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Author(s): Suzanne M. Hobson and H. Mike Kanitz

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features

Multicultural Counseling: An Ethical Issue for School Counselors

Suzanne M. Hobson
H. Mike Kanitz

School counselors face an ethical issue when deciding whether to engage in multicultural counseling without having had multicultural training. Divergent expert opinions and the implications of each are considered.

The field of multicultural counseling is still in its infancy (Gelso & Fretz, 1992) both because of its relatively recent emergence within the counseling and psychology professions and because of its current lack of development and maturity. Lee (1995) noted that the civil rights movement of the 1960s laid the foundation for tremendous sociopolitical changes within the United States. Students with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are now being recognized as deserving of equal rights. As a result, actions to ensure equal economic, legal, and social opportunities are in increasing demand. The nation as a whole has become more cognizant that the American educational system has a complex pluralistic nature.

Demographic trends have also contributed to the increasingly pluralistic nature of our society. According to Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1993), "the current trend might well be referred to as the 'diversification' of the United States... and is a function of two major forces: (a) current immigration patterns; and (b) differential birthrates among racial/ethnic groups" (p. 3). The authors explain further that demographic predictions indicate that 33% of the United States population will represent a minority culture by the year 2050. Consistent with this figure is the U.S. Department of Education estimate that "by the year 2000, 40% of the youth in the nation's schools will be from ethnic groups of color" (Lee, 1991, p. 5). Given these fore-

Suzanne M. Hobson is a full-time temporary instructor in the Department of Counseling and Special Education at Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, and is a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo. H. Mike Kanitz is a professor in the Department of Counseling and Special Education at Central Michigan University. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Suzanne M. Hobson, CECP Department, Sangren Hall, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo. MI 49008.

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casts, it is apparent that the percentage of the United States population representing non-White groups will dramatically increase over time.

It is clear from these estimates that many school counselors cannot expect to practice without coming in contact with diverse clients. This condition creates an ethical dilemma for the many school counselors who have received little or no training in multicultural counseling in their graduate programs. The ethical standards of the American Counseling Association (ACA, 1995); and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 1992) require members to treat each student as a unique individual and to provide services uniquely tailored to their needs. At the same time, members are required to avoid practicing outside the areas in which they are competent. This may therefore be viewed as an ethical dilemma for school counselors not trained in multicultural counseling. Should they make their services available to all students, seeking to treat each uniquely, yet taking a risk of practicing beyond their scope of competence? Or, should they limit the scope of their practice to areas in which they are confident in their competence and therefore withhold services from clients with diverse backgrounds with whom they have not been trained to work? We contend that many school counselors are inadequately trained in multicultural counseling. Furthermore, the lack of training in multicultural counseling in many master's degree programs also decreases the likelihood that school counselors are clearly aware of the importance of such training, and therefore increases the possibility that many school counselors are unknowingly practicing beyond their scope of competence.

Our goal is to address several issues related to this ethical dilemma. We reexamine the need for culturally sensitive practices with an illustration of how theories that seem to be free of bias may be based on false cultural assumptions and result in the culturally insensitive treatment of students; provide a historical overview of the profession's response to the need for multicultural counseling; and address divergent expert opinions in the continuing debate about whether specific training is necessary to ensure culturally sensitive counseling for all students. We also point out that school counselors are ethically obligated to resolve this dilemma by pursuing additional training to develop multicultural competencies to ensure appropriate services for all students. We further assert that professional associations and counselor education programs are ethically obligated to make adequate training available and required of all master's degree students.

THE NEED FOR MULTICULTURAL TRAINING

Graduate training programs for school counselors generally include a requirement for a course in counseling theories. Such a course is intended to provide the theoretical foundation on which to base their practice. Until recently, it was assumed that counseling theories and techniques were somehow culture free and therefore equally applicable to and effective with all people. The theories covered in such courses, however, have been developed primarily by White men and may not be applicable to counseling with women or racial and ethnic minorities (Espin & Gawelek, 1992; Ivey, 1993).

