

Article 27

Developing Advocacy Skills: A Program Model

Le'Ann L. Solmonson

Solmonson, Le'Ann L., is an assistant professor and Director of Counselor Education Programs at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Dr. Solmonson was recently awarded the 2009 Advocacy Award by the Texas Counseling Association for her work with training students.

A review of the history of the counseling profession reveals a strong professional history of advocacy (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). Although numerous significant individuals have engaged in advocacy work, it has only been embraced as an essential element of the profession in recent years. An increased emphasis on advocacy is evident through professional literature and program offerings at conferences. With this increased emphasis came the acknowledgement of American Counseling Association (ACA) leaders that many counselors do not possess the skills necessary to engage effectively in the work (Goodman, 2009). This acknowledgement resulted in a task force charged with developing the ACA Advocacy Competencies to identify the specific knowledge and skills necessary to equip professionals to serve in the role of advocates (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002).

Counselor training provides for foundational knowledge and skills necessary to engage in advocacy work. Counselors possess knowledge of human development, interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, cultural context, and systems theory. They are trained in communication skills, conflict resolution, and problem solving. Toporek, Lewis, and Crethar (2009) suggest additional training on the advocacy role is necessary and should be included as a part of counselor education curriculum.

The integration of advocacy competencies in the initial training of counselors incorporates the advocacy role as an essential element of professional identity. Pepper and Larson (2006) define professional identity as "a feeling of attachment between the individual and the profession, characterized by a perceived value linkage" (p. 49). Professional identity is also strengthened by the acceptance of professional beliefs associated with professional standards (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003). Training in advocacy skills provides the deliberate linkage to the professional values, beliefs, and standards as identified through the ACA Advocacy Competencies.

Lewis and Lewis (1983) identify two different types of advocacy. Case advocacy occurs when counselors are advocating on behalf of individuals. Class advocacy entails advocating at the political or institutional level in order to change regulatory statutes, policies, or procedures that result in barriers for particular populations. Both of these types of advocacy would involve intervening in a manner that has a direct impact on clients or individuals. Another area in which counselors can advocate is on behalf of the profession. Professional advocacy has a direct impact on counselors, but often also has an

indirect impact on clients. For instance, counselors have been advocating for several years to obtain provider status under Medicare. The direct impact on counselors would be additional sources of revenue and equal status with other mental health providers. The indirect impact on clients would involve access to care. It would increase the number of mental health providers available to individuals covered by Medicare.

The ACA Advocacy Competencies encompass the different types of advocacy described above. The competencies support the continuum suggested by Toporek and Liu (2001) ranging from empowerment to social action. As counselors, our goal is to empower our clients to engage in self-advocacy. Counselors must possess the knowledge to assess situations, systems, and institutions in which barriers exist and have the ability to determine how those barriers impact human development. Advocacy skills are then utilized to create and carry out a plan of action that would attempt to remove the barriers.

As is true with other aspects of the counselor education curriculum, advocacy requires the development of the essential knowledge and skills necessary to develop competency. Toporek, Lewis, and Crethar (2009) define advocacy competency as “the ability, understanding, and knowledge to carry out advocacy ethically and effectively” (p. 262). The counselor education program provides for the laboratory in which to develop and practice knowledge and skills. The role of the counselor educator is to provide the scaffolding for students as the skills are developing. This can be done through thoughtfully designed assignments and experiential activities. The remainder of this article will discuss the process utilized by a counselor educator to develop advocacy competencies in students.

A Program Model

The program described in this article is at a public university located in a rural setting in a southern state. The program is CACREP accredited and serves approximately 80 students. The program has three tracks: school counseling, community counseling, and rehabilitation counseling. The school counseling students make up 62% of the students, 28% are enrolled in the community counseling program, and 10% are in the rehabilitation counseling program. The students in all programs take the majority of their courses together, with specialty courses being taken within their major.

