Sam Gladding offers words of guidance

Periodically, "New Perspectives" gives students and new professionals the opportunity to ask a renowned counselor educator questions about his or her life. In this issue, Samuel T. Gladding, a past president of the American Counseling Association, reflects on his professional journey. Gladding is also a popular author in the counseling profession, an ACA fellow and chair of the Wake Forest University Department of Counseling.

I am a master’s student looking for ideas on how to find and what to look for in a good mentor. What has been your experience with mentorship?
— Master’s Student, Georgia

Sam Gladding: I was fortunate to have a couple of good mentors when I began my career. What I looked for then and what I look for now are as follows. Find someone who is comfortable with you. Otherwise, the process gets stilted and one-sided. There needs to be a real relationship. Second, find someone who is unselfish and wants to help you rather than tell you everything he or she has achieved or sell you a point of view you are uncomfortable with. Third, find someone who listens well as a counselor but has insight into the world of counseling and the world in general and, thus, can guide you as you look into the future.

I am a new master’s counseling student who walked away from corporate America several years ago to follow my calling as a “helper.” However, I am confused about what population I want to work with or my specialty area of interest. How did you decide on your current career path?
— Master’s Student, Michigan

Sam Gladding: In looking at my own career path, I think I evolved. I think that is true for many if not most counselors, especially those who do not have a passion for a particular population or specialty. I began as director of children’s services at a mental health center. I enjoyed the work but found my interests were broader than working with children. My next step was working with families under close supervision. I still do a lot of family work and love it. I then worked with groups. I am still engaged in this activity, along with counseling individuals.

I have not done much with corporations or institutions, at least formally. I think they might be interesting to explore, and since you have a background in this area, you might want to look at this group. The cartoon character Dilbert (inhabits) too many institutional settings. You can help break bad cycles in corporate thinking by working with those who seek to look beyond the bottom line. The important thing, I think, is to realize most crucial decisions in life, such as a career path, are made with both the head and the heart. The poet E.E. Cummings once said: “Feeling comes first.” There is a lot of research to back up the primacy of emotions. Thus, I would trust your gut as well as your knowledge of what you are good at and enjoy.

I am not getting enough out of my graduate program. I am starting my second year. The program is CACREP-accredited and the course work is challenging. However, I don’t believe we are being taught enough clinical skills. I feel like the school expects too much of us in our internship sites. Short of changing schools, what do you recommend that I do to get more out of my time in grad school?
— Master’s Student, Kentucky

Sam Gladding: Based on what you have asked, I would do the following. First, I would ask your professors for more help with increasing your clinical skills. They may not be aware that they are not doing enough or that you want more. Regardless, they may have some resources—for example, films—that can help you see other skilled clinicians at work, or they may expand what they are doing with experiential learning.

Second, I would seek out as much help from your internship supervisor as possible by again letting him or her know that you really want to learn excellent clinical skills and you do not think you are mastering as many skills as you would like. Most times, professors and supervisors are willing to help you learn more and be better.

I would also keep in mind that there is life after graduate school. I did not think I learned as many skills as I needed when I was a student. Thus, on my first job, I asked for more supervision and training than was customary. My clinical director was impressed and offered the help I needed. That was many years ago. I think my clinical skills have continued to develop since that time. Becoming a skilled clinician is a lifelong process. We are always “becoming.” Develop skills now as much as you can, but also realize that you will have opportunities through ACA and elsewhere to hone your skills even further once you are in an agency or educational setting.

I am interested in hearing about a situation in which you had a client from a completely different culture and
My life, my story

To nominate an exceptional student or new professional to be featured in “My life, my story,” email acanewperspectives@yahoo.com.

This month, new professional Michelle Langley is featured as founder of Simple Love, Inc. (simpsimplelove.com), a nonprofit organization focused on ending commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking of women and children.

Age: 41

Current residence: I am from Portland, Ore., but currently live in Brunswick, Ga.

Education: M.A. in clinical mental health counseling from George Fox University

Greatest professional accomplishments: Starting Simple Love Inc., a nonprofit 501(c)(3), less than a year out of school. I was also featured on the Halogen TV network show called Tainted Love speaking for those without a voice, and I consider gaining the trust of the most vulnerable sex industry workers a huge accomplishment.

Biggest professional challenges: Advocating for a change in public perception and establishing policies to protect our children. Simple Love is currently lobbying for a change in Georgia [state] law that would require a “john” caught purchasing sex from an underage girl to register as a sex offender for life.

Words of advice for students: Our profession has so many opportunities for growth and development, so take advantage of offers and follow your passion. If you love what you do, you will make all the difference in the world.

how you worked with that individual.
— Master’s Student, South Carolina

Sam Gladding: One of the first clients I ever had was a 50-year-old African American woman who was married, Catholic and had three adolescent daughters. At the time, I was 26, single, Baptist and a WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant). In other words, our life experiences and worldviews were very different. Rather than try to tell and sell her on what she should do in life regarding her husband and daughters, I asked her to tell me her story. As she did, I tried to listen carefully and pick up facts concerning her difficulties, resources and worldview. I looked for her strengths and made sure she knew I was aware of her assets as well as deficits. To my amazement, she seemed to appreciate what I did.

I have found since that day it is best to be humble in working with people from completely different cultures. It is also important to focus on what individuals have as well as what they lack. Advocacy is also crucial, and helping unite individuals with programs and people that can help them is essential in our work as counselors.

What do you think helped you to reach your current level of success as a counselor educator? — Doctoral Student, Florida

Sam Gladding: I think if I have been successful as a counselor, it is due to a variety of factors. First, I love the profession and my identity as a counselor. Second, I have gotten deeply involved with the American Counseling Association and given my time and talents to as many initiatives within ACA as possible. Third, I am willing to take any job and get my hands dirty. I think it is “in the trenches” where so much of counseling is done, and it is also where much of the fun in the profession is located. Fourth, I believe you succeed by perseverance and that it is not so important who gets the credit as that the job gets done. Finally, I write a little almost every day. It helps me be aware of who I am and what is happening in the world. I can later read and reflect on the words and realize how I am growing or not.

Donjenea L. Fletcher is a student affairs counselor at the University of West Georgia. If you would like to submit a question to be answered in this column or an article detailing the experiences and challenges of being a graduate student or new counseling professional, email acanewperspectives@yahoo.com.

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