



ACA Graduate Student Ethics Competition

The American Counseling Association Ethics Committee holds the annual ACA Graduate Student Ethics Competition to educate members of the association about ethics issues and to engage graduate students at both the master's and doctoral levels in critically analyzing a prospective ethics case and creating an appropriate decision-making plan to respond to the situation.

The competition might seem intimidating, especially to those counseling students who are still taking ethics coursework or who do not yet have field experience. The aim of the competition, however, is to give students an opportunity to work together while practicing ethical decision-making skills as applied to real-world scenarios.

To demonstrate how students have done this successfully, this month's Ethics Update features excerpts from the essay submitted by the 2016-2017 first-place doctoral team from the University of Iowa. The members of the winning doctoral team are Roma Rush, Haley Wikoff and Carol Seehusen, along with their faculty adviser, Noel Estrada-Hernandez.

About the competition

Each counselor education program was allowed to have one team of master's-level students and one team of doctoral-level students. Teams had to be composed of three to four students and one faculty adviser, and all participants were required to be active members of ACA.

The Ethics Committee created two mock scenarios that addressed a current ethical issue in the counseling profession. Teams were required to utilize the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* and information from

relevant counseling literature for their case study responses. Team members were not allowed to consult with anyone outside of their teams, including their faculty advisers or other members of their faculty.

In their case study responses, teams had to clearly identify the dilemma, propose the actions they would take in the case (based on what actions team members believed to be the most ethical), justify their proposed actions and describe the decision-making model they used. The decision-making model was expected to be one that had previously been discussed in the professional literature, and team members had to offer a rationale regarding why they chose to apply that model to the case study.

The top three master's teams and top three doctoral teams received monetary prizes. In addition, one master's team and one doctoral team received an honorable mention. All winning teams were recognized at the National Awards Ceremony at the ACA 2017 Conference & Expo in San Francisco earlier this year, and the winning essays are posted online at counseling.org/ethics-competition.

Mock scenario

The ACA Ethics Committee created the following mock scenario for the doctoral-level teams in the 2016-2017 ethics competition:

Ben has been providing supervision to Sarah, a master's student who is a first-semester intern in a high school. Sarah has been doing good work with a 15-year-old client until the client reveals, in their fourth session, that she is sure she is lesbian and wants help in coming out to her classmates and her parents.

Sarah is a member of a conservative Christian denomination that teaches that

homosexuality is a sin, and she sincerely believes that to be a biblical truth. She adds that she realizes "it's not about me" and has learned, through her previous coursework, that she must set aside her personal values. But where she is struggling now is that she is being asked to be LGBTQ-affirmative as a counselor. She thinks that she can be values-neutral in her sessions, but she would be incongruent with her true self and would be actively encouraging sin if she were to be LGBTQ-affirmative in working with the client.

Ben, as a gay man who is active in advocating for LGBTQ rights in his community, is aware that he may be identifying with the struggles of Sarah's client, and he wonders if his own personal values are affecting his supervision with Sarah. However, during group supervision with other doctoral supervisors from his cohort, he finds himself hesitant to talk about Sarah's issue.

Essay excerpts from the first-place doctoral-level team

Following are unedited excerpts from the winning doctoral-level submission developed by the team from the University of Iowa. The two top essays (doctoral level and master's level) can be read on ACA's website at counseling.org/ethics-competition.

Ethical dilemma

The ethical dilemma involves Ben's hesitation to seek supervision and consultation regarding his feeling of being uncomfortable with Sarah's actions. Ben needs to address the fact that his personal values and LGBTQ advocacy might impact his supervision of Sarah, considering her religious beliefs and values. Since Ben personally identifies

with Sarah's client, he may skew the supervision he provides, imposing his personal values and beliefs onto Sarah, influencing her work with her client in a way that he deems appropriate. This behavior is against the ACA's (2014) *Code of Ethics* and the ACES (2011) Best Practices for Clinical Supervision. Additionally, Ben could also pose harm to Sarah and impact her development as a counselor, which might damage her relationship with this client and future clients.

ACA code conflicts

Examining the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* resulted in the identification of several applicable codes that pertain to Ben's situation. Code A.4.b. Personal Values advises that counselors should be aware of their own personal "values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors" (p. 5) and avoid imposing those on clients or supervisees (ACA, 2014). Ben maintains an awareness that his values conflict with Sarah's, and he worries about imposing his values onto her, yet he has done nothing to avoid doing so. Instead, he ignores the situation entirely, and avoids

seeking consultation with his supervisor or supervising peers. Code A.4.b. explains that counselors should seek training in the areas where the counselor risks imposing his/her own values (ACA, 2014). This ties closely into code C.2.e. Consultation on Ethical Obligations, which solicits counselors to "consult with other counselors, the ACA Ethics and Professional Standards Department, or related professionals" (p. 9) when ethical questions arise (ACA, 2014).

Section F of the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* applies to Ben's situation, as this section deals with supervision specifically. Code F.2.b. Multicultural Issues/Diversity in Supervision and F.4.c. Standards for Supervisees both address issues relevant to Ben's situation. The first code states that supervisors remain aware of and address issues related to diversity in the supervisory relationship (ACA, 2014). The second code states that supervisors ensure supervisees are aware of ethical standards (ACA, 2014). If Ben worries that Sarah might be breaking ethical codes due to the values conflict between herself and her client, he is responsible for bringing this

to her attention. Code F.5.a. Ethical Responsibilities expands on this, stating that supervisees understand the *ACA Code of Ethics* applies to them as it would to students in general, and that the obligation to the client remains the same (ACA, 2014). Additionally, Ben is responsible for bringing up the diversity issues between himself and Sarah in supervision, allowing for full disclosure and avoiding potential imposition of values through communication, and reflection from both Ben and Sarah's perspectives.

Ben, as supervisor, holds some power involving gatekeeping (code F.6.b.). In this role, Ben is responsible for ensuring that Sarah is capable and ethical in her role as a counselor (ACA, 2014). Ben should continually monitor Sarah's interaction with her client and ensure no harm to the client is done. However, a bigger issue arises when Ben is hesitant in discussing Sarah's situation within his own supervision, which could possibly lead to him harshly evaluating her if she does not provide services the way Ben feels she should. F.6.b. continues to say that supervisors seek consultation

HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Spring and Fall admissions
- ▶ 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



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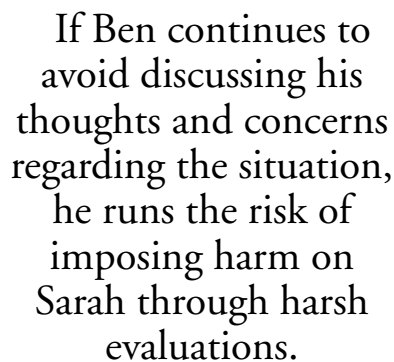
and document decisions, which Ben is hesitant to do (ACA, 2014). If Ben continues to avoid discussing his thoughts and concerns regarding the situation, he runs the risk of imposing harm on Sarah through harsh evaluations that could affect Sarah's progress through the program.

Tarvydas Model applied to Ben's ethical dilemma

The first step in the Tarvydas Model is to gain awareness of the situation and gather as much information as possible (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). Ben is already aware of the situation, evidenced by his unease and hesitation to bring the situation up in supervision. However, he has not considered the sensitive nature of the situation and how his unease could affect others.

Once Ben understands the nature of the dilemma, his next step is to consider all possible stakeholders (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). The obvious stakeholder is Sarah, but Ben also needs to consider her client's stake in his decision. Any impact that his supervision or resolution has on Sarah can have a direct impact on the working relationship between Sarah and her client. Section 5.b. states that the supervisor engages a supervisee "intentionally" (p. 7) to create a strong working relationship (ACES, 2011). Section 5.b.vi. continues that Ben should encourage Sarah to be aware of her own comfort level with scenarios, in this case her conflict between ethics and her religious beliefs, and work on expanding her comfort level (ACES, 2011). More importantly to Ben's dilemma, section 5.b.vii. reminds him that conflict in the supervisory relationship is unavoidable and he should deal with such conflict in ways that are productive (ACES, 2011). His hesitation to seek consultation or discuss dilemma shows that he is uncomfortable with the possible conflict, and currently is not choosing behavior that would be productive to moving forward.

The final component of step one involves Ben gathering as much information as he can about the situation (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). During this step, Ben needs to consider what is causing him to avoid addressing the dilemma in supervision. The scenario did not give many details about the nature



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of the conversation between Sarah and himself; however, more exploration on Ben's part to understand how Sarah is conducting herself in session with her client is needed. Sarah may be handling herself appropriately and ethically. However, Ben's hesitation to discuss the scenario is leaving out those important details and could be contributing to his unease, which may be unwarranted.

Section 5.c. of ACES (2011) Best Practices for Clinical Supervision suggests that Ben should give attention to ethical and cultural concerns within the supervisory relationship. His avoidance shows that he is not comfortable doing so, and this is part of the dilemma. While gathering all the information, Ben also needs to remain impartial and avoid imposing his own meanings or values onto Sarah or on her work with her client (ACES, 2011). More importantly, during this phase, Ben should follow section 5.c.v., which states that he needs to recognize his own issues of transference and countertransference within the supervisory relationship and consider resolutions that address these issues with minimal negative effects, such as supervision or consultation (ACES, 2011).

The second step in the Tarvydas Model involves making a decision that adheres to ethical guidelines (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). Ben should review the facts of the dilemma discovered in the previous step. He should then consult the *ACA Code of Ethics*, any program guidelines or procedures that apply, and consult the ACES Best Practices in

Clinical Supervision guidelines. Once he understands what ethical codes and program policies apply to his specific dilemma, he should then create courses of action to resolve the dilemma (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). Pros and cons of each course of action should be weighed, and Ben should pick the most ethical decision (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016).

The third stage of the Tarvydas Model involves reflection on the course of action chosen, and considering personal prejudices and beliefs, as well as "contextual influences" (p. 73) that impact the decision (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). Section 6.a. of the ACES (2011) Best Practices in Clinical Supervision reminds Ben that supervision is a multicultural process and he needs to broach difficult topics with Sarah. Additionally, section 6.b. encourages Ben to work with Sarah in developing her "knowledge and skills" (p. 9) for advocating and working with diverse clients (ACES, 2011). Upon further investigation into the ACES (2011) Best Practices in Clinical Supervision, section 7.b. states that Ben needs to monitor his own competence and seek consultation or supervision regularly. Reflecting on the above information, Ben is then to select his preferred course of action (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016).

The final stage in the Tarvydas Model is where Ben determines a set of reasonable steps to take (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). While determining these steps, he should consider possible barriers to the plan, and how to work around them while completing the steps (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016). Once he completes the course of action, Ben then needs to document the steps he took. Evaluating how the process went and whether anything needs to be changed for a similar predicament in the future is the final step in the Tarvydas Model (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016).

Proposed action

The final step is for Ben to determine reasonable steps to take to complete his selected course of action. First, Ben needs to have a conversation with Sarah surrounding his discomfort with the situation and his need to seek consultation on how to address the situation appropriately in supervision