

Incorporating Climate Justice into Counselor Education

Climate change poses deeply existential concerns related to issues of equity, inclusivity, and well-being for populations affected by systemic barriers. The environment and other social determinants of health (SDOH) impact identity, culture formation, and wellness. Counselor educators currently lack knowledge and tools to incorporate climate justice into their curricula, although professional emphases on wellness models, multiculturalism, and social justice hold promise. This teaching brief includes a rationale for incorporating climate justice into counselor education and includes a collection of tools and resources counselor educators can use to prepare counselors-in-training.

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Introduction

Climate justice is becoming increasingly recognized by the mental health community as an important aspect of counseling, counselor education, and personal cultural identity (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2018; Hilert, 2021). Climate justice refers to the inequitable distribution of climate burdens and benefits on vulnerable and underserved populations and those facing systemic barriers (Boyle et al., 2023; Simmons, 2020; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Mental health literature is evolving rapidly to reflect climate-related mental health phenomena (Ágoston et al., 2022; Pihkala & Kamenetz, 2024; Woodbury, 2019) and the incorporation of new, environmentally-inclusive wellness models (Reese et al., 2012). Given increasing trends in extreme weather events (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023) and climate-related mental health literature, we propose that counselor educators consider incorporation of climate justice into their curricula. In this teaching brief, we generated several suggestions and non-exhaustive tools and resources for counselor educators as they address climate justice.

Climate Change and Mental Health

In recent years, counseling researchers and organizations have increasingly called for clinicians and educators to attend to climate change, environmental factors, and other social determinants of health (SDOH; ACA, 2018; Hilert, 2021; Lenz &

Lemberger-Truelove, 2023). By proactively addressing SDOH in counselor education, counseling professionals support clinical and communal outcomes (Gantt-Howrey et al., 2024). Climate change, as an SDOH, creates a compounding problem of both increased distress and decreased access to the healing and cultural properties of the environment (Boyle et al., 2023; Hayes et al., 2018; IPCC, 2023). Extreme weather and sociopolitical events resulting from climate change can cause and/or worsen a range of mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic

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stress, and substance use (ACA, 2018; Hayes et al., 2018; Mandavia & Bonanno, 2019). Climate trauma, climate anxiety, eco-anxiety, eco-guilt, and eco-grief, have all been recognized as climate-related mental health phenomena (Ágoston et al., 2022; Pihkala & Kamenetz, 2024; Woodbury, 2019). Conversely, interacting within green spaces provides a wealth of psychological benefits, including increased mental well-being, relaxation, and perceived quality of life and decreased depressive symptoms (Bojorquez, 2018; Wood et al., 2017). Many cultural groups also have practices, traditions, and identities rooted in the natural world. For example, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities have historically strong ties to the land and have experienced notable distress related to displacement, gentrification, and inequitable proximity to pollutants and other anthropogenic environmental hazards (Middleton et al., 2020; Parris et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2021).

Climate crises disproportionately affect communities facing systemic barriers, including rural communities and communities with lower socioeconomic status (Boyle et al., 2023; IPCC, 2023). Those facing systemic barriers, including BIPOC groups, are at the highest risk due to their intersecting positionality and residence in ‘frontline communities’ (e.g., areas most at risk of climate change events [Sanders, 2021, p. 48]). BIPOC communities, despite contributing the least to climate change events, are often the most impacted, bearing the brunt of physical and mental health repercussions (Hilert, 2021; IPCC, 2023; Parris et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2021). Youth also exhibit higher susceptibility to climate distress due to perceived responsibility for managing future climate events (Hickman et al., 2021).

Counselors are uniquely equipped to address climate justice as a profession built upon wellness models (ACA, 2014; 2018; Myers, 1992). Some relevant wellness models that link counselor education to climate change impacts include Swarbrick’s (2012) eight dimensions of wellness, Gamby et al. (2021)’s equitable and decolonized lens of wellness, Indigenous People’s place-based wellness (Middleton et al., 2020), and Medicine Wheel model (Mashford-Pringle & Shawanda, 2023), the one welfare model (Pinillos, 2016), and finally Reese and Myers’ (2012) eco wellness model. These models connect components of wellness like environment (Pinillos, 2016; Swarbrick, 2012), community (Gamby et al., 2021; Middleton et al., 2020), access to nature, environmental identity, and capacity for transcendence (Reese & Myers, 2012) to climate. Incorporation of diverse, environmentally-inclusive, and holistic wellness models into counselor education will therefore encourage inclusivity of diverse cultures and identities in consideration of climate change and mental health.

