

## **American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies**

**Endorsed by ACA 2003 (Lewis, Arnold, House & Toporek) and Updated in 2018  
(Toporek & Daniels)**

The historical roots of advocacy within the counseling profession can be traced back to the early 1900's with Frank Parson's work related to vocational guidance in underserved communities along with Clifford Beers efforts in client mental health advocacy. However, it was not until the late 1990's that the American Counseling Association (ACA) began the process of codifying advocacy and highlighting the importance of it for both the profession and the work that counselors do with clients. Recognizing the growing significance of advocacy in the profession, ACA President Loretta Bradley promoted advocacy as her conference theme and subsequently President Jane Goodman created a taskforce to develop advocacy competencies. In 2003, the ACA Governing Council officially approved and adopted the advocacy competencies that were developed by Goodman's taskforce. These competencies focused on the role of counselors as advocates working with and/or on behalf of their clients who were struggling with systemic barriers. By providing counselors with a framework and the necessary strategies to guide client advocacy the competencies were pacesetting and perhaps ahead of their time.

Building on the growing recognition of the importance of both client and professional advocacy, in 2018, ACA embraced advocacy as one of three central pillars for the organization's strategic initiatives. Around this same time period the Governing Council tasked the ACA Human Rights Committee with creating advocacy statements that could be used by the organization to address different social justice and human rights issues that impact the counseling profession, clients, and communities that counselors serve.

Clearly the role of advocacy both within the profession and the work that counselors do with clients has gained increasing attention and significance over the years. Since the inception of the 2003 Advocacy Competencies and the utilization of them with clients over the last 15 years, additional strategies have been developed and the model has been expanded and clarified. As a result this updated version, presents a growing understanding of how advocacy can be used when working with clients and their communities.

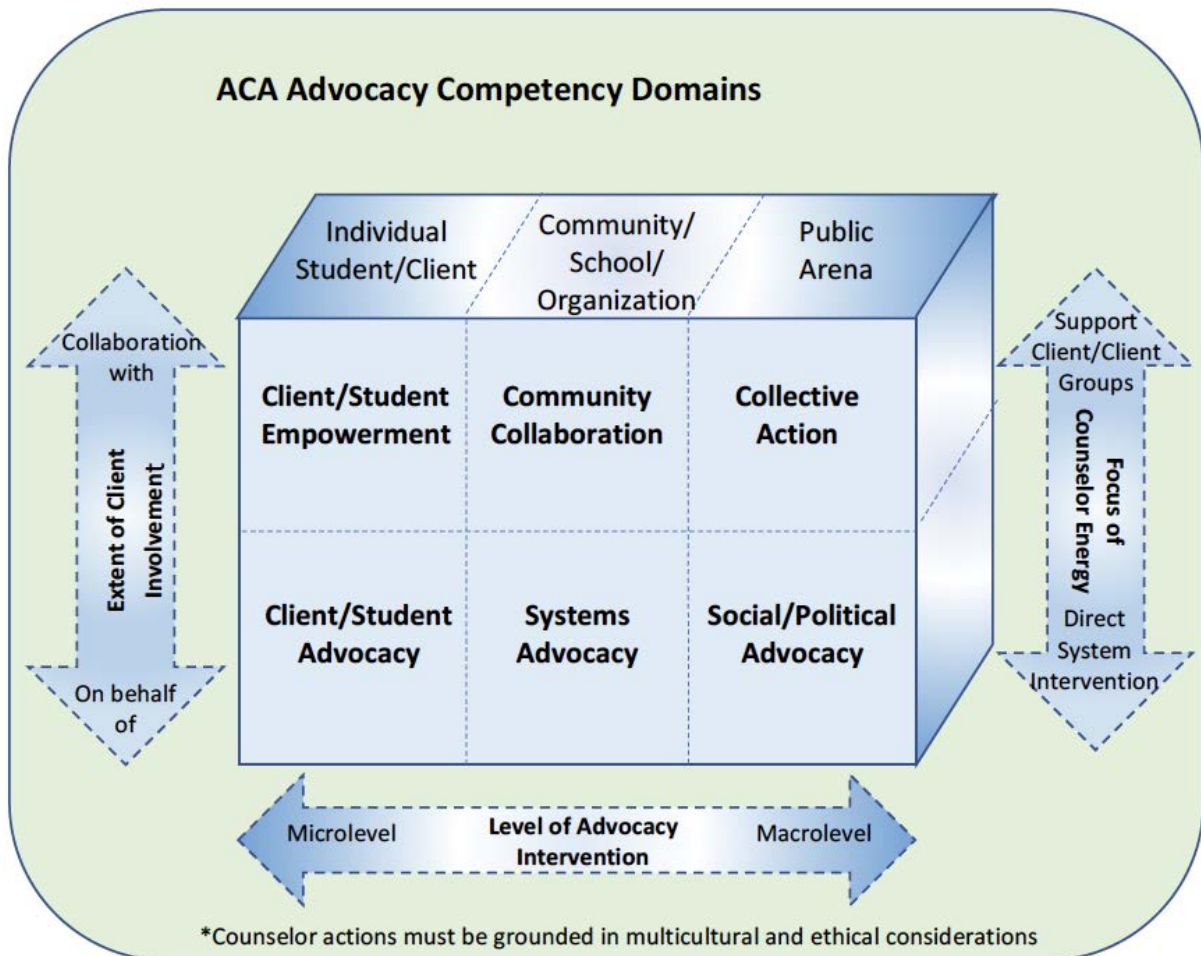
## Overview of the ACA Advocacy Competencies

