Cultural Carefest

A Service-Learning Project for Building Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competence

Cultural Carefest was a semester-long service-learning project that helped counseling students develop multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (MSJCC). The project took place in a multicultural counseling course, where students completed five step-by-step assignments. The final event was a community-engaged presentation where they shared research on the link between culture and healthcare. The project's design incorporated trauma-informed and accessibility-focused practices, with reflexivity integrated through a pedagogical partnership. Evaluation suggested that students gained confidence and advocacy skills and made a positive impact on the community. This brief describes Cultural Carefest and offers recommendations for counselor educators seeking to adapt this model.

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Introduction

Counselor education programs are tasked with preparing students to integrate the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies into professional practice (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016). These competencies are central to ethical practice as they guide counselors in addressing systemic barriers and understanding diverse worldviews. The American Counseling Association code of ethics (2014) highlight that counselor educators have an ethical imperative to infuse multiculturalism and diversity across the curriculum. Similarly, the 2024 CACREP Standards emphasize culturally sustaining practices across all eight core content areas .

While course activities can build foundational knowledge and provide opportunities to discuss cultural issues, these activities do not extend beyond the classroom. Many students reach practicum and field experiences without having meaningful opportunities to apply multicultural and social justice competencies in real-world contexts. This gap is particularly apparent in the MSJCC's action domains, which emphasize advocacy with and on behalf of clients and communities. Without intentional experiences that bring advocacy into lived experience, students may leave their programs confident in theory but unsure about culturally competent practice.

Cultural immersion and service-learning allow students to engage directly with diverse cultural groups and can improve cultural humility and awareness (Atkins & Lorelle, 2022). Instead of relying only on didactic teaching methods, researchers have implored educators to actively involve students in cultural learning experiences (Barden et al., 2014; Collins & Pieterse, 2007). Through in-vivo learning, students have opportunities to examine their own assumptions and biases and reflect on their identities. Engaging with culture in real-life contexts helps students build confidence in their ability to work across differences and better prepares them for the realities of counseling (Barden et al., 2014). Service-learning has been shown to connect academic learning with meaningful civic engagement, thereby deepening knowledge and fostering professional identity development (Chang, 2022; Langellier et al., 2020; Machuca & Martinez, 2022; Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2024).

Chang (2022) demonstrated the value of experiential pedagogy through the Advocacy and Creativity in Community (ACC) Project. In this project, students were asked to produce a creative artifact that highlighted the intersection of mental health and advocacy. The process required them to engage in dialogue about pressing societal issues with peers, colleagues, friends, family, and community members. Students reported feeling proud of the products they created and the impact those products had within their communities. Many also described growth in their advocacy self-efficacy and a renewed commitment to social justice and mental health advocacy. These types of outcomes are the central goals of multicultural counseling courses.

Building on Chang's (2022) work, Cultural Carefest was grounded in constructivist, humanistic, and liberation psychology principles. These frameworks emphasize the lived experiences,

autonomy, and dignity of learners (Freire, 1970; Rogers, 1961; Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivist approaches recognize that students construct knowledge through interaction, reflection, and collaboration within a sociocultural context, making community engagement a natural extension of classroom learning (Barnes & Marlatt, 2020). Humanistic theory highlights the importance of student autonomy, holistic growth, and psychological safety, which are values that are inherent in the project's pacing and structure (Purswell, 2019; Rogers, 1961). Liberation psychology, developed in response to systemic oppression, encourages educators to challenge dominant narratives and elevate the voices of marginalized individuals through collaborative, action-oriented learning (Martín-Baró, 1994). By integrating these perspectives, Cultural Carefest positioned students as recipients of cultural knowledge, co-creators of meaning, and advocates within their community.

This project was carried out in a graduate multicultural counseling course within a CACREP-accredited program in the northeastern United States. The course included a variation of the "group cultural presentation," an assignment commonly found in multicultural counseling curricula. While this format traditionally asks students to research and share cultural knowledge, it is usually limited to the classroom and shared only with peers in the course. Cultural Carefest was created to expand the scope of this assignment by turning it into a scaffolded, public-facing advocacy initiative. By taking the work outside the classroom, the project provided structured opportunities for students to practice advocacy skills emphasized in the MSJCC and fostered dialogue that benefited both the campus and the local community.

