



Ethical issues facing new counselors: Developing competency and pursuing licensure

This column is the second in a two-part series that focuses on ethical issues faced by new counselors. To read part one, see the October 2018 issue of *Counseling Today*.



The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *competency* as “an ability or skill.” It goes on to offer an extended legal definition of competency as “the quality or state of being legally qualified or adequate.”

Within the realm of professional counseling, competency is an ever-changing benchmark, as evidenced by the emphasis placed on continuing education in counselor licensure laws and the *ACA Code of Ethics*. Because this benchmark is not static, students, supervisees and new counselors may struggle with knowing when to consider themselves competent to handle a client’s concerns or whether referral is necessary.

This column addresses considerations associated with developing competency and determining level of competency, as well as how issues of developing competency relate to pursuing licensure.

Competency

The entirety of a new counselor’s training revolves around the goal of developing competency and helping the new counselor to begin feeling comfortable providing counseling without constant supervision. Beginning counseling students tend to struggle with knowing whether they are competent to see and help clients. Counselor educators and supervisors understand this self-doubt and self-evaluation. Hence, emphasis is placed on practicum and internships. Licensure boards understand this process too and therefore require postgraduate supervision.

When counseling students enter a master’s-level counseling program, they are introduced to a wide variety of theories, techniques and skills. Although most programs offer electives to expand students’ exposure to different topics, the core courses are meant to establish a strong foundation of basic competency and skills. Therefore, when students enter practicum and internship, they should be prepared to handle concerns related to individuals, families, couples, career and so on. Students will still need to meet with their supervisors to discuss clients, including possible next steps to take to provide the most help, but these students should already have the foundational pieces in place.

A concern may develop when students or supervisees find themselves questioning their competency to work with a client from a specific population or who is different from the counselor in some way, particularly if a values conflict is present between the client and the counselor. Some counseling students may assume that they can simply claim a lack of competency in such cases. However, the *ACA Code of Ethics* very specifically addresses the difference between values conflicts and true competency issues in cases of client termination and referral (see Standards A.11.a. and A.11.b.).

In an Ethics Update column published in the October 2016 issue of *Counseling Today*, Lynn Linde wrote, “No [counselor] is expected not to be who they are. However, in counseling, it is important to leave our values and worldview at the door of the session and not allow how we see things to influence the way we view and work with our clients. We need to see the world through our client’s eyes and understand the client’s frame of reference.”

New counselors may find it difficult to define when they are experiencing a values

conflict versus when they are truly not prepared to assist a client. Linde explained that the determining factor is whether the referral is based on client needs or client characteristics: “Counselors may not refer based on a client characteristic. So if a counselor lacks knowledge about a client with whom the counselor is working, it is incumbent upon the counselor to seek additional training, consultation or supervision to increase his or her skills and ability to work with that client.”

These are situations in which supervision is critical. The supervisor has a responsibility to help evaluate and address the concern. The supervisor also needs to take the appropriate measures to determine whether the situation requires a referral for the client or possible remediation for the counselor, or whether the situation serves simply as a helpful self-awareness learning opportunity for the supervisee.

The *ACA Code of Ethics* discusses the need for counselors to practice within the boundaries of their competency and to accept a job placement only if they possess the necessary skill set for the clientele (see Standard C.2.). For example, a newly graduated counseling student might be offered a placement at an outpatient clinic for those with eating disorders. However, in this case, the student never had the opportunity in his or her counseling program to take a class that specifically addressed eating disorders. Thus, the supervisee has a responsibility to address that lack of competency with the employer and to develop a plan of action for obtaining some training on working with that specific concern.

New counselors might also encounter situations in which they are being supervised by someone who is practicing outside of his or her boundaries of competency. For example, consider

a supervisee who has just accepted a position providing intensive in-home counseling to lower-income clients. Both the supervisee and the supervisor were trained in a traditional program that taught how to interact with clients in a clinical office setting. The supervisor has never provided in-home counseling. The supervisee is struggling with being culturally sensitive and with establishing professional boundaries with clients in their own homes. However, when addressing the concern, the supervisor provides a rigid and formal approach to establishing boundaries. The supervisee is left feeling as if he or she is not forming a therapeutic bond with the clients, and the clients are left feeling as if the counselor is aloof and uncaring.

