

Ethical Responsibilities and Advocacy in Counselor Education

Tara Lynne Chase

Grand Canyon University: PCE-804-O500

Dr. Renee Starr

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Advocacy has long been central to the mission of the counseling profession. As counselor educators and leaders, doctoral-level practitioners have an ethical and professional duty to promote equity, social justice, and systemic change that supports the well-being of vulnerable populations. Advocacy within mental health extends beyond the counseling relationship, it operates at individual, community, and policy levels to address structural barriers that hinder access to care (Farrell & Barrio Minton, 2019). This paper defines advocacy in the counseling profession, examines ethical obligations and competencies of counselor educators, explores multiple avenues for effective advocacy, and presents a case example demonstrating advocacy in action within a mental health context.

Defining Advocacy in Mental Health Practice

Advocacy in counseling refers to intentional action aimed at promoting client welfare, removing systemic barriers, and advancing equitable access to mental health resources (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). It encompasses individual client advocacy, supporting clients' rights and empowerment, and systemic advocacy, which targets policy and institutional change.

Within the context of mental health, advocacy includes educating policymakers about mental health disparities, collaborating with stakeholders to increase service accessibility, and promoting culturally responsive care. Counselor educators, in particular, advocate through curriculum design, research dissemination, and professional leadership (Parker-Barnes, Jones, & Wilkerson, 2023). They prepare emerging counselors to engage ethically in advocacy as part of their professional identity.

The Importance of Advocacy in the Counseling Profession

Advocacy is not only an ethical mandate but also a mechanism for ensuring social justice and professional legitimacy. Counselors are uniquely positioned to understand how mental health intersects with poverty, racism, classism, and trauma. Farrell and Barrio Minton (2019) argue that advocacy integrates across three tiers, legislative, professional, and client-focused—allowing counselors to influence systemic policies while maintaining client-centered care.

An example of this importance can be seen in efforts to expand tele-mental health access following the COVID-19 pandemic. Counselor educators and professional organizations collaborated to advocate for regulatory flexibility that allowed clients in underserved areas to receive virtual counseling services. Such advocacy not only improved access but also demonstrated the profession's responsiveness to societal needs (Sharma, Keiser, & Guajardo, 2023).

Ethical Obligations of Counselor Educators

Counselor educators hold a dual ethical responsibility: to prepare competent, culturally aware advocates and to model ethical leadership in their own professional practices. According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) and CACREP Standard 6.B.5.m, counselor educators are ethically obligated to engage in advocacy at individual, systemic, and policy levels.

These obligations include:

- Promoting awareness of inequities affecting clients and students.
- Integrating advocacy training and social justice content into counselor education curricula.
- Modeling professional behavior that upholds dignity, respect, and fairness.
- Engaging in professional and legislative efforts that strengthen the counseling field.

Ethical leadership in counselor education also involves amplifying the voices of marginalized populations, including clients and students who experience barriers due to socioeconomic status, disability, or cultural background (Parker-Barnes et al., 2023).

Competencies for Effective Advocacy

The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) framework provides guidance for counselors to act as change agents through awareness, knowledge, and skills (Ratts et al., 2016).

Effective advocates possess:

- **Cultural humility and self-awareness** of privilege and bias.
- **Knowledge of systems and policy structures** affecting mental health delivery.
- **Skills in communication and coalition building** to mobilize stakeholders.
- **Commitment to ethical reasoning and persistence** in advocacy efforts.

Farrell and Barrio Minton (2019) further emphasize advocacy competence in understanding legislation, developing professional partnerships, and translating counseling principles into social action. Counselor educators develop these competencies through scholarly engagement, mentorship, and leadership in professional associations such as the ACA or the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES).

Political Advocacy and Policy Influence

Political advocacy enables mental health practitioners to shape public policy and legislation that impacts service accessibility, funding, and licensure. Counselors may testify before legislative committees, contribute to public policy research, or participate in advocacy days organized by professional associations.

For example, the Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2022, which recognized licensed professional counselors as Medicare-eligible providers, succeeded largely due to sustained political advocacy by national counseling organizations. Counselor educators can train students in civic engagement and legislative literacy to continue this advocacy trajectory. Engaging with policymakers ensures that mental health legislation reflects professional expertise and client needs (Farrell & Barrio Minton, 2019).

Economic Advocacy for Mental Health Funding

Economic advocacy focuses on resource allocation and the financial systems that influence mental health access. Counselor educators can advocate for funding by conducting outcome-based research that demonstrates the economic benefits of counseling interventions. This data supports funding proposals for community-based programs, university clinics, and public health initiatives.

At the program level, economic advocacy may involve securing grants to expand counseling access for underserved groups. Aspy and Aspy (1998) highlight that humanistic advocacy should prioritize people over profit, ensuring funding structures align with client welfare rather than institutional gain. Counselor educators, as grant reviewers or principal investigators, help bridge evidence-based outcomes with equitable financial support systems.

Social Advocacy and Social Determinants of Mental Health

Social advocacy addresses conditions such as discrimination, poverty, and housing insecurity that profoundly shape mental health outcomes. Counselors and counselor educators advocate by participating in community coalitions, promoting trauma-informed systems, and supporting policies that reduce inequities.

Parker-Barnes et al. (2023) advocate for an “anticlassist counseling” approach that challenges structural classism and empowers clients to navigate economic barriers. Social advocacy may also include developing educational campaigns that destigmatize mental illness and partnering with schools or nonprofits to provide preventative interventions. Such efforts move beyond individual counseling to create systemic change.

Community Collaboration and Advocacy Partnerships

Collaboration strengthens advocacy outcomes by aligning mental health professionals with community stakeholders. Effective community advocacy involves partnerships with faith-based organizations, schools, hospitals, and local governments to address shared needs (Sharma et al., 2023).

Counselor educators can model collaborative advocacy through service-learning projects, where counseling students engage directly with community initiatives. These experiences promote civic engagement, cultural responsiveness, and leadership development. By embedding advocacy in both academic and clinical contexts, counselor educators ensure that future counselors are prepared to sustain community partnerships that drive long-term impact.

Case Study: Peer-Led Social Justice Advocacy in Counselor Education

A meaningful example of successful advocacy in mental health is documented by Sharma, Keiser, and Guajardo (2023) in *The Professional Counselor*. Their peer-reviewed study explored the formation of a peer-led social justice advocacy group among counseling students and early professionals. The group focused on increasing mental health awareness and equity within their local community by addressing issues of accessibility and stigma. Through structured collaboration and mentorship, participants engaged in political advocacy by writing letters to local legislators supporting expanded community counseling funding, economic

advocacy by fundraising for mental health nonprofits, and social advocacy through organizing community workshops focused on cultural competence and wellness.

The results highlighted that collective, grassroots advocacy efforts enhanced participants' leadership identity, ethical reasoning, and commitment to systemic change. Importantly, the project demonstrated how counselor educators can foster advocacy competencies in doctoral training by supporting peer-led initiatives that integrate classroom learning with direct social action. This case underscores the profession's potential to blend scholarship, leadership, and community engagement to address systemic barriers in mental health access (Sharma et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Advocacy in professional counseling represents a moral, ethical, and professional imperative that extends across individual, systemic, and societal levels. Counselor educators are pivotal leaders in advancing this mission through ethical modeling, training, and participation in political, economic, and social advocacy efforts. By cultivating competencies rooted in multicultural awareness, collaboration, and ethical leadership, counselor educators empower both students and clients to challenge inequities and transform mental health systems. Effective advocacy ensures that counseling remains a humanistic, socially responsive profession dedicated to equity and justice for all individuals.

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