RATIONALE FOR INCORPORATING CLIMATE JUSTICE INTO COUNSELING EDUCATION

Addressing climate justice embodies core counseling codes and tenets. Counselors are called to enact social justice to promote greater change for both clients and communities (ACA, 2014; Ratts et al., 2016; Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Many professional efforts have already

begun. For example, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) 2024 standards for counselor education and curriculum reflected an increased emphasis on social justice, diversity, and inclusion (2024). The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) recently approved the Climate Change and Environmental Justice Competencies for Counselor Education (ACES Climate Change Task Force, 2025) for incorporation into the CACREP curriculum. The ACES Climate Justice in Counseling interest network also supports counselor educators seeking to integrate climate justice into their curricula.

Despite efforts and calls for action regarding climate justice (ACA, 2018; Hayes et al. 2018; Hilert, 2021; IPCC, 2023; Reese et al., 2023), counselors report as unprepared to address climate topics in counseling (Reese et al., 2023). However, counselor educators and supervisors prepare counselors-in-training (CITs) to serve future generations, shaping student and client outcomes through their teaching decisions (Bernard & Goodyear, 2018; Hickman et al., 2021). We assert that counselor educators and supervisors can prepare CITs to address climate justice and have provided strategies for integrating climate justice into counselor education.

Instructional Strategies for Climate Justice in Counselor Education

Due to the novelty of climate justice discussions in counselor education, this teaching brief includes broad recommendations as opposed to a singular teaching strategy. We will first discuss optimal learning environments and attitudes and then introduce teaching strategies that can be implemented across existing counselor education curriculum. These will range from didactic materials on the topic of climate justice to advocacy-based community projects that CITs can integrate into their practicum, internship, and future counseling sites.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The classroom environment an instructor creates can help or hinder student learning (Higher Education Academy, 2015). It is critical to maintain a trauma-informed, culturally-responsive approach when introducing the topics of climate trauma, ecoanxiety, and climate justice (Abimbola et al., 2021). Students inherently approach learning through the lens of their own attitudes and experiences. A trauma-informed, culturally-responsive teaching approach embodies choice, autonomy preservation, and consideration for and inclusion of diverse perspectives, cultures, and learning styles in the classroom (Bowerman, 2024). We recommend that instructors strive to create emotionally open and responsive spaces, intentionally helping students experience and regulate their emotions during challenging topics.

Instructors should also model “eco-coping” (Ágoston et al., 2022), promoting environmental wellness that students can use for themselves and with clients. One of these methods includes taking classes outside to enjoy the benefits of green spaces, (Bojorquez, 2018; Wood et al., 2017) that might exist around campuses or, if a program is online, places of residence. Instructors can also model mindfulness and other connective practices.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND REFLEXIVITY

Instructors must remember to approach climate justice teachings with reflexivity and cultural humility. Reflexivity constitutes the practice of self-reflection and openness to feedback, while cultural humility is an attitude of ongoing curiosity and specific awareness of one’s own positionality (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). In regard to our own reflexivity, the authors of this paper believe in the relevance and reality of climate change. We strive to remain culturally humble as we explore the attitudes and beliefs of others, including our counseling students. We must be mindful and sensitive to the fact that, according to a recent University of Chicago study on climate change attitudes, approximately 27% of Americans, across all political orientations do not believe climate change is factual, and approximately only half (52%) believe in human-driven climate change (The University of Chicago Energy Policy Institute, 2025). Climate justice discussions can evoke strong emotions and awareness of personal and communal identities, especially if inclusive of topics such as power and privilege, bias, inequity of access, and other social justice issues faced by students and clients as a result of climate events. We suggest establishing collaborative learning agreements that encourage students to practice self-regulation and non-judgmental attitudes during sensitive discussions.

INITIAL CLIMATE JUSTICE TOPIC INTRODUCTION

During initial exposure to a topic, CITs may benefit from a didactic approach (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Informational lectures and readings lay the foundation of vocabulary, awareness of historical and current topic impact, and potential ways counselors can intervene in client and community issues regarding climate justice. We have selected peer-reviewed resources that we feel may be useful to counselor educators. Example didactic tools include: the ACA’s *Climate Crisis Fact Sheet* (Sturm et al., 2020) and the Climate Mental Health Network’s *A Guide to Climate Emotions* (Pihkala & Kamenetz, 2024), featuring a climate emotions wheel and detailed descriptions of how climate-related emotions may emerge and function for individuals.

