

President's Corner – Dr. John Santa, Ph.D.

A New Professionalism, Collegiality, Competition, and Marketing

In the last President's corner I talked about the rapid growth we have experienced in residential treatment. I tried to make the case that the growth has resulted from a real need and a failure of other professions to take care of youngsters who are immature, lack containment, and need an out of home placement. In the past eight years NATSAP has helped nurture a new profession based on the intervention and care for these immature, emotionally or behaviorally disturbed children and their families. This new profession goes beyond our educational backgrounds. We are more than psychologists, teachers, social workers, or outdoor educators in our residential settings, and we are developing a knowledge that begins to create the basis of a new profession.

As knowledge accumulates, NATSAP has created opportunities to share this information by hosting study groups to define ethical approaches and best practice standards. We have sponsored national and regional conferences to build opportunities for sharing information and exchanging ideas. We have now launched a professional journal with the inaugural edition due in January of 2006, aimed at collecting and codifying the growing information we have gathered about effective treatment. The open collaboration and generous sharing of information is beginning to define our new profession.

Those of us who experience emotional growth programs of twenty years ago will note several substantial differences. The early approaches were truly alternative and charismatic in nature as opposed to professional. Each program was unique and depended heavily on the intuitions, guidance, and often the genius of the founder. Programs could best be described as islands of information with little communication and much distrust and secrecy among the different programs. In many ways the early programs, while creative and entrepreneurial in nature, were both anti-professional and non-professional. They prided themselves in providing an alternative to both medical and standard educational approaches to working with out of control teenagers.

The past fifteen years has seen a rapid growth of programs as well as a shift towards a more professional and information sharing environment. NATSAP as an organization is both the result of the increase in professionalism among programs, and a catalyst for fostering the development of our new profession.

As our new profession develops, we must examine what it means to be a professional. We must also ask ourselves what are the boundaries and edges of this new collaborative profession. Where do we bump into the economic, and competitive forces that do not foster collegiality and the growth of a new profession?

Several areas create a high risk for undermining our new profession. In marketing it is often tempting to offer rumors or limited information about other programs in order to make the case that your program is the best answer for a particular client. Or, we pass gossip to each other and consultants. Such gossip at times makes us feel we are insiders, or it places us in a superior position in the eyes of a consultant, or sometimes we are just in a foul spirited mood and are leaking our feelings in the hopes that this will somehow make us feel better. To be honest, I think that Aspen programs have been the unfair target for some of our gossip as we struggle to deal with the fear of change, growth, and corporations entering our profession. But I have the feeling that gossip about each other is endemic and destructive to professionalism, trust, and collegiality.

Another way that marketing has interfered with creating a professional community is when we have a conference and our members pay more attention to the marketing opportunity of having consultants available than to the opportunity to develop relationships among our members. We must look closely at situations in which we leave our conference in order to entertain consultants. For example two years ago at the NATSAP conference we had a dinner to honor Kimball DeLaMare as the first recipient of the award for outstanding contributions in our field. Only a third of the members remained for the dinner and nearly two thirds left to market. I don't think it means we must never look at or talk to a consultant at our conference. Obviously, many of us have close personal relationships with consultants. It makes perfectly good sense to maintain

friendships, but we must also make the development of collegial relationships a priority. And we must constantly question and examine our motives.

Staff recruiting is another obvious area in which we can undue trust, mutual respect and the development of professionalism. At the last NATSAP conference several of my therapists came back quite flattered, but a little chagrined at being openly recruited by other programs. Others have told me of having letters sent to them directly enticing them to leave their current program and go to a new program. Obviously, staff poaching will create distrust and decrease collegiality. How should recruitment be handled in a way that is open and yet respects each other's business? I am not sure any profession has this problem figured out, but we must discuss it and begin to establish agreement as to what is OK and what is not.

Finally, as a profession we have a fiduciary responsibility for those whom we serve, and we must safeguard and care for the emotional well being of vulnerable children and their families. We must guard against greed, excess, corruption, and social irresponsibility even more than Enron, or the White House.