Integrating a Culture of Safety into Clinical Pastoral Education: Narratives That Demonstrate a Need for Healing and Change

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Abstract

The author, an ACPE Certified Educator and BCC, highlights stories and leadership perspectives that address decades of harm caused to clinical pastoral education students in a culture of mistrust and lack of physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual safety.

Keywords: Culture of safety, Physical safety, Psychological and emotional safety, Narrative, CPE horror stories, CPE history, Chaplain cognate groups, Relationship repair, Ethics, Clinical pastoral education

INTRODUCTION

Integrating culture of safety methods, theory, and practice into clinical pastoral education (CPE) programs and administrative structuring, as discussed in my main article in this volume of *Reflective Practice*, can have overarching beneficial effects, including strengthening the relationships of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) and of ACPE Certified Educators with clinical administrators and colleagues, graduate theological education programs and other partnering institutions, spiritual care colleagues, and former, current, and future CPE students.

Within this broader context, the integration of safety culture tools and methods can create the framework for accountability, dialogue, and historical relationship repair regarding an unfortunate aspect of CPE's history, known in the vernacular as "CPE horror stories." Pivoting toward repair after celebrating the one-hundred-year history of CPE in 2025 would be both symbolic and innovative. These stories include primarily emotional and psychological unsafe relational dynamics within peer groups, with the CPE educator, and within educator candidate education. In tragic cases, there is physical threat and sexual exploitation. No published research has specifically tracked and analyzed related CPE data, although ACPE former and current leaders state that the data exists.. Aside from the data, many stories get passed around and down without ever making it to local or national complaint or grievance processes due to, as anecdotally

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reported, fear of further emotional and psychological damage and fear of adverse impacts on future career prospects.

This article contains interviews with selected past and current ACPE leaders, educators, and former students with significant stories who seek to address ACPE's history and hope for a culture change. From a culture of safety methodology perspective, such changes have the potential to improve accountability, professional and leadership development, ethical behaviors and processes, and overall growth and success for the entire field.

Thus, the narrative style of this article functions as a lead safety culture tool for repair and greater organizational wellbeing, telling stories with honesty, courage, and vulnerability in ways that have the potential to expand the dialogue and processes for building cultures of trust and safety across the fields of spiritual care and education.

This article is a small seed of the stories we spiritual care and CPE practitioners hold, many of which are untold, and they reflect this CPE tree with all its branches—some wild and spindly in various directions, others broken off in parts, and many that have formed into a sturdy creation that will continue to have a profoundly positive and meaningful impact on students. We collectively have the power to look closely at the last one hundred years and determine what the health of this tree will be for the next hundred years and beyond.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

> Trust takes a long time to earn, and no time to burn. Rebuilding trust may seem challenging, but it is achievable with dedication.
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> —The Center for Leadership Studies[1]

My professional journey has included a hyperfocus on broad industry safety and hence this work on safety culture, as outlined in my main article in this volume. Further, my transition from being a journalist to a CPE educator began in 1996 when I was randomly assigned by my editor at *The New Haven Register* in Connecticut to write a story about two local CPE programs after one of the educators (then called supervisors) called him with the hope of growing the programs. I had never heard of CPE. I went in curious and left utterly fascinated and captured. After the article was published, I had coffee with both of the educators, Raymond Cooley with Masonic Geriatric Healthcare and John Carr with Gaylord Hospital. Then, with a map in hand, I entered seminary within two years. I was already deeply involved with my church, and from that experience, I came into this work with a strong passion for compassionate teaching and ministry. However, the journalist in me never left, and I naturally began to collect stories about CPE: the good, the bad and the ugly.

The numerous stories and interviews reflecting the bad and the ugly not included in this piece would fill a book. I must also disclose that I have had to leave out numerous detrimental stories and details due to risk of liability and to protect those who were harmed.

A collective body of field literature also exists containing all that is theologically, clinically, and academically good and sound about CPE. However, to maintain and sustain what shines, we cannot overlook all that dwells in the shadows and erodes the roots. That is tantamount to toxic positivity.

I am sharing this work as a two-part article as an open invitation to inspire others to join in this worthy cause of transforming CPE from a culture of mistrust to a culture of safety. It can be done, and it is a choice—the broad history of industry safety confirms this—but it will require more innovation, writing and research, leadership, collaboration, and courageous and humble dialogue from all parties.

