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# At a Crossroads: Improving Counselor Training in Spirituality and Religion

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## Abstract

Spirituality and religion are considered components of wellness, important factors in counseling, and associated with improved mental health outcomes (Brown et al., 2013; Dixon & Wilcox, 2016; Kyle, 2013; Myers et al., 2007). The 2016 CACREP standards and the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies also highlight the need for counselors to be equipped to address clients' spiritual and religious concerns (ASERVIC, 2009; CACREP, 2015). However, some counselor education programs insufficiently prepare counseling trainees to integrate spirituality and religious practices into sessions with clients (Dailey et al., 2015; Dobmeier & Renier, 2012; Henriksen et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2019). This article reviews spirituality and religion and their relevancy for counseling and wellness, discusses the 2024 proposed CACREP standards, examines counselor education programs, and provides recommendations for CACREP and counselor education programs to address the deficiencies in counselors' spiritual training.

## Keywords

spirituality – religion – wellness – CACREP – ASERVIC – counselor education

Counselors are instructed to operate from a multicultural lens and to understand the intersectionality of their clients, which includes spirituality and religion (Sue et al., 2019). According to the professional literature, spirituality and

religion are not adequately addressed in some counselor training programs (Dailey et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2015; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Pearce et al., 2019; Souza, 2002; Troyano-Vazquez, 2005). Scholars assert that competence in spirituality and religion is necessary for counseling trainees to provide services that appropriately and ethically address clients' spiritual and religious concerns (Adams et al., 2015; Dailey et al., 2015; Junfei et al., 2020). Attending to clients' spiritual and religious concerns has been made necessary across different areas within the counseling profession, including career counseling (Bloch, 2004), mental health counseling (Brown et al., 2013; Dixon & Wilcox, 2016; Kyle, 2013; Nichols & Hunt, 2011), and school counseling (Sink & Devlin, 2011; Yocum et al., 2015). In the 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards, spirituality is mentioned two times. The CACREP standards highlight spirituality as a component of one's culture, and standard 2.F.2.g states that the counseling curriculum of CACREP counseling programs is to educate trainees on the "impact of spiritual beliefs on clients' and counselors' worldviews" (CACREP, 2015). Spirituality is also mentioned within the Addictions Counseling section, which advises counselors to understand "the role of wellness and spirituality in the recovery process" (CACREP, 2015).

In the 2024 proposed revision of the CACREP standards, spirituality is no longer mentioned in standard 2.F.2.g., nor within the Addictions Counseling section. Spirituality is now mentioned in standard 3.2.k, which instructs counselors to understand "the role of religion and spirituality in clients' and counselors' psychological functioning" (CACREP, 2023). Contrarily, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) asserts that counselors should possess 14 spiritual competencies to properly address clients' spiritual and religious concerns (ASERVIC, 2009), extending beyond what is mentioned in the CACREP standards. This difference may suggest that more standards on spirituality and religion are needed within the 2024 proposed CACREP standards to ensure that counseling trainees receive adequate training to address their clients' spiritual and religious needs. Additionally, many counseling trainees report insufficient training and a lack of competence in implementing spirituality and religious practices into their work with clients (Dailey et al., 2015; Dobmeier & Renier, 2012; Henriksen et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2019), which may further indicate the need for more standards on spirituality and religion.

## Spirituality and Religion as Components of Wellness

Spirituality and religion have been identified as components of wellness within the professional literature in the past and present. For example, the definition of wellness has progressed to become more holistic and comprised of all areas of the human experience, including the spiritual (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Wellness is described in the American Counseling Association Encyclopedia of Counseling as “a state of positive well-being in which the body, mind, and spirit are integrated” (Myers, 2009, p. 563). Corey (2006) agreed when he noted “effective counseling addresses the body, mind, and spirit” (p. 117). Myers and Willard (2003) also noted spirituality and religion as resources that promote wellness and assist clients in maintaining it. Spirituality and religion are associated with resiliency in coping with stressful events and have been linked to survival, tolerance of pain, feelings of health and hope, and optimum well-being (Corey, 2006; George et al., 2000; Myers & Sweeney, 2007). Scholars have noted that wellness has been deemed an important feature of the counseling field’s identity, which differentiates it from other professions within the mental health field (Bohecker et al., 2017; Chi Sigma Iota, n.d.; Gladding, 2013). Spirituality and religion are also relevant among Americans and are topics that are relied upon during crises and in times of need (Becker, 2009; Myers & Willard, 2003). Spirituality and religion also improve mental health outcomes (Brown et al., 2013; Dixon & Wilcox, 2016; Kyle, 2013). Koenig (2015) completed a review of more than 3,000 studies and found that physical, behavioral, and mental health were positively associated with religious involvement.

