

Profiles

Thomas J. Sweeney: A Visionary Leader and Advocate for the Counseling Profession

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The contributions of Thomas J. Sweeney to the counseling profession through professional leadership and advocacy, scholarship, teaching, and the development of Chi Sigma Iota are chronicled through a personal interview and comments from professional colleagues. Readers are provided with a sense of the depth and breadth of his more than 50 years of dedicated service.

Keywords: Thomas Sweeney, leadership, advocacy, Chi Sigma Iota, counselor identity

Tom is the giant upon whose shoulders we all stand. His vision, passion, courage, and commitment have brought counseling to the forefront of professional excellence. He has been, and continues to be, a hero and role model for me.

—Courtland C. Lee, professor, University of Maryland
(personal communication, December 7, 2012)

Thomas J. Sweeney, PhD, licensed professional clinical counselor-supervisor (Ohio), is a professor emeritus in counselor education in the College of Education at Ohio University and the founding executive director of Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) Counseling Academic and Professional Honor Society International. He has held numerous leadership positions, including president of the American Counseling Association (ACA), president of the South Carolina Personnel and Guidance Association, first chair of the ACA Southern Region, president of the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES), president of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, and founding president of the International Association for Marriage and Family Counseling. He also served as the founding chair of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) during its first 6 years of gaining recognition within the community of accrediting bodies.

Through his commitment and dedication to service, which have been recognized with numerous honors and recognitions, Sweeney has established a reputation over more than 50 years as one of the profession's strongest and most effective leaders and advocates. CSI, ACA, and the Ohio University Counselor Education Program have all

developed awards in his honor. His enduring contributions are seen in his authorship of licensure and accreditation position papers adopted by the ACA Governing Council in 1975 and 1981, respectively, that remain in place today. Through the continuing leadership efforts of many others, these visionary documents have led to the licensure of professional counselors in every state and accreditation of more than 600 counselor education programs nationally.

Sweeney's publications include books, monographs, chapters, nationally distributed educational media, and more than 80 articles in nationally referred journals. He was listed among the top 2%–5% of contributors to ACA's flagship journal, the *Journal of Counseling & Development*, over a span of 15 years (Weinrach, Lustig, Chan, & Thomas, 1998). His book, *Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Practitioner's Approach* (Sweeney, 2009), is now in its fifth edition, and he served as coauthor and editor of a book with Jane E. Myers on their 30 years of work developing assessment instruments, models, and methods for wellness counseling (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Most recently, Sweeney served as an author and coeditor of the CSI-endorsed book *Professional Counseling Excellence Through Leadership and Advocacy* (Chang, Barrio Minton, Dixon, Myers, & Sweeney, 2012).

In this article, we profile Sweeney's efforts working with and through others to achieve the counseling profession's position as a force dedicated to improving the well-being and dignity of all through mutual respect, reason, and responsibility. Sweeney's contributions are too many to detail in this article, so we have elected to describe two threads of his career that to us are the most unique and impressive: his efforts to promote counselor licensure and a unified accreditation body

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(i.e., CACREP), and his establishment and mentoring of the counseling profession's international honor society, CSI. In addition, we draw on his rich professional experiences and seek his vision regarding what is needed for the counseling profession to continue to develop and thrive.

Major Contributions

Advocacy for Counselor Licensure and Counselor Training Program Accreditation

When speaking with Sweeney, it is clear that he is exceptionally passionate and proud of the work that has been done for counselor licensure and counselor training program accreditation. To illustrate the injustices that have fueled his passion for advocacy, we share several stories that demonstrate his experiences with this topic.

Victoria E. Kress (VK) and Casey A. Barrio Minton (CBM): “We have never met anyone as passionate about counselor advocacy as you, Tom. Can you talk about what you see as your most significant advocacy experiences and initiatives?”

Thomas Sweeney (Tom): “I think it all started during my doctoral program in the early 1960s. I learned a number of things that got my attention. One was that my chosen career as a counselor was an occupation, but not yet a profession; we did not meet the criteria to be called a profession. We had an ethical code as guidelines, but no real enforcement. We did not have preparation standards and, of course, there was no accreditation of counselor education programs. There were forms of school counselor certifications in different states, but some required only a few guidance courses and teaching experience. We were unregulated practitioners.

