

Understanding Accreditation: MPCAC vs. CACREP

Choosing the right graduate program is a pivotal step in your journey toward becoming a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). At Lehigh University, we are committed to transparency and helping you understand the landscape of professional accreditation. Below, we outline the differences between the two primary accrediting bodies in the field and why Lehigh has chosen to align our **M.Ed. in Mental Health Counseling** with the **Master's in Psychology and Counseling Accreditation Council (MPCAC)**.

Accreditation Comparison at a Glance: MPCAC vs. CACREP

Both MPCAC and CACREP are recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and both are valid pathways ensuring high-quality educational standards. They do, however, differ in their philosophical approach and some requirements.

Feature	MPCAC (Lehigh's Choice)	CACREP
Field of Study	Rooted in the field of Psychology	Rooted in the field of Counselor Education
Philosophy	Blends counseling and psychological sciences; strong focus on multiculturalism and culturally responsive care.	Focuses strictly on a singular "Counselor" identity.
Curriculum	Competency-based; allows for interdisciplinary research and faculty expertise; science-backed practices taught; careful attention to optimal faculty-to-student ratios	Prescriptive and content-based; requires specific coursework and faculty-to-student ratios.
Licensure	Designed to meet licensure requirements in most states (including PA). Recognized by VA/TRICARE systems.	Designed to meet licensure requirements in all states. Recognized by VA/TRICARE systems.
Clinical Focus	Emphasizes evidence-based practices across counseling settings and culturally responsive services. Number of practicum and internship hours is the same.	Emphasizes standardized professional identity and counseling roles. Number of practicum and internship hours is the same.

Why Lehigh Chose MPCAC Accreditation

Lehigh University's Counseling Psychology program has a long-standing reputation for excellence, rooted in the **scientist-practitioner model**. We chose MPCAC accreditation for several strategic reasons:

1. **Interdisciplinary Excellence:** MPCAC values the intersection of psychology and counseling. This allows our students to benefit from cutting-edge psychological research while developing practical counseling skills.
2. **Academic Freedom & Innovation:** MPCAC's competency-based standards allow our faculty to update the curriculum quickly in response to new research and the evolving needs of the mental health field, rather than being locked into a rigid, one-size-fits-all structure. Our faculty are not limited to Counselor Education degrees, but also include an array of Counseling Psychology and Clinical Psychology faculty with a variety of areas of expertise and experience.
3. **Commitment to Social Justice:** MPCAC's mission aligns perfectly with Lehigh's commitment to culturally responsive training. This accreditation supports our focus on social justice and serving diverse populations in a variety of settings, and students develop multicultural and social justice competencies across the full curriculum.
4. **Focus on Professional Competencies:** MPCAC's competency-based focus accords with our focus on bridging the gap between theory and practice. A content-based approach prioritizes the accumulation of knowledge (lectures, textbooks, assignments on particular topics), whereas MPCAC's focus on competencies prioritizes the **application** of that knowledge in real-world clinical scenarios.
5. **Licensure Eligibility:** Our curriculum is meticulously designed to meet the educational requirements for **Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)** status in Pennsylvania and the majority of other states.

Benefits to You as a Lehigh Student

Enrolling in our MPCAC-aligned program offers distinct advantages for your future career:

- **Evidence-Based Training:** You will be trained as in a *science-practitioner model*, meaning your clinical work will be grounded in the most current, proven psychological methods.
- **Focus on Developing Professional Competencies:** Instead of just ensuring you are exposed to specific content areas ("what is taught"), your training will focus on helping you to attain specific professional competencies ("what a student can actually do").
 - In a high-stakes field like mental health counseling, this distinction is critical for both student development and client safety.
 - Your training will prioritize the **application** of knowledge in real-world clinical scenarios.
 - For example, instead of measuring success by whether a student passed a course on a specific topic (e.g., "Human Growth and Development"). A competency-based model asks: "*Can the student apply developmental theory to build rapport with a grieving child?*"
- **Flexibility in our curriculum:** Competency standards focus on the *outcome* (e.g., "The student can utilize evidence-based trauma interventions"). This allows Lehigh's faculty to integrate the latest neuroscience or specialized research into the curriculum immediately without waiting for a national accreditor to update a specific course list.

