester credit hours, the school counseling, career counseling, and student affairs and college counseling programs required only a minimum of 48 semester credit hours (CACREP, 2009). The proposed 2016 Standards, however, require that all degree programs have a minimum of 60 credit hours by 2020 (CACREP, 2015). In time, these changes aim to unify all counseling specializations (Williams et al., 2012). Such an increase in credits aligns with CACREP's mission of developing standards that better the profession and affirm a unified identity (Bobby, 2013).

When CACREP published proposed standard 1.J., requiring school counseling programs to have a minimum of 60 credit hours by 2020 (CACREP, 2015), debate arose. At the 2013 ACES School Counseling Interest Network meeting, counselor educators expressed concern about the proposed standard (Transforming School Counseling and College Access Interest Network [TSCCAIN], 2013). Some attendees asserted that mandating an increase to 60 credit hours would disenfranchise low-income students. Attendees argued that an increase in program costs and subsequently, tuition costs, could make counseling less practically desirable to otherwise qualified prospective students. Additionally, some counselor educators stated that increasing the number of credits for school counseling programs would place an undue burden on the training programs themselves by forcing these programs to hire more faculty members to teach additional courses. However, some counselor educators expressed support for the proposed credit hour increase, suggesting the standard could lead to higher quality applicants to school counseling programs and ultimately produce better qualified professionals in the field (TSCCAIN, 2013).

Although concerns about the outcomes of transitioning to 60 credit hours are understandable, when compared to the gains that can be made by increasing credit hours, standard 1.J. appears warranted. Three pieces of evidence support this claim: existing research on credit hour increases, data from a pilot study, and anticipated benefits to the school counseling field.

Existing Research

To date, no research has explored the implications of changing school counseling credit hour requirements from 48 to 60; however, it is beneficial to explore other fields of study to understand trends, long-term effects and the manner in which other researchers have studied this topic. Previous studies either focused on non-counseling fields (T. K. Fagan, personal communication, November 1, 2014) or are in school counseling-related fields, but the research is significantly outdated (Barkley & Percy, 1984; Hollis, 1998).

More than 30 years ago, Barkley and Percy (1984) explored enrollment in counselor education programs. As the most recent individuals to publish on this topic, their research still warrants attention. Barkley and Percy's study examined the declining rate of applications to counselor education programs ($N = 90$) in the United States at that time. They used correlation research to examine whether or not relationships existed between the number of applications to programs, program accreditation status, and whether programs had increased credit hours between 1975 and 1983. Barkley and Percy found that although accredited programs in their sample ($n = 8$) had more applicants than non-accredited programs ($n = 77$), those that increased credit hours ($n = 39$) encountered fewer applicants than those that did not ($n = 37$). They hypothesized that applicants to lower credit hour programs were more interested in attending lower credit requirement schools than higher credit requirement schools (Barkley & Percy, 1984; Hollis, 1998). They found that these relationships were weak, however, and concluded: "There is no evidence from this study to support a hypothesis that seeking accreditation and/or moderate increases in credit hour requirements results in declining enrollments" (Barkley & Percy, 1984, pp. 23–24).

In the related field of school psychology, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is a professional association recognized by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education as a specialized professional association. NASP began reviewing and approving school psychology programs in 1988. In 2011, approximately 70% of school psychology programs in the United States were NASP-approved (Prus & Strein, 2011). When the NASP credit hour requirement for school psychology programs changed from a master's degree to a 60-credit hour Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) requirement, programs that adjusted to meet this new requirement received a comparable amount of applications (T. K. Fagan, personal communication, November 1, 2014). This outcome in school psychology suggests that school counseling programs increasing to 60 credit hours also may receive similar numbers of applicants after increasing to 60 credits as they did before increasing credit hours.

