

## Article 49

# Creating Your Professional Counselor Portfolio

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The beginnings of modern-day counseling have been discussed as occurring well after the origins of psychology, psychiatry, and social work (Gladding, 2004; Neukrug, 2000, 2003; Shertzer & Stone, 1980). As such, counseling can be seen as a new profession relative to the numerous other mental health disciplines that share our professional work. While it may be argued that the roots of the other mental health professions are those of counseling as well (Weinrach, Thomas, & Chan, 2001), counselors may do well to examine their own professional identity to understand, determine, and/or advocate for themselves and their role in the mental health maze.

Counselor professional identity has been identified, in general, as the sum of existing professional counselor knowledge (Neukrug, 2003). However, specific to individual counselor identity, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1995) suggested that "... if the individual is building an authentic professional identity... personalization is occurring" (p. 62) and "...one's professional identity is in part defined by her/his skills...and competence...." (p. 11). In the process of developing portfolios, counselors concretely examine their professional identity by identifying and categorizing demonstrated skills and competencies (Schindler, 1997). Furthermore, by creating professional portfolios, counselors (1) organize their thoughts about professional accomplishments, and (2) identify future professional plans (McCulloch, 2000; Schindler, 1997). These portfolio development by-products have direct application to professional interviews in which counselors may be asked to discuss their proven skills, competencies, and accomplishments. According to Beale (2003),

the latest development in ... interviewing is the use of behavioral questioning... In effect, applicants are asked to tell what they have done rather than what they would do... It is imperative, then, that prospective counselors be able to convey their skills and competencies to potential employers in concrete ways. (p. 69)

The counselor portfolio is a concrete way of conveying skills and competencies to potential employers. By creating portfolios counselors can promote professional identity, organize thinking regarding present professional status and accomplishments, solidify future plans, and aid in professional presentation during interviews, thereby helping counselors compete more effectively in the job market.

Many professions have utilized portfolios for assessment of professional accomplishments and abilities (Beale, 2003; Schindler, 1997). The professions of art, theater, dance, journalism, education, engineering, and architecture have long utilized portfolios as a means of assessing professional candidates. For professional counselors the portfolio is a new phenomenon. As a result, counselors may be unsure as to the style and organization of their portfolios.

### Style and Organization of Your Professional Counselor Portfolio

Two concepts may be key to the style and organization of your professional portfolio. First, your portfolio is a unique expression of who you are. Your portfolio may be unlike that of other counselors because your interests, experiences, and accomplishments are uniquely yours. Second, your portfolio is a living document that you will expand and change over time. You will expand and change it along with your expanding and changing professional experiences, while at the same time tailoring it to meet the requirements or expectations of a particular position or organization. Keep in mind that a good professional fit between a counselor and a counseling position may involve walking the sometimes fine line between staying true to who you are, and providing what is desired by employers in the portfolio and on the job.

#### *Your Portfolio: Style*

Generally, counselors at a master's level restrict the size of their portfolios (the portfolio or "carried pages") to one three-ring binder and keep additional,

supplementary, and/or duplicate materials (the folio or “pages”) in a tote containing a series of labeled folders. Binders come in a variety of styles and materials. Binder styles vary from the simple, three-ring binder to fully zippered brief-case style binders with handles.

Binder materials vary from traditionally conservative black leather to neon-colored hard plastic. Either style of binder may be appropriate given the counselor and the position. For example, black leather may appeal to those involved in a counseling practice merger offering professional consultation services to corporate employees. The neon-colored binder may appeal to those involved in hiring a professional counselor for kindergarten children in a school district.

Binders may have a clear sleeve on the front cover and the spine to house external, identifying cover sheets. These identifying cover sheets, in conjunction with a matching table of contents and index tabs, will help you present your portfolio as an organized and professional document. The table of contents identifies each section of your portfolio, and the index tabs allow easy access to each section. Consider placing documents you have three-hole punched in each section, rather than placing documents in clear, slide-in sheets. The look is neater and will allow your index tabs to show past the portfolio documents. Using color copies of documents rather than originals will avoid the loss of original/irreplaceable documents in the event your portfolio is misplaced.

The use of a heavy stock paper (65 lb.) for portfolio documents (such as the curriculum vitae and philosophy of counseling) will allow for three-hole punching while standing up to frequent handling. Heavier stock pages will also be easier to locate, separate, and turn. Consider the use of cream-colored matching papers for use throughout your portfolio. The cream color will match the resume paper (24 lb.) and full-size folders you use for separate distribution of your curriculum vitae and reference list.

### *Your Portfolio: Organization*

To determine the organization of your portfolio consider who you are, your professional goals, and what you want to communicate about your professional self. Variables affecting portfolio organization may include the position sought, the position or organization to which you apply, and your educational level. For example, doctoral-level counselor educators seeking college level or higher teaching positions generally have lengthy and academically oriented portfolio requirements established within the particular institution to which they are applying. Master’s-level counselors seeking nonacademic positions generally utilize shorter and more clinically oriented forms of portfolio organization.

Various forms of portfolio organization can be found in the literature. For example, Beale (2003) suggested the following portfolio components for school counselors: Introduction, Program Planning, Counseling, Consulting, Coordinating, Appraisal, Professional Development, and Technology. James and Greenwalt (2001) suggested nine areas for portfolio consideration: Vita, Counseling Courses, Internship/Practicum, Postdegree Supervision, Work Experience, Professional Credentials, Continuing Education, Presentations/Publications, and Professional Service. McCulloch (2000) stated that while there is no universal format for a portfolio, certain categories apply to most counselors. She suggested utilizing 10 portfolio categories that serve professional counselors regardless of their practical setting: Curriculum Vitae, Philosophy of Counseling, Credentials/Certifications, Professional Affiliations, Professional Development, Commendations, Evaluations, Professional Service, Publications, and Presentations/Projects.

