

Would the Accurate Representation of You Please Stand Up?

By Mita Johnson, EdD, LAC, MAC, SAP, NAADAC Ethics Committee Chair

The addictions and behavioral health professions rely heavily on credentials (i.e., diplomas, degrees, certificates, certifications and licenses) that attest to: (1) attendance and completion of specialized education and training; (2) successful completion of credentialing or certification exams; and (3) an individual possessing the knowledge, skills, and work experience necessary to practice competently. Credentials are meant to accurately portray one's scope of practice to other members of one's profession and the public. In addition, credentials delineate specific specialty areas and attest to continued adherence to NAADAC/NCC AP's Code of Ethics and other codes of ethics and regulatory statutes. There are many contexts within which credentials are displayed: business cards, informed consent documents, contracts, email signature blocks, and letterhead. These credentials also represent experience working in the profession and pathways within which one's career has ventured.

The art of "representing" one's academic and professional accomplishments can be an invaluable tool in securing employment, internships/externships/fellowships, scholarships and grants, awards, and other professional recognition. Masterful wording can reveal depths of critical thinking that are necessary for one's work, and can add extra padding or significance to otherwise minor professional accomplishments. There is not always a clear distinction between stating and overstating or misrepresenting one's professional qualifications. When a professional/provider goes beyond negligible overstating of one's certifications and credentials to intentional or unintentional deception, it is evident that ethical principles and licensing laws have been violated. Misrepresentation of credentials misrepresents education, training, skills and supervised experience—all factors in one's scope of practice.

In addition to the misrepresentation of one's credentials, certifications, and skills to one's profession, there is the public side of this problem. Clients and the general public expect counselors and other service providers to represent themselves accurately so they can determine as to whether this counselor/provider is suitable to their needs. Clients expect providers to operate ethically and morally—with values that promote honesty and integrity. To misrepresent one's professional credentials, certifications, and work experience is to lie to the general public and/or a client. Intentionally or unintentionally lying to a client can cause a great deal of harm. Unintentional lying occurs when the provider does not correct his or her peer's or client's understanding of his or her credentials when it comes to light that the provider has misrepresented himself/herself. It is vital that counselors and allied professions accurately represent their credentials—in all contexts written and verbal—for the sake of the profession and to do no harm to clients who are already struggling with psychosocial concerns.

So you may be wondering what examples there are of misrepresenting one's credentials. One example is on business cards, where a person adds letters after their name that they did not earn or only put letters but



not levels (i.e., CAC rather than CAC I, II or III). Not including levels as required by the certifying/licensing body is unethical and intentionally deceptive. Another example is website marketing information about one's agency and services provided. When a person who is not a NAADAC Approved Education Provider puts on his or her website that he or she is a NAADAC-approved trainer, that is deceptive, unethical, and sanctionable.

Yet another example is stating that one provides services that he or she is not qualified to provide as part of his or her scope of practice. The client looking at all these materials is expecting providers to represent themselves accurately. The client does not know the difference between levels or how a person applies to become an approved training/education provider—he or she is taking the information presented at face value. To prevent harm towards a client—whether actual or perceptual—it is important that we clearly state what our qualifications are and how we achieved them. It is always helpful to clients for them to understand what you had to accomplish to earn your certifications and licenses. By carefully explaining what each credential means and what it allows in practice, we are being open, genuine, and transparent.

NAADAC's and NCC AP's Ethics Committees encourage all NAADAC members, NCC AP credential holders, and other allied professionals, to step into the public's shoes and scrutinize all materials and information put into the public domain. Take time to critically think about what information or credentials are being presented that could cause harm to the profession and/or public. Take time to consider what values are on display when erroneous information is provided in the public domain. Take time to consider what Principles of the NAADAC Code of Ethics are being violated by offering inaccurate information. Take time to consider what state regulatory statutes are being broken by endorsing erroneous information without correcting it. With the opioid crisis and surge of other substance use disorders, we are being scrutinized more intensely by the public. How will you fare if your credentials and practices are carefully analyzed?



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