Description of the Teaching Innovation

APPLICATION TO COUNSELOR EDUCATION

Cultural Carefest was designed as a semester-long, scaffolded project that resulted in a community-engaged event attended by around 100 people, including students, faculty, professionals, and community members. The project intentionally guided students through a series of experiences that gradually developed their knowledge, skills, and confidence for public advocacy. Preparation started early in the course as students formed self-selected pairs, identified cultural groups relevant to the local context, and conducted initial research. This early phase ensured that students' projects were academically rigorous and grounded in the realities of the communities they might serve as professional counselors someday.

Building upon that foundation, the course dedicated in-class time to a collaborative planning day. During this session, students were encouraged to refine their projects by considering multiple perspectives and reflecting on how different audiences might perceive their work. This process fostered accountability, encouraged critical reflection, and helped students shift

their mindset from just preparing a classroom assignment to developing a project meant for a broader public audience.

Chang's (2022) ACC project demonstrated the benefits of experiential approaches in counselor education. Inspired by this work, Cultural Carefest evolved into a semester-long, scaffolded sequence that explicitly linked advocacy skills to the MSJCCs and provided students with practical experiences directly connecting counselor education to learning outcomes. The next section outlines the design and implementation of Cultural Carefest, describing how the project was structured throughout the semester and how each assignment contributed to the community event.

Prep Day 1: Group Formation and Preliminary Research

At the start of the semester, students formed self-selected pairs and chose a cultural group or theme related to culture and healthcare. This choice was intentionally open-ended so students could explore topics that match their professional interests and the communities they might serve in the future. Each group then began initial research on their chosen group or theme, using scholarly sources, community contacts, and publicly available resources. The goal of this first step is to build a knowledge base and guide their next actions before moving on to more formal project stages. Although this stage did not count toward the grade, it was required to participate in the next phase to ensure all students come to planning day prepared with background knowledge and potential ideas. Students were encouraged to select topics that aligned with their professional interests and with communities represented in the local area. Groups could select a cultural group they personally belonged to or one outside their own identity. Allowing this choice was intentional and trauma informed. Some students preferred to work with a cultural group they knew well, while others felt safer or more comfortable engaging with a group outside their own identity. Rather than requiring students to disclose or use their own lived experiences, the assignment emphasized student choice, psychological safety, and supported autonomy. Instructor approval was required only to ensure cultural groups were framed respectfully and that sufficient scholarly and community-based resources were available for meaningful research.

Prep Day 2: Collaborative Planning Day

During this class session, each group met individually with the instructor to review their preliminary research, clarify their focus, and discuss community contacts and resources. After these meetings, groups participated in structured peer feedback rotations, sharing their early ideas with other groups and collecting suggestions to improve content, accessibility, and clarity. These feedback exchanges fostered constructive dialogue and collaborative learning, while also helping students anticipate potential challenges when presenting their work to a public audience. By the end of the session, students had a clearer understanding of how to frame their projects for real-world impact.

Stage 1: Video Presentation

Building on the feedback received during the planning day, students created a 25 to 30-minute video presentation introducing their chosen cultural group. These presentations were designed to explore the intersections of cultural customs, resilience factors, wellness practices, healthcare needs, and healthcare disparities. To ensure depth, each presentation was required to include at least eight scholarly and community-based sources, highlight cultural strengths, and identify relevant local resources. Students could submit their videos in multiple formats, including narrated PowerPoint presentations or recorded presentations done in person or digitally, to the learning management system. The instructor reviewed the content for accuracy and to prevent stereotyping or deficit framing, defined here as portraying a cultural group primarily in terms of problems, lacks, or pathology rather than strengths and contextualized systemic factors, emphasizing trauma-informed and ethically responsible teaching practices.

Instructors implementing this assignment may find it helpful to provide students with examples of culturally responsive presentations from previous cohorts or publicly available advocacy videos. Offering a brief mini lecture on avoiding deficit framing and identifying cultural strengths can help students conceptualize their work in alignment with MSJCC principles.