Although little research addresses differences between counseling programs before and after credit hour changes, research on CACREP-accredited programs and non-accredited programs may indicate potential differences, given that, on average, accredited programs require more credit hours than non-accredited programs (Hollis, 1998; Mascari & Webber, 2013). In 1998, Hollis compared admissions data from 104 mental health counseling programs and found that on average, CACREP-accredited programs required students to have higher grade point averages for admission (3.02) than non-accredited programs (2.91). Minimum GRE scores for admissions were nearly the same, but graduation rates differed. Despite similar average enrollments across programs, CACREP-accredited programs graduate more students on average than non-accredited programs (Hollis, 1998). This research may indicate potential differences in graduation rates and admission standards between programs with higher and lower credit hour requirements.

These three examples suggest that credit hour increases do not lead to poorer outcomes for programs and may in fact enhance the overall educative experience. Though findings did not include conclusive evidence of benefits from increasing credit hours, the studies showed that after programs increased credit hours, they encountered similar admissions outcomes (Barkley & Percy, 1984; T. K. Fagan, personal communication, November 1, 2014) or improved graduation rates (Hollis, 1998) compared to those measures before increasing credit hours. Consequently, there is no research base to conclude that increasing counseling program credit hours is harmful to counseling programs in admissions or graduation rates.

Pilot Study

Although existing research is consistent, it is outdated. To understand the potential outcomes school counseling programs encounter when they increase credit hours, the authors conducted a pilot study to explore the admissions and job placement data of CACREP-accredited school counseling master's programs that previously transitioned to 60 credit hours. In 2014, 59 (26%) of the 229 school counseling CACREP-accredited programs required 60 credits or more for program graduates. This number constitutes more than one quarter of all CACREP-accredited school counseling programs, despite CACREP requiring only 48 credit hours at the time. Furthermore, it supports Hollis' (1998) assertion that counseling programs often increase their required credit hours before higher standards are established. These increases may symbolize support for and valuing of increased credit hours for the benefit of program graduates. The authors collected admissions and job placement data from CACREP program liaisons (henceforth, "participants") whose school counseling programs previously transitioned to 60 credit hours. They also explored the participants' perceptions regarding whether transitioning to 60 credit hours impacted program admissions and graduate job placement rates. Though the study was a pilot with limited sample size ($N = 22$), the exploratory data may prove insightful for school counseling faculty members looking to transition programs to 60 credit hours. These data also may be helpful for researchers to understand the potential impact of credit hour transitions on programs.

Participants provided data via a 26-item electronic questionnaire. Twenty-four questions addressed quantity of applications, quality of applications (measured by enrolled students' undergraduate grade point average [GPA], GRE scores, racial demographics, gender demographics, international demographics, and out-of-state demographics [Cassuto, 2016]), and graduate job placement rates. Two open-ended questions explored participants' perspectives on the topic. The questions read: "From your perspective, what, if any, impact did the transition to a 60-credit graduation requirement for master's school counseling programs at your institution have on the quantity, quality and diversity of applicants?" and, "What (if any) feedback on the survey would you like to provide to the researchers?"

Positive and Neutral Outcomes

CACREP standard 1.J. established equal credit hour requirements in order to create unity among counseling specialties, thus leading to positive effects for the profession (Williams et al., 2012). In their pilot study, the authors found that all participants contributing program data ($n = 7$) experienced positive or neutral effects in some items measuring admissions quality, admissions quantity or graduate job placement rates after transitioning to 60 credit hours. Although data indicated mixed experiences for two items, *enrolled students' undergraduate GPAs* and *GRE scores*, in the majority of items participants encountered only positive and neutral effects. These items were: *racial diversity of enrolled students*, *number of enrolled international students*, *number of enrolled out-of-state students*, and *job placement rates of program graduates*.

Participants who provided comments to open-ended questions ($n = 22$) contributed further insights on these positive outcomes after transitioning to 60 credit hours. Nine participants explicitly stated that transitioning to a 60-credit hour minimum had a positive impact on their school counseling master's programs. For example, one participant stated that the 60-credit hour program format "brought better applicants," and another participant said, "I believe our student applicant pool increased in size as well as improved in quality of applicant." A third participant indicated the following as a result of changing to 60 credit hours:

> The quality of our program increased as did our enrollment. We anticipated an initial drop in enrollment that never materialized. Students told us that they preferred the comprehensive training they would get with a 60-hour program and selected us over other 48-hour programs. Our program grew as a result of moving to 60 hours.

