

NASAC: The First Four Years

By Edward Reading, PhD, LCADC

The National Addiction Studies Accreditation Commission (NASAC) will be celebrating its fifth anniversary this Fall at the 2015 NAADAC Annual Conference. CAADE, the California Association of Alcohol and Drug Educators (1985), and INCASE, the International Coalition of Addiction Studies Educators (1990) were the first to “accredit” college Addiction Studies academic programs. NAADAC, also “approved” colleges for pre and post credentialing education. As this article will describe, there has been both an evolution of Addiction Professionals as well as the specific education and training they require. NASAC is the only national accreditation for Addiction Studies that accredits all four levels of academic degrees (Associates, Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral Degrees).



between the 12-step recovery programs and paid alcoholism counselors. This set the stage for the birth of the profession of Addiction Counseling. These early para-professionals were trained by their agencies with in-service training which was integrated with their 12-step experience. Experiential learning was

the standard. Most of these para-professionals were persons in recovery from their own alcoholism and addiction, while a small minority were non-recovering people who believed in the “disease concept” and 12-step recovery, and who were also enthusiastic to work with those with addictive disorders.

In the 1970s, there was a movement towards identifying a basic core knowledge base, and the “certification” of alcoholism counselors, and soon after, drug abuse counselors. As these two certification processes blended together, the certification process developed around a bilateral approach of learning core content of the knowledge and supervised counseling experience. This approach was the initial standard, while the IC&RC examination process would soon follow (both written and oral exams). Later, the NAADAC Counselor Certification Commission developed similar standards.

During this time, there also emerged a group of recovering people who also had academic training. Some even had

A Quick History of Addiction Counseling

Addiction Counseling, as a specialty, began over 60 years ago with people in recovery beginning to work as “para-professionals” in early detoxification and outreach programs. Early in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson was offered a paid position to work as a para-professional in a New York psychiatric hospital. He declined the offer, knowing that there should be a separation



clinical licenses (e.g. MDs, MSWs, MFTs, Nurses and Pastoral Counselors). These early addiction professionals learned from their experience that academic training had valuable competencies and skills that would add to the self-help recovery model.

Some colleges began to add addiction coursework as electives within the curriculum of various counseling and social service disciplines. As time passed, coursework to include all of the core content required for addiction counselor certification was added, frequently in the form of certificate programs. The next level of development evolved into degree-based programs with “concentrations” or “minors” within professional disciplines.

The Current Standards

Today we have two approaches to academic credentials in Addiction Studies. The first group includes degrees in specific mental health disciplines, with an Addiction Studies Minor. Examples include a Master’s in Counseling or Social Work with a concentration in Addiction Studies, or an Associate’s Degree in Human Services with a concentration in Addiction Studies. The second type of degree, which is a newly developing model, is specific to the independent “Discipline of Addiction Studies”; for example, a Master’s in Addiction Counseling, or a Master’s in Addiction Studies. NASAC has a mandate to accredit both of these types of Addiction Studies programs.

Why Do We Need Addiction Studies Accreditation?

If we were to allow other disciplines to determine curriculum standards and content based solely on their own discipline, they would most likely not have the most evidence-based curriculum content and skill sets for effective addiction treatment. Addiction professionals have this

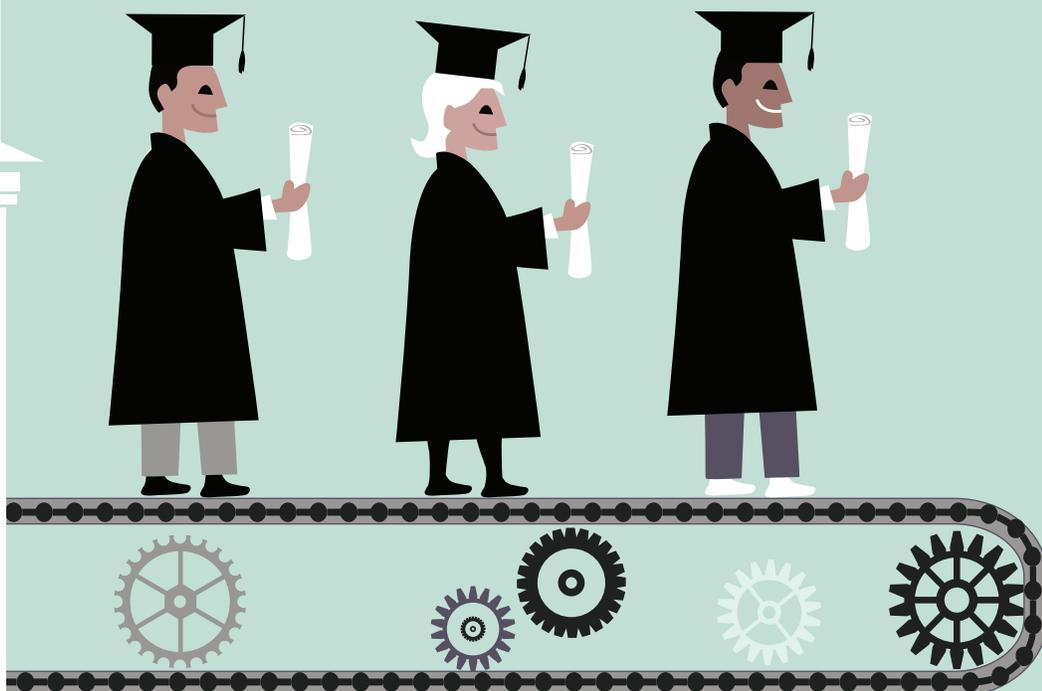
NASAC was a strong advocate for NAADAC’s Minority Fellowship Program for Addiction Counselors at the Master’s level, funded by a federal SAMHSA grant awarded in 2014 and already providing tuition stipends, education, and mentoring for its first cohort of graduate students.

knowledge, competence and skill set based on very specific training and education. This is why Addiction Studies must have “self-governance of addiction studies within higher education.”

