

**University of La Verne
Marriage and Family Therapy (MS) Program
External Review
Benjamin Caldwell, PsyD
April 10, 2010**

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OVERVIEW

On March 25, 2010, I visited the University of La Verne (ULV) main campus in La Verne, CA to serve as an external reviewer for the Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) program. The program is a 55-unit program of study that is part of the Masters Counseling Program, housed within the university's Department of Psychology.

I met individually with Program Chair Trish Long; with a group of program faculty; with the Interim Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Jonathan Reed; and with two classes of students combined into one group. I invited all groups to email me with any additional thoughts or comments that arose subsequent to the visit. I also reviewed a number of program-related documents, including the 2009-10 university catalog, the packet of materials sent to prospective students, and syllabi for all courses. I also reviewed related external documents, including California Board of Behavioral Sciences (BBS) data on how ULV graduates have performed on the state's MFT licensing exams, and the current requirements for external program accreditation, an area of inquiry for both the Program Chair and the Dean. While this review did not seek to uniquely evaluate each of the program's designated learning outcomes (a task that was conducted quite thoroughly in the October 2008 internal review), some of the findings of this report are relevant to some of those specific outcomes.

This report provides summaries of each component of the site visit. It concludes with a number of recommendations, based on my current knowledge of the program and the expressed desires of students, faculty, and administration.

Information on my background and training is available in the attached vita. Because I have a consulting contract with AAMFT that involves discussion of program accreditation, I have also included a Conflict of Interest statement with additional detail.

Benjamin Caldwell, PsyD
April 20, 2010

PROGRAM DOCUMENTATION

Information sources:

- Course syllabi
- Admissions packet
- 2009-10 ULV Catalog
- MFT Program Review (October 2008)

One of the most meaningful questions to emerge from my review of program documentation was that of the program's overall identity. In reviewing the Program Goals, only one of them ("[g.] MFT students will acquire training that prepares them for licensure as a Marriage and Family Therapist within the state of California") specifically mentions marriage and family therapy, and this goal is particular to licensing. The others reference Psychology and counseling.

Of course, it is a normal and expected thing that MFT programs will have various identities and points of emphasis; this is one of the ways by which students can select which program is the best fit for them. In California, some MFT programs are standalone MFT programs (e.g. Loma Linda University); others are tracks or emphasis areas within Psychology programs (e.g. Pepperdine University), and still others are tracks or emphasis areas within Counseling programs (e.g. CSU-Sacramento). As the University of La Verne program continues to grow and develop, and particularly as the university considers how to approach the state's newly available Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC) license, it will become increasingly important to stake out a clear identity for the program. This can guide choices in future program offerings, student and faculty recruitment efforts, and program accreditation. The question of program identity is one which I asked each core group (students and faculty) with whom I met through the day; their responses appear in those respective sections.

The internal Program Review completed in October 2008 is particularly thorough and informative. It offers a great deal of information on student and faculty needs, and indicates that the program's offerings are largely in line with what students, faculty and alumni find most important. These conclusions rely in part on self-report surveys; if it has not done so already, the program is likely to need to identify more objective outcome measures to satisfy the demands of external accreditation bodies.

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION EXPERIENCES

Information sources:

Meeting with program faculty

Meeting with Interim Jonathan Reed, Interim Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

Program strengths. The MFT faculty and Dean Reed described a number of program strengths. Faculty and administration spoke in very positive terms about the leadership of Program Chair Trish Long. They felt she represented the program well in discussions with university administration, including on difficult issues, and that her leadership had improved the overall quality of the program.

Faculty also reported that there had been, and would continue to be, an active process of curricular revision in response to student needs and changing state requirements. (The ULV MFT program is currently a 55-unit program, and under state law will need to become at least a 60-unit program by fall 2012.)

The faculty noted that they are a diverse group and that the student body is a diverse group, and each of these areas of diversity is an asset to the program. This emphasis on diversity was echoed later in the day as I met with students.

Finally, faculty reported that in spite of increasing class sizes, they had attempted to maintain a “high-touch” environment where students could maintain frequent contact with faculty for learning and mentoring. They expressed hope that this could continue, amid concern that the program’s growth (in both students and required units) would make preserving that environment increasingly difficult.

Concerns. Faculty expressed concern over two specific issues: the need for additional faculty positions within the program, and the growing role of the university’s Enrollment Management office in recruiting new students.