Niles (1993) described the belief that counseling is culture free as a "universalistic fallacy" (p. 15) and challenged the notion that the existing theories and techniques are appropriate for use with all cultures. Niles's belief that the theories, in fact, are not universalistic and value free echoes what has previously been expounded by Sue and Sue (1977): "Within the Western framework, counseling is a

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white, middle-class activity that holds many values and characteristics different from third-world groups" (p. 421). Carney and Kahn (1984) supported Sue and Sue's statement by pointing to the fact that interventions and counseling goals are often based on implicit, unspoken cultural values and assumptions.

TEN ASSUMPTIONS OF COUNSELING THEORIES

In a strong statement against the automatic acceptance and use of traditional theories and approaches with minority clients, Pedersen (1988) asserted: "These assumptions are usually so implicit and taken for granted that they are not challenged even by fair-thinking, right-minded colleagues. The consequences of these unexamined assumptions are institutionalized racism, ageism, sexism, and other examples of cultural bias" (p. 39). Pedersen concentrated on 10 specific assumptions of counseling theories that often go unexamined and yet have a tremendous impact on a theory or a technique's appropriateness for any given client or cultural group:

1. A common measure of "normal" behavior
2. Emphasis on individualism
3. Fragmentation by academic disciplines
4. Dependence on abstract words
5. Neglect of client's support system
6. Overemphasis on independence
7. Dependence on linear thinking
8. Focus on changing the individual, not the system
9. Neglect of history
10. Cultural encapsulation (pp. 63–69)

These 10 assumptions are so essential to an understanding of why multicultural training is necessary for school counselors that an examination of each is warranted. In the remainder of this section, we elaborate on each of Pedersen's (1988) 10 assumptions. Usher (989) has also provided an excellent examination of how these assumptions are inherent even in Rogerian, person-centered theory, a theory that is often assumed to be free of bias.

A Common Measure of "Normal" Behavior

The idea of a common measure of "normal" behavior is especially important in terms of diagnosis in counseling. Within the White, middle-class society, it might be considered abnormal or even pathological (for example, hypochondriasis) for a client to experience somatization in response to emotional upset (that is, having a stomachache instead of feeling anxious). However, some cultures consider this type of behavior normal and, in fact, consider it to be the only acceptable expression of some feelings. One can therefore understand that the traditional diagnostic system needs to be revised for multicultural counseling to honor cultural differences.

Emphasis on Individualism

Many traditional theories impose the concept of individualism on the individual. Only in family systems therapy is any considerable emphasis placed on ecological factors. Most theories instead advocate concentrating on the individual. A student is therefore encouraged to make decisions based, for example, on individual values. However, this approach runs counter to the teachings and beliefs of other cultures. For example, Japanese, Native American, and Hispanic cultures all place loyalty to family above individuality.

Fragmentation by Academic Disciplines

Counseling and psychological theories are the most popular source of our interventions, and the notion that they provide an adequate understanding of a student's

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problems is widely held. However, psychological theories tend by nature to be individual. Atkinson and Hackett (1995) professed, "We believe that for some of the issues clients bring to counseling, particularly for clients that are victims of oppression, counselors need to consider alternatives to the individual psychopathology and psychotherapy models" (p. 5). For some minorities, a focus on sociological dynamics will be more helpful than a focus on interpersonal dynamics. This is especially true in counseling oppressed groups.

Dependence on Abstract Words

This assumption refers to the counselor's belief that students will understand their words and abstractions the way the counselor understands them. Sue and Sue (1977) pointed out that many clients do not speak English as a first language (or at all!). Furthermore, even with a common language, abstractions such as love can have very different meanings. Pedersen (1988) pointed out that it is a mistake for counselors to assume that they understand what these meanings are for clients.

Neglect of a Client's Support System

This statement reflects the assumption that the school counselors or other professionals within the mental health system are best suited to assist students with their problems and that counseling, so to speak, is the solution. As Lee and Richardson (1991) pointed out, however, "many people of color have perceived counseling as a tool of oppression and social control" (p. 7). In such situations, Atkinson, Thompson, and Grant (1993) suggested that counselors might play a variety of roles. One role that would not neglect a person's support system would be "facilitator of indigenous support system" (p. 264).

Overemphasis on Independence

Traditional counseling theories also tend to suggest that independence is a desirable outcome or goal of the counseling process. The value placed on autonomy is so ingrained within White, middle-class society that its validity for other groups is rarely questioned. However, Pedersen (1988) reminded us that other cultures do not share the value of independence. For these cultures, a more appropriate counseling goal might be related to honoring the traditions or wishes of one's family.