The ACA Advocacy Competencies describe necessary counselor skills, knowledge, and behavior that can be implemented to address systemic barriers and issues facing students, clients, client groups or whole populations (hereafter, clients and client groups is inclusive of students and student groups). The Advocacy Competencies are organized around two dimensions: Extent of Client Involvement in Advocacy and Level of Advocacy Intervention. The first dimension, Extent of Client Involvement, distinguishes advocacy done in collaboration with clients from advocacy conducted on behalf of clients, client groups, or communities. When done effectively, advocacy in partnership with the client, client groups, or populations facilitates greater empowerment and more helpful advocacy. Still, there are times and circumstances in which it may be necessary and effective for counselors to advocate on behalf of clients or client groups. The second dimension, Level of Advocacy Intervention, refers to the focus of advocacy interventions and whether that takes place at an individual level to address issues faced by an individual client; at the school, community or organizational level to address issues faced by whole groups of clients or community members; or, at the broadest level, within the public arena reflecting large scale change efforts. In Figure 1, permeable lines indicate that the different dimensions and domains are not mutually exclusive as advocacy may be most effective when multiple approaches are taken.

The intersection of the two dimensions described above are reflected in six domains of advocacy: empowerment, client advocacy, community collaboration, systems advocacy, collective action and social/political advocacy. The Advocacy Competencies presume that counselors evaluating and implementing advocacy examine multicultural and ethical considerations relevant for the client, group, issue, and approach. Figure 1 depicts how the intersection of the dimensions of advocacy relate to the different domains. In the sections following the figure, each domain is described along with specific skills, knowledge and behaviors associated with that domain.

### Domains of Advocacy

Advocacy interventions are organized by the extent that the client is involved as an advocate and thus the role of the counselor as well as the level at which the barrier is experienced and where the intervention takes place. When advocacy is done in partnership or collaboration with clients and client groups, the role of the counselor and the focus of their energy is to support and facilitate them in planning and carrying out advocacy. When counselors engage in advocacy on behalf of clients or client groups, their role and the focus of their energy is direct system intervention.



Original model by Lewis, Arnold, House & Toporek (2003) updated by Toporek & Daniels (2018)

Figure 1. ACA Advocacy Competencies

### Client/Student Empowerment

An advocacy orientation involves not only systems change but also the implementation of empowerment strategies in direct counseling. Client empowerment is focused on helping the client identify systemic barriers, learning approaches to address those barriers, helping them to evaluate those approaches as well as facilitating their reflective processing of their advocacy experiences.

## **Client/Student Empowerment Counselor Competencies and Strategies**

In direct interventions, the counselor is able to:

- Identify strengths and resources of clients and students.
- Identify the social, political, economic, and cultural factors that affect the client/student.
- Recognize the significance of counselor's own cultural background and sociopolitical position in relation to power, privilege and oppression and in relation to the client or client communities.
- Recognize signs indicating that an individual's behaviors and concerns reflect responses to systemic or internalized oppression.
- At an appropriate developmental level and cultural perspective, help the individual identify the external barriers that affect his, her or their development.
- Share resources and tools that are appropriate for the client/student's developmental level and issue.
- Train students and clients in self-advocacy skills.
- Help students and clients develop self-advocacy action plans.
- Assist students and clients in carrying out action plans.

## **Client/Student Advocacy**

Client/student advocacy refers to actions a counselor takes to advocate on behalf of an individual client, student or family. This may be appropriate in situations where the counselor has access to systems or processes that the client may not have, or in ways the client may not. This may also be appropriate when the client chooses not to engage in advocacy due to fear of retribution, concerns about communication or cognitive challenges, or other factors. Counselors engaging in client/student advocacy directly address the system in which the barrier or problem exists or where a solution can be found. Often, this type of advocacy involves addressing systemic issues within the counselor's own organization or school but may also include advocacy within broader systems of care on behalf of a specific client or student.

