

NCC AP Update: The Importance of Quality Assurance

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In the article I wrote for the last issue of *Advances in Addiction & Recovery*, I focused on why substance use disorder professionals need to be pursuing national credentials. As noted, the U.S. Department of Labor projects employment of addiction counselors to grow by 23% in the next seven years. The demand for qualified professionals is increasing at a pace exceeding most other professions. This is one reason for advocating for accessible training and education to enable people entering the field to learn the basics of substance use disorder treatment and to continue to advance their counseling skills and work toward earning credentials.

With that background, the following is a “look behind the curtain” of the National Certification Commission for Addiction Professionals (NCC AP). It is imperative that we, as a profession, adapt to and take advantage of innovations in our field. NAADAC and NC CAP have long advocated for training and education that facilitates learning the basics of substance use disorder treatment and then continuing to learn updated information or technologies as it become available. In fact, it was because of the need for a consistent and concise requirement of specialized and continued training and experience that NCC AP was founded.

A Look Back

The recognition of the need in the 1980’s for national credentialing was a strategic initiative by NAADAC, resulting the sponsoring of NCC AP. The impetus was the various credentialing criteria and titles being used by states. “Alphabet soup” was often used to describe the various combinations of letters for identifying addiction professionals. Further complicating professional recognition was the approach by some states to separately credential alcoholism counselors from other psychoactive substances (White, 1998).

Since 1990, NCC AP has been developing standards for national credentials. Commissioners are experienced state licensed or certified SUD professionals responsible for “developing and keeping current national standards of requisite knowledge in substance use disorder counseling and providing evaluation mechanisms for measuring and monitoring the level of knowledge required for national credentialing. . .”

NCC AP recognizes that the addiction profession is in constant development, which requires reassessing the tenets underlying credentialing.

In 1998, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSA) and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) published *Addiction Counseling Competencies – The Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes of Professional Practice (The Competencies) as Technical Assistance Publication (TAP) 21*. TAP 21 identifies 123 competencies that are essential to the effective practice of counseling for psychoactive substance use disorders. TAP 21 presents the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) counselors need to become fully proficient in each competency. (CSAT, 2005)

Today, TAP 21 is considered the source document defining addiction counseling and the technical aspects of the profession. It was last formally updated in 2005.

A Look Behind the Curtain

NCC AP uses a combination of requirements to determine eligibility for national certification, including having a state credential as a SUD/addiction counselor, supervised work experience, requisite SUD/addiction related training and passing a comprehensive exam (NAADAC, n.d.). NCC AP, as part of its strategic plan, is doing quality assurance activities related to the examination process to ensure our credential exams for our three main credentials (National Certified Addiction Counselor Level I (NCAC I), National Certified Addiction Counselor Level II (NCAC II), Master Addiction Counselor (MAC) reflect the current state of the profession. Information, technology, and best practices from ten years ago may be outdated. For example, we need to consider advances in understanding the impacts of adverse childhood events and other traumatic events on assessment techniques and counseling strategies, as well as advances in medication assisted treatment (MAT). Other examples include the expanding use of electronic clinical records, as well as increased use of electronic technologies to connect with clients through everything from texting to remote monitoring and tele-behavioral health. Further, competencies may remain the same but the tools needed may change.

The quality assurance process for the NCAC I, NCAC II, and MAC started from the ground up. First, NCC AP worked to answer the question, “Why is the exam being created?”

Short answers included:

- To establish national professional standards for addiction professionals based on training, education, experience, and demonstrated knowledge. Credentials are part of a career ladder tied to a scope of practice, and are available for professionals to advance through the profession of addiction/SUD counseling.
- To ensure professionals receiving credentials agree to a national code of ethics.
- To position candidates for career advancement and increased salary potential.
- To distinguish candidates as practitioners who have specialized addiction/SUD training and experience in assessment, treatment, and counseling.

Next, NCC AP underwent a critical reviewing of and ultimate reaffirming of the major topics constituting critical areas to be addressed by exams. The topics are:

- Clinical evaluation, including screening, assessment and diagnosis of substance use/addiction and screening for CODs
- Treatment Planning for SUDs, including initial, ongoing, continuity of care and discharge and planning for relapse prevention

- Referral
- Service coordination/case management in the areas of SUDs and CODs
- Counseling skills and theories of counseling – therapy and psycho-education with individuals, families and groups in the area of SUDs
- Client, family and community education

- Documentation and compliance
- Professional and ethical responsibilities
- Clinical supervisory responsibilities for all categories of SUD counselors
- Pharmacology and physiology of SUD/addictive and COD
- Code of ethics & professional development

The NCC AP then underwent a review of the 123 competencies outlined in TAP 21 and determined the minimally acceptable knowledge and skills to be assessed by the examination process. In the fall of 2018, NCCAP credentialed professionals were surveyed regarding job roles in terms of the job functions (i.e., responsibilities/duties) and tasks performed on a job as well as the knowledge and/or skills (i.e., competencies) required to perform those tasks.

The results of the job analysis will provide evidence to the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills substance use disorder counselors should possess in 2018. In turn, NCC AP will ensure that the exams accurately reflect the updated information. This is key to insuring a quality national credentialing process reflecting what the profession considers to be the minimum standards for identifying SUD professionals.

In closing, NCC AP recognizes the need for developing and maintaining current national standards of requisite knowledge in substance use disorder counseling and monitoring the level of knowledge required for national credentialing. As described above, that process is currently underway in a robust manner. All of this is in support of insuring our national credentials for recognizing SUD counseling professionals are up to date and reflective of our critical task in effectively addressing substance use disorders.

REFERENCES

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