Stage 2: Peer Feedback on Video Presentations

After viewing classmates' videos, students provided structured written, audio, or video feedback focused on clarity, cultural responsiveness, accessibility, and advocacy framing through the course learning management system. Each student was required to offer at least one suggestion for improving accessibility and one for enhancing advocacy messaging. This activity gave presenters constructive feedback to improve their projects and encouraged reviewers to think critically about the standards of effective advocacy communication. Before students begin reviewing peer work, instructors should consider modeling what constructive, culturally responsive feedback looks like by providing a short template or sentence starters can help students balance encouragement with specific, actionable guidance.

Stage 3: Research Poster Design

Building on the content from their videos and the suggestions they received through peer feedback, students created research posters for presentation at Cultural Carefest. Posters were required to include a plain-language summary that made their findings accessible to a broad audience, culturally responsive visuals that reflect the communities they studied, and accessibility features such as large-font text and high-contrast color schemes. Preparation was supported by an in-class workshop on poster layout, visual communication, and inclusive design. This workshop was led by the local chapter of the Chi Sigma Iota Counseling Academic and Professional Honors Society International. The workshop emphasized clarity, accessibility, and creativity, reinforcing the counselor's role as both communicator and advocate. Students submitted their poster designs to the instructor at least one week before Cultural Carefest to ensure they could be printed in adequate time. Instructors may support student poster development by sharing posters from professional conferences or demonstrating basic visual

design strategies. Coordinating with campus partners such as accessibility services or learning centers can reinforce accessibility standards and inclusive design.

Stage 4: Public Presentation at Cultural Carefest

With their posters finished and printed, students presented them to an audience of community members, faculty, and peers at the hour-long Cultural Carefest event. Each presenter delivered a quick "elevator pitch" summarizing their project, engaged in conversations with attendees, and answered questions. The event was designed with flexibility to support student participation. Presenters could rotate if needed, and those who preferred to sit while presenting to manage fatigue or anxiety could do so. Students were encouraged to share digital information from their posters and provide additional details via QR codes. This public presentation gave students the chance to practice advocacy and cultural communication skills. To prepare students for the event, instructors may role-play sample attendee questions or facilitate a rehearsal session. Discussing professional communication and advocacy framing beforehand can help students feel more confident and grounded during the event.

Stage 5: Reflective Integration

The sequence ended with a structured reflection to help students reinforce their learning and link it to professional growth. In this assignment, students assessed their development in cultural self-awareness, evaluated the effectiveness of their advocacy communication, and outlined specific steps for ongoing growth as counselors. Each prompt was deliberately aligned with the MSJCC domains (Ratts et al., 2016) and matched with CACREP 2024 standards on multicultural competence and advocacy.

Reflections can be submitted as written, audio, or video files through the learning management system. Example prompts included: "How did researching and presenting on cultural and healthcare topics enhance your understanding of the intersection between culture and mental health in your future practice?", "How has your perspective on the importance of cultural competence in counseling evolved?", and "How do you plan to apply this knowledge in your future work with diverse populations?" Instructors may invite students to revisit course learning objectives and the MSJCC framework before beginning the reflection. Doing so can help anchor students' reflections in explicit competencies and highlights areas of growth.

By concluding the project with reflection, students were able to critically assess their growth, cultural responsiveness, and professional identity. This step helped turn the experience of preparing and presenting research into a stronger commitment to ongoing multicultural and social justice competence.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The project was designed using trauma-informed and accessibility-focused practices. Trauma-informed elements included avoiding stereotyping or deficit framing through instructor review, allowing students to choose their own groups and topics, and providing flexible assignment

formats (written, audio, video). Accessibility was incorporated following the national counseling honor society workshop guidelines, which included high-contrast, large-font poster designs, and digital QR codes for additional resources. The trauma-informed components of the project were grounded in ethical principles related to beneficence, nonmaleficence, and respect for students' lived experiences. Allowing students to self-select their partners and cultural groups reduced the likelihood of any forced disclosure, tokenization, or pressure to represent a cultural group on behalf of others. Instructor review of content before submission served as an ethical safeguard against stereotyping or misrepresentation. Providing flexible assignment formats also honored accessibility needs and recognized that students bring varied experiences of safety and comfort when engaging with sensitive cultural material. These practices aligned with the ACA code of ethics (2014) and supported the creation of a classroom environment that prioritized student agency, cultural humility, and psychological safety.

REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity was intentionally incorporated at various levels of the course. The instructor highlighted the importance of transparency with students regarding how their own positionality, life experiences, and biases influenced the course's design and teaching. Students were prompted to understand that the course material was viewed through the instructor's perspective, even as the course aimed to expand the classroom discussion.

To improve accountability and inclusion, the instructor took part in a university-wide student–faculty pedagogical partnership program, which pairs faculty with students to strengthen inclusive teaching. The student partner was an undergraduate student outside the counseling field. She attended every class, met with the instructor weekly, and gave feedback on accessibility and inclusion. She also held mid-semester feedback sessions with students and shared observations that helped make real-time changes to classroom practices. This partnership acted as an additional safeguard to keep student experiences at the center of the project's design and implementation (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather, 2025).

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Counselor educators aiming to adopt or modify this model may find it helpful to intentionally scaffold assignments that lead to public engagement, partner with campus organizations to improve accessibility, and build community collaborations to increase relevance and impact. Assignment descriptions and grading rubrics used in Cultural Carefest are available on the project's blind-review OSF page (Author, 2025), serving as additional resources for replication. Educators might also think about working with campus offices, such as disability services or student organizations like the national counseling honor society, to improve accessibility and involvement.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

Cultural Carefest was evaluated through student and attendee surveys as well as faculty observation. Post-event survey feedback suggested that participants gained exposure to unfamiliar cultural practices and traditions, learned new information relevant to healthcare and wellness, and identified strategies they could apply in their personal and professional lives. Students also reported increased confidence in communicating their research to a public audience.

Faculty observations supported these findings. The scaffolded sequence seemed to effectively prepare students for public engagement by gradually building their knowledge, skills, and confidence. The inclusive poster workshop led to noticeable improvements in poster design and clarity, while the option to rotate presenters or hold seated presentations supported student comfort and participation. Together, these observations indicated that Cultural Carefest provided meaningful opportunities for students to practice advocacy and see themselves as contributors to a broader cultural dialogue within both campus and community contexts. However, the findings are descriptive and aimed at improving the program, not for general research use.

Assessment Tools and Methods

Each assignment was created to both instruct and assess student learning. The video presentation measured students' ability to synthesize research and accurately present cultural information. Peer feedback demonstrated collaborative critique and focused on accessibility and framing in advocacy. The research poster evaluated students' skill in condensing complex ideas into a clear, visually appealing, and inclusive format. The public presentation assessed students' ability to engage diverse audiences, practice advocacy, and communicate effectively in real time. The final reflection documented growth in cultural self-awareness and professional identity development, aligned with MSJCC domains and CACREP 2024 standards.

Grading rubrics were created for each assignment to set clear expectations and align with course goals, program outcomes, and professional skills. These rubrics promoted accountability and modeled the evaluation students will encounter in professional settings. Additionally, reflection prompts were included to help students explore the links between culture, healthcare, and counseling practice. Full assignment descriptions and rubrics are available as supplemental materials on the project's blind-review OSF page linked above.

Discussion and Implications

Cultural Carefest demonstrated how a typical classroom assignment can be transformed into a structured service-learning project with broader community and professional impact. By extending student work beyond the classroom, the project offered opportunities to translate multicultural and social justice counseling competencies into real world experiences. This project also highlighted how public-facing advocacy activities can foster early professional identity development and cultivate culturally responsive communication skills that students can carry into practicum, internship, and future counseling roles.

Although the project shows potential to be an impactful intervention, several limitations should be noted. It was implemented within a single course, and evaluation relied on descriptive program assessment rather than validated research measures. Survey feedback also identified logistical challenges such as the event's one-hour timeframe and the lack of a poster map. These limitations offer concrete directions for refinement and point to the importance of balancing classroom and event planning skills. Future iterations will incorporate IRB-approved assessment tools, including measures of cultural humility and advocacy skill development, to evaluate outcomes more systematically. Planned modifications include extending the event to 90 minutes, providing printed maps of poster titles and locations, and expanding community partnerships to involve more local organizations and stakeholders. These improvements are expected to enhance accessibility, engagement, and the overall educational value of the event. Cultural Carefest may serve as a replicable model for counselor education programs seeking to bridge the gap between multicultural coursework and authentic advocacy experiences. Integrating service-learning, community engagement, and structured reflection supports the MSJCC's call for action in both individual and community contexts while promoting ethical, culturally responsive professional development.

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