According to poll and survey results, between 80-90% of individuals in America believe in a higher power or God, 77% of adults report religious affiliation, and individuals who define themselves as religious possess better well-being than those who do not (Gallup, 2023; Newport, 2011; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015). Around the world, religion is also important, with more than 80 countries ascribing to a specific religion, such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism (Pew Research Center, 2017). In addition, Sue et al. (2019) reported that non-western indigenous forms of healing in countries such as Sudan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia take a holistic approach to wellness through the belief that mind, matter, and spirit are unified, and they use religious houses and read the Quran to aid in the healing process. Pearce et al. (2015) demonstrated that, clinical outcomes can be improved by incorporating clients’ spirituality and religion into the treatment process. Diallo (2013) also found that spirituality and religion are topics that clients want to discuss in counseling, which helps them to conceptualize their problems. More recent studies describe spirituality and religion as essential to

life, sources of strength that lead to overall wellness, and tools for managing work pressure (Del Castillo et al., 2023; Tanner et al., 2022; Zou et al., 2020).

As spirituality and religion have remained essential to wellness and are viewed as components of one's culture, counselors are expected to possess multicultural counseling competencies to manage clients' spiritual and religious needs (Sue et al., 2019). However, a limited number of CACREP counselor education programs incorporate spirituality and religion content in their programs (Cashwell & Young, 2004; Currier et al., 2023; Koenig-Nelson, 2021; Young et al., 2002). In turn, some graduates of counselor education programs enter the profession with inadequate training and lack the confidence to handle the spiritual and religious needs of their clients (Dailey et al., 2015; Dobmeier & Reiner, 2012; Henriksen et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2019; Souza, 2002; Troyano-Vazquez, 2005). The goals of this proposal are to inform readers of the training issues within counselor education programs as it pertains to competency in spirituality and religion, to suggest that CACREP counselor education programs may need more curriculum content on spirituality and religion to prepare counselors to serve clients with spiritual and religious needs, and to advocate for more standards on spirituality and religion in the proposed 2024 CACREP standards.

### Defining Spirituality and Religion

If counselors hope to address the spiritual and religious concerns of clients effectively, it is recommended to understand the difference between the two concepts (ASERVIC, 2009; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013). ASERVIC (n.d.-a) provides a starting point for counselors by defining spirituality as:

A capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons. This spiritual tendency moves the individual toward knowledge, love, meaning, peace, hope, transcendence, connectedness, compassion, wellness, and wholeness. Spirituality includes one's capacity for creativity, growth, and the development of a value system, and encompasses a variety of phenomena, including experiences, beliefs, and practices. Spirituality is approached from a variety of perspectives, including psychospiritual, religious, and transpersonal. While spirituality is usually expressed through culture, it both precedes and transcends culture. (para.1)

Although one may express spirituality through religion, it is different from religion. ASERVIC provides its definition of religion but also draws from Corbett (1990) to better explain the concept, defining it as "an integrated system of belief,

lifestyle, ritual activities, and institutions by which individuals give meaning to or find meaning in their lives by orienting them to what is taken to be holy, or the highest value” (p. 2). In addition: “Religion can be thought of as the organization of belief which is common to a culture or subculture” (ASERVIC, n.d.-a). The definitions provided by Corbett (1990) and ASERVIC (n.d.-a) help distinguish religion from spirituality, a skill counselors should possess, especially when assessing clients’ presenting problems. Many times, clients seek therapy due to concerns that are related to their spiritual or religious values (Harris et al., 2016). However, a spiritual concern may differ from a religious concern, so the terms are not interchangeable (Junfei, 2020). Counselors are challenged to be competent in working with these values if they hope to effectively address clients’ spiritual and religious concerns in assessment and treatment (Corey, 2006). Distinguishing spirituality from religion is an area of spiritual competency within the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (ASERVIC, 2009) and an important step toward understanding the client’s spiritual or religious needs. The following sections highlight a theoretical model and the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies framework mentioned previously, which help to further establish the importance of spirituality and religion in counseling to promote holistic wellness.

## Conceptual Foundations

### *The Wheel of Wellness Model*

Centered on the concept of holism proposed by Adlerian Individual Psychology, The Wheel of Wellness was developed by Sweeney and Witmer as a theoretical model for holistic wellness to encourage optimum health across the lifespan (Myers et al., 2000; Sweeney & Witmer, 1991; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). The concept of holism, which stresses understanding the whole person (Corey, 2017), suggests that people are best understood through all aspects of their lives, including their social contexts, rather than in parts (Carlson & Johnson, 2016). In this holistic wellness model, wellness is defined as:

A way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being, in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully within the human and natural community. Ideally, it is the optimum state of health and well-being that each individual is capable of achieving.