## **Client/Student Advocacy Counselor Competencies and Strategies**

In environmental interventions on behalf of clients and students, the counselor is able to:

- Identify barriers to the well-being of clients and students with attention to issues facing vulnerable groups.
- Recognize the significance of counselor's own cultural background and sociopolitical position in relation to power, privilege and oppression and in relation to the client or client communities.
- Identify potential allies for confronting the barriers including those within the organization as well as those who have cultural expertise relevant to the client's issue.
- Develop an initial plan of action for confronting these barriers in consultation with client and ensuring plan is consistent with client's goals.
- Communicate plan with client including rationale, and possible outcomes of advocacy.
- Negotiate relevant services and education systems on behalf of clients and students.
- Help clients and students gain access and create a plan to sustain needed resources and supports.
- Carry out the plan of action and reflect/evaluate effectiveness of advocacy efforts.

## **Community Collaboration**

In community collaboration, the counselor works with a group or community to identify and address systemic barriers and issues. The role of the counselor in this type of advocacy is primarily one of ally and contributor of professional skills such as interpersonal relations, group facilitation, communications, training and research. In community collaboration, the community is viewed as the leader and expert with regard to the issue of concern. The counselor supports the community efforts and helps them to examine the issue, determine courses of action, and reflect on that action. The extent of

contribution the counselor makes often varies depending on the expertise and resources held by the community.

### **Community Collaboration Counselor Competencies and Strategies**

In collaborating with the community, organization or school community to address systemic barriers or problems facing clients and client groups, counselors are able to:

- Identify environmental factors that impinge upon students' and clients' development.
- Alert community or school groups with common concerns related to the issue.
- Develop alliances with groups working for change and explore what has already been done to address the issue. Understand counselor's sociocultural position in relation to the issue, the client group, and allies.
- Use effective listening skills to gain understanding of the group's goals and help facilitate examination of causes and possible avenues for advocacy.
- Facilitate understanding of group dynamics, cultural and sociopolitical variations in group members, and how that may affect group decisions as well as variable repercussions for different group members.
- Identify the strengths and resources that the group members bring to the process of systemic change and communicate recognition of and respect for these strengths and resources.
- Identify and offer the skills that the counselor can bring to the collaboration as well as any ethical limitations they might have as a professional.
- Facilitate the group in considering possible outcomes of action, both favorable and unfavorable, and support them in preparing for possible resistance or other challenges.
- Integrate considerations of the ecological and political context in which the advocacy actions will be taking place.
- Assess the effectiveness of counselor's collaborative efforts with the community.

### **Systems Advocacy**

Systems advocacy reflects counselors advocating on behalf of groups of clients or students within a school, organization or community. Existing groups may come to counselors for assistance regarding an issue, for example a student club. In other cases, counselors' ongoing work with people gives them a unique awareness of recurring themes. Counselors are often among the first to become aware of specific difficulties in the environment. When counselors identify systemic factors that act as barriers to their students' or clients' development, they often wish that they could change the environment and prevent some of the problems that they see every day. Systems level advocacy may take place within the organization systems in which the counselor works and may engage the counselor in arenas where client groups may not have access, for example, staff committees. Regardless of the specific target of change, the processes for altering the status quo have common qualities. Change is a process that requires vision, persistence, leadership, collaboration, systems analysis, and strong data. In many situations, a counselor is the right person to take leadership.

### **Systems Advocacy Counselor Competencies and Strategies**

In exerting systems-change leadership at the school, organization or community level, the advocacy-oriented counselor is able to:

- Identify environmental factors impinging on students' or clients' development.
- Understand the cultural, political, developmental and environmental contexts of the clients or client groups.
- Understand the counselor's own cultural identity in relation to the group and the target of advocacy including privilege, oppression, communication, values, and intentions.
- Investigate the issue, population and possible allies and stakeholders.
- Provide and interpret data as well as share research and expertise to show the urgency for change.
- In collaboration with other stakeholders, develop a vision to guide change.
- Analyze the sources of political power and social influence within the system.
- Develop a step-by-step plan for implementing the change process, attending to possible ethical issues.
- Develop a plan for dealing with probable responses to change.

- Recognize and deal with resistance.
- Assess the effect of counselor's advocacy efforts on the system and constituents.

## **Collective Action**

Collective action (formerly Public Information) refers to advocacy in which the counselor collaborates with groups to address issues that exist on a broad scale or that can be remedied through changing public perception or policies. Collective action refers to advocacy in which the counselor collaborates with groups to address such large scale issues. The counselor contributes as a group member and lends their knowledge and skill to the process of advocacy. This may include group facilitating, research, and communication skills as needed by the group. Advocacy strategies in the public arena may involve increasing public awareness about an issue, lobbying decision making bodies for legislative or policy change, or other such actions. In collective action, the counselor's role is as collaborator with the group or community affected by the issues who have chosen to engage in advocacy.