Introduction to Advocacy

The introduction to advocacy begins in the Professional Orientation course, which is most frequently taken in the student’s first semester of the program. In this course, the students are introduced to the history of the counseling profession. The historical overview emphasizes the roots of social justice in the work of many of the pioneers of the profession. Within the course, one of the units of study is entitled “The Counselor as a Professional.” This unit introduces students to the ACA Code of Ethics and the idea of professional identity. The unit also details the different roles a counselor can take on, including the role of advocate. The unit concludes with a Professional Organization Research Project in which students research three different counseling related professional organizations. The students are required to identify the mission of the organization, membership benefits, professional development opportunities, opportunities for member involvement in the work of the organization, and legislative efforts of the

organization. The learning goal of the assignment is to broaden the students' understanding of the value of being involved in a professional organization and the correlation to professional identity. Student feedback indicates an increased awareness of the scope of the work of professional organizations. The majority of students indicate the only reason they have previously joined a professional organization is to obtain liability insurance. Students are encouraged to sign up for electronic updates on critical issues and legislative issues in order to maintain current information regarding professional issues.

Curriculum Infusion

The introductory training is supported through efforts to infuse a social justice emphasis throughout the curriculum. Attempts are made to modify assignments so that a social justice framework can be incorporated. The multicultural course offers many opportunities for a social justice infusion. As students study different populations, an inclusion of social and political barriers would be helpful in increasing knowledge of areas for advocacy. Information on cultural bias can be including in courses such as Theories, Tests and Measurement, and Psychopathology.

The School Counseling courses in the program have a strong social justice emphasis. Students are trained using the Transforming School Counseling model (The Education Trust, 2009), which includes a new vision of school counseling. Students are taught to analyze school accountability reports in order to identify achievement gaps among subpopulations within the school. Social justice issues typically emerge from an analysis of the school accountability reports. In addition to test results, students analyze attendance rates, drop out rates, over-representation of subpopulations in Special Education, and under-representation of subpopulations in gifted and talented programs and advanced level courses. This information is utilized as data to be included as a part of a school needs assessment. The needs assessment data is then the springboard from which program development occurs. By utilizing data-driven decision-making procedures, school counselors have strong evidence to support advocacy efforts that promote equity in education. Students are also trained in the analysis of policies and procedures that result in barriers for subpopulations within the school.

Extra-curricular Offerings

In addition to curriculum based training, the program uses other opportunities to educate students on advocacy opportunities. The program utilizes an electronic listserv to communicate with students about important programmatic information. The listserv is also utilized to inform students of advocacy opportunities. The Program Director forwards all electronic communications from ACA and the state counseling association regarding legislative issues. When the emails are forwarded, the Program Director provides an explanation of the issue and why it is important to students, the profession, or counseling clients. Students are encouraged to contact their legislators and a sample message is provided to assist them.

The local chapter of Chi Sigma Iota International Counseling Honor Society hosts a variety of events that are open to all members of the program. Several of these events involve invited speakers. Those speakers have been from local, state, and national organizations that provide information to students about the clients they serve. The speakers serve to increase awareness of opportunities for advocacy. Elected officials,

including the local representative to the United States House, have spoken at functions in order to develop a relationship with legislators so that advocacy efforts have to potential of being more effective.

Legislative Training

In order to scaffold students in developing the skills necessary to work with legislators, a legislative training occurs. This begins with training on legislative processes and procedures. As an introduction to the process, students are shown the Schoolhouse Rock (1975) video “I’m Just a Bill.” The video is an educational cartoon that follows the process of a bill being written and introduced to being signed into law. Although elementary in nature, it provides a good overview of the process. Students are introduced to the state counseling association and ACA public policy agendas. Discussions occur regarding the agendas in order to develop knowledge related to the issue. The state counseling association provides beneficial information and training related to the issues and the key legislators involved in the issues.