MYERS ET AL., 2000, p. 252

The Wheel of Wellness includes several spokes within the wheel representing life tasks and sub-tasks that collectively lead to holistic wellness (Myers et al.,

2000; Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Five main life tasks are identified within the model: love, work and leisure, friendship, self-direction, and spirituality (Myers et al., 2000). Spirituality, identified as life's first task, lies within the center of the wheel and is deemed the "most important characteristic of well-being" (Myers et al., 2007, p.1). The starting point for all life tasks is spirituality, which is viewed as the force that provides an individual with feelings of wholeness (Myers et al., 2000).

Spirituality at the center of wellness has been historically supported in the professional literature. Chandler et al. (1992) noted spirituality as the origin of all areas of wellness. Likewise, Cashwell et al. (2007) proposed spirituality as a vital component of wellness. Early on, Mosak and Dreikurs (1967) supported spirituality being at the forefront of life tasks because they believed spiritual tasks were fundamental aspects of life. Furthermore, Moe et al. (2012) supported the idea of holistic wellness that includes the spiritual component and suggested that treatment planning and case conceptualization be approached from a holistic wellness stance. Although the above literature is dated, including it within this proposal demonstrates the long-withstanding history of spirituality as the source for wellness. Within group and individual counseling spaces, the Wheel of Wellness model has been used effectively to assess wellness and guide counselors as they incorporate wellness interventions into sessions with clients (Myers & Sweeney, 2007). This theoretical model demonstrates the relevancy of spirituality in holistic wellness. Like the Wheel of Wellness, the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies are discussed further to highlight the importance of spirituality and religion in counseling.

### *ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies*

ASERVIC is: "an organization of counselors and human development professionals who believe that spiritual, ethical, and religious values are essential to the overall development of the person" (ASERVIC, n.d.-a, para 1.). This American Counseling Association (ACA) division adopted 14 spiritual competencies as a framework to help prepare counselors to work with clients with spiritual and religious needs (ASERVIC, 2009). The ACA outlined the 14 competencies within six topics: assessment, counselor self-awareness, communication, human and spiritual development, diagnosis and treatment, and culture and worldview. These competencies provide clear and specific instruction on the knowledge and skills necessary to assist counselors in incorporating spirituality and religion interventions in counseling. According to the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies, counselors should understand the different world religions, recognize how spirituality and religious beliefs shape the client's worldview, reflect on their own spirituality and religious beliefs, distinguish spirituality

from religion, use religious and spiritual practices as necessary, and assess the client's spiritual and religious values during intake sessions (ASERVIC, 2009).

The ACA's affirmation of these spiritual competencies (Dailey et al., 2015; Miller, 1999) aligns with the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics, which mentions spirituality and religion. In the Multicultural Issues/Diversity in Assessment section, ethical standard E.8. directs counselors to think about the spirituality and religion of clients when conducting assessments (ACA, 2014). Considering that counselors are expected to follow the ACA Code of Ethics, it appears as if counselors must be competent in spirituality and religion concerns as they pertain to assessing clients. These spiritual competencies have also been used within some counselor training programs. Hagedorn and Gutierrez (2009) noted the successful use of these spiritual competencies in counseling training courses for addictions, family, multiculturalism, and ethical issues. Schweiger et al. (2017), who examined the spiritual competency of students upon completion of a spirituality course in counseling, which used the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies as a framework for lessons, found an increase in students' spiritual competency. The content of the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies, spirituality and religion components found in the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics, and related findings reported in the professional literature suggests the effectiveness of the spiritual competencies in counselor training programs and illustrates the growing need for counselors to be prepared to address the spiritual and religion needs of clients. However, although the counseling profession has endorsed the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (Dailey et al., 2015; Miller, 1999), there is limited information on how program faculty are integrating these competencies into counselor education programs. In addition, these competencies do not appear to be incorporated into the curriculum outlined within the CACREP standards.

### **Enhancing Presence of Spirituality and Religion in the CACREP Standards**

#### ***CACREP***

CACREP, which serves as the accrediting body for counseling programs within the United States, has developed standards to address the diverse needs of society to prepare counseling trainees to provide services that promote the ideal development of clients (CACREP, n.d.). This places CACREP in a position of power within the counseling profession as the organization establishing curriculum guidelines for counselor education programs. In the current CACREP standard 2.F.2.g, counseling trainees are expected to understand how spiritual

values may influence the worldviews of clients and counselors (CACREP, 2015). Additionally, spirituality and religion have been viewed as important to wellness and one's culture within the CACREP standards. For instance, the spirit was deemed a component of wellness, and spirituality and religion are also highlighted within the term multicultural in the CACREP glossary. CACREP (2009) defined wellness as "a culturally defined state of being in which mind, body, and spirit are integrated in a way that enables a person to live a fulfilled life" (p. 69). Multicultural is "a term denoting the diversity of racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage, socioeconomic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, and religious and spiritual beliefs, as well as physical, emotional, and mental abilities" (CACREP, 2009, p. 67).

