
Beyond Reproach: Relationship Boundaries in Counselor Education

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Counselor educators hold a great deal of power over graduate students and their academic success. The wielding of this power through decisions made by educators can impact the lives of students immensely. These decisions include, but are not limited to: admission to graduate school programs, matriculation into graduate school programs, grading, academic retainment, research and writing opportunities, internship opportunities, job

opportunities, professional recommendations, and professional success after graduate school. This power differential between educators and students commands counselor educators to maintain professional relationships with students. Professional relationship lines may be blurred, however, with graduate-level adult students. This article examines: (1) professional ethical codes for student-counselor educator relationships, (2) state and federal implications relevant to student- counselor educator relationships, and (3) specific ways in which the breach of student-counselor educator relationship boundaries hurts students, faculty, programs, institutions, and the field.

Professional Ethical Codes

Institutions of higher education have policies regarding the conduct of professors and their relationships with students. Professional organizations also have written ethical guidelines for the conduct of professionals that extend to include educators within the professions. In the mental health field, the American Counseling Association (1995), American Medical Association (1992), American Psychiatric Association (1993), American Psychological Association (1992), and the National Association for Social Workers (1996) have established codes of ethics for their respective professions. Many texts exist that can be helpful to counselors in

examining the fine lines, gray areas, and philosophic considerations of ethics. Some of these include: *The portable ethicist for mental health professionals* (Bernstein & Hartsell, 2000), *Issues and ethics in the helping professions* (Corey, Corey, & Callahan, 1998), *Ethical and professional issues in counseling* (Cottone & Tarvydas, 1998), and *An introduction to philosophy and practice* (Freeman, 2000).

The American Counseling Association (ACA) explicitly outlines standards for educator-student relationships. According to the ACA "Counselors clearly define and maintain ethical, professional, and social relationships boundaries with their students and supervisees. They are aware of the differential in power that exists and the student's or supervisee's possible incomprehension of that power differential" (1995, p. 8). ACA further states "Counselors do not engage in sexual relationships with students and do not sexually harass them" (1995, p. 9).

ACA also explicitly outlines a standard for reporting possible ethics breaches. As in the reporting of child abuse and maltreatment, counselors are ethically bound to report suspected violations of professional ethics. According to the ACA "Counselors expect professional associates to adhere to Code of Ethics. When counselors possess reasonable cause that

raises doubts as to whether a counselor is acting in an ethical manner, they take appropriate action" (1995, p. 11).

It may be tempting to look the other way when colleagues are known or suspected of having inappropriate relationships with students. It may be difficult to believe or acknowledge that a friend is acting unethically.

Further, fear of retaliation, the prospect of tenure, worry over job security, the possibility of drawn out legal battles, and one's own professional reputation are just a few of the legitimate considerations associated with filing an ethics complaint on an academic colleague. There may be a department history of inappropriate faculty relationships with students; there may be administrative and institutional pressures to "not make waves" or tarnish the reputation of the department, school, college, or university. There may be pressure from other faculty who may say "leave them alone, they are adults" or "it happens all the time" or "it is taken care of" or "no one has been hurt." Despite these pressures, counselors are obligated to report suspected violations of ethical codes. Failure to report known or suspected violations places one complicit with the activity and in breach of ACA ethics.

State and Federal Law and Educator-Student Relationships

Aside from institutional and professional standards for educator-student relationships, state and federal laws also guide the conduct of educators. Romantic, sexual, and/or inappropriate social relationships between educators and students are considered discriminatory and constitute sexual harassment of the targeted student as well as other members in the same class. The United States Department of Education sexual harassment guidance states that "Sexual harassment can interfere with a student's academic performance and emotional and physical well-being, and ...preventing and remedying sexual harassment in schools is essential to ensure non-discriminatory, safe environments in which students can learn..." (Office of Civil rights, 1997). These guidelines are applicable "...to students at every level of education" (Office of Civil rights, 1997, p. 2). State divisions of human rights, affirmative action, and education also outline policies and expectations of educators and professionals.

How Counselor Educator-Student Relationship Breaches Hurt

Breaches in counselor educator-student relationships are problematic at many levels. Cursorily, these inappropriate relationships may be seen as having little impact and may be easily ignored or dismissed. In fact, breaches in counselor educator-student relationships adversely affect

students, the faculty, the department, the college/university, and the field.

Breaches in counselor educator-student relationships hurt the targeted student (the student with whom the counselor educator is inappropriately involved). The targeted student at the very least has purchased a compromised learning experience based on improper modeling of counselor behavior. The targeted student may experience confusion as to what is ethical, how to interpret ethics, and who can "get away with" unethical behavior. The targeted student may also be ostracized by other students who may fear continued association with the targeted student.

Breaches in counselor educator-student relationships hurt other students in the program. The learning experience of the other students in the class (those who are aware of the ethics breach) has also been compromised.

[Note that it is likely within a short period of time that most students in the program will be aware of the counselor-educator's unethical behavior.]

They, too, may experience confusion as to what is ethical, how to interpret ethics, and who can "get away with" unethical behavior. These other students may fear similar treatment by the instructor, and question what it takes to pass the course or receive high grades. These students may object to the educator's behavior, but fear reporting it since doing so might risk

their status in the program, their future internship and job placements, and letters of recommendations. Students may additionally question the integrity of other faculty. Uncertain as to whether other faculty are aware of the ethical breach, students may be unusually cautious and distrustful of all faculty.

Breaches in counselor educator-student relationships hurt faculty relationships. As noted earlier, it may be difficult to accept that a colleague is acting unethically. Deciding how to handle such a breach is a difficult decision. It may affect job security, tenure, and day-to-day functioning as a department. It may result in drawn out legal battles, and may place professional reputations in danger. Excuses for the unethical behavior may be voiced by faculty who feel trapped between their fear of retaliation and their own conscience. A history of tolerance or acceptance of similar breaches can add complications and raise unresolved or sensitive issues from the past. Faculty may feel distrustful, cautious, hurt, and angry. Additionally, all faculty members who are aware of the breach are at risk for being reported as complicit. Unless the ethics breach is handled openly and honestly within the department with a consensus resolution, the potential exists for escalation into legal action at the professional, state, federal, and civil levels. This may exacerbate the already existing

harassment and ethics issues.

Breaches in counselor educator-student relationships hurt the program. With students cautious and distrustful, confused by conflicting messages from faculty, and with optimal faculty functioning disrupted by similar caution and distrust, the entire program suffers. Collaboration may be difficult and meetings addressing regular departmental functioning, future growth and planning, faculty issues, and student concerns may be obstructed. Since all faculty members who are aware of the breach are at risk for being reported as complicit with the breach, the reputation of the program suffers as long as the ethics violation is unaddressed and unresolved.

Breaches in counselor educator-student relationships hurt the college/university. While there may be administrative and institutional pressures to "not make waves" by reporting ethical breaches, a quick, efficient, low-level resolution to such matters is most helpful to the students, the faculty, the program, and the institution. The reputation of the college or university rests on the collective reputations of its' programs and faculty.

Breaches in counselor educator-student relationships hurt the counseling field. Counseling, as a profession, is built on trust: The trust of our clients, our students, our colleagues, our science. Trust is a critical element in counseling regardless of setting, and it is crucial that counselors earn the trust of their clients by behaving in a manner that is trustworthy. Counselor educators stand as models holding to the highest of standards in the field. When counselor-educators breach relationship boundaries with students, they tread on the sacrosanct and betray the counseling profession.

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