

Increased ABA Program Standards: Good for Small Colleges?

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As the program director for the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) program at Johnson State College in Johnson, Vermont, I have learned many things via my association with the ABA community. I have learned that the practitioners are passionate, that the schools and agencies are in desperate need of qualified personnel, and that the students of ABA are talented and out to make a difference in the lives of children and others who need high-quality, ethical intervention. I have learned that the need for services and the wonderful people who provide those services is only growing. I have come to conclude that having a local and accessible option for Vermonters and other students across the nation to gain BCBA certification is crucial.

I have learned something different in my dealings with the national Behavior Analysis Certification Board (BACB). I have learned that the goals of the board, with all good intentions, run contrary to achieving our local goals and may be driving small colleges like us out of the business of ABA at the height of need.

The BACB has been gradually tightening their requirements for higher education programs in ABA. They announced in 2013 that they would be increasing the requirements for programs to include that they must have a program director who is 1) a full-time employee, 2) holds a doctoral degree, and 3) has BCBA/BCBA-D certification in order to “help to ensure compliance and foster better communication between the BACB, approved course sequences, and students” (BACB, 2013, p.3). This regulation takes effect in January of 2017.

I am a firm believer in rigor and in accountability in higher education. Any student who has completed our program will testify to the level of expectation in terms of content, application, ethics and single-subject design that we require from our ABA students. Requirements that will improve outcomes for students are something that I will consistently support.

What I cannot support is a requirement that penalizes small and local programs. While the BACB did, to their credit, give four years for colleges to meet this requirement, those four years did not magically result in a financial windfall for small colleges to be able to add additional staff, or for faculty to take time from their already busy schedules to become BCBA certified. Colleges can have qualified and excellent ABA instructors, high pass rates on the Board exam, and a record of sending out wonderful students in the community but it will do them no good without a program director with a doctorate. Small colleges across the country who do not already have such a program director would need a new hire to fit this requirement. The addition of a single faculty member on a small college campus is a major change and a serious financial investment, and yet the BCBA has mandated it in the name of compliance and communication.

A requirement such as this by definition benefits large, impersonal programs over small and intimate ones. A big, national online institution can afford to add a staff member for this as they draw on students from across the country; small colleges in rural areas, which exist to serve the local community, will never have a student pool of that size. And yet, the need for high-quality behaviorists in that same community exists.

We have not yet decided at Johnson State how we will handle this challenge. We, like all small colleges, want to serve the community in the best way possible while also being clear-eyed about fiscal circumstances that are

inarguable. It would be a shame, however, if good aspiring ABA practitioners were forced to choose an impersonal nationwide online program rather than a local and community-based one simply because the regulations have forced us out of the business.

References

Behavior Analysis Certification Board. (2013, May). Increased Requirements for Coordinators of Approved Course Sequences. *BACB Newsletter*. Retrieved from http://bacb.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/BACB_Newsletter_5-13.pdf