Correspondingly, the term spirituality was also included in the glossary and defined as "a sense of a relationship with or belief in a higher power or entity greater than oneself that involves a search for wholeness and harmony" (CACREP, 2009, p. 69). However, CACREP no longer defines wellness and spirituality in their current glossary. In the proposed 2024 CACREP standards, the term spiritual has been removed from standard 2.F.2.g, and spirituality is no longer mentioned within the addictions counseling section. Spirituality and religion are mentioned in standard 3.2.k, which instructs counselors to understand "the role of religion and spirituality in clients' and counselors' psychological functioning" (CACREP, 2023). The previous and current 2016 CACREP standards address all components believed to lead to wellness of the mind, body, and spirit. The removal of wellness and spirituality from the CACREP glossary, standard 2.F.2.g, and the addictions counseling section suggests an inconsistency between CACREP's former idea of holistic wellness and the changes within the 2024 proposed standards. It appears uncertain where spirituality and religion fit into the counselor education programs' curriculum. The potential loss of an important resource for counseling trainees and clients seems significant.

Although the current CACREP standards mention spirituality as it pertains to one's culture in the Social and Cultural Diversity section (CACREP, 2015), the organization has not established clear guidelines within the standards on how spirituality and religion content could be integrated into the curriculum of counselor education programs. In addition, some counselor educators have expressed barriers to integrating spirituality and religion into counselor education programs, including a lack of clear training guidelines (Adams et al., 2015). Alternatively, the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies detail the skills and knowledge counselors should possess about religion and spirituality, and strategies are also provided for counselors to implement spirituality and religion into their work with clients (ASERVIC, 2009). In comparing CACREP's standard on



spirituality and religion to the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies, there seems to be inconsistency regarding the knowledge counselors should possess to address clients' spiritual and religious issues properly.

The professional literature asserts that counselor education programs are influenced by the CACREP standards and are essential to the development of competent counselors (Bohecker et al., 2017; Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009; Mascari & Webber, 2013; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014). However, some graduates of counselor education programs have reported dissatisfaction with the spirituality and religion training they received and a lack of competence in addressing spirituality and religion concerns with clients (Dailey et al., 2015; Dobmeier & Reiner, 2012; Henriksen et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2019; Souza, 2002; Troyano-Vazquez, 2005). CACREP may address how spirituality and religion are covered within counselor education programs as it sets forth the curriculum guidelines for counselor education programs. CACREP could consider the findings from the professional literature presented in this proposal, re-evaluate its standards and consider adding more standards on spirituality and religion where appropriate in the 2024 proposed standards. Without re-evaluating the standards counselor educators may lack clear guidelines on integrating spirituality and religion content into the curriculum of counselor education programs, which may impact counseling trainees' competency in spirituality and religion.

### *Counselor Education Programs*

Although the professional literature asserts the importance of spirituality and religion to holistic wellness and indicates counselor competency issues in spirituality and religion, no standardized way exists to integrate spirituality and religion into the curriculum of counselor education programs. While the exact reason for the issues in some counselors' spirituality and religion training is unknown, there seems to be possible reasons. First, clear guidelines have not been established within the CACREP standards on how counselor educators should integrate spirituality and religion content into the curriculum of counselor education programs. Young et al. (2002) examined several CACREP-accredited programs and found that only 23 of 94 programs had a course on spirituality and religion. The instructors reported needing more explicit curriculum guidelines on how to teach spirituality and religion content. Also, 46% of the 94 programs felt prepared to include spirituality and religion into the curriculum (Young et al., 2002). Cashwell and Young (2004) examined the syllabi of 14 spirituality courses in counseling programs and found discrepancies among the syllabi, with some covering the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies more extensively than others. Specifically, 21.4% of syllabi infused the ASER-

VIC Spiritual Competencies throughout, whereas 28.5% did not (Cashwell & Young, 2004). Similarly, Evans and Koenig-Nelson (2021) noted that some counselor education programs tend to cover spirituality and religion content minimally. Currier et al. (2023) also identified the lack of spirituality and religion coursework in some graduate programs as a key barrier to counselors' ability to provide competent spiritual and religious care.