Students utilize online legislative resources to research proposed legislation introduced by or supported by their representatives and the legislator’s voting records. This provides valuable information for the students to determine whether their representatives are supportive of the students’ views and opinions. The online resources are also utilized to track the progress of proposed legislation. By tracking the progress, students can time their contact with their representatives, committee chairs, and committee members during critical periods. To prepare students for these contacts, role-plays are conducted to allow students the opportunity to practice and prepare for legislative contacts.

Experiential Learning

The capstone experience in the advocacy training is an opportunity for students to participate in an experiential learning activity through a field trip to the state capitol to meet with legislators. Students who are unable to participate in the field trip are given the opportunity to write three letters to legislators on issues related to counseling or the clients that are served. If students participate in the field trip or write letters, they are given an exemption from an exam. Students are encouraged to schedule appointments with their individual legislators on the day of the visit. The field trip occurs on one of the state counseling association’s Advocacy Days.

The day begins with students participating in an orientation provided by the state counseling association. Information is provided on key issues and the status of legislation impacting counselors. Key legislators are identified with suggested messages for these individuals. The message may be thanking the legislator for supporting counselors or it may be requesting support for legislation, the scheduling of legislation to be discussed in a committee, or encouraging budgetary appropriations. During the orientation, the students determine who will speak to whom about the different issues. In order to get obtain the exam exemption, each student must speak.

After the orientation, students briefly observe both the House and Senate procedures. For many students, this is their first trip to the state capitol and the opportunity to watch congress in session is fascinating to them. On both visits, local legislators have recognized the group from the House and Senate floor.

After observing the congressional sessions, visits to individual legislators begin. In some offices, the students speak to a legislative aide. In others, they are able to speak to the legislator. Because the group is normally 10-12 people, many of the legislators will take the time to speak with the group. If appointments have been made in advance, the legislator will often be available. On one visit, students were able to speak directly with the Chair of the Senate Finance Committee to encourage funding for school counseling initiatives. On another visit, a representative came off the House floor to speak with the students. Because of the advance preparation, students are able to speak in a knowledgeable and articulate manner about the issues. They are armed with facts and statistics to support their opinion.

If committees are in session and are discussing a pertinent issue, students sit in on the committee meetings. They have the opportunity to sign up to testify before the committee. Some of the issues the students have advocated for include the school counselor to student ratio, proposed legislation that would limit a school counselor's time spent on non-counseling duties to 10%, notification of parents if a fully certified school counselor was not employed by a school, requiring Licensed Professional Counselors to obtain special licensure to work with specific populations, use of stimulus funds for mental health issues, and a limitation on services available to children of illegal immigrants. The students urged the legislators to support the proposed legislation related to the ratio, the limitation on counselor time, and parental notification. They were opposed to additional licensure requirements and limitation of services.

The limitation on services available to children of illegal immigrants was a bill that had been authored by the local representative. The limitations included access to healthcare and educational services. The students were very articulate in expressing their concerns regarding the impact of the legislation on the individual, the community, and the state economy. The representative attempted several times to divert the conversation to other topics. However, the students were very skillful in redirecting the representative back to the topic of concern. The representative made comments that were offensive to several in the group. Rather than becoming emotionally charged by the comments, the students maintained their composure and used reflections and clarifying questions to continue the dialogue. Because they had done extensive research and practiced, they were prepared to handle a situation that had the potential of becoming confrontational and uncomfortable.

Student Follow-Up Survey

The field trip and hands on experience at the state capitol had a profound impact on the students as is evidenced through the results of a follow-up survey. Approximately 50 students participated in the advocacy activities. Thirty-one students completed the survey after the activities. Nine of the students had participated in the field trip and 22 had written letters. Of the 31 students, six reported having previous experience in activities designed to influence legislation and 25 had no previous experience. The previous experience included writing letters or e-mails, signing a form letter, and working on a school committee to change an educational issue. Two students had previous lobbying experience and one had testified before a congressional committee.

The students were asked to rate their level of awareness regarding legislative issues that impact the counseling profession prior to the advocacy activities and after the activities. Table 1 represents the results of those questions. The numbers represent the total number of students who chose that ranking.

