# *Specialties, Specialization, and Specialists in Professional Psychology and the Role of Lifelong Learning*

Specialty, specialization and specialists are terms used frequently within professional psychology yet such use often reflects confusion about the distinctions between these terms. Use of these terms also evokes varied opinions about the implications of these for the practice of psychology. Nonetheless, as the knowledge base within professional psychology expands and as individuals' knowledge becomes obsolete it is essential to discuss how a psychologist can maintain one's competence in the areas that they chose to practice. This session at the 2010 Education Leadership explored these tensions and their relationship to lifelong learning.

To set the framework for discussion session chair, Dr. Ronal Rozensky, provided the groups key foundational information that included the definitions of specialty, specialization and specialists and reviewed the mechanisms for formal recognition of specialties and specialists. The varied understanding and application of these terms and the resulting confusion was highlighted. The potential benefits of greater organization and consistent use of terms that will be offered in the taxonomy under development by CRSPPP was shared with the group.

The role of lifelong learning and competence to practice in a specialty area raised discussion by the groups of the advantages and disadvantages of specialization in professional psychology. One perspective is that professional psychologists should be generalists and thus be able to serve a broad population. The alternative perspective is that obtaining training in a specialty area benefits the public in that the provider has obtained competencies in a distinctive area of psychology and thus has unique skills. It was noted that even generalists are specialists to the extent that their doctoral degree is from one of the traditional specialty areas in psychology (e.g., clinical).

The evolution of the various specialties was a key point raised with respect to the role of lifelong learning and expanding one's practice to include practice in a recognized specialty area. Specialties vary with respect to the degree of structured guidance available related to education and training requirements. Newer specialties may have structures that are less fixed in terms of a required sequence than older specialties. As such, some specialties may encourage the acquisition of the core knowledge and skills through life long learning at the post-licensure level, whereas others may not recommend such a pathway. Further, as new specialties emerge, it behooves the profession to consider ways to broadly disseminate information to students and providers about the specialty and the specialty specific education and training needed to practice in that area. The groups noted that students should be introduced to the topic of specialties in psychology at the high school level to provide students awareness of the diversity of opportunities within the practice of psychology. A key challenge for those who seek training in a specialty area post-licensure is who will provide supervision as they develop their competencies. An interesting comment was raised about the progression from generalist to specialist and constructing a developmental model to reflect the stages that might occur in this progression.

The distinction between what is a specialist and specialization provoked animated conversation in the groups. Specifically, is it sufficient to operate within the parameters of our ethics code regarding practicing within one's competence or must one obtain an advanced credential in order to refer to oneself as a specialist. It was generally agreed that the use of the term board certified is restricted to those who have obtained an advanced credential, otherwise an individual psychologist must determine what are the limits of their competence. The topic of advanced credentialing raised the point as to whether the profession should be recertifying those with specialty credentials. No consensus was reached, although there was clear acknowledgement of the need for the

individual psychologist to take steps to maintain their competence.

Who gets to decide what it takes to be a specialist? There are many stakeholders including the individual psychologist who wants to expand their competence, national professional associations, the specialty council, licensing boards who are charged with protecting the public from psychologists practicing outside their competence. Providers of continuing education may also be motivated to encourage psychologists to seek education and training in a specialty area.

The discussion reflected the myriad of opinions that inevitably are raised when the topic is specialization in professional psychology. While no consensus was reached on how to apply habits of lifelong learning to training in or maintaining one's competence in a specialty area, lifelong learning is a core value for professional psychology.