Second, some counseling students lack the competency to handle clients' spiritual and religious needs due to insufficient training in their counselor education programs. Some counseling students report struggles to address spirituality concerns in counseling because they were advised in their counselor education programs not to bring up matters related to spirituality and religion. After all, it is believed to be a controversial topic (Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013; Souza, 2002). Evans and Koenig-Nelson (2021) noted counselors' hesitancy to address clients' spiritual and religious concerns due to fears of influencing the clients and offending them. Likewise, Rhodes (2022) mentioned that counselors avoid the topics due to fears of not knowing how to respond to clients' spiritual or religious issues. Troyano-Vazquez (2005), who examined students' satisfaction with spirituality and religion training in their doctoral program, found students to be dissatisfied with the training they received and viewed themselves as incompetent to manage clients' spiritual and religious concerns. Although Souza's and Troyano-Vazquez's research is dated, it was important to include it in this proposal as it shows the history of challenges within counselor education programs regarding training counselors for competency in spirituality and religion.

Additionally, Dobmeier and Reiner (2012) examined the preparedness of master's and doctoral counseling students to address spiritual and religious concerns with clients. They found 56% of the students to be either unprepared or very unprepared to describe the cultural context of spiritual and religious beliefs, which is an area of knowledge that the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies asserts counselors should possess. This study also examined students' awareness of ASERVIC and the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies. Dobmeier and Reiner (2012) also found that 62.9% were unaware of ASERVIC, and 86.1% were unaware of the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (. In a similar study, Reiner and Dobmeier (2014) examined the knowledge of the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies among 234 counselors and found that 16.7% of the counselors knew about the competencies and most learned about spirituality in counseling through external learning experiences rather than through their graduate programs. These findings may suggest that some counseling trainees remain unaware of the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies, which may better prepare them to address spiritual and religious concerns with clients. A more

recent study also suggests counselors' lack of preparation to address clients' spiritual and religious concerns. Henriksen et al. (2015) examined counseling students' perceptions of the training they received to assist clients with spiritual and religious concerns who reported that more education and training was needed. These students felt that a course on spiritual counseling was needed and suggested infusing spiritual and religious competencies into the entire curriculum (Henriksen et al., 2015).

Lastly, another possible reason for the issues in some counselors' spirituality and religion training may be that the CACREP standards on spirituality and religion differ from what is outlined in the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies. While it is not certain, this difference may be a contributing factor to the training issues in some counselor education programs that have been reported by counselor educators, counselors, and counseling trainees in the professional literature presented in this proposal (i.e., inadequate training, unclear curriculum guidelines, inconsistent syllabi, lack of competency, lack of awareness of the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies). CACREP is in a great position as it outlines the curriculum guidelines for counselor education programs (CACREP, 2009). As such, it may be beneficial for the organization to consider the information that scholars have presented in the professional literature highlighting the challenges in spirituality and religion competency amongst counselors and consider changing the curriculum where necessary. CACREP could consider reevaluating the 2024 proposed standards and possibly adding more content on spirituality and religion, which may present the topics comprehensively within the standards.

### **Recommendations for CACREP, Counselor Education Programs, and Counselors**

#### ***Recommendations for CACREP Standards***

Considering the counselor competency issues in spirituality and religion presented in the professional literature (Dailey et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2015; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Pearce et al., 2019; Souza, 2002; Troyano-Vazquez, 2005), the following recommendations are offered for CACREP. First, CACREP could add more standards on spirituality and religion by drawing from the content within the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies. The ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies provide specific instructions on the skills counselors should possess across all six competency areas (ASERVIC, 2009). CACREP could consider doing the same across the eight core counseling curriculum areas in Section 3: Foundational Counseling Curriculum (CACREP, 2023) of the CACREP standards. For

instance, consider adopting competencies 1, 2, and 3 found within the Culture and Worldview and Counselor Self-Awareness sections of the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (ASERVIC, 2009), and add them to standard 3.2.k within the Social and Cultural Diversity curriculum area (CACREP, 2023), or these spiritual competencies could be used to create three new standards within this section. Making changes to this area of the CACREP standards might help educate counseling trainees on how spirituality and religion are important to one's culture, how these concepts may shape the worldview of their clients, and could provide instructions to counselor educators on what content to cover in the curriculum of counselor education programs.

In addition, CACREP could consider adopting Competency Six found within the Human and Spiritual Development section of the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (ASERVIC, 2009) and use it to create a new standard 3.3.o within the Lifespan Development curriculum area (CACREP, 2023). This adoption might highlight the idea that spirituality and religion are important to human growth and development. Also, CACREP could consider drawing from Competencies 10 and 11 found within the Assessment and Diagnosis and Treatment sections of the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (ASERVIC, 2009) and add them to the Assessment and Diagnostic Processes curriculum area (CACREP, 2023). This addition might help counseling trainees understand that spirituality and religion may impact clients' wellness and influence their problems. For instance, Bockrath et al. (2021) noted that clients' distress may worsen due to spiritual problems. Using the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies as a guide to present spirituality and religion comprehensively in the CACREP standards may be a good strategy, as these competencies have been endorsed by the ACA (Dailey et al., 2015; Miller, 1999).

