Patterns of Unmet Competencies by First-time Candidates for APC Board Certification

Daniel H. Grossoehme

Many of the chaplains serving on state certification committees for the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC) in Ohio during 2003, experienced a sense of surprise at the end of the committee process. Overall, 50 percent of the state’s candidates were asked to make a second committee appearance. A closer inspection revealed that the same competencies were failed by a substantial percentage of these first-time candidates.

- All of those asked to make a second appearance failed to demonstrate the “ability to integrate the insights of theology and the behavioral sciences into pastoral care assessments and practice” (2d).
- Half failed to demonstrate an “awareness of strengths and limitations in ministry to various types of persons and situations” (2a).
- Eighty percent failed to demonstrate competence in one or both of the following: “ability to understand and articulate relevant aspects of one’s history and personality, and the manner in which these are reflected in one’s behavior and relationship” (1b); “ability to conceptualize and communicate theologically the meaning of the crises experienced by persons in the setting in which one ministers” (3g).

Committee members expressed concern about the large number of candidates who did not meet these competencies as well as the apparent pattern of theologically-related competencies being a major stumbling block. This led to self-doubt among committee members, who wondered if they were somehow too harsh in their interpretation of the APC standards and frustration as to exactly how much “ability” needs to be demonstrated in order to judge someone as “meeting” the competency standard.

This research proposal was designed to test for statistically significant patterns of competencies not being met by candidates for APC board certification across the country. The hypotheses were a recent study showed that approximately 13 percent of first-time candidates for APC board certification during a three-year period (2001-2003) did not meet all of the fifteen required competencies and were asked to make a subsequent appearance. Five competencies were not met by at least 50 percent of those asked to make subsequent appearances: theological competencies were the most commonly unmet. Two competencies correlated with the candidate’s gender. This study suggests issues in the board certification process which merit discussion both at the association level and by pastoral educators and department heads in order to prepare candidates for successful ministries as professional chaplains.

The Reverend Daniel H. Grossoehme, MDiv, BCC, serves as staff chaplain at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital College Hill Campus, Cincinnati, OH. He is endorsed by the Episcopal church. Correspondence may be directed to Daniel.Grossoehme@cchmc.org
that more than 50 percent of candidates nationwide who were asked to make a second appearance would have failed to meet one or more of the competencies referenced above (1b, 2a, 2d, and 3g) and that none of these variables would correlate with the candidate's state or gender.

Method

Following approval of the project and research method by the APC Research Committee, copies of the committee reports (Form C-3) for those candidates for whom a second appearance was recommended during the three-year period 2001-2003 were provided to the author. To protect confidentiality, candidate names were removed prior to transmittal. During the 2001 year, the C-3 form was changed from a format in which each of the three major competencies—personal, pastoral, professional—were assessed in narrative form to the current item-by-item format in which each specific element within those categories is marked individually as "met" or "not met."

It was not possible to determine precisely from the narrative comments which of the specific competencies were or were not met; therefore those forms (n = 23) were not included in the study sample. In cases where forms for both the initial and subsequent committee appearances were provided, only the initial appearance was used.

The candidate's state and whether each competency was or was not met was entered into a database with only a sequential serial number for identification. The candidate's gender was obtained through the notation of the pronoun "his" or "her" in the presenter's written comments. All copies of the applications and C-3 forms were then destroyed in the hospital's commercial shredder. The data were analyzed using the statistical package EpInfo 2002 from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Results

Seven hundred fifty candidates appeared before certification committees during the study period. Ninety-eight (13 percent) received a recommendation to make a second appearance. The C-3 forms for seventy-five of these were deemed usable for this study. The candidates appeared before committees in twenty-six states with eight states accounting for 60 percent of those asked to make a second appearance (n = 45): Florida, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin. Table 1 (p. 15) shows the percentage of candidates nationwide (n = 75) who failed to meet each competency.

The first hypothesis was validated with respect to competencies 1b, 2d, and 3g as 50 percent or more of the candidates nationwide failed to meet these standards. Further, there was a statistically significant relationship between competencies 2d and 3g, with 35 candidates (47 percent) failing to meet both competencies (p = .003). Contrary to the hypothesis, only 37 percent failed to demonstrate an awareness of strengths and limitations in ministry to various types of people (2a). In addition, 50 percent or more failed to meet the following standards:

- Ability to effectively utilize one's authority in relationships (1c).
- Ability to describe one's model of spiritual assessment, plans of care, and demonstrable outcomes in one's practice of pastoral/spiritual care (2e).

With respect to the second hypothesis, although there were no significant correlations between a candidate's state and met competencies, there were not enough candidates in each state to draw meaningful conclusions. There was, however, a statistically significant relationship between the candidate's gender and failure to meet competency 2c. Eighty percent of male candidates (n = 8) and 48 percent of female candidates (n = 13) failed to demonstrate the ability to provide leadership in pastoral care in an institution with diverse faith and cultural traditions (2c) (p = 0.008). As it was not possible to determine gender in the written comments for the remaining four candidates, the study group for gender comparison totaled forty-four males and twenty-seven females.

A second competency, the ability to integrate the insights of theology and the behavioral sciences into pastoral care assessments and practice (2d) came very close to significantly correlating with gender (p = 0.06) and thus deserves mention. Sixty-one percent of male candidates (n = 27) and 82 percent of female candidates (n = 22) failed to meet this competency.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that candidates who do not meet the competencies for board certified chaplain do so because they fail to demonstrate several specific elements of ministry. Two of the five competencies that more than half of these candidates failed to demonstrate involve theology and its integration into practice. In two committees on
### Table 1

**Competencies not met by 50 percent or more of first-time candidates for APC board certification 2001-2003**

(n = 75)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Percentage failed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to integrate the insights of theology and the behavioral sciences into pastoral care assessments and practice (2d).</td>
<td>69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to conceptualize and communicate theologically the meaning of the crises experienced by persons in the setting in which one ministers (3g).</td>
<td>56*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to understand and articulate relevant aspects of one's history and personality and the manner in which these are reflected in one's behavior and relationship (1b).</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to effectively utilize one's authority in relationship (1c).</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to describe one's model of spiritual assessment, plans of care, and demonstrable outcomes in one's practice of pastoral/spiritual care (2e).</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Forty-seven percent failed to meet both 2d and 3g.

