

Article 36

Cultivating Authentic Community in Counseling Programs Through Faculty-Student Relationships

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Introduction

Graduate counseling programs are encouraged to “create and support an inclusive learning community” (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009, p. 4). To fulfill this ideal, counselor educators must foster a program culture based on trust, collaboration, authenticity, support, and care. Key to establishing such a culture is the successful navigation through myriad roles and corresponding relationships that counselor educators and students engage. Through such varied roles as instructor, supervisor, advisor, mentor, administrator, and gatekeeper, counselor educators are continually presented with opportunities to enhance or diminish the development and well-being of counselors-in-training. Likewise, throughout the duration of their counseling program, students must often grapple with ambiguous ethical situations and navigate multiple relationships between faculty and peers.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) provides written standards for counselor preparation programs in the United States, and more recently abroad. These CACREP Standards (2009), alongside the

American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014), are considered the basis for effective counselor preparation and include items such as course content, degree requirements, faculty qualifications, clinical experiences, informed consent, and remediation procedures. These standards, however, provide limited guidance on the nature and quality of the relationships between faculty and students, which are truly pivotal in counselor education programs. Indeed, the literature has indicated that strong working alliances between faculty and students play a crucial role in the growth and success of students (Borders et al., 2012; Choate & Granello, 2006; Huber, Sauer, Mrdjenovich, & Gugiu, 2010; Jordan, 2006). Although CACREP (2009) outlines general qualifications of counselor education faculty, “the degree to which counselor education programs confirm and direct the role of faculty member as systematic planner and provider of student-faculty relationships” is ill-defined (Hazler & Carney, 1993, p. 81).

CACREP representatives (2009) maintain that the essence and purpose of counselor education and related program standards is to provide minimum criterion that allows for flexible and fluid implementation based on the unique culture of the program. Nevertheless, vast ambiguity and incongruence between theory and implementation of developmentally effective and healthy faculty-student relationships remains a concern and, at times, problematic in counselor education programs (Chung, Bemak, & Talleyrand, 2007; Kottler, 1992; Scarborough, Bernard, & Morse, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to propel dialogue on how to cultivate and sustain a culture of nurturing and balanced professional relationships within counselor education programs through examination of literature as well as discussion on direct application to counselor education programs. A brief overview of organizational culture and climate will be provided, and key concepts that contribute to healthy program culture in counselor education programs will be examined. Particular attention will be paid to the faculty-student relationships within counselor education programs as well as potential gray areas and pitfalls in managing these relationships. A general framework will be provided that outlines important elements of a healthy environment and culture within counseling programs; potential challenges and ethics will be discussed.

Organizational Culture and Climate

Widely considered to be the leading expert on the topic of organizational culture, Edgar Schein (1992) defined this phenomena as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 12). According to Schein, it is only through understanding this third level of deeply embedded assumptions that true and lasting organizational change can occur. This philosophy/process of reflection is embedded in our work as counselors and counselor educators. Furthermore, by applying Schein’s concepts specifically to the underlying structure of counselor education programs, one may better comprehend the elements of a positive culture and the appropriate strategies to successfully maintain this culture.

The concept of climate is considered to be a subset of culture and can be defined as “the feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which

members of the organization interact with each other, with customers, or with other outsiders” (Schein, 1992, p. 9). Several researchers have indicated that a healthy climate in mental health graduate programs includes such qualities as trust, respect, morale, caring, and transparency (Foster & McAdams, 2009; Veilleux, January, VanderVeen, Reddy, & Klonoff, 2012). Thus, attention to the relationships, connections, and values that comprise the organization is critical to evaluating and innovating counselor education programs. Despite this knowledge, there are numbers of subtleties within counseling programs and higher education department culture in general that can confound these efforts.

In recent years, there has been greater attention given to the importance of culture and climate within institutions of higher education (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; Kezar, 2013; Yeung & Johnston, 2014). In highlighting the importance of academic culture, Lee (2007) underscored the complexity that is inherent in departmental cultures, often containing myriad factors and values that conflict with other programs and departments on campus, such as mission, power, resource allocation, evaluation methods, and teacher-student interactions. Furthermore, the author purported that “the institutional culture also strongly affects departmental perceptions of students and their collegiate culture” (Lee, 2007, p. 50). Consequently, a greater examination of the culture of academic departments is warranted.