In 1972, I moved back to Ohio, where I learned that a new practice law for psychologists had been passed. In short order, their board aggressively started enforcement actions. They even sent a letter to all universities saying that anyone who taught a course of a psychological nature needed to be licensed by them! According to the psychology board, even as an Adlerian counselor who regularly did public demonstrations of our intervention methods, I was practicing psychology without a license!

At that time, having just moved from South Carolina, I was still president of SACES. I invited the executive directors of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA/ACA) to present with me for a general membership session on the implications of psychologists' licensure efforts nationwide. The APA executive described a well-developed plan by psychologists to establish their practice laws in every state. The APGA/ACA executive director talked about school certification. I shared my thoughts about the implications and the need for the licensure of counselors. During the SACES

business meeting, members asked what ‘we’ were going to do about the psychologists' efforts since it was clear enough that they would impinge on counselors' right to practice. As a consequence, I was asked to chair the first SACES established licensure committee. My SACES presentation was soon published in what is now the *Journal of Counseling & Development* (see Sweeney & Sturdevant, 1974).

In addition to writing the licensure position paper for the ACA Governing Council, I was asked to chair the first APGA/ACA licensure committee. At that time, reports from counselors receiving cease-and-desist orders from boards of psychology really picked up. One southern state attempted to prevent counselors from practicing at all based on the advice of legal counsel that they were not qualified to practice in the mental health arena as were psychologists.

Most students in counseling should know that the first state to license counselors was Virginia (1975). They may even remember the case of *Weldon v. Virginia State Board of Psychologist Examiners* (1972), in which the defense convinced the judge that counseling is a separate profession from psychology and should be regulated as such. The Virginia legislature responded with a new law for counselors. The case that most do not know is that of Dr. Cook. I received a call from APGA/ACA reporting that an Ohio ACA member had been arrested on a felony charge for practicing psychology without a license. I called to investigate before deciding how we might respond.

Dr. Cook reported that he had inquired of the psychology board about his ability to practice prior to being arrested, but received no return messages. He was providing educational and psychological evaluations of children suitable for school placement purposes because school psychologists were not able to keep up with their load. He was summarily arrested and booked just like any criminal! As an upstanding member of his African American church and community, he was mortified when his arrest was published in the local newspaper.

Not only was Dr. Cook a doctoral-prepared counselor but he had postgraduate preparation in advanced psychological testing. His attorney was advising that he plead no contest! That would be tantamount to “guilty”! I met with him and his attorney and they agreed to fight the charge.

Carl Swanson, PhD and JD (VA), and cochair of the ACA Committee on Licensure, subsequently prepared a brief on behalf of ACA for use in court. In this instance, the judge dismissed the case but unfortunately did not make a ruling such as was made in the case of Weldon. My commitment to working on behalf of professional counselors and the counseling profession grew in response to these flagrant efforts to prevent counselors from practicing commensurate with their didactic and supervised preparation.

Through the efforts of our accreditation, credentialing, and licensing movements, counseling is now more than just an occupation; we are a profession. The need for advocacy

is ongoing, however, as there remain those who are trying to restrict the right of counselors to obtain jobs and to practice. As a consequence, there continues to be a need for new, servant-type leaders who understand the profession and lend their talents through leadership roles.”

Certainly, Sweeney has been instrumental in envisioning a future for the counseling profession and establishing professional structures essential for realizing that vision. Perhaps most striking, however, are the ways in which he offers the best of himself to the task and, in so doing, brings out the best in others. As Carol L. Bobby, president and CEO of CACREP noted,

Over the years, Tom moved from being a mentor to me on all things related to CACREP and accreditation to being a valued colleague. I feel that our relationship is one of mutual respect and honesty. When I need an honest opinion about my reactions to ongoing issues in the profession, I know that I can pick up the phone and talk to Tom. One of the things that has made Tom a mover and shaker in the profession is that he makes himself available to others. Somehow he makes you feel like he has all the time in the world for your questions, even though you know with all of his accomplishments that he must be one of the busiest people in the counseling profession. Tom’s biggest gift to the profession has been the giving of his time. (C.L. Bobby, personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Development of Chi Sigma Iota

Despite the far-reaching influences of his professional advocacy work, Sweeney is perhaps best known as the founding executive director of CSI. According to the organization:

CSI is an international honor society that values academic and professional excellence in counseling. We promote a strong professional identity through members (professional counselors, counselor educators, and students) who contribute to the realization of a healthy society by fostering wellness and human dignity. Our mission is to promote scholarship, research, professionalism, leadership, advocacy, and excellence in counseling, and to recognize high attainment in the pursuit of academic and clinical excellence in the profession of counseling. (CSI, 2012, retrieved from csi-net.org)

First founded at Ohio University in 1985, CSI has flourished over the decades. It is through the work of CSI chapters that many aspiring professional counselors first have the opportunity to establish their professional identities and develop critical leadership skills. It is also through chapters that faculty advisors have an opportunity to mentor students in cocurricular leadership experiences.

