Advocating for and Advancing Chaplaincy

Reflection on Advocacy - by Executive Director David A. Lichter, D.Min.

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NACC’s mission is to advocate “for the profession of spiritual care.” Over the past weeks, I have had phone calls with chaplains, a news reporter, a journal writer, and a couple other association professionals on the topic of current or future trends in the “profession” of spiritual or pastoral care. I am still learning your “profession,” and I have been blessed to receive wisdom from many of you who know the landscape, and see the road ahead. Balancing the “professional” and “ministerial” components of your call is a topic for another reflection. Here I want to focus on the “professional.”

Perhaps more than almost any other ministry, the business environments where chaplains serve have required them to learn and embrace the “professionalization” (for lack of a better term) of the ministry. The NACC Revised Standards 305.1-6 address the professional standards that are required for certification, and certainly for ongoing professional growth.

Here are the areas I highlight regarding current/future trends for professionalization. Please let me know if I am hitting the mark, or if other areas should be emphasized. In the next five years, there will be:

Increased need for certified chaplains who understand, embrace, and are prepared to be an effective contributor at the center of the spiritual care services of their institution (Standards 305.1, 305.2, 305.3). The two points here are:

a. Higher need due to anticipated retirement of a large number of chaplains, thus an overall recruitment effort; and

b. Chaplains who are savvy about and effective in all the organizational environments in which they minister. Training in key areas of organizational effectiveness is emphasized. Greater clarity of and emphasis on spiritual care roles through job descriptions that reflect the impact of spiritual care on advancing the mission of and preserving the institution. Thus the need to:

a. Identify what the chaplain does that no one else does, and

b. Describe the position in language that codes the complexity/importance of the work so that human resources and executives can understand it.

A more effective, persuasive way to:

a. Answer the question “How do we know we are doing it?”

b. Show the “value add” of spiritual care by being able to demonstrate its worth through improved methods of measuring its effectiveness.

c. Chart activity in a way that aligns with and aids all members of the care team. (Standards 106.9, 305.5)

A more widely cultivated professional mindset among spiritual care providers (Standard 305) that emphasizes:

a. A resolute dedication and ongoing commitment to improving one’s gifts and competency for the sake of the patient/resident/client being served.
b. A willingness to “give away” the profession through open discussion and dialogue with, and teaching and mentoring of, other healthcare colleagues to understand what we do and outcomes we expect, rather than trying to hold onto our work under the aura of mystery or out of fear of being misunderstood.

c. An attitude that moves from “I am afraid of losing my job” to “I will get better at my job by training and delegating to others what I can in order to stay focused on the key aspects of my work, thus better serving our patients/residents/clients.

For those who seek it, the availability of more commonly developed, accepted, and utilized:

a. Professional career tracks, along with

b. Accessible and affordable educational/formational resources within systems and across professional associations aligned with these tracks.

Improved compensation, based on market-based salary ranges:

a. Adjusted to comparable Master level (plus) professionals, and

b. Appropriate to the level of influence, decision-making, accountability, and problem-solving the ministry entails.

Let me make one other observation from a professional business perspective. Jean Lambert has said, "We assert our value by measuring our effectiveness." I would offer for consideration that the first four points made here are, in effect, efforts we need to make, in collaboration with our employers, so that our value and “marketability” as spiritual care providers will be strengthened. Points five and six will, in part, be dependent on what we do to realize the first four. NACC is committed to be working collaboratively with many partners to help our members be prepared for these trends.

How did I do? What needs to be tweaked? Added? Please let me know your thoughts.