Prior to considering applying climate justice knowledge, students should also be encouraged to construct an understanding of their own attitudes, emotions, experiences, and perspectives related to the environment. A personal history task features an evaluation of the systems an individual lives in and how they have changed or impacted the individual over time, including aspects of multiculturalism and intersectionality. During this assignment, students are prompted to reflect upon their history of environmental interactions. Prompts can include topics

such as community resources, historical ‘safe spaces,’ major moves or transitions into new environments, loss, or generational geographic origins. Participants can write reflectively and narratively, engage in dialogue, use creative methods of expression, or create a collaborative place-based presentation.

Instructors can employ initial assessments to foster student self-awareness, encourage dialogue, and generate valuable data related to climate justice competence. Assessments can increase students’ awareness of interactions with and impact on the environment, including overconsumption of Earth’s resources or negative impact on vulnerable populations (Grothaus, 2024). We have selected a range of climate-related assessments that we have used in our own counselor education activities successfully, including tools for teaching, research, and clinical practice. Tools include: (a) *Ecological Footprint Calculator* (<https://www.footprintcalculator.org>); (b) *Climate Change in the American Mind Survey* (Marlon et al., 2024); (c) *Climate Change Counseling Scale* (Peterson & Kozlowski, 2024); and the (d) *Environmental Attitudes Inventory* (Milfont & Duckitt, 2007; 2010).

CURRENT EVENT INCORPORATION

Research findings suggested that self-application encourages information retention (Higher Education Academy, 2015). A current event assignment can encourage students to think critically about how events in the world around them may impact them and their clients. In this task, students present and lead a discussion on a current event related to climate justice. Instructors should encourage accuracy of information and thought-provoking questions that consider social justice and equity, environmental effects, interpersonal and intrapersonal impacts, and generally be multiperspectival. Students should consider what populations and systems are involved and how they can address issues at various levels. Additionally, students and instructors alike should be mindful to process emotional reactions that may emerge from this activity—a mutually beneficial and therapeutic practice for students and future clients.

HOPE AND ADVOCACY-BUILDING

Instructors can use concrete activities to encourage a felt sense of effective advocacy—something that students often lack within the classroom. Concrete, collaborative activities allow students to imagine future possibilities and challenge assumptions in real time.

On a large surface (table) or the floor in a classroom, create a series of rings representing Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems model. Students will place a collection of random objects (e.g. pencils, pinecones, fidgets, etc.) into the model. When placing an object, they will share what the object represents to them and why they have chosen its position. After the group is satisfied with the current model and discusses their reactions, students will move the existing objects into new positions that represent their future hopes for climate justice advocacy in counseling. Students will reflect and identify winnable goals for climate justice advocacy and how all of this pertains to their future work as clinical mental health counselors

or school counselors. This activity may also be conducted in an interactive online space for online or hybrid programs.

Counselor educators can incite CIT hope of combating climate justice by collaborating outside of the classroom, as well. Projects highlighting involvement with pre-existing local groups can assure students that there are platforms from which to build advocacy efforts. Including a professional activity assignment encourages students to connect with other professionals doing climate justice in various counseling contexts. In this activity, students will participate in a professional event related to climate justice, including attending climate justice and mental health-related conferences or workshops, webinars, and counseling speaker series or meetings, or listening to appropriate professional development podcasts. A culminating project within a course could involve providing a local climate justice talk to undergraduates or high school students, either in-person or online. CITs should provide proof of attendance and a brief description of the activity, including key takeaways and reactions.

IMPLEMENTING INTO COUNSELING AND TEACHING PRACTICE

With a basic understanding of climate justice and how these issues are relevant to clients, students may grow in their ability to confidently apply their knowledge within practicum and internship. At one state university in the southwestern United States, for instance, CITs have been gathering outcome data from half-semester long eco-wellness-based support and psychoeducational groups from an acceptance and commitment therapy lens within practicum. With vocabulary from didactic presentations, CITs can practice discussing topics like climate emotions, ecoanxiety, climate justice, and climate trauma with their clients. Practical activities include hosting “climate cafes” (<https://www.climate.cafe/what-is-a-climate-cafe/>) or therapeutic groups for eco-distress. Mindfulness groups can highlight client’s connections to the world around them or holistic, communal self-care practices (Gamby et al., 2021). Students can also volunteer with organizations like the Red Cross that serve climate-distressed communities. Volunteer mental health work can provide concrete opportunities for advocacy and professional identity development (Toporek & Daniels, 2018).

Table 1 illustrates how each of the aforementioned activities may be used to address current 2024 CACREP standards.