Culture and Climate in Counseling Programs

The relevance of programmatic culture and climate within counseling and psychology programs has also been documented (Foster & McAdams, 2009; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Veilleux et al., 2012). In seeking to explore the common experiences of doctoral counselor education students, Protivnak and Foss (2009) conducted a qualitative study using an Internet-based sample of 141 participants, identifying themes emerging from coded categories. The researchers found the departmental culture to be a significant theme. Elements of a positive departmental culture included faculty responsiveness to student concerns as well as a collaborative and inclusive environment where faculty initiated opportunities to work on a number of projects with students. Conversely, a negative departmental culture was reported in the same study and characterized by unequal treatment of students, political factions, imposition and abdication of values, and extreme competition (Protivnak & Foss, 2009).

A recent study on perceptions of climate in a graduate psychology training program by Veilleux et al. (2012) led to the formation of the Graduate Program Climate Scale. This scale measures domains such as feelings of safety, community, and collegiality between faculty and students and among faculty. In their study, the authors found that a strong program climate was associated with various forms of program satisfaction by students (Veilleux et al., 2012). The authors found a relationship between climate and how evaluation and feedback is delivered in a graduate psychology program, and that program climate may foster increased confidence among students regarding their abilities (Veilleux et al., 2012).

Foster and McAdams (2009) argued for a climate of transparency in a healthy counselor education program, stating that such a climate “is one in which student perceptions of their academic program’s values, intentions, and expectations are

congruent with those of the program faculty and administration members” (p. 275). It is evident that students value counselor education programs with a commitment to transparency, responsiveness, and community, while avoiding favoritism and dogmatic imposition of values. In order to ensure that such an environment is cultivated, the nature and quality of faculty and student relationships must be a paramount consideration in assessing counseling programs.

Faculty Roles

The culture of any program is vastly influenced by several systemic factors; national region (e.g., Midwest), state history and politics, university culture (i.e., size, philosophy, mission, rural/urban locale, student demographics, etc.), program offerings, and faculty philosophies and training histories (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Of course there are no counselor education programs without counselor-in-training students who influence existing cultural expectations of the university and program with unique expectations, needs, and goals. Faculty roles and the corresponding responsibilities weigh heavily on professed and experienced program culture (Bowman, Hatley, & Bowman, 1995; Kottler, 1992).

Counseling faculty roles include educator, advisor, supervisor, administrator, research collaborator, mentor, gatekeeper, and other roles that are intended to support emerging counselor development throughout counselor education programs (Black, Suarez, & Medina, 2004; Bowman et al., 1995; CACREP, 2009; Chung et al., 2007). Kahn and Schlosser (2010) stated that positive and supportive advising relationships were foundational to student professional development. Counselor educators within each program are often the first and primary models for professionalism, ethical practice, cultural sensitivity, and competent performance. Counselor educators play important roles as direct and indirect, overt and covert mentors for counselors-in-training (Black et al., 2004; Hazler & Carney, 1993). Chung et al. (2007) referenced mentoring as processes aiding career development and psychological functions for mentees through nurturance and advisement. Regarding career development, CACREP (2009) provided career development standards for counselor education programs with varied flexibility in how those standards are met. In regards to psychological functioning and what faculty qualities enhance positive and healthy psychological functioning of counselors-in-training, other sources of guidance beyond CACREP standards must be consulted.

Modern and contemporary scholars across helping and leadership professions have investigated qualities and characteristics that promote enhanced psychological functioning and student connectedness to their counselor education program culture (Foster & McAdams, 2009; Frego, 2006; Rosenbach, Taylor, & Youndt, 2012; Veilleux et al., 2012). Faculty who are deliberate, intentional, and authentic in their modeling, teaching, and mentoring help create what was defined as healthy program culture (Schein, 1992). This healthy culture can be developed and maintained through reflective leadership practices (Rosenbach et al., 2012) and ongoing development of positive faculty qualities; (a) respectful, (b) compassionate, (c) transparent, (d) authentic, (e) present, (f) reliable, (g) competent, (h) empowering/strengths-based, and (i) collegial with other faculty, staff, and students (Carusetta & Cranton, 2005; Frego, 2006; Kottler, 1992). When faculty are committed to being professional models through the transparent

humility of their own authentic congruence and awareness of biases while providing informed consent and clear course/program expectations, students experience greater positive connectedness to self and healthy program culture as well as developmentally appropriate competence (Frego, 2006; Hazler & Carney, 1993; Rosenbach et al., 2012; Schein, 1992).

In their qualitative study on counselor education doctoral students, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) found that the quality of faculty and student relationships was one significant factor in determining if students would complete their program. These positive relationships were deemed more influential than even that of their peers, and to one participant labeled as absolutely “essential” (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005, p. 184). However, in order to successfully navigate appropriate faculty-student relationships within the numerous roles and settings, ethical considerations must also be addressed.