Table 1
Student Ratings on Level of Awareness Regarding Legislative Issues

	No Awareness	Very Little Awareness	Somewhat Aware	Highly Aware
Field Trip				
Before	2	4	2	1
After	0	0	2	7
Wrote Letters				
Before	4	10	7	1
After	0	1	12	9

The results clearly indicate the activities increased the level of awareness among the majority of the students. The students attending the field trip reported more significant change and overall higher levels of awareness after the activity than the students who wrote letters. One student who attended the field trip reported no change. This student was highly aware prior to the activity and had previous lobbying experience and had previously testified before a congressional committee.

Among the students who wrote letters, two students reported no change. One rated herself as somewhat aware both before and after the activity and the other rated himself highly aware before and after.

The remainder of the survey asked the following open-ended questions:

1. Prior to participating in the advocacy activity, what were your thoughts and feelings regarding involvement in activities designed to influence the legislative process?
2. After participating in the advocacy activity, what are your thoughts and feelings regarding involvement in activities designed to influence the legislative process?
3. How do you think this experience impacted you as an emerging professional?
4. Do you plan to maintain an awareness of legislative issues in order to continue to participate in advocacy work for the counseling profession? Explain why or why not?
5. How do you think political advocacy is related to professional identity?
6. Please comment on your thoughts regarding counselors being politically active regarding legislation that impacts the profession. Do you think training in advocacy should be included in counselor education programs? Why or why not?

The answers to these questions were analyzed using qualitative coding procedures in order to identify themes.

A review of the responses to the first question found a common theme emerging related to lack of knowledge about how to be involved. Following is a sample of common responses:

- “I thought it was hard to understand and out of my reach to change anything.”
- “I understood the need for involvement but was somewhat ignorant about the process of becoming involved and lacked confidence in the knowledge I did have.”
- “I thought advocacy was an important element in creating change but felt unsure of my individual role outside of writing letters.”
- “That I did not know how to speak with my representative or senator and would not know what to say if I did have the opportunity.”

These responses are evidence of the need for training students on the processes and skills needed to advocate. The students’ responses demonstrate an understanding of the need to be engaged in advocacy, but a lack of knowledge and skills necessary to do so. Several student responses also indicate a lack of confidence. Appropriate training would likely increase the student confidence level because of feelings of competence related to acquisition of knowledge and skills.

The responses to the second question support the increase in confidence. Students also indicated a better understanding of the process and the importance of being involved. Responses included:

- “I think I will take a more active role in activities designed to influence legislation. I am less afraid of the process.”
- “Taking part in the legislative process is no longer a frightening thought. Involvement in such activities makes me proud to contribute to the shaping of future legislation.”
- “Now I see how and why it is so important to advocate. It is really important to be involved in the process.”
- “I feel more comfortable making contact and advocating for counselors.”
- “I believe they are terribly important and I feel more confident about participating in them.”
- “I realize that I have a voice that could help my profession and help others. I am not afraid of the process.”

The third question asked the students how they believe the experience impacted them as an emerging professional. The two themes that emerged from the responses to this question were awareness and empowerment. Responses also indicated a sense of responsibility to be involved. Sample responses were:

- “It brought forth an awareness of how critical advocacy is with counseling. I realized my multifaceted responsibilities as an emerging professional.”
- “I feel a sense of empowerment. Made me feel more a part of the profession.”

- “I became aware that things will not change in the counseling profession unless you advocate for it.”
- “The experience helped me to understand why it is important to stand up for my profession because if we don’t, nobody else will.”

The fourth question asked if the student will continue to maintain awareness of legislative issues in order to continue to advocate. Twenty-six responses indicated they would continue to be involved, and five indicated they would attempt to maintain awareness and involvement. Of those who would continue to be involved, the responses all indicated an understanding of how important it is for the profession and for clients. Responses once again indicated a sense of professional responsibility and duty to engage in advocacy activities. The students who were less committed to involvement all made reference to time issues. One respondent indicated she realized that was an excuse as she was writing it.

