



Revisiting 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling

Counseling leaders involved in the strategic planning initiative that launched in 2005 reflect on how the multiyear endeavor helped to forge consensus and moved the profession forward

By Bethany Bray

In the world of ophthalmology, having 20/20 vision means that a person can see the letters on an eye chart clearly and sharply while standing 20 feet away. It is estimated that just 35% of adults have 20/20 vision without the help of glasses or other corrective aids.

Fifteen years ago, leaders from a wide range of counseling organizations embarked on an initiative to bring the profession and its future into sharper focus. Those leaders, representing 31 counseling organizations, met regularly between 2005 and 2013 to identify and forge a vision for the direction the profession of counseling should be heading — into the year 2020 and beyond. The initiative, co-sponsored by the American Counseling Association and the American Association of State Counseling Boards (AASCB), was

ultimately named 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling.

What organizers initially intended to be a two-year endeavor stretched into eight years. Not surprisingly, the participants weren't always in agreement, but simply having delegates from 30-plus counseling organizations — representing a broad range of specialty focuses and passions — in the same room was a watershed moment for the profession.

"The adage about herding cats applies here, but these cats were all dedicated professionals passionate about consensus building; seemingly disparate cats whose visions would contribute immeasurably to the establishment of a unified profession," says Kurt L. Kraus, who facilitated 20/20 in the latter years of the initiative, succeeding Samuel T. Gladding, a past president of ACA.

“Prior to the work of the 20/20 [initiative], I believe that all of our partner organizations had worked tirelessly to establish themselves as free-standing and supporting pillars in a warehouse of counseling and related fields. But the project asked delegates and their organizations to look at the house as a whole,” Kraus says. “It was time in our evolution to answer the question of *are we a profession?* And the answer was a resounding ‘yes.’”

Steps toward unity

The 20/20 initiative was born out of a conversation focused on the future of the counseling profession that leaders from ACA and AASCB had over breakfast at ACA’s 2005 Conference & Expo in Atlanta. The group, which included the presidents, presidents-elect and presidents-elect-elect of both ACA and AASCB, in addition to David Kaplan, then ACA’s chief professional officer, eventually was established as the oversight committee for the initiative.

Kaplan recalls Gladding and Kraus as “world-class” facilitators who “knew just when to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Kaplan also gives credit to Gladding for coming up with the 20/20 title for the initiative.

The initiative got into full swing at the ACA 2006 Conference & Expo in Montréal. Gladding brought the first full meeting to order with delegates attending from each of the participating organizations. Lynn Linde, who is today ACA’s chief knowledge and learning officer, remembers the energy and buzz that filled the room as delegates took their seats.

“There was a sense of excitement that we were doing something historic — and confusion on how we were going to get there. ... It was overwhelming but also exciting. The counseling profession had needed this, [had] talked about this, for a long time,” recalls Linde, who initially served as a 20/20 delegate for ACA’s Southern Region before joining the oversight committee as ACA president-elect and ACA president (2009-2010).

Across years of work and countless hours of discussion, the 20/20 initiative yielded several major accomplishments, the first of which was a document titled

Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession.

Created and unanimously approved by the delegates as the project’s first milestone, the principles document identified seven critical areas that needed attention from the counseling profession:

- ❖ Strengthening identity
- ❖ Presenting ourselves as one profession
- ❖ Improving public perception/ recognition and advocating for professional issues
- ❖ Creating licensure portability
- ❖ Expanding and promoting the research base of professional counseling
- ❖ Focusing on students and prospective students
- ❖ Promoting client welfare and advocacy

When the delegates took the document back to their respective organizations, just one declined to endorse it: the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).

The creation and ratification of the principles document was historic, Kaplan says, because it marked the first time nearly all of the major stakeholders in the field recognized and acknowledged that they were part of one unified profession: the profession of counseling.

“Counseling organizations have tended to operate as a loose federation, with each tending to their specific focus. The *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession* was the first time in history that professional counseling’s membership, training and certification organizations put in writing that they shared a common professional identity and are all part of a single profession,” explains Kaplan, an ACA past president (2002-2003) who retired in 2019 after 15 years on staff at the association. “The *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession* acted as a catalyst for the change of status from ACA division to independent organization for both the American School Counselor Association and the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA). While the ASCA and AMHCA affiliation status change caused disruption ... it was a healthy development for both the organizations and the counseling profession, as this was an acknowledgment of an evolution that

had been occurring for many years.”