This feedback suggests that for this participant's program, transitioning to 60 credit hours clearly led to positive results.

Six participants responded to open-ended questions indicating neutral outcomes from transitioning to 60 credit hours. They stated that they did not believe their programs' transition to a 60-credit hour minimum had an impact on admissions or job placement rates. For example, one participant noted, "The transition from 48 to 60 hours seemed to have no effect whatsoever on the quantity and quality and/or diversity of applicants." Another participant described the change as having "little to no negative impact" on their program, and another described it as having "minimal impact." The latter participant wrote, "I see no significant change in applicant qualifications."

It is notable that three of the items that did not change for any participants—*quantity of enrolled international students*, *quantity of enrolled out-of-state students*, and *enrolled students' racial diversity*—are items measuring program diversity. This finding suggests that for the participants in this pilot study, the credit hour transition did not impact applicant diversity to their school counseling programs. This may counter the notion that requiring 60 credit hours for program completion will disenfranchise certain students due to increased tuition (TSCCAIN, 2013). In addition, previous research indicates variables such as financial aid packages, faculty contact with prospective students, diverse student populations, and faculty diversity influence the recruitment of diverse students (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Shin, Smith, Goodrich, & LaRosa, 2011; Talleyrand, Chung, & Bemak, 2006). These variables may be more impactful on recruiting diverse students than program credit hours.

Negative Outcomes

Despite the professed intent of CACREP standard 1.J. (Williams et al., 2012), some counselor educators speculated that such credit hour increases would have negative effects on school counseling programs (TSCCAIN, 2013). Of all participants in the pilot study whose programs transitioned to a 60-credit hour requirement, none expressed perceptions that increasing their credit hours led to negative outcomes. This finding suggests opposition to arguments that increasing to 60 credit hours will result in harmful effects in programs. The fact that 22 study participants commented on their transitions to 60 credit hours and none expressed the belief that transitioning caused negative outcomes appears noteworthy.

Descriptive statistics of program data showed that only one item, *enrolled students' gender diversity*, decreased or stayed the same when participants' programs transitioned to 60 credit hours. Although this finding may indicate worsening gender disparity in counseling, recent statistics demonstrate a consistent discrepancy in the number of male and female individuals in the counseling profession (Evans, 2013). According to data from ACA, males consistently comprised only 26–29% of the ACA membership between 2002 and 2012 (Evans, 2013). Given the consistency of these percentages over time, it is reasonable that the participants in this study saw gender diversity decrease or stay the same despite transitioning to 60 credit hours because the construct is one that is stable over time and may not have been impacted by credit hour increases. Similarly, CACREP's 2015 Annual Report authors noted that only 18% of students enrolled in CACREP programs are male (CACREP, 2016a), adding additional legitimacy to a concern for gender disproportionality in counseling overall and disaffirming concern for decreased gender diversity due to credit hour increases.

Program Factors Impacting Outcomes

In the debate over increasing school counseling program credit hours, dialogue centered on the impact that a credit hour increase might have on programs. However, pilot study findings indicated that when programs previously transitioned to 60 credit hours, program-specific characteristics likely had a greater impact on transition outcomes than the transition itself. For example, multiple participants indicated that current events during the time of their credit hour transition appeared to impact their program admissions and student job placement rate more than the actual credit hour transition. As one participant explained:

> I don't think the 60 credits had any impact. The year we moved to 60 was right when the economy went bust, so all of our programs experienced a drop in applicants. We tend to be pretty consistent in the quality of our applicants overall as well as in the relative diversity of our applicants.

Other participants noted that their original number of credit hours prior to transitioning to 60 credits likely impacted their program outcomes after transitioning. Several participants worked in school counseling programs that transitioned from 55 or 57 credit hours to 60 credits. They stated that increasing their program requirements by just a few credit hours did not appear to impact their program admissions or graduate job placement rate.