Dependence on Linear Thinking

Likewise, linear thinking is automatically assumed by most counseling theories and used in most counseling practices. This type of thinking, according to Pedersen (1988), relies on cause-and-effect relationships. He suggests that counselors and psychologists need to carefully consider the "underlying way of thinking behind the translated message" (p. 43) when working with persons from other cultures. For instance, a linear treatment plan that assumes an intervention will lead directly to an outcome for the student may be faulty if used in cultures that use circular thinking instead of linear thinking.

Focus on Changing the Individual, Not the System

Consistent with the emphasis on individuality, another common assumption underlying most counseling theories involves focusing on changing the individual rather than the system. This assumption is especially harmful when working with those who have suffered from direct or insidious oppression. The feminist literature focuses heavily on countering this assumption with a call for counselors to focus not only on helping individuals change but also on helping them understand the oppression and on

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working toward social change. Atkinson et al. (1993) also acknowledged the importance of the change-agent role with such clients (p. 268).

Neglect of History

Pedersen (1988) stated that, even within theoretical approaches that emphasize early childhood, a client's history is still neglected to the extent that the counselor fails to recognize the importance of family or cultural history. A person's problems can be directly affected by the internalized lessons of the past.

Cultural Encapsulation

This assumption serves as a reminder that the field of multicultural counseling is indeed still in its infancy (Gelso & Fretz, 1992). The concept of cultural encapsulation refers to assuming that the profession is aware of all of its assumptions and therefore need not work toward greater understanding and growth.

As an examination of each of these assumptions reveals, many school counselors may be inadvertently treating students in a culturally insensitive manner. The problematic aspects of using traditional counseling theories and techniques with minority populations were also highlighted by Carney and Kahn (1984): "White mental health professionals have historically ignored or minimized the importance of the cultural/ethnic differences that exist between themselves and persons of Asian, Black, American Indian, and Hispanic origins" (p. 111). Although this discussion of the cultural assumptions embedded within traditional counseling theories illustrates only one way in which a lack of training in multicultural issues may have a negative impact on a school counselor's ability to be effective with a diverse population, it clearly illustrates the importance of such training. Despite such clarity, however, professional associations and counselor education departments have been slow to transform such an awareness into requirements for training (Casas, Ponterotto, & Gutierrez, 1986; Ponterotto & Casas, 1987; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

THE PROFESSION'S RESPONSE TO MULTICULTURAL NEEDS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As professional counselors and psychologists became aware of the increasingly pluralistic nature of society and began to question the relevance of traditional approaches to multicultural counseling, professional associations began to respond. Burn (1992) indicated that ACA, formerly the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) and before that the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), recognized the need to provide multicultural counseling in 1965 by forming the Human Rights Commission. In 1972, a formal branch was established to address multicultural concerns. This branch still exists and is known today as the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD).

One role of these professional associations has been to determine what competencies a school counselor should possess to be considered culturally adept. Arredondo-Dowd and Gonsalves (1980) summarized the wide array of suggestions within the literature: "The common theme and recommendation is that to be culturally effective, counselors must learn about and from their clients, demonstrating the nonjudgmental, value-free approach characteristic of their role" (p. 657).

Despite this general agreement of the importance of being culturally sensitive, however, the development of a specific set of competencies has indeed been slow. A historical review of the earlier ethical stan-

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dards of ACA (AACD, 1988) reveals only three, rather tangential, standards that addressed multicultural issues. One referred to the requirement that counselors "must ensure that members of various ethnic, racial, religious, disability, and socioeconomic groups have equal access to computer applications used to support counseling services" (p. 2). Another referred to the interpretation of tests administered to clients who are members of a group not adequately represented in the norming sample. Finally, a third standard required that the counselor remain aware of "the negative impact of both racial and sexual stereotyping and discrimination" to avoid violating the "individual rights and personal dignity of the client" (p. 1).