VK & CBM: “*One of the initiatives for which you are often lauded is the development—in 1985—of Chi Sigma Iota In-*

ternational, counselors’ professional counseling international honor society. Can you speak to the impact that Chi Sigma Iota has had on the counseling profession?”

Tom: “CSI was established at a time when licensure was just beginning to become a reality, when accreditation was in its infancy, and when the national credentialing of counselors had also only just begun. I have been asked why CSI was necessary, and why at that time in our history. The answer for me is easy: There needed to be one professional body that was both a recognition society and an aspirational model to promote excellence in the sole, unified, and undeniably unique profession of professional counseling. I wanted counselors-in-training to have the opportunity to fully understand the uniqueness of *this* profession, and to do that early in their preparation, and to help them establish a firm and unwavering commitment to become the best possible person and the most effective possible practitioner. The needs of a rapidly changing and often difficult world require compassionate and effective practitioners whose goal is to help people experience the benefits of wellness and human dignity.

We have initiated over 90,000 members into CSI. These are individuals who have earned the distinction of excellence in academics with a demonstrated commitment to excellence in all that they do both personally and professionally. In fact, CSI was established on the principle that: (a) all whose motivation is to do good and serve, (b) whose prior academic work is excellent, and (c) whose faculty endorsed them for the qualities needed as a professional counselor should be eligible for membership. We would like to believe that one day all counselor education students will aspire to be members in the society and continue their affiliation after entering the field as professional counselors.

Before excellence was an in-vogue term, our members understood that theirs is a lifelong commitment to a career identity as professional counselors and those whom they serve. CSI serves all counseling specialties, in all settings, and across the life span to promote human dignity and wellness for all. CSI is more than an honor society for academic achievement because it bridges generations and stations in professional life and promotes lifelong excellence in both personal and professional endeavors.

Chi Sigma Iota has over 280 chapters in university counselor education programs, and more chapters are being formed regularly. The vast majority of the chapters are in CACREP-accredited programs. We believe that this is indicative of counselor education programs’ appreciation of the support CSI provides to their program and students. For example, CSI’s distinguished members donate their time to speak at CSI initiations and, in some cases, to offer revenue-generating workshops for the chapter. In addition, CSI has invested over \$1 million in direct funding to its chapters and members since 1985. As a consequence,

CACREP teams report that our chapters help the counselor education programs of which they are a part to meet their national standards. Our chapters, under the mentorship of upwards of 600 chapter faculty advisors, are cocurricular partners to their counselor education programs, not ‘extracurricular.’ Our chapters provide thousands of hours of volunteer service to the university, their programs, and communities. In addition, they contribute thousands of dollars in funds that they raise as well.

We are proud to note that every recent president of ACA, most of its division presidents and leaders, CACREP and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) chairs, and executive officers, as well as our top contributors in publications and research, are CSI members. There was a time when we were pleased to have past presidents of other organizations lend their leadership to CSI. This is still true going forward, but now I think we can say that CSI international, its chapters and its committees, are the preparation experience for many—if not most—new leaders in counseling today. We also recently published the first textbook on counseling excellence in leadership and advocacy addressing the new CACREP standards (see Chang et al., 2012). In sum, I would say CSI is, as others have called it, a critical ‘stakeholder’ in the profession.”

More than anyone in the history of counseling, Tom Sweeney has promoted excellence in the profession and made it an attribute for competent counselors to uphold and encourage. How? Through establishing, sustaining, and growing Chi Sigma Iota since its inception in 1985. Tom has proven to be the goodwill ambassador of quality in counseling through his tireless travels, speeches, and advocacy actions in supporting the merit and value of counselors who strive to reach the highest levels of service to others. Without Tom Sweeney and Chi Sigma Iota, the profession of counseling would not be as appreciated and respected. Tom has made a positive and significant difference in people’s lives and in the life of counseling. —Samuel T. Gladding, professor and chair, Department of Counseling, Wake Forest University (personal communication, January 6, 2013)

A Vision for the Future

There was a time not so long ago that professional counselors were receiving cease-and-desist letters demanding that they stop doing their work, counselor licensure was but a dream, and counselor education programs had no general standard of preparation. We suspect few professional counselors imagined that they would see the level of professional development we have achieved over the last 50 years. Just as our current reality is rooted in the past efforts of professional visionaries, such as Sweeney, our future depends on what we do now, and in the future. In closing, we asked Sweeney to share his vision for the future of professional counseling.

