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Are Florida Universities Training Therapists to Be Political Activists?



University of South Florida in Tampa, Fla., July 2, 2020. (Octavio Jones/Getty Images)

By **SALLY SATEL & RICHARD REDDING**

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Governor DeSantis’s investigation into DEI and higher ed in his state suggests blatant politicization of mental-health care.

GOVERNOR RON DESANTIS’S investigation into universities’ diversity, equity, and inclusion policies uncovered a trove of documents on the University of South Florida (USF) and the University of

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“systemic racism, privilege, oppression, and institutional challenges” at USF in the wake of George Floyd’s death. At UCF, a professor of counselor education exhorted white people “to stop the systemic system that’s been put into play by white people.”

We’ve been studying politicized trends in counselor training, and while we do not know the specific practices at USF and UCF, there is mounting evidence that university training programs for counselors are in trouble — and so are their future clients.

Our review of mission statements of graduate counselor-training programs across the country reveals an emphasis on social justice and identity politics over client concerns and well-being.

Today, many fledgling therapists are being taught to see themselves as social-justice activists with the power to define the goals of therapy, overriding the client’s needs and preferences.

Christine Sefein, who resigned as a professor of counseling at Antioch University in 2021, reveals that her colleagues taught trainees that white heterosexual male clients are the “source of all problems.” If clients belonged to a racial minority, however, trainees were to encourage their clients to “see themselves as part of an oppressed group and to blame their hardships on oppressor groups.”

New York-based psychologist Andrew Hartz describes how “leftist extremism turns therapists against their own clients.” He points to a therapist who was advised by colleagues to drop a “racist” client unless he changed his views.

The client’s transgression? He felt he was denied a research fellowship because he was white. “No one seemed to consider that it is unethical to turn someone away from therapy for his opinions about affirmative action,” Hartz says.

Victim politics pervades the field’s professional associations. The American Counseling Association, ACA, directs counselors to “assist privileged and marginalized clients in unlearning their privilege and oppression [and help them] develop critical consciousness by understanding their situation in context of living in an oppressive society.”

Likewise, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs requires programs to include training on “the effects of power and privilege for counselors and clients.”

The stakes are high when social-justice therapists impose their political agendas on clients. Individuals labeled by their therapists as oppressors can feel alienated; those branded as oppressed learn to see themselves as feeble victims lacking agency. Good clinicians adopt a posture of caring neutrality and



outcome of therapy. For clients who do not share the therapist's progressive politics, developing an alliance will be very difficult.

During our training, we learned to detect within ourselves the kind of strong reactions to a patient that can distort one's clinical judgment. But to social-justice therapists, strong negative reactions are a reason to proselytize to their clients.

Countering the ideological intrusion into counseling is a challenge that Brian S. Canfield is trying to meet. In 2020, the two-time former president of the ACA established the International Association of Psychology and Counseling for professionals who believe that "advocacy should be the domain of individual conscience, not one's professional identity."

Later this month, Andrew Hartz will launch the Open Therapy Institute to offer therapy to individuals who have been marginalized for their viewpoints and conduct workshops in sound psychological treatment for both clinicians and the public.

But every year millions of people seek counseling services. What can they do? Like any consumer, they should investigate the credentials, training, and clinical philosophy of prospective therapists. And prospective counseling students must apply due diligence when applying to programs.

The corruption of counseling represents a new front in the DEI incursion. Therapists in training suffer, but far worse, so will the people who seek their help.

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