

Chapter 3

Seeking the Balance Between Trauma- Informed Supervision and Gatekeeping: Addressing Impairment and Problems of Professional Competency in Counselors- in-Training

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Remediation and gatekeeping in counselor education can be a scary and stressful process for students and faculty alike. While mandated by the American Counseling Association's 2014 Code of Ethics and the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), there is little guidance related on how to approach gatekeeping, particularly in a growth-oriented manner. Even the term "impairment," as referenced in sections C.2.g. and F.5.b. of the Code is problematic, as it is used in the Americans with Disabilities Act to designate a person with disability. This chapter, per the author, will propose more appropriate nomenclature and an approach to gatekeeping utilizing trauma-informed practices (TIP). While gatekeeping may continue to be anxiety provoking, the use of trauma-informed principles such as safety, collaboration, and empowerment may help the process be more successful for all involved.

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INTRODUCTION

Counselor educators and supervisors (CE/S) are tasked with assessing the professional dispositions of counselors-in-training (CIT) and pre-licensed counselors (PLC). Defined broadly as “the commitments, characteristics, values, beliefs, and behaviors that influence the counselor’s professional growth and interactions with clients, faculty, supervisors, and peers” (CACREP, 2024, p. 35), professional dispositions are the personal qualities that characterize a good counselor. Yet, there is a lack of agreement in the counseling field as to which dispositions are necessary to enter the profession, and once determined, there is a lack of agreement as to how they are assessed (Homrich et al., 2014; Rapp et al., 2018; Soldner et al., 2022). Accrediting bodies leave it up to training programs to identify dispositions to assess and how they are assessed, a subjective process when compared with more objectively graded measures of knowledge such as research papers, exams and quizzes, group presentations, or skills videos.

When determining which dispositions to measure, counseling graduate programs should look to the American Counseling Association’s (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) for guidance regarding the professional standards that must be upheld. While the Code (2014) does not specify individual personality characteristics, it does identify values, beliefs, and behaviors. In addition, the Code (2014), utilizes the umbrella term “impairment” as a means of requiring professional counselors to monitor themselves for any signs or symptoms that might impede with their ability to provide adequate care. Section C.2.g. of the code tasks counselors to, “monitor themselves for signs of impairment from their own physical, mental, or emotional problems and refrain from offering or providing professional services when impaired.”

Part of this expectation is inherent in the profession’s principle value of nonmaleficence, which is understood to mean *do no harm*. Akin to the medical profession’s Hippocratic oath, this value demonstrates the commitment to ensure the safety of a vulnerable society when seeking treatment. Nonmaleficence goes hand in hand with another principle value, beneficence, meaning to *do good*. It is not enough for counselors to meet the minimum requirements of doing no harm, but there is also an aspirational aspect to the work of counseling. As a profession, we are expected to serve society by seeking change at a broader level and advocating for safety, justice, and working towards the greater good (ACA, 2014).

CITs and PLCs are held to the same level of standards as licensed counselors, albeit with an opportunity for remediation built into the training process. They are also expected to monitor themselves for signs of impairment. Section F.5.b. of the ACA Code (2014) speaks specifically to CITs and PLC, stating,

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