Adds ACA President-Elect S. Kent Butler, who served as a 20/20 delegate for the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD), “It was important to go through [the 20/20 process] so that counselors could unify and find one voice that we all could champion and use to successfully push our profession forward. The takeaway for me is the bonding that occurred, though contentious at times, because we were in this mission together. Across the 31 organizations involved, I was also able to build strong professional relationships with many of the delegates.”

Finding consensus

After participating organizations endorsed the 20/20 principles document, focused effort was put toward addressing two of the critical areas identified in the document: solidifying professional identity and forging a path toward licensure portability, or the ability for counselors to transfer their professional license when moving from one state to another.

One of the primary ways the delegates sought to strengthen professional identity was by developing a unified definition of counseling. The definition was meant to be an “elevator pitch,” something succinct that would easily explain what counselors do to the public and to other helping professionals. Ultimately, the 20/20 delegates reached consensus in 2010 on a one-sentence statement: “Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals.”

“It was important that we define counseling and the principles on which it is built and not have outside groups try to define it for us,” Gladding says. “It was also crucial to establish that although counseling is diverse, there is a common core. As Maya Angelou writes in her poem ‘Human Family,’ ‘We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.’”

ACA Past President Bradley T. Erford counts creation of a consensus definition of counseling as being among the initiative’s most meaningful achievements. “I am fond of saying that

it took 31 counseling professionals 24 months to agree on a 21-word definition of counseling. But we did,” he says. “20/20 was a coming-of-age event in the counseling profession. We needed consensus on some of the most pressing issues of the day, including licensure requirements and professional identity.”

Erford initially served for six years as a 20/20 delegate for the Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling (AARC) before moving onto the oversight committee when he became ACA president-elect and president (2012-2013).

Lack of portability has been a long-standing problem in the counseling profession, in large part because license requirements vary widely. License requirements for counselors were set up state by state over a period of decades — beginning with Virginia in 1976 and ending with California in 2009 — as the profession matured and pushed to establish itself. But in the process, significant disparities arose between counselor licenses across the United States, from the number of supervision hours required to obtain a license to the license titles themselves.

The 20/20 delegates hoped to spark movement toward license portability by developing and gaining support for a single overarching scope of practice for the profession and a single preferred license title. Both ideas emerged out of a subinitiative of 20/20 called the Building Blocks to Portability Project.

“We wanted to get to the heart of who are we as a profession, our professional identity. We spent hours locked in that room talking about this,” Linde recalls. “Everyone was amazed that we got there, that we trusted the process and were actually able to [reach consensus].”

The 20/20 delegates finalized the consensus licensure title — choosing *licensed professional counselor* (LPC) — and scope of practice in March 2013. (Turn to page 39 for the full text of the 20/20 scope of practice, a five-paragraph job description that defines the work of professional counselors.) Both items were recommended for use to state licensing boards across the United States in a letter co-written by the leadership of ACA and

Find out more

Additional details about the 20/20 initiative, its participants and accomplishments are available on the ACA website at tinyurl.com/2020InitiativeACA.

In addition, the project generated three *Journal of Counseling & Development* articles (ACA members have electronic access):

- ❖ Summer 2011 issue: “A Vision for the Future of Counseling: The 20/20 Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession,” by David M. Kaplan & Samuel T. Gladding

- ❖ July 2014 issue: “20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling: The New Consensus Definition of Counseling,” by David M. Kaplan, Vilija M. Tarvydas & Samuel T. Gladding

- ❖ April 2018 issue: “Building Blocks to Portability: Culmination of the 20/20 Initiative,” David M. Kaplan & Kurt L. Kraus

AASCB and sent in the summer of 2015.

The 20/20 delegates also debated but ultimately weren’t able to reach consensus on a third piece of the Building Blocks to Portability Project: uniform education requirements for licensure. Even so, as a whole, the 20/20 initiative stands as a large-scale success that moved the counseling profession forward and made it much better prepared to meet subsequent challenges.