VK & CBM: *Professional counseling has developed tremendously over the course of your career. We have gone from having no counselor licensure, to licensure in every state. We are even seeing states start to move toward requiring accreditation of programs in order for counselors to become licensed. As you think about the past and contemplate our profession’s future, what direction and initiatives do you see as most important in buttressing a strong profession?*

Tom: Perhaps all of us who have participated in professional advocacy efforts since the 1970s wonder *if not now, when* will we do what the vast majority of leaders agree needs done? Chi Sigma Iota held conferences in 1998 with the same types of organizations as 20/20 and derived essentially the same list of priorities and agreements (see csi-net.org/advocacy) also identified by a similar ACA conference in 1990. We know what needs to be done, it is in the “doing” that we fall short.

The first and most obvious need for me is to reconcile the differences between our specialties, and to first and foremost define ourselves as professional counselors. Legislators, policy makers, other professions, and the public can relate to a unified “profession.” Let’s give them what they can understand: one unified voice on common issues of advocacy. I think we all need to understand the particular advocacy issues of our specialties and support each of them on matters particular to their clients, settings, and circumstances. Together, all benefit from such a position of strength.

Second, we need to define professional counseling by its preparation standards. Credentialing bodies can help in this respect by requiring graduation from a program accredited by one national counseling accrediting body and eliminating reference to “related professions” as alternatives to credentialing as counselors. All other established professions have only one definition of their field, and so should we.

Third, counselors need tools to be competent professional advocates. Our counseling efforts for social justice advocacy are a useful place to start. We have had no such collaborative, focused, sustained efforts for *professional* advocacy. We need annual professional stakeholder advocacy conferences; special issues of counseling journals devoted to the myriad of issues related to professional advocacy; major conference keynote session speakers and panels talking about advocacy issues, priorities, and best practices; and ACA-adopted professional advocacy competencies, textbooks, and competency-based practice experiences for those in training.

Finally, more funding for research to support evidence-based practices of counselors is needed. Data that support what we do well can go a long way toward informing the public of what professional counselors can do to advance wellness and human dignity within a global society. It is incumbent upon us to provide these data. We know that what we do works. We need to help others understand this as well.”

Final Observations

Although this article describes Sweeney's career accomplishments, it has only touched on the deep admiration bestowed upon him by his colleagues. His style of leadership has been described as deliberate, thoughtful, and compassionate. He has an uncanny ability to make people feel heard and respected and to make one want to be the best person he or she can be. He also has a way of igniting and nurturing others' passions.

Words by colleagues and students describing Sweeney's leadership range from visionary to caring and compassionate.

I never saw Tom seek leadership for the sake of prestige. Always it was because his colleagues recognized his talents and believed he had the vision and skills to accomplish the goals of the group. His leadership never wavers and his encouragement is motivating until the goals are accomplished. Along the way, his spontaneous sense of humor lightens the day. —J. Melvin Witmer, professor emeritus, Ohio University (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

During our interview process, Sweeney reported that he subscribes to Greenleaf's (1977) observations about servant leaders and the betterment of society. To paraphrase Greenleaf, what can harm our profession is servants who have the potential to lead, but do not lead. In developing this article, our hope is for readers to personally connect with one of our profession's great leaders, and maybe more important, to understand the impact we can all have if we connect with our passion, volunteer to be a servant leader, and maintain a steady vision for success.

... and then there are servant leaders who model what should and can be accomplished. Tom Sweeney is one professional who proves that there is no true leadership without vision and

innovation. Tom's professional life could not be so remarkable unless he had that spark of insight to imagine the profession we have now seen emerge. His vision captured the passion of many leaders who understand parity, excellence, and the realities of politics. He has inspired rising stars and seasoned leaders. We don't often have a leader of leaders to chronicle and to learn from. And, we all owe Tom Sweeney tribute for a major part of counseling's professional ascendance. —Tom Clawson, president and CEO, NBCC (personal communication, December 11, 2012)

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