

The top portion of the cover features a photograph of a fern frond in a forest setting. The letters 'NCCA' are overlaid on the left side of the image in a light green, serif font.

NCCA

Carolina Counselor

Summer 2022

Official Newsletter of the North Carolina
Counseling Association

Campus Happenings

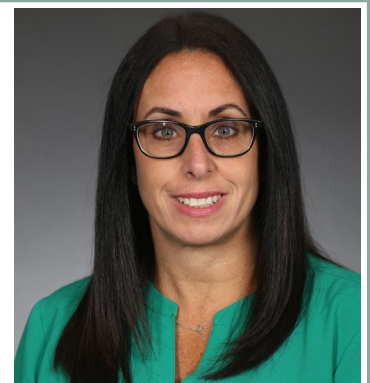
Enriching UNCP Counseling Students' Professional Identity Through Engagement and Membership in NCCA

Stephanie Robinson, Whitney P. Akers, and Nicole Stargell

Outlined in the American Counseling Association's (ACA) 2014 *Code of Ethics*, professional counselors have an ethical obligation and responsibility to participate and engage in professional counseling associations (ACA, 2014). The importance of counselors, including counseling students, to be involved in professional counseling associations is also supported by an expectation of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016). Participation in national and regional professional counseling associations provides counselors the opportunity to be exposed to and involved in current professional issues relevant to the field. This can include advocating for the profession and clients, as well as becoming involved in current governmental and legislative issues that may impact the profession.

Participation in professional counseling organizations provides counselors the opportunity to attend conferences and receive current field-related research and literature through conferences, scholarly journals, newsletters, books, and other resources supported by the association.

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Additionally, professional membership facilitates student attendance of professional organization conferences, allowing for networking and community building with other professionals. Perhaps most critically, professional counseling organizations publish and enforce the guiding code of ethics or standards that members must adhere to in order to protect the profession and the clients served (e.g., the *ACA Code of Ethics*; Remley & Herlihy, 2016).

Through professional associations, counselors and counseling students can enhance and support their professional identity development and growth. For counseling students in particular, this professional identity development is seen as one of their most critical tasks during their academic journey (Remley & Herlihy, 2016).

In response to the importance our field places on professional counselors' involvement in counseling organizations, the Department of Counseling (DoC) at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP) was recently awarded the Grant for Excellence in Teaching & Learning from UNCP's Teaching and Learning Center to cover the cost of a NCCA Academic Institution

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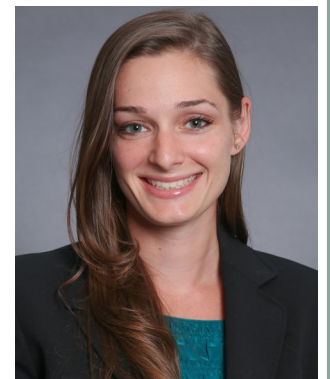
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Membership. The NCCA Academic Institution Membership provides every student enrolled in the graduate counseling program at UNCP a NCCA membership and a NCCA division membership. Offering a NCCA membership to DoC students will prepare UNCP graduates to work in North Carolina with a deeper understanding of their professional identity and a stronger connection to the field in general. The NCCA Academic Institution Membership also provides faculty members in the DoC with a NCCA membership as well as the opportunity to add several division memberships to support their efforts to teach courses, content, and curriculum that span the diverse counseling field and the various specialty areas of each faculty member.

Alignment with the Values and Mission of ACA, NCCA, and UNCP

By introducing counseling students to the professional obligation of being involved in counseling organizations and associations during their graduate counseling studies and by modeling this ethical behavior as counselor educators, we can instill in our counseling students the principles outlined in the *ACA Code of Ethics*.

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The grant also allows the DoC to emphasize the importance of students continuing involvement in these professional organizations and associations after graduation and upon entering the field (ACA, 2014).