“Until 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling, we allowed external forces to define what we could do,” Kaplan says. “Apart from the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE) training standards, this was the first time in history that the counseling profession told the world what our skill set is. As with the consensus licensure title, having one scope of practice promoted by professional counseling to licensure boards helps solidify counselor identity, leads to licensure portability,

reduces confusion among the public, and facilitates needed legislation. [This initiative] was the mark of a profession that had reached maturity. Until 20/20, the counseling profession had focused on being reactive and responding to how others defined us — particularly psychology. ... [The 20/20 initiative] was the first time in history that all of the two-dozen-plus stakeholders within counseling worked together for a sustained period of time to develop a road map for the advancement of our profession.”

A lasting legacy

In January 2019, ACA signed a contract with the Council of State Governments’ National Center for Interstate Compacts, embarking on a multiyear project to develop an interstate compact focused on counselor licensure portability. The project is still in the early stages, but its ultimate goal is to create a compact that states could adopt to accept the credentials of professional counselors who are licensed in another state. Individual state licensing boards would be allowed to impose additional requirements such as a jurisprudence exam or an FBI background check, but the compact could keep counselors from having to apply for a new license — in some cases, starting over virtually from scratch — when they move across state lines.

Getting this project off the ground has been made easier by the foundation built by the 20/20 initiative, says Linde, who serves as ACA’s staff liaison to the interstate compact for portability project. She notes that the cohort is using LPC, the 20/20 consensus licensure title, in its work.

“The 20/20 project made it much easier for the compact project to come to an agreement on who we are and what we do. We didn’t have to rehash years of work. It made it easier to get started and look at other issues around portability,” Linde says.

Kaplan agrees, saying that the 20/20 initiative “provided both background and energy for ACA’s national interstate compact project. Many ACA Governing Council members referenced 20/20 when

they approved the substantial amount of money needed to fund this project. If all goes as planned, the interstate compact will go a long way toward solving both our long-standing licensure portability and cybercounseling [telebehavioral health] problems.”

(For more details about the compact project, search for the article “Interstate compact plan provides hope for licensure portability” at ct.counseling.org.)

20/20: In their own words

Counseling Today reached out to some of those who participated in 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling to reflect on the lasting impact of the initiative.

Now that the 20/20 initiative is in the rearview mirror, what reflections would you like to share?

“The elegant premise that change begets change is so visible when we look back at where we were to where we now are. ... I remember approaching my role as facilitator — not to mention how daunting that role felt following Sam Gladding *and* being asked by the oversight committee to bring this ‘two-year project’ to conclusion before we actually reached 2020 — as that of an orchestra conductor. The 30-plus people gathered together were each soloists, and my task was to help them coalesce into an ensemble — an apt analogy for the mission of the project actually.

“The delegates had to see themselves as a cohesive group who could practice together only briefly before the individual members would travel back to their home symphonies to play. Home, they then had to present this vision for the future of counseling to their organizations/affiliations in order to garner 90% agreement [the majority needed for consensus approval during 20/20] and adoption. Conducting was an honor for me.” — **Kurt L. Kraus, LPC, 20/20 facilitator and professor and director of the doctoral program in the Department of Counseling at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania**



Thirty-one counseling organizations participated in the 20/20 initiative. This photo, courtesy of Samuel T. Gladding (kneeling at center), shows some of the delegates and other stakeholders who took part in the first full meeting in 2006 in Montréal during the ACA Conference.

“I’d like to emphasize that everybody — all 31 organizations — had the ability to be heard, and every voice carried weight. No one voice was more important than somebody else’s.

“Sometimes I see the [20/20] definition of counseling on someone’s email signature, and it makes me feel that we really did make an impact. It’s in textbooks, and we have a whole group of counselors out there who were trained using this definition. I have had those elevator speeches with people. It’s nice to have some prepackaged words to be able to answer the question, ‘What do you do?’” — **Lynn Linde, past president of ACA and current chief knowledge and learning officer**

Why was it important to go through the process of 20/20?

