

Why I Got Board Certified and How You Can Too

Why would I go through the seemingly “arduous” process of getting board certified after already becoming licensed? After all, I had paid my dues - five years of graduate school, completing a dissertation, working as a pre-licensed clinician for multiple years at various practicums, internships and post-doctoral training programs, completing an oral exam, and sitting for the EPPP and CPLEE. Isn't that enough?

For many of us, it might be. For me, it wasn't. As a newly licensed clinician, I almost felt as if I knew “too much.” Over the course of six or seven years, I was inundated with information; I had been trained by numerous supervisors, often with theoretical orientations, perspectives and training styles. I yearned to feel comfortable and confident in my clinical decision making, ranging from daily tasks such as diagnostic interviewing, treatment planning and providing interventions, to more complex endeavors such as ethical decision making, crisis intervention and interdisciplinary communication with an array of treatment team members from different disciplines.

When I learned about board certification, I was intrigued. It seemed to fit the piece of the puzzle I felt was missing. I could do self study (with extensive guidelines provided) to help integrate the years of knowledge and skills I had acquired. I'd be reviewed objectively, through written and video samples of my work and then evaluated and assessed orally by a panel of professionals I'd never met. Although it seemed daunting, the more I explored what it required, I realized I'd gain what I was hoping for throughout the process, rather than whether I'd actually receive certification or not (sound familiar...hint, hint..growth mindset). Please don't get me wrong, I knew I'd be very upset if I didn't achieve the certification, but I recognized I'd receive feedback to help me pass the next time I applied. The only thing I had to lose was time and possibly some ego. I decided to take the plunge!

What was the process like? Not what I'd expected. When I applied initially, I submitted an application along with the required materials (official transcripts from my graduate program, certification of completion of internship, etc), for my speciality (clinical psychology) to the central office. And then I waited...and waited...and three months later I received a congratulations that I had met candidacy status. In other words, my credentials had been reviewed and approved by the central office as well as my particular specialty board.

This is where it got scary! The next step was to register for the practice sample within 30 days of receiving the candidacy letter and then I had exactly one year to send in my practice samples (written and video). Fortunately, ABPP offers a very thorough manual of exactly what you need to do and you are provided a mentor to help you through the process, if you choose. Although each specialty board is different, practice samples are representative of your work and competency.

Specifically, for the clinical speciality, my practice sample included a personal statement describing various aspects of my role as a psychologist (my theoretical orientation, the evidence base that informs my practice, my ethical decision making style as well as my awareness of individual and cultural

diversity., etc.), my CV, and two one-hour recorded video samples of myself in my clinical role (providing assessment, intervention, etc) with thorough written self-review reflecting on my foundational and functional competencies as a clinical psychologist. This piece took a lot of effort, however, it was what I was hoping for. I was able to explore myself in a professional role and although it increased my awareness of my strengths, I also identified some weaknesses. In doing so, I was able to reflect on how I could do certain things differently in the future, in other words, I was finally integrating my knowledge.

While working on the practice samples, I met online with my mentor several times. His guidance was invaluable; I had someone I could ask questions of which helped “demystify” much of what was expected. Once the samples were completed and submitted (which took a good amount of time) my assigned committee members each evaluated my samples independently. After several months of waiting, fortunately, I learned I had passed and was invited to sit for the oral exam.

The oral exam was much different than I had imagined. Although it was explained the exam would be collegial in style, my imagination (and anxiety) had gotten the worst of me. I envisioned three stoic interviewers grilling me with very challenging questions about myself and my work. The three hour oral exam was not this case at all, but quite the contrary. It truly felt like a thought-provoking conversation with deep introspection of myself as a psychologist. Of course I was asked questions about my work, my thoughts on how I’d handle certain ethical dilemmas and such, but it really was that final puzzle piece I was hoping for. It was a reflection and integration of my work; my chance to not only show the committee, but to myself, how I had grown personally and professionally through the process. Equally as important, from this deep dive into my work, I had grown in my knowledge, skills and abilities into a true specialist: someone who could offer the public the same “gold standard” that medical and other health professions offer.

In closing, I wrote this to help demystify the process and to encourage others to apply for board certification. You might be further along in your career and may not feel you need the same level of reflection, however there are many other benefits. Some institutions, such as the VA or other large medical organizations pay a higher salary or a monthly bonus. Board certification facilitates license mobility in most states and some academic institutions require certification for promotion and tenure. It distinguishes you within our profession by obtaining specialty expertise and most importantly in ensures the public you’ve gone above and beyond in your training to provide the best care possible for your client and the public.

If you would like more information, please go to www.abpp.org or feel free to contact me directly at lorraine@feelinggoodinsitute.com.