Another participant indicated school counselors in their state are paid a higher salary if they graduate from 60-credit hour programs. Therefore, offering a school counseling program with a 60-credit hour track helped market the program, the participant reported. If school counseling faculty members work in states in which school counselors receive higher salaries for earning 60 credit hours, then a credit hour increase may lead to more positive changes in admissions than negative ones.

Lastly, hosting other counseling specialties (e.g., clinical mental health, addictions) at a university may impact a school counseling program and its transition to 60 credit hours. One participant noted that their school counseling program increased to a 60-credit hour minimum because the other counseling programs at their institution already required 60 credit hours. This participant said, "We decided to move all programs to 60 hours rather than have the difference in concentrations (in part due to perceptions of why one concentration would require more than the other)." If faculty members are increasing credit hours for school counseling programs at institutions in which other counseling programs already required 60 credit hours, the credit increase may be more widely accepted by potential applicants and lead to neutral or positive outcomes in admissions.

According to pilot study participants, each of these program factors impacted the effects their programs encountered after changing to 60 or more credit hours. Counselor educators leading school counseling programs that have not yet transitioned to 60 credit hours may take note of the factors and examine their own programs' characteristics that may impact transition outcomes. Counselor educators would benefit from reflecting on the context and characteristics of their programs before concluding that increasing to 60 credit hours will be problematic.

Benefits to School Counselors

As the field of school counseling has evolved, so has the preparation of school counselors-in-training. Such preparation has evolved from an emphasis on vocational guidance (Cinotti, 2014), to training on comprehensive programming (ASCA, 2012; DeKruyf, Auger, & Trice-Black, 2013), to

training on leadership and advocacy to create systemic change in schools (Ockerman, Patrikakou, & Feiker Hollenbeck, 2015). Researchers, counselor educators and school counselors are frequently calling for even better training. Recent calls include better preparation in instructional techniques to effectively conduct classroom guidance lessons (Ohrt, Blalock, & Limberg, 2016), collaborative coursework with educational leadership students (Beck, 2016; DeSimone & Roberts, 2016), preparation specific to working in urban areas (Hannon, 2016), suicide assessment practice (Douglas & Wachter-Morris, 2015), training in navigating professional identity issues (Gilbride, Goodrich, & Luke, 2016; Scarborough & Luke, 2008) and improved training in Response to Intervention to advance school counseling services (Ockerman et al., 2015).

In creating CACREP standard 1.J., CACREP has created an opportunity for counselor educators to add coursework that meets these calls and better prepares school counselors-in-training for the needs they will encounter in schools. Counselor educators may want to consider adding courses on the preparation topics called for, such as consultation in school counseling (Ockerman et al., 2015), leadership in school counseling (Beck, 2016; DeSimone & Roberts, 2016), and conducting classroom guidance lessons (Ohrt et al., 2016). In better training future school counselors in these areas, counselor educators can enhance the expertise of school counselors graduating from their programs, and ultimately better support K–12 students.

Lastly, CACREP's standard 1.J. holds the potential to benefit the school counseling field as a whole. School counselors serve as both counselors and educators in schools and often receive mixed messages about this dual role (Cinotti, 2014). CACREP's previous school counseling credit hour requirements may have contributed to school counselor role confusion, suggesting that school counselors were not as well-trained as clinical mental health counselors or counselors in other specialties requiring 60 credit hours. In establishing the same credit hour requirements for all counseling programs, CACREP has asserted that school counselors are equally as well-prepared as their colleagues in clinical mental health, marriage and family counseling, addictions counseling, and other specialties. Such an affirmation lends support to the professional standing of school counselors in the counseling field.

Future Research

With the recent release of the 2016 CACREP standards and the inclusion of standard 1.J. requiring 60 credit hours for school counseling programs, faculty members who work at programs with less than 60 credit hours may want to look to the 59 programs that have already transitioned to 60 credit hours as models for transition. Although counselor educators have understandable concerns about the impact that a credit hour increase may have on school counseling programs, previous research and the authors' pilot study findings provide limited support for these concerns. Instead, research indicates that on average, school counseling programs may encounter improved outcomes in programs admissions and graduate job placement rates or similar outcomes to those experienced before increasing credit hours. Future research on programs that transition to 60 credits will prove valuable in confirming these outcomes.