A complete listing of the personal (3), pastoral (5) and professional (7) competencies required for APC board certification is available on the APC Web site: www.professionalchaplains.org (click “join,” “membership categories,” and look under Board Certified Chaplain).

which the author sat in 2003, candidates were literally dumb-struck when asked to “speak theologically” about a clinical example of their choice. They struggled to conceptualize an event in theological terms and appeared to have no idea where to begin such a conversation. The ability to work with people on the level of their suffering and meaning rather than just the level of emotions is often cited as the unique contribution that chaplains make to the health care team. Given that chaplains are theologically trained individuals and are the theologians-in-residence, or clinical theologians, in their institutions, it is curious that the failed competencies are theologically related. What might explain this overall difficulty with the theological competencies?

One possibility is that the emphasis on theological reflection and integration differs among clinical pastoral education (CPE) centers. Thus, candidates trained at centers where this aspect receives less attention likely would constitute the majority of those who fail to demonstrate the competency before an APC certification committee. Perhaps CPE supervisors need to be more rigorous about holding students to the ACPE standard for theological reflection before granting credit for a unit.

In addition, there may be a variety of practices across centers as to what constitutes a theological reflection in a verbatim or other document. Is it more accurately described as a “spiritual assessment” of the patient, or is it a personal reflection on a theological issue that arose for the student out of the visit? The APC certification standards consider these to be two separate competencies; perhaps this differs markedly from how many chaplains are trained and subsequently presents a stumbling block when they appear before a certification committee.

Although most chaplains are seminary trained, it is in the CPE process that theology is linked with the behavioral sciences. It may be that pastoral education focuses to such an extent on the behavioral sciences that theology is subordinated to a large extent with detrimental effect. If solid integration of the two disciplines is not emphasized during clinical training, it may be very difficult to demonstrate competency in integrating these two areas one or more years after leaving the training center, as well as in one’s day to day clinical practice. This is not to suggest that CPE supervisors “teach to the test,” but rather to question whether or not students have the basic theological
skills necessary to receive credit for a unit or to move towards Level II CPE. Pastoral care departments could also be intentional about theological reflection during staff meeting time and do less department "business." This could be an important part of a department's ongoing continuing education program.

It could also be the case that seminary education programs fail to address adequately the issues of practical theology, placing too much emphasis on systematic theology. Practical theology itself is a relatively new term, gradually replacing pastoral theology as the academic domain in which the link is made between textbooks and actual experience. Another possible reason is that a certain percentage of candidates are simply uninterested in theology and fail to build this dimension into their pastoral role definitions. Greater clarity in the standards may help to articulate how much of a theologian one has to be in order to be recognized as an APC board certified chaplain.

Delving deeply into the reasons why the candidates in this three-year study failed to demonstrate these competencies was beyond the scope of this project, and, given the privacy policies set forth for the protection of the candidates' materials, it would be difficult to do so in the future. However, additional work should be done to determine which interventions might improve a candidate's ability to demonstrate theological competency.

As there were no statistically significant differences in failure rates on any of the competencies from one state to another, higher standards applied by one or more states does not explain the data. However, the APC standards are open to interpretation by each committee that sits for a candidate, which may lead to a lack of uniformity within a given state. Regional certification committees might benefit from greater clarity in distinguishing between the two theologically-related competencies: ability to integrate the insights of theology and the behavioral sciences into pastoral care assessments and practice (2d) and ability to conceptualize and communicate theologically the meaning of crises experienced by persons in the setting in which one ministers (3g). The national certification committee might offer some guidance via education programs currently under development that would set our what competent theological integration looks like.

Only two of the competencies correlated with the candidate's gender. In both, a higher percentage of women failed to demonstrate competency. What is it about these issues that caused women to struggle more than their male peers? Do committee members have different expectations for female candidates? Additional research in this area would be beneficial in order to understand if this is a sign of gender discrimination, a difference in education or training, or some other combination of variables.

Limitations of study

This study has several limitations. The defined scope of the project did not include entering data on the overall group of first-appearance candidates. It should be borne in mind that the percentages discussed here represent only the percentages of candidates who were asked to make second appearances. In addition, it is not possible to determine whether the states which had high numbers of candidates asked to make second appearances also had high numbers of candidates who were recommended for board certified status. There were not enough candidates from enough states in the study group to make statements about whether or not state results differ meaningfully. A larger study sample over a longer time period would be helpful. In short, the question remains: is it more difficult to become certified in some states than in others?

Conclusion

Certification ought to be a rigorous process. It is not in the profession's best interest, nor in the best interest of those for whom chaplains care, for ill-prepared persons to be recognized as competent practitioners. At the same time, if there are systemic problems in the certification process, they may be remedied only if they are first identified.

One requirement for APC board certification is that candidates have at least a year of experience beyond their CPE training. This would be an excellent time for the chaplain and supervisor, mentor, or colleagues to address these issues. Pastoral educators and department heads, not to mention the candidates themselves, ought to be aware of issues that are most likely to be weak points in a candidate's preparation. Steps may then be taken to prepare the candidate for success, not only in the certification process, but for a solid ministry as an APC board certified chaplain.