“In some instances, our profession was being left out of important legislative initiatives, insurance reimbursements and recognition of the efficacy of counseling due to our fragmentation as a profession. Bringing together all the players [the 31 participating organizations] allowed us to begin to speak with one voice to the public and government. More than this, it allowed us to break down fences between us and make the connections necessary to value each other’s contributions to the profession.” — **Perry C. Francis, LPC, 20/20 delegate for the American**

College Counseling Association and professor and counseling training clinic coordinator at Eastern Michigan University

Now that we’re in the year 2020, do you feel the project hit the mark?

“Yes and no. Yes: We are seeing the fruits of our labor begin to take root as licensure laws are rewritten, cooperation between organizations increases, and the counseling profession is expanding into previously denied territory. CACREP and CORE eventually merged in part due to the 20/20 process.

“No: What I hoped would be quicker progress and greater unity has not come to fruition. For example, we are still fighting for reimbursement with Medicare, and the process of getting counselors hired into the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs systems is painfully slow. By the time we got to the end of the 20/20 process, many of the leaders moved on to other issues, and the momentum lessened.” — **Perry C. Francis**



“We completed the tasks that were possible to complete at the time. I was proud of our decision to end the project when we did because the work truly didn’t end then. Like a therapeutic goal that can’t fully be assessed as met,

or unmet, from in the office, we had to let go, be patient and watch to see how the vision of the profession of counseling would be operationalized, to fully emerge in real time. In 2020, I have smiled every time I read some reference to the work done by everyone involved in the project. It was a cast of hundreds.

“The results are visible, the references to our work are plentiful, and the process resulted in a host of next steps. Inherent in the evolution of a profession is change — the work left undone arises from the work accomplished. As our profession is rooted in humanity and all of its complexities, it is probably safe to say our work will always be undone.”
— **Kurt L. Kraus**

What do you feel was accomplished by the 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling initiative?

“We have had several positive things happen during the last few years. First and foremost, all 50 states now have [counselor] licensure, the last one being California. Another advancement was the communication between states. There were times when states did not communicate with each other. Some states were more exclusive rather than inclusive. Now, there seems to be more acceptance between states.

“Another accomplishment is the uniformity of state requirements. More states are complying with the stricter requirements, such as requiring 60 hours in a degree program. ... As one person put it, [prior to 20/20,] going from state to state was more like going from one country to another.”
— **Charles Gagnon, an LPC and supervisor, member of the 20/20 Oversight Committee and AASCB past president**

“The project brought counseling groups together in a way that was nonpolitical and altruistic. We were all working for the good of the profession in what it could be. There were some disagreements, but there was [also] a lot of harmony, and when delegates were not together on a point, they worked constructively to reach consensus. I have never been in a better group in my life. It was a lot of hard work, but it was worth it.

“I wish we could have accomplished more, but given that we met in person only once a year, we did well, and the profession of counseling is better and stronger, I believe, for 20/20.

“20/20 was a proactive project. Too often, counseling has been reactive. 20/20 changed the mindset and made efficacy even more important professionally. I think the spillover from 20/20 continues.” — **Samuel T. Gladding, 20/20 facilitator, ACA past president and a professor of counseling at Wake Forest University**

“The project has yielded many things. For one, the consensus definition for counseling, which has helped in our quest to unify our profession. I believe that the project was also a slowly evolving start to conversations surrounding inclusion. This may have been undergirded in our conversations about unifying the profession.

“While it is many years later, [it is] funny how in 2020 we are able to engage in conversations that actually matter as they relate to unity. I stated in the past that there was quite possibly a breakthrough in which it seemed we ‘gave ourselves permission to engage in enriching conversations that will further unify our counseling community.’ I was able to chair a task force a couple of years back that provided a template for engaging in difficult dialogues. Amazingly, the current pandemic has forced our hand,

Remembering J. Barry Mascari

Any mention of the 20/20 initiative would be remiss without acknowledging the important contributions of J. Barry Mascari, who passed away in May at age 71. Mascari was a part of the initiative from its start in 2005, participating in initial discussions and planning sessions as AASCB president-elect-elect. He remained closely involved throughout the entirety of the 20/20 initiative.

“Barry will always be known as the father of 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling,” says David Kaplan, ACA staff administrative coordinator for 20/20. “It was his brainchild, and he willed it into existence. Barry

is greatly missed, but his legacy in catalyzing the growth of the counseling profession continues on.”