Furthermore, the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies have been used as a framework for lessons and activities in several counseling courses within counselor education programs, which helped to improve counseling trainees' spiritual competency (Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009; Schweiger et al., 2017). Incorporating the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies into the CACREP standards may be one way to improve counselor preparedness to address clients' spiritual and religious needs today.

### *Recommendations for Counselor Education Programs*

#### Re-imagining Multicultural Counseling Courses

Counselor education programs may consider reimagining multicultural counseling courses. According to Sue et al. (2019), spirituality and religion are important cultural considerations to be addressed within multicultural counsel-

ing training to promote counselors' cultural competency. Within counselor education programs that offer multicultural counseling courses, the professional literature suggests that these topics are covered minimally, not discussed at all due to negative feelings about addressing church versus state issues, and often more attention is given to race and gender issues (Evans & Koenig-Nelson, 2021; Junfei et al., 2020; Kelly, 1994; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013; Souza, 2002; Sue et al., 2019). Pieterse et al. (2009) examined the syllabi of multicultural and diversity courses of 54 counseling psychology and CACREP counselor education programs and found differences in the content covered across the programs. Within the syllabi, more than 20 topics were covered, however only 40% covered the same topics (Pieterse et al., 2009). Overall, more attention was given to topics such as racial identity, racial and ethnic groups, multicultural concepts, and LGBTQ concerns, while only 17% covered spirituality and religion (Pieterse et al., 2009). In a similar study, Priester et al. (2008) examined the syllabi of 64 master's level multicultural counseling courses and found dissimilarities among the topics covered. Seventy-two percent focused on sexual orientation and 41% on gender, while only 35% included religion (Priester et al., 2008).

The work of the scholars above suggests that while spirituality and religion are topics within multicultural counseling courses, they are addressed inconsistently and minimally. It also appears unmanageable for counselor educators to cover all aspects of diversity within a single multicultural counseling course, as some counselor educators report a lack of room within the curriculum to integrate spirituality and religion content (Adams et al., 2015). However, there is a single-course approach to training counselors on multicultural concerns within counselor education programs (Pieterse, 2009), which may be inadequate as counseling trainees report a lack of preparedness to address clients' spiritual and religious concerns (Dailey et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2015; Reinert & Dobmeier, 2014; Pearce et al., 2019; Souza, 2002; Troyano-Vazquez, 2005).

As spirituality and religion are covered minimally in some multicultural counseling courses (Evans & Koenig-Nelson, 2021), the recommendation is to reimagine multicultural counseling courses in counselor education programs by shifting from a one-course model to a two-course model. Counselor education programs could consider offering two multicultural counseling courses. One approach could be as follows: Multicultural Counseling Part 1: Multicultural Concepts, Racial Identities, Marginalized Groups, Political and Social Justice and Multicultural Counseling Part 2: Specific Populations, Specific Circumstances, Spirituality and Religion, and Non-Western Methods of Healing (Sue et al., 2019). Adding a second course might allow counselor educators to present each topic outlined within multicultural counselor training in depth.

The professional literature asserts that it is important for multicultural counseling courses to be developed with all aspects of diversity in mind, including spirituality and religion, to foster educational experiences that promote cultural competency (Hage et al., 2006; Sue et al., 2019). Placing more attention on one aspect of diversity (i.e., race, ethnicity, or gender) may take away from other areas of diversity which may impact clients, as for some, “spiritual values could possibly be one of the most salient cultural values” (Burke, 1998-1999, p. 2). Adding a second multicultural counseling course may not be ideal for some counselor education programs. With this in mind, adding a course on spirituality and religion is another recommendation.

#### Adding a Spirituality and Religion Course

Counselor education programs could consider adding a spirituality and religion course. As few CACREP counselor education programs incorporate spirituality and religion content in their programs (Cashwell & Young, 2004; Young et al., 2002), and some counseling trainees report insufficient training on spirituality and religion from these programs (Dailey et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2015; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Pearce et al., 2019; Souza, 2002; Troyano-Vazquez, 2005), it may be helpful to add more content on the topics into counselor education programs. Young et al. (2007) noted a way to train counselors to address spiritual and religious concerns, including adding coursework on spirituality into the counseling curriculum. Hence, the next recommendation is to consider mandating the implementation of a spirituality and religion course in all counselor education programs. The professional literature also supports the idea of adding a course on spirituality and religion within counselor education programs.