Offering a NCCA membership to UNCP's graduate counseling students is in line with NCCA's overarching goal to "improve advocacy efforts, increase membership, provide more educational opportunities for counselors, address mental health needs of diverse populations, improve internal and external communication, and improve services and support to divisions" (NCCA, 2021). The NCCA memberships provided through this grant will further support our efforts to connect and unify NC counselors, address current professional issues, promote professional growth, maintain high professional standards, engage in advocacy efforts in the field, support counseling-related research and creative engagements, and promote acceptance and well-being for the clients we serve. In offering the opportunity for counseling students to join and participate in one of the 15 NCCA divisions, counseling students will be introduced to a variety of specialties that focus on the varied counseling needs of our clients by specifically addressing the unique needs of diverse populations, marginalized individuals, and disenfranchised groups.

Consistent with UNCP's mission and the purpose of the Grant for Excellence in Teaching & Learning, a NCCA membership for UNCP counseling students highlights the University's dedication to and involvement in "active student learning, engaged scholarship, high academic standards, creative activity, and public service" (UNCP, n.d.). In considering the overall mission of UNCP's DoC, having access to a NCCA membership prepares UNCP graduate counseling students to work with clients on improving their "mental health and

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well-being... across the region and beyond through innovative, interdisciplinary, and effective research, and service that prepares culturally- responsive clinical mental health counselors and professional school counselors” (UNCP, n.d.). As discussed throughout, a NCCA Academic Institution Membership provides DoC students and faculty the opportunity to be exposed to the most current and up-to-date research in the field enhancing what is taught and learned in the classroom. A NCCA membership exposes students and faculty to professional counseling conversations, legislative initiatives that affect our profession and our clients, as well as inventive and creative approaches to counseling diverse individuals. Ensuring that our graduate counseling students are prepared to be “engaged in global society and responsible stewards of the world,” a NCCA membership provides the opportunity for students and faculty to be involved in advocacy and social justice efforts that professional counselors are participating in and researching across the nation and region (UNCP, n.d.).

Many of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling (CMHC) and Professional School Counseling (PSC) students enrolled in UNCP's counseling program belong to underrepresented and systemically, socially, and financially disenfranchised groups. Out of the 200 CMHC and PSC students surveyed for the 2020-2021 UNCP DoC Assessment Pan and Report, 88.8% of students identified as female, and 55.8% of students identified as Black/African American, American Indian/Native Alaskan, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino/Hispanic American, Multiracial, or Other (Stargell, 2021). Considering the socioeconomic status of the UNCP service region and the anticipated tuition for a student to complete a UNCP counseling program (estimated at approximately \$22,585.80; UNCP, 2022), providing a NCCA membership for all UNCP counseling students removes a significant financial barrier for those

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who may not otherwise have the resources to engage in and benefit from professional counseling organization.

Finally, participation in professional counseling organizations is a shared value of the collective UNCP DoC faculty. Currently, the majority of DoC faculty members serve in a leadership role with NCCA or one of the NCCA divisions. Dr. Stephanie Robinson is the current President of North Carolina Addictions and Offender Counselors Association (NCAOCA). Dr. Whitney Akers is the current President of the North Carolina Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive Identities (SAIGE NC) as well as the current Vice-President of NCAOCA. Dr. Nicole Stargell is the Editor of the NCCA Newsletter, and Dr. Jonathan Ricks serves as the current Trustee and Special Projects Liaison for the Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling of North Carolina (ACACNC). As Counselor Educators and Supervisors, we philosophically and fundamentally believe modeling involvement in and a commitment to professional counseling organizations is important for our field, our growth as counselors, and our clients.

Conclusion

The DoC at UNCP is thrilled to have this grant to cover the NCCA Academic Institutional Membership for the 2022-2023 academic year, and we plan to apply for funding from the Grant for Excellence in Teaching & Learning each year to cover this cost of the NCCA membership for our counseling students and faculty. We encourage our colleagues at other graduate counseling programs to seek funding to also provide students with a valuable NCCA membership.

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Through this grant funding, UNCP is actively honoring our counseling program, complying with the teaching and leadership expectations of CACREP, engaging in and modeling our ethical mandate and professional responsibility outlined in the *ACA Codes of Ethics*, and supporting the counseling field.

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