These earlier ethical standards, therefore, did not specifically require that members become trained in multicultural counseling. Although they required members to treat each student as a unique individual, the standards seemed to convey a mixed message by requiring counselors who had not been trained in multicultural counseling to avoid practicing outside their areas of competence. Standard A.7 states that "members recognize their boundaries of competence and provide only those services . . . for which they are qualified by training of experience . . ." (AACD, 1988, p. 1).

Not surprisingly, authors questioned the adequacy of these standards (Sue et al., 1992). Some responded to the lack of clarity by proposing new guidelines and ethical standards. Ibrahim and Arredondo (1986) proposed new cross-cultural standards in the areas of counselor preparation, counseling practice, assessment, and research. Other authors called for action from the professional association. In a scathing rebuke of the professional associations, Casas et al. (1986) stated that "most professionals with expertise in counseling persons from racial and ethnic minority groups concur that there is a general lack of professional interest in and concern for understanding and effectively serving these groups and thus a dearth of research and training" (p. 348). In a later statement, Ponterotto and Casas (1987) implored the profession to develop better guidelines: "It urgently behooves the profession to take action to instill in its training programs an acceptable level of multicultural sensitivity and competence" (p. 430).

Perhaps in response to such calls for action, AMCD (a member association of ACA) published in 1986 "a set of multicultural competencies to be used as guidelines for counselor education programs in the preparation of culturally skilled counselors" (Lee & Richardson, 1991, p. 210). (*Reader's Note.* The newest version of these competencies has been approved by AMCD and published in the association's journal [Arredondo, 1996].) In recognition of these competencies, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) included multicultural training objectives in its 1994 manual. The manual has as its very first objective "reflect current knowledge and positions from lay and professional groups concerning the counseling and human development needs of a pluralistic society" (p. 50). More specifically, the CACREP manual requires that programs of study in school counseling

> include . . . (a) multicultural and pluralistic trends including characteristics and concerns of diverse groups; [and] (b) attitudes based on such factors as age, race, religious preference, physical disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity and culture, family patterns, gender, socioeconomic status, and intellectual ability. (p. 51)

Throughout the CACREP manual, guidelines and directives repeatedly refer to diversity awareness such as including clinical experiences within a training program for school counselors that "provide opportunities for the students to counsel clients representative of the ethnic, life-

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style, and demographic diversity of their community" (p. 57). Thus it seems that better guidelines have finally been established and adopted by the profession.

However, incorporating these standards into instructive programs has been slow. The 1994 CACREP Fact Sheet indicated that only 83 school counseling programs in the country currently meet the stated criteria. Master's-level counseling students may therefore be especially at risk of inadequate preparation. Demonstrating the need for additional education at this level, Carey, Reinat, and Fontes (1990) surveyed school counselors and found that "there is a high general level of need for continuing education of school counselors in multicultural counseling. By implication, more coverage of multicultural issues in the school counseling curriculum is also warranted" (p. 166).

The most recent effort by ACA to establish a code of conduct was the publication of a revised document titled *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (1995). The Governing Council included the wording in the new publication's Section C: Professional Responsibility, "Counselors will demonstrate a commitment to gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills pertinent to working with a diverse client population" (C.2.a., p. 7). The document provides a continuing education statement and requests that counselors ". . . take steps to maintain competence in the skills they use, are open to new procedures, and keep current with the diverse and/or special populations with whom they work" (C.2.f., p. 7). The *Standards of Practice* directives are clear, "Counselors respect diversity and must not discriminate against clients because of age, color, culture, disability, ethnic group, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, or socioeconomic status" (SP-1, p. 20). The code will serve the profession well if adhered to by the ACA membership. Counselor educators can use the new code as a guide to implement effective interventions and resolution strategies against discrimination.

DIVERGENT OPINIONS ABOUT MULTICULTURAL COUNSELING

Despite the fact that the professional associations for both counseling and psychology formally recognized the importance of cultural sensitivity by 1973 and recommended specific training and preparation for multicultural counseling, and despite cautions from researchers about the dangers of cultural encapsulation, a debate continues to exist within the professional literature. Not all members of the profession agree that it is specifically necessary to take cultural background into consideration. This debate offers insight into why training programs have been slow to require at least one course in multicultural counseling of all graduates.

