



Preamble scramble

As a service to members, *Counseling Today* is publishing a monthly interview series focused on new aspects of the revised *ACA Code of Ethics*. The entire code is available on the American Counseling Association website at counseling.org/ethics.

For this column, ACA Director of Ethics Erin Martz and ACA Chief Professional Officer David Kaplan interviewed members of the Ethics Revision Task Force.

Erin Martz & David Kaplan: Before we get to changes that were made to the preamble, let's address its purpose. Why does the *ACA Code of Ethics* need a preamble? Why not just go directly to the nuts and bolts and the do's and don'ts?

Ethics Revision Task Force: The preamble sets the tone for the code of ethics. It gives information about what's contained in the code of ethics, and it explains the purpose of the code of ethics. It also provides core professional values as well as principles for ethical behavior and decision-making.

The preamble is also a statement to the public: "This is who we are as a profession, and these are the things that we value. This is the foundation on which we base our ethics." When you take a look at the new statement of professional values, when you take a look at the new statement of principles that provide that foundation, you get a jumping-off point to understand the rest of the code.

Q: In this revision, the focus has expanded beyond ACA members to include the counseling profession as a whole. Why was that done?

A: The *ACA Code of Ethics* is often used in courts of law as the guidelines for the profession. We must also bear in mind that while ACA has 55,000 members, there are many more counselors out there.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to say that this is the code for the profession and these are the expectations for all the subspecialties that we represent.

Q: With that in mind, tell us what is new in the preamble to the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*.

A: For the first time, the *ACA Code of Ethics* provides the values of the profession of counseling as well as the fundamental principles of professional ethical behavior for our profession. The Ethics Revision Task Force focused on fundamental values and principles because we wanted to make sure that members abide by the spirit as well as to the letter of the ethical standards. We are trying to ensure that counselors understand that they can't just go to one statement within the code, read half of it and then base their ethical decision-making on that. They need the bigger picture.

The preamble also reinforces the idea of using a decision-making model. The Ethics Revision Task Force wanted counselors to understand the necessity of thinking through an ethical decision.

Q: As mentioned, the preamble now lists and describes six foundational principles for the ethical practice of professional counselors: autonomy (fostering the client's right to control his or her life), nonmaleficence (avoiding actions that cause harm), beneficence (working for the good of the client and society), justice (treating clients fairly), fidelity (being trustworthy) and veracity (dealing truthfully with clients). Where did these principles come from?

A: Most of these principles go back several decades and actually come from the medical model, where physicians were taking a look at the basic core principles that underscore appropriate decision-making as well as patient rights. Through

the intervening decades, we've seen a greater understanding of not just those beginning principles but the addition of a few more. For example, veracity is new. Veracity is truth telling. It encompasses being truthful in all of our interactions — not just with our clients but with colleagues and other professional entities as well.

Q: Does that mean that counselors can't use paradoxical interventions?

A: Paradox is a treatment modality in which we try to help our clients rethink things. As such, it is not being untruthful to our clients. Veracity focuses on such things as the need to make appropriate and accurate diagnoses and to bill clients and insurance companies accurately.

Q: Are all of the six principles equally weighted, or are there any that take precedence?

A: Nonmaleficence is something that often rises to the top since causing harm can have catastrophic effects.

Some counselors would suggest that autonomy is the top principle, but you can't look at the principles in an absolutely hierarchical fashion because each of them is applied in different ways to particular situations. For example, if a client is suicidal, autonomy would suggest that it's up to that person to determine the direction of one's life. But nonmaleficence has to take precedence because in that particular case, we would cause extreme harm if a client was suicidal and we did not intervene. We can say that the different principles interact in such a way that one takes precedence over another based on the needs of the client and the context of the situation.

Q: Speaking of client needs, it looks like there is an increased focus on collaboration between the counselor and the client. Why is that?

A: We really wanted to make clear that collaboration with clients is a key piece of what counselors do when we are acting in an ethical manner.

The first code that was created in the early 1960s focused very much on the counselor as expert. As we've grown as a profession, we have figured out that we're not always the experts that we'd like to be. We work collaboratively with our clients to determine the best direction. Counselor-client collaboration is an ethical obligation for us now, and it's reflected in how we've revised and created the code.

Q: Let's turn now to the professional values that are listed in the preamble for the first time: enhancing human development, embracing multiculturalism and diversity, promoting social justice, safeguarding the integrity of the counselor-client relationship and practicing in a competent and ethical manner. Why were the professional values of the counseling profession highlighted?

A: Counseling codes of ethics from outside the United States tend to be upfront about counseling values.

We wanted to reflect this worldwide trend and, therefore, made the values of counseling more clear within the preamble.

Q: Is there anything about the preamble that you want ACA members and professional counselors to know about that we haven't covered so far?

A: The task force thought it was important to make a distinction between ethics and law, so new language was added clarifying that a violation of the code does not necessarily constitute legal liability or a violation of the law. Legal liability is only determined by courts of law.

Q: One last question. Why should professional counselors read the preamble rather than just delve into specific ethical statements?

A: It is increasingly important to understand what the basis of the statements are — those basic fundamental principles that help in deciding how the ethics are applied. Without reading the preamble, counselors can take a statement in the code out of context because they did not understand how it came to be,

how it is applied in a particular situation and how it can be applied more broadly in the profession itself.

The preamble gives us additional information about how we can use ethical decision-making to meet specific needs that are not necessarily in the code or that conflict with other needs. So the preamble gives us a lot of guidance.



To receive assistance with specific ethical dilemmas or questions as a benefit of your membership in ACA, contact the ACA Ethics Department at 800.347.6647 ext. 314 or email ethics@counseling.org. ♦

Letters to the editor:
ct@counseling.org

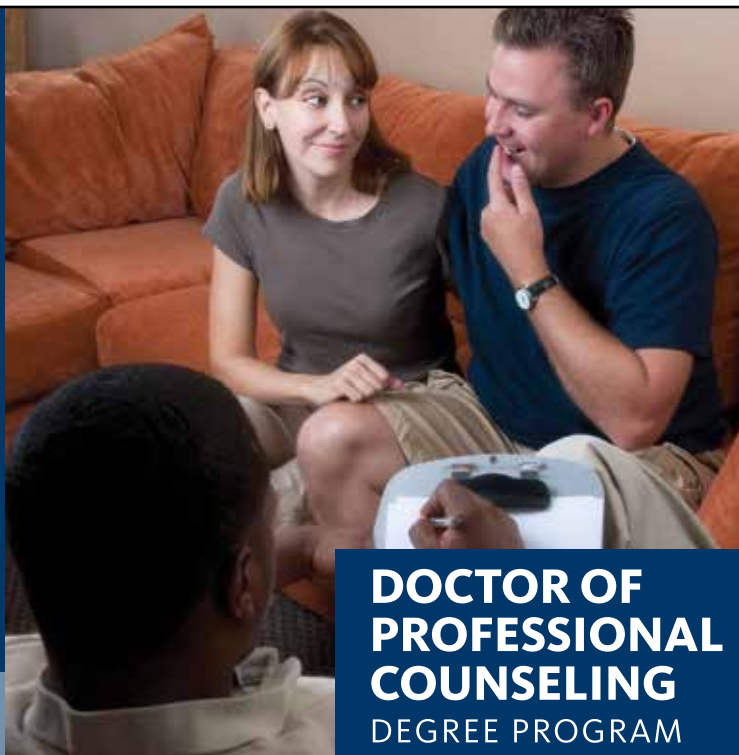
HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Year-round admission
- ▶ On campus and online courses
- ▶ Experienced clinical faculty
- ▶ Cohorts of supportive professional colleagues
- ▶ Clinical specialization
- ▶ Evidence based practice
- ▶ Psychotherapy integration
- ▶ International learning opportunities
- ▶ Community service
- ▶ Clinical project instead of dissertation

CONTACT INFORMATION

Dr. Stephen Southern

Professor & Chair
Department of Psychology and Counseling
Southern@mc.edu
601-488-4631



**DOCTOR OF
PROFESSIONAL
COUNSELING
DEGREE PROGRAM**

GPS | **Mississippi College**
GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL STUDIES