- **Flexibility for Doctoral Study:** Because MPCAC recognizes the overlap between counseling and psychology, our graduates are exceptionally well-prepared if they choose to pursue a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology or Clinical Psychology later.
- **Path to Licensure:** Graduates of our program successfully pursue licensure as LPCs. While a small number of states (such as Kentucky and Florida) have moved toward requiring CACREP-specific degrees, the vast majority of state boards recognize MPCAC-accredited programs or allow for "equivalent" educational reviews.
- **Quality Assurance:** MPCAC accreditation is a mark of rigor. It signals to employers and state boards that you have graduated from a program that meets the highest national standards for clinical training and ethical practice.

Note on Licensure: We encourage all potential students to review the specific licensure requirements for the state in which they intend to practice. Lehigh's faculty and staff are here to assist you in navigating these requirements to ensure your education aligns with your professional goals.

Are there states in that only license graduates of CACREP-accredited programs?

- There is a misconception that license portability is severely limited without a degree from a CACREP-accredited program. Despite some misrepresentations about this, the fact is that the vast majority of states and agencies (e.g., VA/TRICARE systems) that mention CACREP accreditation view MPCAC and CACREP as equivalent.
- About 11 states (including California, Maryland, and Utah) technically "require" CACREP in their primary language but explicitly include a clause that allows for "equivalent" programs. Because Lehigh's program is MPCAC-accredited and meets the 60-credit threshold with specific core coursework, and includes the same number of clinical (practicum and internship) hours, Lehigh's MPCAC-accredited Mental Health Counseling program is typically accepted as equivalent in these states.
- There are only four states that present challenges for graduates of MPCAC-accredited programs at this time:
 - **Kentucky or Florida:** If you plan to work as a counselor in these states, then you should probably go to a CACREP-accredited program.
 - **Ohio** has a long-standing requirement that clinical mental health counseling programs must be CACREP-accredited for a graduate to be eligible for the LPC/LPCC. Ohio provides a very specific "**Educational Equivalency**" review, but it is primarily intended for people with degrees in **related fields** (like Clinical Psychology). It is much more difficult for a standard non-CACREP counseling degree to pass this review than it is in other states. A detailed Board review of your syllabi is likely.
 - **North Carolina:** North Carolina's Board of Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors (NCBLCMHC) requires a master's degree in counseling from a CACREP-accredited program. However, North Carolina allows for "licensure by endorsement" for experienced counselors from other states. If you have been licensed in good standing in another state for at least five years (and meet other criteria), you may be able to obtain a license even if your original program was not CACREP-accredited.

Summary for students in MPCAC-accredited programs:

If you attend Lehigh's MPCAC-accredited program and wish to practice in these states:

1. **Pennsylvania & Most Other States:** You are in the clear. MPCAC is widely accepted as an equivalent standard.
2. **The "Big Four" (KY, FL, OH, NC):** If you plan to move to these states **immediately after graduation** as a new counselor, you may face significant challenges.
3. **The "Practice First" Strategy:** Many counselors graduate from an MPCAC program, get fully licensed in a state like Pennsylvania or New Jersey, and *then* move to a state that prioritizes CACREP, such as North Carolina. Once you are a fully licensed "Independent Counselor" with years of experience, many states (like North Carolina) become more flexible through **Reciprocity or Endorsement** rules.

Why Lehigh Remains MPCAC

Despite the four states that pose challenges, the majority of the United States (and the VA/TRICARE systems) recognize that high-quality training exists outside the CACREP silo. By choosing MPCAC, Lehigh maintains an interdisciplinary curriculum that bridges psychology and counseling—a philosophy that many students find more academically rigorous and better preparation for potential doctoral (Ph.D.) work. CACREP will not accredit programs whose faculty are primarily psychologists (Counseling or Clinical), rather than counselor educators.

Bottom Line: If your immediate goal is to move to Kentucky or Florida, or to move to Ohio or North Carolina the day after graduation to start your career, a CACREP program is the path of least resistance. For almost everywhere else—and for those who value a science-practitioner psychological foundation—MPCAC remains a highly respected and viable credential.