Table 1*Alignment of 2024 CACREP Standards with Identified Instructional Activities*

Activity	CACREP Standard	Activity	CACREP Standard
Didactic Lectures & Readings	A.1., A.4., B.4, C.7, E.1., E.11.	Current Event Assignment	A.4., B.4., B.9., E.2.
Personal History Task	B.2., C.11, E.8.	Ecological Systems Activity	B.3., B.5., C.13., D.2.
Climate-Related Assessments	B.6., B.7., G.7., G.8.	Professional Activity Assignment	A.2., A.9., B.10.
Support/Psychoeducation Groups	A.11., B.8., C.13., E.6., E.20., F.2., F.7., E.10.	Volunteer Mental Health Work	A.2., A. 3., A.5., A.9., E.20.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

Currently, a relative dearth of CACREP-accredited programs have incorporated climate justice into their curriculum (Kozlowski, 2024). We acknowledge the broad scope of the topic and the difficulty in evaluating its effectiveness in education. Thus, we have provided multiple avenues for incorporation of climate justice and environmental components into curricula through a trauma-informed and culturally-responsive lens (see Table 1). As instructors build upon and expand our recommended tools, they should consider conducting program evaluations, longitudinal studies, pre- and post-tests, and focus groups, among other kinds of research. Their research efforts may additionally address broader impacts of climate-related instruction on students' advocacy efforts, awareness of SDOH, client satisfaction and wellbeing, and personal experiences of ecoanxiety and climate trauma. Individual educators may also consider conducting informal polls, asking for student feedback and attitudes specific to the topic.

Assessment Tools and Methods

Given the novelty of climate justice in counselor education, climate-related assessment tools are few and far between. Peterson and Kozlowski (2024) developed the *Climate Change Counseling Scale* to measure "...counselors' ability to provide counseling to address the mental health impacts of climate change" (p. 1), including knowledge of climate change and skills and abilities related to climate-informed counseling. However, this scale does not specifically address components of social justice, equity, and inclusion. Given the lack of culturally-responsive assessments for didactic stages of counselor education, students may be assessed through knowledge application assignments such as journals and collaborative

projects. We encourage counselor educators to consider their instructional theory and what measures of evaluation best align with their conceptualization of learning.

Discussion and Implications

Climate change continues to affect the world in increasingly lethal and unpredictable ways, impacting communities facing systemic barriers and other vulnerable populations disproportionately (IPCC, 2023; Sturm et al., 2020; WHO, 2021). However, it is often a divisive topic (Marlon et al., 2024). Given the tasks counselor educators and supervisors face in shaping student outcomes (Bernard & Goodyear, 2018), their decisions to incorporate climate justice into their teachings will impact the next generation of counselors and clients.

The novelty of climate justice, ecoanxiety, and other climate-related mental health concerns in counseling discussions (Reese et al., 2023) makes it challenging to find and employ relevant teaching resources. We encourage counselor educators to increasingly incorporate elements of climate justice into their existing curricula, including the various tools we have provided. Infusing the *ACES Climate Change and Environmental Justice Competencies for Counselor Education* (ACES Climate Change Task Force, 2025) either across the curriculum, within crisis, trauma and disaster counseling courses, or as stand-alone special topics electives may be a constructive start. We also encourage counselor educators to adapt their own environments, whether they be in-person or online. Climate-supportive academic settings allow for more exploration of this topic. The CACREP (2024) core curriculum also includes numerous entry points for climate justice topics, such as ethical considerations, multicultural and social justice components, concerns for human growth and development, and much more. We recommend that upcoming iterations of CACREP standards more directly include climate justice themes within the core curricular sections of the standards, perhaps especially as these relate the crisis, trauma and disaster counseling standards. The climate crisis impacts all systemic levels from micro to macro (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), providing numerous creative and tailored opportunities for advocacy, awareness, and intervention.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Though climate change has been documented for decades (IPCC, 2023; WHO, 2021), counselors have only recently begun to discuss its impact on mental health. Counselor educators still have many questions about instructional tools, implementation strategies across settings, and general openness to the topic. Climate change can be politically divisive and emotionally burdensome to discuss (Abimbola et al., 2021; Marlon et al., 2024), and many counselor educators are already experiencing burnout and overwhelm related to pre-existing curricular and role-related requirements (Coaston & Cook, 2017). Despite these obstacles, we hope counselor educators make the decision to explore the impacts of climate justice on mental health.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The authors suggest future research on climate justice incorporation into curriculum. Researchers should assess the effectiveness of teaching tools mentioned in this brief and methods for improvement. Additionally, researchers could investigate counselor educator attitudes towards climate justice. As explored in previous sections, diverse CITs and clients will benefit from understanding and application of climate justice concepts. Addressing climate justice in counselor education will promote adaptive and inclusive approaches to a rapidly changing future.

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