Perhaps one of the strongest opponents of Pedersen's (1988) suggestions for multicultural training of counselors is Patterson (1985), who has advocated what he calls "eclectic psychotherapy" as being a "therapeutic relationship." Patterson does recognize that cultural differences do exist. To paraphrase, he made reference to "Westerners" being more independent, more extroverted, and more verbal than are people from other cultures such as the Eastern cultures. In his chapter on cross-cultural counseling, he also acknowledges the existence of opinions regarding the inappropriate nature of traditional counseling theories for use with clients from other cultures. In reference to these opinions, he stated the following:

> All of the major systems or theories of counseling or psychotherapy, it is pointed out, have developed in Western Europe and America. It is assumed that the theories (if not the nature) of human behavior and its psychopathologies are culture-bound. Thus, it is concluded that new approaches,

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> as yet undefined, are necessary. (Patterson, 1985, pp. 184–185)

Although Patterson offers this acknowledgment, however, he swiftly moves to counter it. Based on his belief that differences between cultures are outweighed by "the universality in human nature and values" (p. 185), Patterson pointed toward the potential bias of developing new approaches for use with different cultures:

> As the assumption that we must develop a new kind of (simplified, structured) psychotherapy for the poor . . . [Goldstein, 1973] . . . is a manifestation of extreme bias and prejudice in subtle disguise, so also may be the assumption that different cultures require different approaches and methods of counseling or psychotherapy. (p. 185)

Patterson seemed to be communicating a belief here that the form of counseling he advocates is immune from the danger of being culturally biased because it focuses on universal truths (such as the self-actualization being the goal of psychotherapy) and simultaneously allows for individual differences because of the strong emphasis on Rogerian concepts such as unconditional positive regard and acceptance.

Lloyd (1987) is another who questions the verity of Pedersen's model. In a stimulus article titled "Multicultural Counseling: Does It Belong in a Counselor Education Program?" Lloyd argued that training programs that teach students about cultural characteristics focus a counselor's attention on differences between themselves and their clients and thereby prompt them to offer services based on stereotypical beliefs about the clients. Lloyd based these conclusions on his personal counseling experiences in Malaysia and stated that the cultural information he collected beforehand served only to facilitate social graces. In terms of the actual counseling relationships, however, these "seemed to be enhanced by forgetting [emphasis added] the cultural 'truths' and relying simply on communications and counseling skills" (p. 166).

In reaction to Lloyd's position, Hood and Arceneaux (1987) expressed disdain: "Is a university professor actually attempting to convince us that . . . ignorance is to be preferred to knowledge?" (p. 173). Hood and Arceneaux pointed out that stereotypes of cultures already exist, many of them incorrect, and that it is essential to provide counselors with accurate information about cultures. They also indicated that this information should be used only as "conceptual frameworks" (p. 173) for counselors; counselors should be aware that clients from a particular culture may or may not be described by the cultural information because of "the great diversity that exists among individuals within a cultural group" (p. 174).

Another reaction against Lloyd's position came from Ivey (1987). Ivey's reaction is especially interesting because he had previously advocated a position much closer to Lloyd's. Ivey indicated that his original concept of "microcounseling in its 1968 and 1971 versions . . . was culturally blind" (Ivey, 1987, p. 169). However, as he conducted research and applied his microcounseling skills to people of other cultures, Ivey began to realize the importance of cultural differences and now holds a belief very similar to that posited by Pedersen (1988). Ivey described this transformation of his beliefs:

> Over the years, I have become increasingly aware of the severe contradictions and limitations of our Eurocentric construction of the helping process that we term counseling and psychotherapy. For me, this has been a gradually evolving change covering virtually my entire career. . . . In effect, I now believe that all helping practice is based on a set of cultural assumptions. Counseling and therapy practice may be described as a set of methods developed by male Europeans and European-Americans

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> perhaps useful with clients (especially if they are male) of that cultural background, but certainly not relevant to all cultures without major changes and additions. (Ivey, 1993, p. 225)

It is evident from this excerpt that Ivey underwent a tremendous change in his beliefs about multicultural counseling as a result of his experience. However, he also agreed with Lloyd that it is important not to assume that a client is accurately described by the knowledge one has about the client's culture but to seek, instead, to honor a client's individuality within his or her culture. Ivey called this concept "cultural intentionality" and defined it as "the ability to see oneself as a unique human being in a cultural context" (1987, p. 170).