*Curriculum vitae.* The curriculum vitae, CV, or vita is a critical category in the professional portfolio since it can relate your career and your portfolio at a glance. The CV is a consolidated version of the portfolio. Master’s-level counselors have outgrown the one-page resume often requested by employers. However, consider limiting your CV to two pages with the critical contact information, education, certifications, and most current/relevant professional experience listed on the first page. As with all portfolio decisions, remember that your CV is an expression of who you are. The style, organization, and content of your CV reflect who you are and how you communicate (Bolles, 2001; McCulloch, 2001). Further, it is a living document that changes over time as you acquire additional professional experiences. McCulloch (2001) suggested using the following CV categories: Name, address, phone numbers, and e-mail address; Education; Certifications; Professional Experience; Professional Affiliations; Projects/Presentations; Professional Development; Professional Service; and Awards/Hobbies. Do not state the obvious by including objectives or references upon request. Do keep a list of references (names, addresses, phones, e-mail addresses) on a separate sheet, along with additional copies of your CV ready for use as appropriate.

*Credentials/certifications.* In this section include copies (preferably laminated color copies) of your diplomas (MS Ed, BA) and certifications relevant to the position you seek (LPC, NCC, ACS). Additional certifications may be valued or required by an employer and might include school counselor, teacher, identification and reporting of child abuse, CPR, and first aid.

*Philosophy of counseling.* In this one or two page statement, clearly outline your approach or theoretical orientation to counseling. It may be helpful to direct specific applications of your counseling philosophy to the population you intend to serve.

*Professional affiliations.* Membership in professional organizations can communicate professional commitment and/or involvement. In this section, place membership certificates for all professional organizations to which you belong.

*Professional development.* By attending professional trainings, workshops, seminars, or in-services, counselors can remain current on professional theory and practice issues. In this section, place one-page flyers/slingers or a copy of the program descriptions of the professional development events you have attended.

*Evaluations.* Evaluations outline areas of competence and skill as assessed by other parties. These assessments may be from clients, supervisors, or colleagues. In this section, place copies of your best evaluations. Frequent scheduling of evaluations of your work will increase the number of evaluations you may wish to use in your portfolio.

*Commendations.* Commendations are honors, awards, or praise from other parties on the high quality of your work. Like evaluations, commendations may be from clients, supervisors, or colleagues. They may also be from family or friends of clients and can include formal letters, informal notes, and e-mails commenting positively on your work. Letters of recommendation, certain evaluations, and award certificates can also be placed in this section. Note that in this portfolio section issues of confidentiality arise. Signed consent to use client-related materials and deletion of client-specific information is critical.

*Professional service.* Counseling-related work beyond the job duties for which you are paid is service. This includes counseling-related pro bono and volunteer work. It also includes time spent serving in administrative offices (e.g., president, editor) for professional organizations. Service can be at local, state, regional, national, and international levels. Service can also be for the organization by which you are employed.

*Publications.* Any published article focused on counseling-related topics may serve as publications. Consider contributing to newsletters of professional organizations and counseling programs, or to popular publications such as newspapers and magazines. Also keep in mind that your thesis or other research can be submitted to professional journals.

*Presentations/projects.* In this section, include representative material for all professional presentations you have offered. Venues for presentations may include

professional conferences, workplace in-services, invited local workshops, and classroom presentations. As with all sections of your portfolio, include minimal materials. Single-page, clearly identified materials will present in an organized and professional manner. Remember, your portfolio is not a scrapbook.

## **Portfolio Sections for Counselor Educators**

Counselor educators seeking academic positions generally adhere to academic portfolio requirements. These large portfolios often contain multiple binders organized in a carrying case or tote box. Three main categories are usually addressed in these large academic portfolios: Teaching, Scholarship, and Service. These three categories have numerous subcategories. Teaching subcategories might include student grades, university evaluations, departmental evaluations, student-involved projects, peer evaluations, and student results on professional standardized tests. Scholarship subcategories might include publications (e.g., journal articles, books, book chapters, book reviews), presentations (at state, national, international conferences), and research (e.g., outcome research, exit reports). Service subcategories might include: membership or leadership positions on committees at departmental or university levels; membership or leadership positions in professional organizations related to field at local, state, national, and international levels.

Requirements for doctoral-level counselor educators in teaching, scholarship, and service can be more stringent than the master's-level counselor categories described in the preceding section. For example, publications for counselor educators are generally expected to be those publications accepted in refereed professional journals. Additionally, institutions generally have high productivity expectations with respect to teaching, scholarship, and service. As a result, the counselor educator vita is generally larger than that of the master's-level counselor.

Academic institutions (colleges, universities, and departments within those institutions) have specific criteria for professional portfolios. Further, institutional requirements for academic positions vary dependent on institutional policy, the institution itself (e.g., 2-year college, 4-year college, 4-year doctoral granting), and the rank of the position being sought (assistant, associate, or full professor). It may be helpful to check with the particular institution in which you are interested for printed or online materials outlining the structure and areas to be addressed in your portfolio. Doctoral-level academic colleagues may be a great resource for

portfolio information, particularly if they are part of the institution of interest. Ask to view their portfolios.

### Summary

The professional portfolio can be an effective tool for counselors at all levels. Benefits to portfolio creation and use may include establishment of professional identity, awareness of professional skills, organized thinking about career, and improved performance at interviews.

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