David Kaplan’s recent article in the Fall 2009 edition of Spectrum addressed the state of research in counseling and counselor education; an issue that we believe could have serious implications regarding counselor identity and the capacity for independent, counselor-centered scholarship within the profession. Kaplan underscored that much of the new scholarship in the field, including publications in ACA journals, presentations at ACA conferences, and new dissertations, has focused on surveying and reporting opinions of the membership. This, he asserts, has led to counseling research becoming “a collection of opinions” at the expense of focusing on more salient, outcome-based research.

Kaplan attributes this misdirection of the counseling research trajectory to the fact that counselors, as a group, tend to be more interested in clinical practice, supervision, and teaching (based on Holland Codes) than in research. Kaplan also contends that counselor educators with an aversion to research are now mentoring doctoral students who, likewise, are uninterested in developing their skills as researchers. This shared distaste for research results in a collusion between faculty and students to meet the dissertation demands in the “simplest and easiest way possible rather than focusing on conducting meaningful research”. Kaplan concludes that the best way to address this problem is for the profession to change our doctoral degree from a research-focused degree to a professional degree that minimizes research requirements.

As counselor educators in a Research I institution, parts of Kaplan’s argument resonated strongly with us. We stand with him in questioning the apparent influx of opinion-based research that fails to address complex research questions more meaningful to the field, including those avenues of inquiry concerned with outcome- and process-based studies. Additionally, as mentors and advisors to doctoral students for the past ten years, we have certainly worked with a number of counselor education doctoral students who are highly skilled counselors, teachers, and supervisors but who have struggled in developing their research interests and agendas.

We do not, however, agree with Kaplan’s conclusion that counseling research should be summarily terminated and left to psychologists, whom, he argues, are more interested in and qualified to conduct research. While recognizing the contributions that psychological research, both past and present, has made to the field of counseling, it is also important to note the significant potential that the counseling profession, a body with a distinct and divergent identity, has to offer the advancement of clinical practice in counseling and related field. In particular, our commitment
to developmental counseling; unique appreciation for the ecological complexity of human nature, growth and change; and allegiance to social justice and empowerment of historically marginalized clients are important elements of our helping process that could fruitfully inform inquiry in psychology, social work, and other professions serving the psychological needs of clients. Of equal importance, the counseling perspective has the potential to mount substantive challenges to the burgeoning popularity of the medical model.

Therefore, while we agree with Kaplan regarding the current state of much of the counseling research, we respectfully disagree with the conclusion that counselors become passive recipients of research generated by psychologists, psychiatrists, and those from other helping professions. Instead, we offer the following recommendations as an entry point for addressing the current state of research in counseling.

First, the counseling profession would be well advised to develop and foster a research genre that is reflective of counseling’s core values. Many of the intervention efficacy studies lauded by Kaplan are expensive, multi-site, quantitative studies that identify “subjects” using criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and involve the use of more cognitively-based, psychologically focused, manualized, short-term interventions. These studies are generally designed to measure observable changes in subjects, often related to the number of DSM criteria being manifested. These large-scale positivist designs, reflective of research practices in medicine and pharmacology, pay scant attention to dimensions of the helping relationship central to the counseling profession. We suggest that counselors develop research designs using methodologies that reflect counselor’s constructivist, diversity-focused epistemology, ecological ontology, acknowledgement of the empowering nature of co-constituted knowledge, and commitment to emancipatory inquiry. Research that adheres to counseling ideology has the potential to challenge psychological knowledge generated by uncritically using the tools and assumptions of medicine and science.

Second, we need to reevaluate the mandate from the field that all scholarship, including journal articles and presentations, provide strong practice components. While implications for practice are certainly important to all counseling research, it is our sense that the field has emphasized the practical components of our work to the point that theoretical and other research-based contributions have become marginalized. The marginalization of research can be seen clearly when examining the presentations that are accepted at the American Counseling Association’s annual conference, our field’s premiere conference. The guidelines for submitting proposals clearly state that presentations must focus on practice, and even go as far as rating presentations on how well they “involve participants.” While we agree that presentations should be engaging, these guidelines are not always conducive to presenting research-based findings. We recommend that ACA consider expanding the criteria to accommodate and encourage research-based presentations. Rather than relegating these presentations to “posters”, they should be integrated into the regular (and more esteemed) presentation slots and reviewed and selected by experienced researchers. Similarly, the Journal of Counseling and Development could also benefit if the practice mandate from the association were eased to allow publication of sound, counseling-related research not immediately transferable to practice.

Third, we believe that counselor research will be advanced by allowing CACREP accredited programs to hire qualified faculty from a wide range of disciplines. While there are certainly many counselor educators with extraordinary research skills, there are others, as Kaplan asserts, who are much stronger in teaching, supervision, and clinical practice than in research. The proliferation of statistical software now allows researchers to conduct more complicated statistical analyses than ever before. Conducting research using
Recognizing the same need for preparing skilled practitioners in the field of counseling, counselor education programs at many research institutions, including the University of Rochester, offer a parallel degree to the Psy. D. referred to as the Doctorate of Education in Counseling, or an Ed.D. Students in our Ed.D. program receive the same training in clinical practice, teaching, and supervision as our Ph.D. students and graduate as "doctors". However, Ed.D. students’ research training is much more practitioner focused. While they often take the same research courses as Ph.D. students, their individual class projects and dissertations are geared toward action-based, practitioner scholarship, which often includes program evaluations, small-scale intervention or process studies, and systematic examinations of their own practice. The Ed.D., therefore, allows the field to continue to develop advanced level practitioners without burdening these practice-oriented student with more theoretically-focused Ph.D. dissertations.

In conclusion, we thank Kaplan for raising this issue. A critical review regarding the state of research in the field is both timely and necessary. Rather than abandoning research, however, we assert that it is imperative to the success of the field to increase and modify the course of our research preparation so that we can assertively chart a course for counseling and counselor education that is consistent with our values. We assert that loosing the mandate for strong practice implications in ACA publications and presentations, dropping the mandate that only CACREP graduates become full-time counselor educators, and widening the use of the Ed.D. degree to educate advanced level practitioners provides a beginning to strengthening the field’s research identity. We welcome the opportunity to discuss reactions to our ideas and to learn about other innovative ideas for training counselor educators in research.