To conduct this research, researchers will need longitudinal program data, including ongoing admissions and job placement data, from universities. In collecting data for their pilot study, the authors learned that many school counseling programs do not maintain continuous data on admissions and job placement. Of the 34 participants who initially responded to the pilot study questionnaire, 27 participants could not provide complete quantitative data on program admissions or job placement rates. Many of these participants noted that they were unable to do so because such data were unavailable. Some participants reported that transitioning to 60 credit hours so long ago

inhibited them from finding and submitting data; seven participants indicated that they transitioned to 60 credit hours more than 15 years ago.

Reasons for unavailable data varied, but most had to do with the absence of data-keeping over time. One participant wrote, "I apologize that I don't have concrete data for you. It's a long time ago that we changed to 60 hours (8 years). I was not program director then." Another participant explained, "We transitioned almost 30 years ago . . . and it would be impossible to get the information to you." A different participant highlighted that aggregate data-keeping presented a challenge. They wrote, "I am sorry I cannot answer the first part of this survey. Because we have a counselor-first identity, all program admission processes are in aggregate—we do not have separate data for community counseling students, clinical mental health counseling students, and school counseling students."

These data-keeping challenges pose an obstacle for future research on the impact of credit hour changes on counseling programs. They also support Shin and colleagues' (2011) findings that counselor education programs often do not maintain admissions data. In their survey research study of 114 CACREP liaisons, Shin et al. found that although some participants reported maintaining admissions and student race and ethnicity data for up to 20 years, other programs reported keeping this data for as little as one year. Moreover, 57% of participants reported not retaining information on prospective students that declined admission to their programs. Although these data may or may not be related to the impact that credit hour changes have on counseling programs, these data-keeping percentages suggest that counseling programs could benefit from collecting and maintaining data in more thorough and consistent ways.

When conducting research on credit hour increases, researchers may also want to examine data points other than admissions and job placement. When counselor educators devote added credit hours to new coursework, they can consider how this coursework will benefit counselors-in-training, then measure those benefits. For example, if counselor educators devote extra credit hours to coursework in advanced techniques, they should collect and maintain data on the counseling techniques of counselors-in-training before and after transitioning to 60 credit hours. If counselor educators create extra coursework in consultation in schools, advocacy or leadership, these skills can be assessed in students before and after creating the courses. Evaluations from employers of alumni can also be examined to explore if counselor ratings improve after increasing credit hours.

If researchers are to better understand the impact that credit hour changes have on counseling programs, it is imperative that counselor educators regularly collect and store data on program outcomes. If counselor educators can begin doing so before credit hour changes take effect, they may be able to track trends in program outcomes associated with the credit hour changes over time. Researchers would be wise to begin longitudinal studies with programs in order to collect data on an ongoing basis and determine if the credit hour change has any effect. This research could prove useful in informing future CACREP standards, including potential credit hour changes. As Barkley and Percy (1984) recommended more than three decades ago, "Counselor education programs [ought to] begin keeping data on applications, acceptances, and enrollments. . . . These factors are too important to the life of most counselor education programs not to have accurate data readily available" (p. 25).

Conclusion

In the three and half decades since CACREP was established, credit hour increases for accredited programs have been met with divided reactions from counselor educators (Cannon & Cooper,

2010; Henriksen et al., 2008; TSCCAIN, 2013). The publication of CACREP's 2016 Standards is no exception. Counselor educators are wise to consider the program implications of any new standard, including standard 1.J. However, to date, no research provides cause to believe that this standard will significantly contribute to negative school counseling program outcomes. To the contrary, previous research indicates program outcomes will improve or stay the same after increasing credit hours, and findings from the authors' pilot study reflect similarly. Future research can provide further valuable insights on the impact of credit hour increases on counseling programs.

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