One can see, therefore, that an unresolved debate about the role of cultural information in the counseling and psychotherapy professions still exists. This continued debate among the prominent writers may well explain the reason that the profession as a whole has been slow to embrace the idea of multicultural counseling and to implement specific training programs. However, this debate has resulted in more than the challenging cross-cultural counseling issues suggested by Whitledge (1994). Pedersen and Marsella (1982) have noted that now that ACA has adopted ethical guidelines, the "counseling of persons of culturally diverse backgrounds by persons who are not trained to work with such groups should be regarded as unethical" (p. 492). This, Pedersen (1988) stated, presents the counselor as well as the profession as a whole with the dilemma described at the beginning of this article: Without appropriate formal training, providing counseling to minority clients is unethical; however, counselors "have few opportunities to receive training in cross-cultural issues of mental health" (p. 497).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A direct result of the lack of training opportunities is that many school counselors may graduate without having taken a class in multicultural counseling. Yet, it is clear that school counselors will be faced with rising demands to counsel culturally diverse students as our society becomes increasingly pluralistic. In addressing the need for multicultural training of school counselors, Pedersen and Carey (1994) concluded that "our educational system is facing a dilemma in which training [of staff regarding diversity issues] must supplement counseling and education in order to prepare a favorable educational environment" (p. 237). Lee (1995) stated, "In order to build a comprehensive school counseling program that meets the needs of a culturally diverse student body, it is important to develop a conceptual base for such a service" (p. 5). Furthermore, Lee reminded us that "changing population demographics challenge school counselors to reassess their professional attitudes and behaviors and take action to ensure that they have the awareness, knowledge, and skill to deliver services to all students" (p. 189).

We believe that this ethical dilemma can and should be resolved. Each school counselor is challenged to assess his or her own level of multicultural competence and seek additional training, whether through university courses or continuing education opportunities, to remediate any deficiencies. Each counselor education department is challenged to assess and ensure the multicultural competence of each counselor educator within it. Furthermore, conventional wisdom would direct that each department not only require a course in multicultural counseling, but also infuse each class with information on multicultural issues. For example, a course on theories needs to address the cultural as-

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sumptions embedded within traditional theory discussed by Pedersen (1988), and a course on assessment needs to address the adequacy of norming samples in deciding whether to use and how to interpret a particular assessment instrument with diverse populations. Finally, we believe that professional associations need to take a more definitive stance regarding the need for multicultural training and take steps to enforce any guidelines by more closely monitoring counselor education programs and the licensure or endorsement of school counselors. It is our sense that ACA's newly revised *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (1995) do reflect a more conclusive position regarding the ethical necessity for all counselors, including school counselors, to develop and maintain multicultural competencies. It is further hoped that these revised standards will also convince counselor educators to incorporate comprehensive multicultural training into degree requirements.

As a service profession whose continuation and growth depend greatly on effectiveness with clients and on their satisfaction, it is imperative that counselors continue to address this issue. As Burn (1992) stated, "the continued growth of the profession depends on its ability to gain the confidence of a pluralistic society by providing relevant and effective services" (p. 579). It is for this reason that our profession cannot afford to neglect its ethical responsibility to students in a diverse and pluralistic society. Likewise, each school counselor is challenged to take action to promote the development of more effective and extensive multicultural training. Ten years ago, a thoughtful criticism was aimed at helping professionals: "Continued apathy by the counseling profession [and by counseling professionals] will result in a significant number of counselors working from what should be regarded as an unethical position, one that could eventually result in the ethical indictment of the profession" (Casas et al., 1986, p. 348). To the extent that counselors strive to practice in an ethical manner, it is incumbent on each counseling professional to seek instruction in multicultural counseling. To the extent that counselors desire to be associated with a profession that thrives and offers comprehensive services to all people, it is crucial that each one voice this opinion to their professional associations and to counselor educators. To the extent that counselor educators seek to meet these needs and prepare counselors to offer multiculturally sensitive services, it is essential that they review their existing counselor education programs, modify existing courses to ensure attention to diversity issues within each course, and move to require that each student take at least one course that deals exclusively with multicultural counseling.

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