Ethical Considerations

There is little doubt, given the findings of studies related to graduate programs in the mental health field, that authentic relationships between counseling students and faculty can be beneficial, if not vital (Huber et al., 2010; Foster & McAdams, 2009; Jordan, 2006; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). There are many benefits to positive faculty-student relationships, such as development of professional identity, networking, professional socialization, professional opportunities, and development of student’s autonomy and decision-making skills (Hazler & Carney, 1993). Research consistently showed a positive correlation between increased contact between students and faculty, and students’ level of persistence, satisfaction, and achievement (Bowman et al., 1995). Furthermore, social support by faculty was one of the essential components in assessing levels of students’ satisfaction (Hazler & Carney, 1993). Despite substantiated gains that increased contact between students and faculty can provide, the additional level of contact influences the possibility for developing dual (or multiple) relationships and myriad ethical considerations (ACA, 2014). Specifically, counselor educators must consider how to maintain these pivotal relationships as supportive and nurturing, but still professional.

Multiple Student Roles

Many counseling programs require students to hold multiple roles (graduate assistant, researcher, mentee or mentor, etc.) in which they interact with faculty and peers in various ways. In counselor education programs that maintain collaborative doctoral programs in counselor education and supervision, multiple roles and the increased professional intimacy of such roles may be amplified (Nelson, Oliver, & Capps, 2006). Some doctoral counselor educators-in-training take on quasi-faculty roles such as mentor, instructor, supervisor, consultant, and/or group leader to master’s level counselors-in-training. Doctoral students must learn complex and dynamic navigation skills between their student-peer roles and their emerging faculty-supervisor roles (Scarborough et al., 2006). In some situations, doctoral students may find themselves in the role of friend to some master’s-level students prior to encountering professional roles with said students (i.e., new teaching, leadership, or assistantship responsibilities that add professional relationships to pre-existing friend relationships). These multiple relationships between

faculty-master's, faculty-doctoral, and master's-doctoral persons within counselor education programs are not coincidental, but are necessary for purposes of skill acquisition and career development (CACREP, 2009; Kress & Dixon, 2007). According to Scarborough et al. (2006) "learning to identify and appropriately respond to boundary issues while in training programs may have a positive impact on dealing with the inevitable ethical dilemmas that will occur in future practice" (p. 55).

Faculty-Student Boundaries

In a recent study by January, Meyerson, Reddy, Docherty, and Klonoff (2014) on the perceptions of clinical psychology students regarding unethical faculty behavior, nearly one third (32.4%) of the 374 students reported they knew of a faculty member who committed an ethical violation. Furthermore, students that reported awareness of such unethical behavior were also more likely to report a significantly lower program climate (January et al., 2014). In a qualitative study of faculty and students in counselor education programs, Kolbert, Morgan, and Brendel (2002) found a notable discrepancy between perceptions that faculty and students held with regard to ethical situations and the ability of faculty to successfully manage such dilemmas. More specifically, faculty members were more likely to trust in the ability of other counselor educators to handle multiple relationships than were student participants. The authors underscored the importance of this issue when reporting that "many students noted that such relationships would destroy their confidence in the professor's objectivity" (Kolbert et al., 2002, p. 204). Consequently, the ability to appropriately identify and manage multiple relationships is paramount.

What is appropriate? The question "how close is too close?" is a highly subjective one and the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) offers only vague guidance (except for prohibiting romantic and/or sexual relationships between faculty and current students). It is not easy to decide on norms given the many factors that influence faculty's and students' perceptions of ethical versus unethical behavior (Bowman et al., 1995; CACREP, 2009; Scarborough et al., 2006). Research did indicate, however, that most students and counselor educators believe that alleged ethical violations should be evaluated on an individual basis, with motivation behind such behaviors considered (Bowman et al., 1995). This decision-making process should be undergirded with the principle ethics and core values that are delineated in the ACA Code of Ethics (2014): autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity.

When presented with a potential multiple relationship, Kress and Dixon (2007) suggested counselor educators apply both virtue and principle ethics in ethical decision-making processes. More specifically, authors recommended that faculty "develop both self-regarding and other-regarding virtues" (Kress & Dixon, 2007, p. 117). According to Kress and Dixon, self-regarding virtues recognize the constant modeling behavior in which faculty engage, regardless of their specific role. Other-regarding virtues highlight the commitment and attention to the well-being, dignity, and respect of the student (Kress & Dixon, 2007). By adopting these aspirational principles, counselor educators may be more confident that their actions will lead to the most beneficial outcome for students.