At the time of Mascari’s passing, ACA CEO Richard Yep acknowledged how instrumental he had been to the 20/20 project, as well as to numerous other advances in the profession, including co-authoring the counselor licensure law in New Jersey.

“His [Mascari’s] tireless work to advance licensure portability, mentor his students, and advocate on behalf of the profession was in part what led to his 2019 selection as an ACA Fellow,” Yep said.

Mascari, a licensed professional counselor and counselor educator at Kean University



in Union, New Jersey, was co-author with his wife, Jane M. Webber, of the book *Disaster Mental Health Counseling: A Guide to Preparing and Responding*, published by the ACA Foundation.

and we are courageously engaging in that process now.

“Lastly, while we are not where we want to be in the battle for portability, we are strategically making progress in bringing this concept to fruition with our pursuance of an interstate compact. The vision gave us flexibility perhaps to find alternative ways to support counselors seeking to move or start a practice in another state.” — **S. Kent Butler, ACA president-elect, 20/20 delegate for AMCD, and interim chief equity, inclusion and diversity officer and a professor of counselor education at the University of Central Florida**

What work is left undone?

“The only thing on which 90% consensus was not reached [during 20/20] was educational requirements because CACREP and CORE had not yet merged. If we had extended the task force two more years, I believe adoption of the CACREP standards would have passed by consensus.

“There are many additional counseling issues that have been percolating under the surface for a number of years that a new multiorganizational task force should tackle. And many of these issues are international in scope. I suggested creation of a multinational task group [while I was ACA president] to address international counseling issues and priorities, [but it] never got prioritized.” — **Bradley T. Erford, ACA past president, 20/20 delegate for AARC and member of the 20/20 Oversight Committee; director and professor in the counseling program at Peabody College at Vanderbilt University**

“The profession of counseling is always changing, and so there is more to be done. Certainly, getting counselors to be considered core mental health providers and reimbursed by the military, the government and insurance companies is a next and continuous major step.” — **Samuel T. Gladding**

20/20 Scope of Practice for Professional Counseling

The independent practice of counseling encompasses the provision of professional counseling services to individuals, groups, families, couples and organizations through the application of accepted and established mental health counseling principles, methods, procedures and ethics.

Counseling promotes mental health wellness, which includes the achievement of social, career and emotional development across the life span, as well as preventing and treating mental disorders and providing crisis intervention.

Counseling includes, but is not limited to, psychotherapy, diagnosis, evaluation; administration of assessments, tests and appraisals; referral; and the establishment of counseling plans for the treatment of individuals, couples, groups and families with emotional, mental, addiction and physical disorders.

Counseling encompasses consultation and program evaluation, program administration within and to schools and organizations, and training and supervision of interns, trainees and pre-licensed professional counselors through accepted and established principles, methods, procedures and ethics of counselor supervision.

The practice of counseling does not include functions or practices that are not within the professional's training or education.

points in the *Principles for Unifying and Strengthening the Profession*]: developing an undergraduate major in counseling. Unlike other helping professions such as psychology and social work, professional counseling does not have any feeder programs. As a result, our students find us by happenstance. Many undergraduates who would thoroughly enjoy a career in professional counseling and would greatly benefit the clients they serve never hear about our programs. Exactly what an undergraduate major in counseling looks like and how it is implemented is for a future planning process that focuses on the counseling profession in 2030 and beyond.” — **David Kaplan, 20/20 administrative coordinator and retired ACA chief professional officer**



“I believe the profession needs to really embrace the momentum that has begun around dismantling systemic racism. To be true to our code of ethics, we must consciously and consistently make sure that professional counselors do no harm. A very important addition to our next go-around at strategic planning needs to be deliberate attempts to make our profession more inclusive, especially within every level of leadership across every ACA entity.

“Each of us is accountable and should be beacons for our students and colleagues, ensuring that they are adequately trained and/or held accountable for the work that they do with their clients. ... We also must be accountable to society and work to break down barriers that prevent equity for all.” — **S. Kent Butler ♦**

What's next? Do you think the counseling profession should begin some kind of new strategic planning project to continue this work?

“One idea that has been tossed around for future strategic planning is in the area of focusing on prospective students [one of the seven

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