The MFT program is required to add units to the program by 2012. Faculty reported class sizes as increasing; the most recent program enrollment data in the October 2008 program review is from Spring of that year, making this difficult to verify. It may be useful for the program to analyze total enrolled units over the past few years, as well as examining average class sizes, to determine whether expansion pressures are indeed increasing average class size. The October 2008 program report does clearly note that adjunct faculty teach a majority of courses in the program. Related pressures for MFT faculty include contractual requirements that they split time between multiple programs, and a newer expectation that they be actively involved in research/scholarship, without being offered release time to meet this expectation. Overall, faculty members feel stretched very thin, and expressed concern about the program’s ongoing ability to function in the absence of additional full-time faculty. This need for additional program faculty was echoed by the Dean.

Relative to the second concern (involvement of Enrollment Management), faculty expressed a tension between maintaining high admissions standards and meeting enrollment targets. There was a

consensus that past admissions standards may have been too low, and created a difficult teaching environment because of the presence of both accelerated learners and those who would struggle more significantly in classes. This tension is not unique to ULV; however, it can impact faculty morale, student perceptions of program quality, and program performance on outcome measures (see the information on licensing exam pass rates in “Other Considerations” below).

Administrative transitions. Faculty reported that university administration is currently in flux, with an interim dean and an interim provost currently in place, and a president who plans to leave within a year. While turnover in higher administration is not unusual at any university, near-simultaneous instability in all three of these levels of administration presents uncertainty for the program.

LPCC options. Both faculty and administration suggested interest in – and uncertainty about – the forthcoming LPCC (licensed professional clinical counselor) license in California. A review of current course requirements in the MFT program suggests that its graduates would likely* meet 8 of the 12 “core content areas” required for LPCC licensure (for those starting their education on or after 8/1/2012); if the program were to develop a program or track geared toward LPCC licensure, coursework would need to be added or adjusted in the following highlighted areas:

Counseling & psychotherapy theory & technique	PSY516 would likely meet requirements
Human growth and development across lifespan	PSY507 would likely meet requirements
<i>Career development</i>	<i>3-unit course would need to be offered</i>
Group counseling	PSY522 would likely meet requirements
<i>Testing</i>	<i>PSY509 would need to be transformed to a 3-unit class</i>
Multi-cultural counseling	PSY523 would likely meet requirements
Diagnosis	PSY512 would likely meet requirements
Research and evaluation	PSY502 would likely meet requirements
Law, ethics, and professional orientation	PSY527 would likely meet requirements
<i>Psychopharmacology</i>	<i>PSY534 would need to be transformed to a 3-unit class</i>
Addictions counseling	PSY528 would likely meet requirements
<i>Crisis or trauma counseling</i>	<i>3-unit course would need to be offered</i>

Note: Based on educational requirements for those seeking LPCC licensure who begin their education on or after August 1, 2012.

In considering LPCC options, it is worth noting that the license will be new and initially unrecognized in California workplaces. LPCC licensees will not initially be covered under any state or county job classifications, and will not be reimbursable through Medi-Cal. These are likely to change

over time, of course, but it is impossible to predict how rapidly the California job market for LPCCs will develop, how LPCCs will be seen relative to MFTs when applying for similar positions, and how many other universities will be offering LPCC programs. Simply put, no one knows whether there will be too many or too few LPCCs to meet the market need.

** - The hedged language of "likely" here is used only because decisions on acceptability of courses as meeting specific requirements is ultimately up to the Board of Behavioral Sciences.*

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Information sources:

- Meeting with students
- Followup email communication from students

Overall, the students in attendance during the review reported very positive experiences in the University of La Verne MFT program. They described a number of factors that drew them to the MFT program at La Verne over other options. These factors included (in no particular order) *Location, the Fact that they could get in/be admitted, Personal touch with faculty, Small class sizes, and Welcoming atmosphere*. It is worth noting that the element of personal touch with faculty is an experience that faculty members expressed concern was no longer happening, with the heightened involvement of Enrollment Management in the recruiting and admissions process.

When asked about additional program strengths, students reported *Faculty who are in practice themselves, Structure for working adults/evening classes, Ability to attend part-time, and the program's Emphasis on diversity (specifically demonstrated in not requiring the GRE)*.

Students were asked how they would describe the program's identity. To what degree is it a psychology program, a family therapy program, a counseling program, and/or something else? Students generally described the program as *a mix of psychology and family therapy*, with first-year students noting that they had received very little specific instruction in family therapy and second-year students reporting they had received much more information about family therapy and systemic models in the second year of the program.