### **Collective Action Counselor Competencies and Strategies**

In partnering with client groups and community members to address environmental and systemic issues, and inform the public as well as policy makers about the role of environmental factors in human development, the advocacy-oriented counselor is able to:

- Recognize the impact of oppression, other barriers, and environmental factors that interfere with healthy development.
- Identify factors that are protective of healthy development as well as various avenues for enhancing these protective factors through the public arena.
- Share research and professional expertise with partner client groups and community members in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways.
- Determine appropriate role within community initiative such as facilitator, researcher, negotiator, etc. aligned with professional and personal skill set.
- Understand counselor's own cultural identity including positionality related to power, privilege, and oppression and how that influences the ways they work with the community and the targets of advocacy (e.g., decision makers).



- Participate with and/or facilitate community partners in identifying the source of problems, setting goals, developing an action plan, considering possible outcomes, and implementing the action plan.
- Prepare written and multimedia materials that provide clear explanations of the role of specific environmental factors in human development in consultation with engaged community or client groups.
- Communicate information in ways that are ethical and appropriate for the target population.
- Disseminate information through a variety of media appropriate for the target audience.
- Collaboratively prepare and present materials and information to influence decision makers, legislators, and policy makers, ensuring that the community's voice is central.
- Facilitate the community group in assessing the influence of their public information and advocacy strategies.

### **Social/Political Advocacy**

Counselors regularly act as change agents in the systems that affect their own students and clients most directly. This experience often leads toward the recognition that some of the concerns they have addressed affect people in a much larger arena. When this happens, counselors use their skills to carry out social/political advocacy on behalf of client or student populations. In this domain, counselors engage in advocacy strategies often independent of specific clients or client groups to address issues they observe. This may include examples such as writing advocacy briefings regarding an issue, invitations to testify at hearings, appearing in mass media (e.g., talk shows, podcasts) to raise awareness of issues, and other actions where the counselor speaks on behalf of an issue.

#### **Social/Political Advocacy Counselor Competencies and Strategies**

In influencing public awareness, legislation and policy in a large, public arena on behalf of client groups or communities, the advocacy-oriented counselor is able to:

- Identify the communities affected by this issue including who makes up the community and whether the community is engaged in advocacy around the issue.

- Consult with communities affected by the issue to understand their views and experiences, with attention to economic, social and cultural perspectives.
- Distinguish those problems that can best be resolved through using the counselor's expertise and where the community may have limited access.
- Identify ways the community may have input into the advocacy process.
- Identify and collaborate with other professionals as well as other allies who are involved in disseminating public information and may be interested in or already engaging in policy advocacy.
- Identify appropriate mechanisms and avenues for addressing these problems and distinguish the role of public awareness, legislative, policy and judicial action.
- Understand counselor's own cultural identity including positionality related to power, privilege, and oppression and how that influences the ways they work with the community and the targets of advocacy (e.g., decision makers).
- Support existing alliances for change through providing information, support, and expertise.
- With allies, prepare convincing data and rationales for public awareness campaigns or to lobby legislators and other policy makers.
- Maintain open dialogue with communities and clients to ensure that the social/political advocacy is consistent with the initial goals.

## **Conclusion and Future Directions**

The 2003 ACA Advocacy Competencies provided an important guide for counselors to implement advocacy in their practice. This update expands on those competencies, clarifying domains and elaborating specific strategies, knowledge and skills as well as explicating the original authors' intentions for inclusion of multicultural and ethical considerations. Clients, students, and communities continue to face extreme challenges and affronts to their dignity and ability to take care of themselves and their families. Therefore, this update also reflects the increasing engagement of individuals, communities and schools in social action and enhances the ways that counselors can work to support those efforts through advocacy and collaboration.

As we look toward the future of counseling, ACA's strong commitment to advocacy as a central role in counseling will require consistent inclusion of advocacy in future training and research endeavors. We will need to find ways to facilitate counselors in understanding how advocacy fits into their role within a culturally relevant context as well as understand the power and function of advocacy in addressing complex client and professional issues. Training grounded in empirical and practice-based research will enable counselors to develop skills and intervention strategies consistent with advocacy as a core element of counselor professional identity.

*Acknowledgement: Thank you to Jane Goodman, Muninder Kaur Ahluwalia, Michael Hutchins, Alejandro Menchaca, and Tiffany O'Shaughnessy for reviewing and providing feedback to the updated document.*

### **Appendix: Additional Resources**

Counselors for Social Justice (CSJ). Retrieved from <https://counseling-csj.org>

Ratts, M. V., Toporek, R. L. & Lewis, J. A. (Eds.) (2010). *ACA Advocacy Competencies: A social justice framework for counselors*, Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Toporek, R. L., Lewis, J. & Crethar, H. C. (2009). Promoting systemic change through the Advocacy Competencies. In the Special Section on Advocacy Competencies. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 87, 260-268.