For instance, a spirituality counseling course was taught to 14 master's level counseling students to examine their level of confidence in addressing spirituality and religion concerns with clients (Curtis & Glass, 2002). This course included lectures that helped students distinguish spirituality from religion, and related activities, discussions, and written assignments taught students various techniques to handle client issues related to spirituality and religion (Curtis & Glass, 2002). Completing this course on spirituality increased students' confidence in infusing spirituality into their work with clients, and discussing different types of religions was helpful in increasing students' awareness (Curtis & Glass, 2002). Ingersoll (1997) provided insight on how to teach a spirituality course in counselor education programs. The goal of that course was to teach university students the difference between spirituality and religion, provide spiritual development models, and introduce instruments to assess clients' spirituality (Ingersoll, 1997). He also used roleplays to simulate the spiritual

concerns that clients may bring to sessions (Ingersoll, 1997). Students learned that spirituality could exist within individuals without having a religious affiliation, which helped to validate some of their own experiences (Ingersoll, 1997). Pate and Hall (2005), taught a course on counseling and spirituality, which focused on the various spiritual and religious beliefs that clients may have and how they may impact the counseling relationship to increase counselor educators' and students' knowledge of different spiritual and religious beliefs. This course, provided in an internet and seminar format, engaged students through experiential activities (i.e., attending church services), meditation, discussions, guest speakers, and projects (Pate & Hall, 2005). From this experience, students felt a void within their counselor education program had been filled and expressed acquisition of new material not covered in their multicultural counseling course (Pate & Hall, 2005). Moreover, Adams et al. (2015) also completed a study where they interviewed a panel of experts from the counselor education field who recommended offering a course on spirituality and religion as the best way to integrate spirituality and religion into the counseling curriculum.

Findings from the professional literature excerpts above highlight how courses on spirituality have been successfully integrated into counselor education programs and provide a rationale for adding a course on spirituality and religion into the curriculum of these programs. As these courses on spirituality improved students' understanding and ability to address spiritual and religious concerns with clients, it may be beneficial for counselor educators to consider examining these teaching methods and those attributed to other scholars mentioned earlier in this proposal. The scholars successfully used the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies as a framework for their lessons in counseling and spirituality courses, improving students' spiritual competency (Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009; Schweiger et al., 2017). While adding a course on spirituality and religion or an additional multicultural counseling course may impact counselor education programs already set at 60 credit hours, the possibility of improving counseling trainees' competency in spirituality and religion, which may impact client outcomes, might be worth reevaluating the 60 credit hours. Counselor education programs could also consider offering an elective course on spirituality and religion.

### **Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counselor Education**

Experts from the counselor education field believe that the most effective way to integrate spirituality and religion into counselor education is to engage in continuing education and to integrate spirituality and religion into the curric-

ulum intentionally (Adams et al., 2015; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014). Continuing education options should cover key concepts (i.e., similarities/differences between spirituality and religion, forms of spiritual/religious expression, explanation of different religions, mental and physical benefits of spirituality and religion, negative impacts of spirituality and religion, techniques for navigating challenging conversations about spirituality and religion with clients, and strategies for attending to spirituality and religion in counselor training) (Adams et al., 2015). To help counselor educators and trainees understand the differences and similarities between spirituality and religion, the *ASERVIC White Paper* (ASERVIC, n.d.-a) is recommended, which can be found on the ASERVIC website within the resources section see ([aservic.org/resources](http://aservic.org/resources)). The professional literature suggests reviewing the following texts to promote understanding of the different religions and how spirituality and religion may be expressed: *Integrating Religion and Spirituality into Counseling: A Comprehensive Approach* (Frame, 2003) and the *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Religious Diversity* (Richards & Burgen, 2000) (Adams et al., 2015). To promote knowledge on the physical and mental benefits of spirituality and religion and techniques on how to facilitate discussions with clients on the topics, counselor educators and trainees should read *Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counseling Practice: A Guide to Competent Practice Third Edition* (Cashwell & Young, 2019). This text may be beneficial as it focuses on wellness and examines how clients' experiences are shaped by spirituality and religion (Cashwell & Young, 2019). Insight on how spirituality and religion may harm clients' health in negative ways may be gained through reading *Religion That Heals, Religion That Harms: A Guide to Clinical Practice* (Griffith, 2010).