NASAC supports Addiction Studies Educators in their advocacy for their existence, as specialists, within their institutional environment. At the same time, NASAC supports students in the development of a career ladder for addiction professionals. NASAC accreditation also assists in the interstate transferability of education and credentialing. This is done by aiding in the linkage of academic programs to workforce development issues and trends, and enhancing employability and interstate career mobility. NASAC was a strong advocate for NAADAC’s Minority Fellowship Program for Addiction Counselors at the Master’s level, funded by a federal SAMHSA grant awarded in 2014 and already providing tuition stipends, education, and mentoring for its first cohort of graduate students.

NASAC ensures that curricula and institutional modalities, resources, and qualifications of faculty are inclusive of the higher academic standards, including but not limited to Prevention, Treatment, Recovery Support, Administration and Research.

NASAC is part of the network that ensures that the addiction specialty is maintained as a primary discipline, and not simply a sub-specialty of a variety of mental health or counseling “generalists.” Generally, mental health curricula have minimal, if any, addiction studies content beyond an introduction to alcohol and drug abuse, or other entry-level classes. This is not enough specific education to adequately provide for the public safety with a quality of care that gives the best, and most up to date evidence-based prevention treatment and recovery support modalities. NASAC will not accredit programs that are less than adequate.



The Birthing of NASAC

In the early 2000s, SAMHSA began moving the addiction profession towards concretizing its place among the professional disciplines. At a meeting in 2007 of addiction stakeholders, which included about 20 national and state organizations, including the two major addiction counselor credentialing bodies, IC&RC and NAADAC/NCC AP, a decision was made to add a new component to solidify the professional discipline of Addiction Counseling. This new component would add two missing elements: academic standards and an academic accreditation process.

Among the stakeholders at that meeting were NAADAC, representing addiction counselors and professionals, and the International Coalition for Addiction Studies Education (INCASE), representing academic educators and the academic accreditation process. NAADAC provided the infrastructure to build upon and expand the addiction studies accreditation developed by INCASE. It was decided that a “marriage” between NAADAC and INCASE would be the most efficient way to establish the necessary structure to be a credible accrediting body. A new corporate entity was created, and NASAC was born.

NAADAC-Accredited Colleges & Universities

Bellevue College, WA
Casper College, WY
Clark College, WA
College of Lake County, IL
Edmonds Community College, WA
Elgin Community College, IL
Governors State University, IL
Grand Canyon University, AZ
Hazelden Graduate School, MN
Indiana Wesleyan University, IN
Kingsborough Community College, NY
Metropolitan State University, CO
Minot State University, ND
Monmouth University, NJ
Naugatuck Valley Community College, CT
Ottawa University, KS
Rio Salado Community College, AZ
Spokane County Community College, WA
University of South Dakota, SD

The Process

The process of becoming a NASAC Accredited Program is voluntary, although some State Licensing Boards have already included the requirement of NASAC Accredited degrees to qualify for licensure. The NASAC accreditation process requires another accreditation from one of the five Regional Accrediting Agencies for colleges and universities to assure a broad span of already documented educational standards. This makes NASAC a “specialty professional accreditation” similar to other discipline specific accreditations (e.g. Counseling, Medicine, Nursing, Social Work, etc.).

The first part of the process is a “Self-Study” completed by the applicant. The Self-Study helps the college or university to refine its curriculum and make sure it is in compliance with SAMHSA’s TAP 21 *Addiction Counseling Competencies*, published in 2006. This self-study is the basis of the application, and is submitted electronically to the NASAC office.

After a review for completeness, the Self-Study is reviewed by a three-person team of evaluators. These evaluators have experience with the same academic level of the degree (Associate, Bachelor’s, Master’s, or Doctorate) as the applicant seeking to be granted accreditation. After the Self-Study evaluation/review by the evaluation team, there may also be a site review, or a distance/Skype-type version of a site visit.

Once this is complete, the evaluation team makes a recommendation to the Commission for a seven year Full Accreditation, a one year Probationary Accreditation with a remedial plan, or denial.

Finally, the Commission reviews all the materials and either awards Full or Probationary Accreditation, or denies the application.

Benefits of Accreditation

Several colleges and universities who have achieved accreditation have indicated that they have seen a significant increase in applicants to their program and added prestige to the degree program and the college or university. Additionally, concrete benefits are seen in helping students climb the career ladder and gain both addiction credentials and employment.

Currently Accredited Colleges and Universities

As of September 2015, 19 colleges and universities have received NASAC Accreditation (see sidebar) and several schools are in the initial application process. Since this is still a relatively new accreditation process, we anticipate more colleges applying as the need for this specific programming expands.



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