Recommendations

Counselor educators carry a large responsibility in ensuring the development of ethical and competent professional counselors. In promoting a healthy programmatic culture, and in light of many of the ethical considerations mentioned above, Schein (1992) identified several “culture-embedding mechanisms” that leaders may engage in to modify the culture of their program. Several of these mechanisms may be applicable to counselor educators and include the following: rituals and rites of the program/organization, deliberate role modeling, and design of the physical space and layout of the program/organization. Examples of each will be expanded upon in more detail.

Rituals and Rites of Passage

According to Schein (1992), “if one can ritualize certain behaviors that one considers important, that becomes a powerful [reinforcement]” (p. 249). Counselor educators have multiple opportunities to institutionalize and ritualize events to convey a sense of value for students and community. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) suggested interactions that may include student orientations, potluck events, conference attendance, brown bag lunch workshops, research teams, and regular faculty adviser check-ins. Protivnak and Foss (2009) echoed this recommendation, suggesting that faculty engender a proactive and collaborative nature, inviting students to participate in research projects, co-teaching, co-presenting, service projects, and other professional development opportunities. Furthermore, by institutionalizing such events and activities, a consistent culture may be facilitated that emphasizes value and care for students.

Deliberate Role Modeling

As indicated earlier, faculty have numerous opportunities to serve as role models and mentors for students. Furthermore, due to inherent power differentials, students will continue to actively seek and often emulate behaviors and qualities that they observe in their professors. Consequently, counselor educators are held to a high standard of ever vigilant integrity and professional behavior. Consideration should be given to the self-regarding virtues that Kress and Dixon (2007) recommended. Through demonstrating qualities like respect, compassion, transparency, authenticity, reliability, congruence, and collegiality, counselor educators help create a safe environment that enhances the learning potential of each student while providing an exemplary model for students to aspire toward.

Counselor educators may also consider seeking out both informal and formal opportunities to mentor students (Black et al., 2004; Chung et al., 2007). According to Black et al. (2004), mentoring in counselor education programs should be carried out with strong adherence to ethical standards and clear boundaries within the context of supportive relationships. Such relationships may help both faculty and students successfully manage multiple relationships as they are presented. Given the study by January et al. (2014) indicating that knowledge of faculty ethical violations can spread quickly within programs, the competent handling of multiple relationships may play a significant role in facilitating a healthy program culture.

Physical Layout and Structure of the Program

The visible artifacts, physical location, and procedural structures of an organization can convey strong value and purpose (Schein, 1992). Consequently, counselor educators may benefit from a closer consideration of all of the physical attributes of the program. For example, is there a common area for students and faculty alike to informally meet and converse? Are there bulletin boards that clearly indicate the program mission, philosophy, and values? Seemingly simple gestures like posting pictures of faculty and students at conferences may go a long way in building community and a healthy culture. At a more basic level, faculty can make an intentional effort to be visible and accessible to students. While the typical professor may not be on campus 40 hours per week, making concerted efforts to be visible may send positive messages to students that facilitate stronger connections and relationships.

Foster and McAdams (2009) purported that a healthy culture in counselor education programs required transparency. Consequently, the authors suggested that program expectations and procedures should be developed in a fair and accessible manner (Foster & McAdams, 2009). Such program expectations might be conveyed through multiple venues, including student handbooks, program Web sites, and course syllabi, to note a few. Additional considerations may include opportunities reserved for students to voice concerns, provide feedback, attend faculty meetings, and be involved in some decision-making processes.

Conclusions

The authors of this article wholeheartedly agree that “students who are satisfied with their programs and faculty are more likely to be successful whether they are undergraduate or graduate students” (Hazler & Carney, 1993, p. 83). Faculty must be mindful of culture-embedding mechanisms within their program (Schein, 1992), such as admissions interviews, orientations, transition rituals, and student-centered social events. Counselor educators are pivotal in developing healthy counselor preparation programs by virtue of their inherent and designated roles. Positive or adverse student-faculty relationships across program levels (master’s, doctoral, adjunct instructors, and larger university dynamics) are highly influenced and shifted by faculty philosophies, congruence, and transparent authenticity.

Kottler (1992) suggested that faculty may need to confront their own hypocrisy by reflecting on (a) how counselor educators model the core conditions of helping that are taught as so important, (b) if faculty members are narcissistic or self-indulgent, (c) how faculty inadvertently reveal unresolved issues, and (d) how some faculty pretend to be omnipotent, omniscient, and perfect. By taking into consideration the manifold opportunities to positively influence students and the larger programmatic culture, counselor educators may better fulfill the noble task of equipping burgeoning counselors, advancing the profession, and impacting society.

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