Supervisors should be able to provide insight into their supervisees' situations and concerns. When supervisors have a lack of understanding or experience within a specific realm, they should seek learning opportunities to rectify that gap in knowledge.

Additionally, students, supervisees and new counselors might be interested in expanding their skills to include techniques and approaches for which they didn't receive training in their graduate programs. For instance, perhaps the agency in which the supervisee is working does not have a trained play therapist on staff but does have a play therapy room where children are seen. The supervisee might want to seek certification as a play therapist to better utilize the agency's resources and to best help its clients.

In such a scenario, the supervisee should seek additional supervision from a certified play therapist. Therefore, the supervisee would have two different supervisory relationships at one time. The expectations and responsibilities of each supervisor — and of the supervisee — need to be communicated and clearly defined for all parties (as discussed in detail in last month's Ethics Update column).

Finally, the issue of competency should be considered for licensure purposes. The supervisee is practicing under the license of the supervisor, which means that the supervisor is ultimately responsible for the clients' welfare. A supervisor must act as a gatekeeper for the counseling profession, attempting to help mold new counselors

into competent professional counselors who are capable of solo practice.

The supervisee, on the other hand, must be willing to be molded. At times, a supervisor's suggestion or request might appear to the supervisee to be too demanding or even wrong. However, the supervisor should be expected to possess more experience and better clinical judgment than the supervisee does. The supervisee has an ethical responsibility to listen to the supervisor and to follow through on the supervisor's requests. The supervisee also has a responsibility to explain his or her rationale for choosing not to follow through on the supervisor's suggestions.

Licensure

Obtaining a license to practice professional counseling is typically the ultimate goal for master's-level counseling students. Licensure requirements differ from state to state. Prospective counselors should consult with their state licensure boards to verify requirements even before beginning training. The American Counseling Association also offers a quick reference list on licensure boards under the Knowledge Center tab at counseling.org (see "Licensure Requirements" and then "State Professional Counselor Licensure Boards" under the drop-down menu).

A few states have entered into reciprocal arrangements through which licensed individuals in one state can be fast-tracked toward licensure in another state. However, being licensed in one state does not guarantee licensure in another, especially at the same level. For instance, Ohio has four different licensure levels, depending on the person's education level and ability to practice without supervision. It is possible that a counselor with a full license in one state could move to Ohio and still be required to practice under the supervision of another individual.

Regarding competency, some states require supervisees to have a board-approved supervisor or a licensed counselor (rather than another mental health provider) sign off on their licensure hours. This requires some supervisees to seek outside supervision to meet licensure requirements. It is imperative that postgraduate counselors review the specific licensure requirements in their states to ensure that they get off on the right foot.

As it relates to counseling students, educators should be discussing licensure requirements with the students in their programs and ensuring that their students meet the education requirements found within the state's licensure requirements. Some states do have different education requirements. For example, Florida requires a course in human sexuality. This means that those who move to Florida to complete their residency will need to take an additional course if human sexuality was not part of their program. It also means that licensed counselors who move to Florida may have to take another course as well.

Conclusion

Let's review the definition of competency: an ability or skill, or a quality or state of being legally qualified. One could argue that as professional counselors, complete competency is never truly achieved. However, competency starts with one's education and continues to develop as students and supervisees are exposed to and guided through numerous situations.

Students, supervisees and new counselors should be able to rely on more seasoned supervisors to help them process conflicts with clients and determine appropriate treatment. Supervisors should act as gatekeepers for the counseling profession and require competency from their supervisees. ❖

Michelle E. Wade is an assistant professor at Marymount University. She is a licensed professional counselor and a board-approved supervisor in Virginia and Maryland. She is a member of the American Counseling Association Ethics Committee and previously has served on the Ethics Revision Task Force and as an ethics specialist for ACA.

Joy Natwick is the ethics specialist for the American Counseling Association. Contact her at ethics@counseling.org.

Letters to the editor:
ct@counseling.org