Division 17 Fellows Talk

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I am honored to be awarded Fellow Status by the American Psychological Association (APA) and recognized as such by Division 17. Division 17 of APA has been a professional home of mine since the Fall of 1997, when as a new doctoral student at the University of Missouri I was encouraged by Puncky Heppner to join the Division. At the time I had recently received my masters degree in Sport Psychology from the University of North Carolina, and assumed that I was going to receive my PhD in Counseling Psychology and go onto a life where I provided both psychotherapy and performance-enhancing consultation to athletes at a variety of competitive levels. Instead, I decided to become an academic, developed a couple of research areas where I have had some degree of success, and am now an administrator responsible for multiple academic departments. I have to believe that Norm Gysbers, who taught my first career theories course, would enjoy dissecting the planned happenstance of this career journey.

Before providing a few thoughts on where we are as a profession, I wanted to take the opportunity to mention a few people who have been instrumental in my career. By far the most important influence has been my wife, Tiffany Sanford-Martens, who is also a Counseling Psychologist and a graduate of the University of Missouri program. We met at the new student orientation during my second year in the program (her first), and after a student outing that I believe involved dancing and some drinks with rum in them (not necessarily in that order), we have basically been together since. No one has been more supportive of me, either professionally or personally. She still gets excited about my academic accomplishments, and I continue to be thrilled to share good news with her. My advisor, Dr. Richard Cox, allowed me the freedom and flexibility to develop my scholarly interests, and was an excellent model of how to organize one’s thinking when engaging in academic writing. During my first or second year an offhand comment by Dr. Dennis Kivlighan about how wonderful the life of a faculty member is has always stuck with me, and something I now try to pass along to junior faculty. Dr. Sue Phillips took a chance on this person with a hodge-podge of interests in sport psychology, motivation, and addictive behaviors, by offering me a faculty position at SUNY-Albany coming out of graduate school. During my second and third year at SUNY Dr. Mary Larimer, an eminent clinical psychologist at the University of Washington, basically taught me how to write grant applications, and subsequently became a trusted colleague and mentor. Finally, Dr. John Wedman, a long-time administrator in the College of Education at Missouri, who recently lost a long battle with cancer, decided that I had potential as an administrator, and, along with my current dean Dr. Dan Clay, provided me with professionally rewarding opportunities in that area.

It is some of my experiences as an administrator that are in part informing a few thoughts I want to provide about our profession. I believe that the unique aspects of our training provide us with an opportunity to make important contributions to science, to improve services in our health care system, and to alleviate suffering and optimize functioning among those who seek treatment from us. I am, however, concerned about our future as a profession and an academic discipline. Over the past decade or so we have had several historically strong programs at top institutions, like Michigan State, Notre Dame, Penn State, and Ohio State, close, and several other that have been integrated into combined programs. What do we need to do to ensure that such closures do not continue, and to increase the possibility that existing programs will thrive and new programs will be developed? Below I offer three brief thoughts.

First, I encourage us in the academic community to be less concerned with talking to ourselves and more concerned with disseminating our scholarship to the broader psychological community. Over the years I have had a number of discussions with colleagues who have complained about our propensity in Counseling Psychology to “navel-gaze.” I will offer just one brief illustration that I have experienced first-hand. Throughout my career I was told by multiple senior colleagues that I needed to focus specifically on “JCP” publications. Not publications in top, high-impact journals, but JCP specifically. Now, the Journal of Counseling Psychology is of course a fine journal, but the message I received was that in our field it is most important to talk to ourselves. We should, of course, be publishing in our own premier outlets, but is also important that our best work be disseminated to a wider audience. We have a lot to offer psychology and behavioral health in general, and one way to do so is to publish our work in journals that attract a different audience. Publications in outlets like Health Psychology, the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, and the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology should be encouraged and incentivized just as much as publications in our own top outlets.

Second, we need to embrace a mindset where seeking out external funding is encouraged, incentivized, and becomes a part of our professional identity as researchers and scholars. There are clear economic benefits of Counseling Psychology programs having faculty with significant external funding, but more important is that receiving such funding means that our work is consistent with national health, educational, and scientific priorities. There is a historical mindset in our profession that “Counseling Psychology” research is not of interest to funding agencies, which unfortunately continues to some degree today. This needs to change, as I believe that such a mindset is simply not true. Fortunately there seems to be promising signs in this area, particularly among some of the junior scholars in our field who have received significant external awards in recent years. But as a profession in general we must embrace the notion that it is good for our field, and perhaps even necessary for us as a viable scientific discipline, to consider our research questions in light of those issues that are of interest to major federal, state, and foundation funding agencies.

Third, I believe we need to adapt to the changing realities in the manner in which mental health care is delivered. My observation is that many of our programs continue to train their students with a focus on the 50-minute individual therapy hour. I do believe that such training can provide a foundation for good clinical practice, but I suspect the percentage of our graduates employed in clinical settings who spend a meaningful percentage of their time delivering individual therapy in 50 minute increments is decreasing year by year. Telehealth, technology-based interventions, bedside therapy, and brief behavioral interventions are becoming more and more common in healthcare settings, yet I am concerned that many of our students are not even being exposed to such treatment modes, much less developing expertise in the area. As a field I would like to see us be at the forefront of training students to deliver services that are consistent with our ever-changing societal norms and expectations.

As a field we have much to offer and have been at the vanguard of so many important developments: vocational psychology, multicultural issues, process factors in psychotherapy, and social justice, just to name a few. I am proud of what we have done as a field, but I believe that we must evolve and change our professional norms and expectations regarding the way we conceptualize our work and its intended impact.

Again, I am honored to be recognized by the Division as a Fellow in APA, and hope that my brief words spark thought and conversation among my colleagues.