The fifth question asked students about the connection between advocacy and professional identity. The majority (n=27) of the responses indicated a direct connection between advocacy and professional identity. Three students did not answer the question and one said they are not related. Responses indicated advocacy creates and strengthens professional identity. Sample responses included:

- “How can you empower others if you don’t empower yourself? By advocating for others, it can help you to develop and grow as a person and a professional.”
- “It lets you be an active member of your profession and gives you knowledge of the profession you are in.”
- “I think it relates to the overall competence of the professional. It gives them a level of knowledge about the profession they would not have otherwise. It also raises them to another level and helps them have some influence over what happens in the profession.”
- “Understanding issues that concern your clients and advocating for those issues is a professional and moral responsibility.”

The final question asked whether advocacy training should be included in counselor education programs. All of the responses indicated the training should be included. There were a variety of suggestions on how the training should occur. None of the students supported a course solely dedicated to advocacy training. Suggestions included a seminar, a mini-course, and appropriate infusion in existing courses. Student comments indicated the training provides encouragement and support for being involved. One student stated she would never have gone to the capitol if the professor had not shown her how to do it and explained the process. Others reiterated they did not have the knowledge, skills, or confidence necessary to be involved. One student response suggested all professions should be trained, not just counselors.

Conclusion

Kolb (1984) suggests “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). His experiential learning theory supports the opportunity for students to have a direct encounter with the concepts being studied rather than merely having the concepts presented to them or reading about them. Although both groups in the program (the letter writers and the field trip participants) had positive experiences, those who attended the field trip indicated a greater impact on professional development than those who wrote letters. The ability to actually engage in the advocacy process face to face with the support of a professor was a powerful learning experience, which will hopefully result in higher levels of involvement in other advocacy activities in the future.

Many of the responses of students indicated a lack of knowledge regarding how to be involved in the process of advocating. The final question on the survey also demonstrated strong support on the part of the students for the inclusion of advocacy training in the curriculum. Advocacy skills are valued by the profession as evidenced by the ACA Advocacy Competencies. Students are not likely to develop these competencies on their own without intentional instructional strategies. Counselor educators need to provide the same level of scaffolding necessary for students to develop advocacy skills as they do other counseling skills. We teach our students what we value.

As a profession, we have recognized that many counselors do not have the skills necessary to effectively engage in advocacy activities (Goodman, 2009). Yet, we have identified advocacy as an important role of the counselor. By utilizing some of the strategies outlined in this article, counselor educators can begin to shape the future of the profession so that emerging professionals will incorporate the role of advocate as an essential element of their professional identity.

References

- Auxier, C. R., Hughes, F. R., & Kline, W. B. (2003). Identity development in counseling-in-training. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 43, 25-38.
- The Education Trust. (2009). *The new vision for school counseling*. Retrieved from <http://www.edtrust.org/dc/tsc/vision>
- Goodman, J. (2009). Starfish, salmon, and whales: An introduction to the special section. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 87(3), 259.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lewis, J. A., Arnold, M. S., House, R., & Toporek, R. L. (2002). *ACA Advocacy Competencies*. Retrieved from <http://www.counseling.org/Publications/>
- Lewis, J. A., & Lewis, M. D. (1983). *Community counseling: A human services approach*. New York: Wiley.
- Pepper, G. L., & Larson, G. S. (2006). Cultural identity tensions is a post-acquisition organization. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34, 49-71.
- Schoolhouse Rock. (1975). *I'm just a bill [Video file]*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEJL2Uuv-oQ>

- Toporek, R. L., Lewis, J. A., & Crethar, H. C. (2009). Promoting systemic change through the ACA advocacy competencies. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 87(3), 260-268.
- Toporek, R. L., & Liu, W. M. (2001). Advocacy in counseling: Addressing race, class, and gender oppression. In D. B. Pope-Davis & H. L. K Coleman (Eds.), *The intersection of race, class, and gender in multicultural counseling* (pp. 285-413). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm