



Raising the bar for counselor educators

As a service to members, *Counseling Today* is publishing a monthly interview series that focuses 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.

This month, ACA Chief Professional Officer David Kaplan and ACA Director of Ethics Erin Martz interviewed Shawn Spurgeon, a member of the Ethics Revision Task Force.

David Kaplan & Erin Martz: As it does with many other areas, the 2014 revision of the *ACA Code of Ethics* really raises the bar for counselor educators.

Shawn Spurgeon: Absolutely. That was done intentionally.

Q: How does the 2014 code affect those who teach graduate counseling students?

SS: It raises the bar in terms of the faculty's responsibility to students and responsibility for gatekeeping. In terms of gatekeeping, the code now makes it clear that the primary obligation of counselor educators goes beyond their students to the welfare of future clients. As such, we have an ethical obligation to be vigilant that our students are meeting professional standards.

Q: Previous interviews have brought out that the ACA ethics code has evolved from a focus on the counselor to a focus on the client. For counselor educators, the related change would seem to be an evolution from a focus on the student to a focus on the clients whom the student will be serving.

SS: That is an excellent corollary. That is what the Ethics Revision Task Force was shooting for.

Q: The 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* is the first edition to define *student* in the glossary ("an individual engaged in formal graduate-level counselor education"). Why did the Ethics Revision Task Force provide that definition?

SS: There appears to be some confusion about the boundaries of faculty power and authority. There have been situations in the past where counselor educators were not clear about whether their ethical obligations applied to students who were not enrolled in their class or program. The definition of student provided in the 2014 edition makes it clear that the supervision, teaching and research responsibilities delineated in the *ACA Code of Ethics* extend to all individuals over whom a counselor educator has authority and power.

Q: Can you give an example or two in which a faculty member's ethical responsibilities go beyond students enrolled in the faculty member's program or courses?

SS: Let's say a counselor educator is teaching a summer course that includes a counseling student from a different university. The code's new definition of student makes it clear that the counselor educator has the same ethical responsibilities toward this student as for students enrolled in the instructor's program.

A second example revolves around the role of faculty adviser. If a fellow faculty member discusses an advisee's deficits with you, you have the same gatekeeping responsibilities as if the student were currently enrolled in your class. That may mean having a conversation with your advisee to see what you can do to help get [the advisee] up to speed.

Q: Both of those examples reflect on the gatekeeping function. How does the revised code raise the bar in terms of a counselor educator's responsibility to students?

SS: In two ways. First, counselor educators now explicitly have the responsibility to network with communities and agencies to provide and evaluate field placement options.

Some programs have made it a student responsibility to find their field placement, but this should be the responsibility of faculty because counselor educators are in the best position to identify and evaluate the viability of a clinical placement.

Q: That relates to the new Standard F.7.i., which states that counselor educators have an ethical obligation to provide direct assistance with field placements.

SS: Exactly. The second new area of counselor educators' responsibility to students is the duty to provide information about employment opportunities to counselors-in-training during the course of their program.

Q: And that relates to the new Standard F.8.b., which says that counselor educators now have the ethical obligation to provide career assistance to students.

SS: Right.

Q: What would you say to a counselor educator who states, "That is not my job. I am here to teach them. I don't have to help them find a job"?

SS: I would say to that counselor educator that one of your important roles is to be an advocate for your students. Advocacy includes information sharing. Counselor educators have the obligation to prepare students for their professional life and to make students aware of opportunities after they graduate. That is advocating for your students and an ethical responsibility.

Q: Does that mean that counselor educators have the ethical obligation to find their students a job?

SS: Absolutely not. But at the same time, the Ethics Revision Task Force wanted to make it clear that training goes beyond graduation. There is the obligation to assist students with the skills, information and support necessary to find an entry-level counseling position.

Q: There are two new and interesting imperatives in Standard F.7.b. The first states that counselor educators have the obligation to provide current information and knowledge. That has never been in the code before. Tell us why the Ethics Revision Task Force included that statement.

SS: This goes back to the responsibility for our students' future clients. Counselor educators have a duty to teach current theories, techniques and approaches that are effective for the populations our students will be counseling. Instructors have the responsibility to provide current evidence-based treatments and approaches. It is our ethical obligation to include current outcome research in our courses.

Q: Please pardon us for the outdated stereotype, but this now means that a faculty member who uses the same yellowed notes for 10 years is acting unethically?

SS: Yes, under the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*, that would be an ethical violation.

Q: The second new imperative in Standard F.7.b. states that counselor educators offer instruction only within their areas of competency.

SS: This was a tricky issue for the Ethics Revision Task Force because competence can be a difficult term to define. We didn't want to be either too narrow or too broad. Having said that, there are things that counselor educators need to do in order to demonstrate competence in a given instructional area. This includes acquiring experience with the counseling, supervision and research techniques that we are presenting in class.

For example, let's say I want to do a lecture on emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT). I clearly have the ethical responsibility to research and become familiar with the current literature on EFT. But I also need to have taken the responsibility to use EFT myself — perhaps under supervision — or at the very least consulted with someone who uses EFT in order to learn about applied aspects not covered in articles or books. Not having done the things I mentioned might constitute a lack of competence to effectively teach EFT.

Let me personalize a second example around eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). I have a basic knowledge and can talk about the tenets of EMDR but have never used it with a client. And I've never consulted with a counselor who has. So I wouldn't conduct an EMDR session in my class because I'm not competent in this technique.

Q: What impact does this have on counseling education programs that assign courses hierarchically, where the full professors get to choose the courses they want first, the associate professors go next, the assistant professors get what is left, and the course that nobody wants to teach is assigned to the newest faculty member?

SS: That is a very good question, and the Ethics Revision Task Force actually talked quite a bit about this issue. It highlights that there is now a responsibility for both counselor educators and counselor education programs to be aware that this hierarchy may lead to new faculty teaching courses outside of their areas of expertise. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the

counselor educator to make sure that [he or she is] competent to teach a particular subject. At the same time, we hope that given this shift in the code, counselor education programs will be more vigilant and mindful when assigning courses.

Q: What would you, as a member of the task force that revised the *ACA Code of Ethics*, say to the faculty member who states, "You are infringing on academic freedom. You can't tell me what courses I can teach or how to teach them."

SS: I would say that academic freedom has its limits. What goes hand in hand with academic freedom is academic responsibility. If we return to the primary obligation of counselor educators — to protect the welfare of the client with whom our students will interact — the new issues that the revised code is asking counselor educators to address are reasonable.



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