Students described a number of potential additions or changes to the program that they felt could bring the program closer to meeting its goals. Some of their suggestions were more issues of student convenience than program mission (for example, students suggested stacking required classes on the same day to better accommodate working students), while others more directly related to academic preparation for practice.

One suggestion that drew a great deal of conversation surrounded *preparation for the program's comprehensive examination*. According to the catalog, this exam "is based upon, and occurs after successful completion of PSY 512, 516, 517, and 527." Students who had delayed taking comps until after they had taken more of the family-therapy-specific classes (e.g. 518, 519) reported feeling significantly better-prepared for the comprehensive exam; those who took the test on schedule (that is, earlier) expressed concern that the comps included significant amounts of family-theory coverage, and that they had not been adequately prepared for it. Of course, in any high-stakes testing environment, some students will feel ill-prepared regardless of training; those who have taken more coursework may naturally feel more comfortable with the material. However, the comps may need to be reviewed to ensure they are not testing students above their expected level of skill acquisition from solely the four classes on which the comps are said to be based.

Another suggestion directly related to academic preparedness focused on *skills training for fieldwork, in areas of documentation and theory-based treatment planning*. Students in fieldwork reported they would have liked to receive more of this kind of instruction during their coursework.

While it was a minority position, a few students expressed concern about the program's *academic rigor*. One student noted that the classes the student had taken at La Verne were easier than those the student had taken at an undergraduate level; another felt that courses required too much "busywork" that did not actually contribute to student growth. Notably, the few students who expressed such concerns were all first-year students. Those farther advanced in the program reported that classes gradually increase in difficulty, that they felt this increase was appropriate, and that they felt the program was challenging at an appropriate level. Second-year students also suggested that they better understood the purpose of their first-year assignments after they had progressed farther in the program, and begun fieldwork; it may be beneficial for instructors of first-year classes to effectively place their assignments in the broader context of the program, so students can better see the benefit of such work and invest in it.

Students were asked about their post-graduation plans, and whether they felt adequately prepared based on their experience at the University of La Verne. *Overwhelmingly, students plan to license as MFTs in California*. (This finding is consistent with the program's internal review.) Only two out of a group of approximately 30 suggested they would not: One student talked of moving to another state and licensing as an MFT there; another indicated he may remain in a position that does not require licensure, but would still benefit from the knowledge and experience gained in the program. A large number of students indicated they would continue working in other jobs as they gained hours of experience toward the license, largely out of concern that they would not be able to earn enough money from MFT Intern positions alone.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Information sources:

- BBS licensing exam data
- COAMFTE accreditation standards

Licensing exam pass rates. Exam pass rates are a significant outcome measure for any program seeking to prepare students for eventual MFT licensure. A review of California MFT licensure exam data for January 1, 2001 – June 30, 2009 finds that the program's graduates are performing below average for MFT programs statewide. On the MFT Standard Written Exam (the first of two MFT licensing exams in California), from 1/1/2001 through 6/30/2009 La Verne graduates passed on 51 of 112 attempts, for a pass rate of 45.5%. Looking at the most recent two years of data, from 7/1/2007 through 6/30/2009 La Verne graduates passed on 15 of 37 attempts at the SWE (40.5%).

The BBS parses out exam data by first-time test-takers, which is arguably a better metric for judging a program's pass rate; examinees who fail multiple times can disproportionately impact a university's pass rate when all exam administrations are included. Looking only at first-time test-takers, La Verne graduates passed the SWE on 10 of 15 attempts from 7/1/2005 to 6/30/2007 (67%), and 14 of 21 attempts from 7/1/2007 to 6/30/2009 (72%). While these numbers are still below average (the statewide average for first-time SWE examinees typically is between 75 and 80%), they are far more favorable than the numbers for all examinees.

While this is a limited sample size, it is noteworthy that from July 1, 2007 through June 30, 2009, La Verne graduates taking the SWE for the second (or subsequent) time passed on only 1 of 16 attempts. This relates directly to discussion of admissions standards: It could be argued that the program accepted (and ultimately graduated) some students who may never be successful at the licensing exams, a serious concern. However, such a hypothesis requires a number of caveats; most importantly, graduates taking the SWE for a second or subsequent time from 2007 to 2009 are likely to have graduated between 2003 and 2005, and may have even graduated years earlier. If these students were accepted into the program around 2000-2002, their acceptance at that time may have little resemblance or relevance to the program's admissions standards today.

Program accreditation. One of the issues that arose repeatedly during my visit was the question of external program accreditation. For MFT programs, two organizations offer accreditation: the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE, the accreditation arm of AAMFT), and the Council on Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, the accreditation arm of the American Counseling Association [ACA]). In California, those programs which are COAMFTE accredited tend to be standalone MFT programs, typically in private institutions. Meanwhile, those programs accredited through CACREP are largely Counseling programs with MFT emphasis areas, typically in public (CSU) schools. While each accreditation has its benefits, COAMFTE accreditation is most recognized by MFT licensing boards around the country as the standard

for MFT educational programs. Typically MFTs coming into a new state upon leaving California must establish that the graduate program they attended was COAMFTE-accredited or an equivalent. Information on the COAMFTE accreditation process is attached to this document.

CACREP accreditation may also be worth considering; CACREP accredits counseling programs of all varieties, and has specific standards for accrediting marriage and family therapy specializations. One concern with CACREP accreditation is its hiring restriction: As of July 1, 2013, any new faculty hires would need to either have a doctoral degree in counselor education, or have been full-time faculty in a counselor education program for at least one year. Past that date, if the program wanted to hire faculty with doctoral degrees in Psychology or MFT rather than counselor education, it would not be able to do so in accordance with this standard.

As it is presently designed, the program would likely meet most, but not all, of the requirements for either accrediting body. COAMFTE requirements offer a great deal of flexibility as long as programs can establish they are producing competent marriage and family therapists; however, questions of program identity would need to be addressed, and the program would need to more thoroughly define and measure its outcomes in a manner consistent with COAMFTE requirements. In addition, the Program Director must be "an AAMFT Approved Supervisor or State Approved Supervisor that is equivalent to the AAMFT designation." Such a designation typically requires a 30-hour training course, a theory of supervision paper, and a period of supervision mentoring. CACREP requirements retain some specific requirements for inputs, including a specific student-to-faculty ratio of 10:1 FTE and a requirement that core faculty must teach at least half of all units offered.

External accreditation can provide significant benefits to the program, particularly in the area of student recruiting (both in quantity and quality). COAMFTE-accredited programs outperform their peers on California's MFT licensing exams*. Accreditation also requires an investment of resources (particularly that most precious of faculty resources, their time). The program may wish to consider whether to pursue external accreditation, and if so, which available path to follow.

* Caldwell, B. E., Kunker, S. A., Brown, S. W., & Saiki, S. Y. (in press). COAMFTE accreditation and

California MFT licensing exam success. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop additional faculty positions for the program.** A high faculty-student ratio and associated small class sizes are major draws for the program. However, faculty workloads and responsibilities are increasing, and those who split time between programs in the Department of Psychology are placed in extremely difficult roles. Without additional faculty, not only will program growth be difficult, but even maintaining the program at current levels may become increasingly challenging.
- **Restore more meaningful faculty involvement in the student recruiting and admissions process.** Current students, particularly those farther along in the program, expressed an appreciation for the “personal touch” offered to them by faculty members during their admissions process; faculty expressed concern that their opportunities to provide such an experience were being diminished. While faculty spoke highly of the recruiter who now meets with most prospective students, it should be possible to retain the benefits of having a recruiter involved while also retaining the “personal touch” prospective students experience when they meet and get to know faculty members prior to admission.
- **Maintain program strengths.** These include (but are certainly not limited to) coordination with fieldwork agencies, diversity in the student population, small class sizes, programmatic leadership, and largely satisfied alumni. Future planning should carefully consider actions necessary to maintain these strengths in the presence of other possible changes.
- **Develop a clear sense of program identity.** The program's current goals and learning objectives only specifically mention MFT as an element of licensure. In addition, the program's internal review suggested a need to revisit how some of these objectives (particularly "consuming scientific information") are taught and assessed. As the program charts a future course that may or may not include program growth, an LPCC-related offering, and/or external accreditation, one place to start is by revisiting the program's mission and goals. Doing so will make subsequent choices clearer.
- **Consider professional accreditation through COAMFTE and/or CACREP.** These accrediting bodies offer a powerful validation of the program's careful process of self-examination and continual improvement; serve as a useful student and faculty recruiting tool; and are relatively inexpensive. Information on the COAMFTE process is attached.
- **Offer students greater clarity on the comprehensive exam process.** The comp exam appeared to be one of the greatest sources of anxiety for students (common in any high-stakes testing), and many of them suggested that they felt inadequately prepared. Students who had successfully delayed the exam for a year, including those on part-time program plans, reported that this delay was a great help to them in feeling ready when the time came to take the test.

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Marital and Family Therapy Program
External Review Report
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CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me as listed below.

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