For strategies to integrate spirituality and religion into existing courses of counselor education programs, counselor educators are encouraged to read *Incorporating Spirituality into Core Counseling Courses: Ideas for Classroom Application* (Briggs & Rayle, 2005). To learn specific teaching strategies on spirituality and religion, counselor educators are encouraged to review *Integration Versus Segregation: Applications of the Spiritual Competencies in Counselor Education Programs* (Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009). The professional literature has promoted using Hagedorn and Gutierrez's teaching strategies as their educational activities incorporate the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (Adams et al., 2015; Bohecker et al., 2017). Reiner and Dobmeier (2014) assert that counselor educators should be intentional about incorporating the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies into the course content and purposefully cover topics related to spirituality and religion (i.e., differentiating between spirituality and religion, models of spiritual development, major religions, and theories and research of spirituality in counseling). To educate trainees on the various



models of spiritual development, counselor educators could use the *Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*, which details Western, Eastern, indigenous, psychological, physiological, and other models of spiritual development (Miller, 2012).

Counselor educators and trainees are also encouraged to complete a continuing education course on spirituality and religion to improve competency (Adams et al., 2015). NetCE offers an online course titled *Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counseling*, which summarizes the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies, discusses their application to the counseling process, reviews the similarities between spirituality and religion, major world religions, models of spiritual development, positive and negative aspects of spirituality and religion, and other topics relevant to spirituality and religion and the counseling process are also discussed (NetCE, 2023). NetCE is an Approved Continuing Education Provider by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) and the Association for Addiction Professionals (NAADAC), and upon completion of the course, participants may receive 2.5 NBCC clock hours and 5 NetCE credits (NetCE, 2023). Lastly, counselor educators and trainees are also encouraged to review the ASERVIC website for continuing education opportunities, as the organization offers an annual virtual conference as well as webinars within the events section of the website ([aservic.org/events](http://aservic.org/events)).

### Spiritual and Religious Competency Project

The Spiritual and Religious Competency Project (SRCP) was made possible by a grant through the John Templeton Foundation and consists of a group of scholars from various universities within the United States who are committed to eliminating barriers that impact mental health professionals' ability to acquire and integrate spiritual and religious competencies into their work with clients (Currier et al., 2023). These scholars aim to promote growth across mental health professions by strengthening clinicians' competence in spirituality and religion (Currier et al., 2023). The SRCP group proclaimed that they will take the following steps to address the barriers to spiritual and religious competence:

- (a) generating strategies and tools for defining, studying, and assessing religious/spiritual competencies;
- (b) establishing effective methods of promoting religious/spiritual competencies in graduate and postgraduate training;
- (c) understanding graduate faculty views, experiences, supports, and barriers related to training religious/spiritual competencies across these disciplines;
- (d) synergizing diverse stakeholders with a com-

mitment to promoting religious/spiritual competencies; and (e) fueling momentum for systemic and cultural changes in ways that religious/spiritual are addressed in mental health care.

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The SRCP may serve as a good resource for counselor education programs because, through Sub-Project 1, the group is working to foster educational experiences in religious and spiritual competencies by developing, evaluating, and disseminating standardized content that can be integrated into graduate courses (Currier et al., 2023; Pearce et al., 2019; Spiritual and Religious Competencies Project, 2023). For more details on the SRCP see ([srcproject.org](http://srcproject.org)).

### Conclusion

In closing, readers are reminded that spirituality and religion are facets of one's culture, components of wellness, resources that promote resiliency and improve mental health outcomes, and topics of discussion among clients (Brown et al., 2013; CACREP, 2015; Corey, 2011; Diallo, 2013; Dixon & Wilcox, 2016; Myers et al., 2007). Although the professional literature indicates the need to address spirituality and religion in counseling, the literature also suggests that these topics are covered inconsistently within some counselor education programs (Evans & Koenig-Nelson, 2021; Pieterse et al., 2009; Priester et al., 2008). Moreover, some graduates of counselor education programs lack the competency to address the needs of clients who identify as religious or spiritual (Dailey et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2015; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Pearce et al., 2019; Souza, 2002; Troyano-Vazquez, 2005).

The addition of more standards on spirituality and religion to the 2024 proposed CACREP standards, guided by the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies, may be a way for CACREP to present spirituality and religion comprehensively throughout the standards. This addition may provide clarity on the skills and knowledge that counseling trainees should possess to effectively address clients' spiritual and religious needs (ASERVIC, 2009), and may help establish guidelines for counselor educators to integrate spirituality and religion content in their lessons. Spirituality and religion training are aspects of multicultural counseling competency and vital resources that promote wellness and assist clients in maintaining it (Sue et al., 2019; Myers & Williard, 2003; Myers et al., 2007). Some believe that spiritual and religious connections are a "more potent social glue than the color of one's skin, cultural heritage, or gender" (Shafranske & Malony, 1996, p. 564). Thus, it might be helpful to consider how

spirituality and religion content is delivered within counselor education programs to ensure counseling trainees are well prepared to provide effective services to address clients' spiritual and religious concerns.

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