In this article, I disclose further insights into my own motivation for this work. Below, I share a few key moments that crystallized my mission of publishing this work and attempting to directly impact ACPE and the field of CPE to integrate a culture of safety and address their unreconciled history:

- After I first became an ACPE Supervisor-in-Training (SIT), I visited a wellknown urban church for worship and introduced myself to the highly respected head pastor. He glanced at me, looked off into the distance and said, "Oh yes, I had to take CPE many years ago. Cored. Peeled. Eaten." I realized at that moment that a hermeneutic of suspicion is our lot until we address our history. I wondered how many ministry students he had shared that with and how it had affected their view and experience of CPE.
- Another minister of a church I visited while on vacation shared with me that she dropped out of the SIT process due to sexual harassment from her training CPE Supervisor and a complete lack of emotional and psychological support from her all-male peer training cohort.
- After I became certified, a seminary student required to take CPE shared with me their intense fear of taking CPE due to their own mother having been sexually abused by her CPE supervisor decades prior. The mother did not report it to authorities out of fear of how it would affect her family. I cried for a week after I heard that story, and I considered leaving the field.
- And perhaps the final straw occurred when a local judicatory leader hesitated to endorse an excellent staff chaplain to officially become an ACPE Preceptor. I invited the leader to have a Zoom call with me. In the call, the leader shared with me her own horrific story of being sexually harassed by the two male CPE supervisors who ran the program and who had also goaded her all-male peers to do the same. She said she would never forget the final interpersonal relations group (IPR) of the unit where they all brutally emotionally and psychologically

abused her and left her alone in the room, crying hysterically. She stated, "I do not trust CPE, and I fiercely protect my ministry candidates." After I heard this story, I was first gutted, then enraged into action. I entered leadership at the national level, and began writing. It was either that or leave the field entirely.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

> Safety culture is how the organization behaves when no one is watching.
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> —American Institute of Chemical Engineers[2]

To address this history, a searching and thorough examination is in order. These excerpts from interviews unpack anecdotes and experiential speculation about how we got here and what the landscape has looked like for decades. This article reflects merely one corner of that landscape.

William Scrivener, now retired from active supervising, completed CPE in the 1970s and was certified as Full Supervisor in 1987. He has served on standards and certification commissions, served as the ACPE history chair for several years, served as ACPE president from 2008 to 2009, and is currently an active member of the ACPE Ethics Commission. Thanks to all this experience and observation, he holds many stories.

Scrivener speculated that particular psychological factors of our unique history never were addressed from the start. These factors perpetuated the method of "break you down to build you up," another expression commonly used in the CPE vernacular, which is attributed to Gestalt psychoanalyst Fritz Perls's techniques that critics have claimed were too aggressive.[3] Although such factors are rampant in many institutional cultures, "not just in the church," Scrivener says, they do take on a specific composition in CPE.

"It was the classic good ol' boys club," Scrivener added. "If you think about how we started, a bunch of male pastors with inferiority complexes thrown into an environment with these powerful doctors and psychiatrists, who themselves were not necessarily kind to their students, well, that's a recipe. These early supervisors didn't know who they were. They were trying to impress these doctors by being hard, which is what medical training was."[4]

Scrivener recalled that one supervisor said to a student, "'If you don't cry during IPR, you're not doing the work, and you're not getting credit.'" He continued, "It was brutal. This whole mindset heavily contributed to an environment where students were emotionally beat up by their supervisors constantly."

Several interviewees echoed Scrivener's speculation that placing inadequately trained clergy in a medical setting during the era when psychodynamic groupwork was still developing led to the "unique" approach that became CPE groupwork. That uniqueness has not guaranteed quality and safety standardization, and it also allowed

CPE educators to silo themselves within the institutional cultures where they worked without the accountability needed to ensure ethical and ongoing clinical and professional development, leadership, and practices.

This issue of accountability related to CPE history is a primary focus for both of the ACPE Certified Educators hired in June 2025 to newly created national ACPE leadership positions: David Carnish, Director of Education, and M. Colette Gaffney, Director of Member Engagement. Both have served in diverse roles and on committees and commissions in ACPE, and both stepped out of other national leadership positions to accept their new positions, Carnish from the Board of Directors and Gaffney from the Accreditation Commission.

"We have been passing down generational trauma within our own association for decades," said Gaffney. "There has been a lack of support from peers and committees, and the committees especially need to be held more accountable. I want to see accountability in every structure of our organization."

Carnish stated that when he first entered the certification process in 2000 and began observing certain behaviors, he became concerned about "the moral compass," or lack thereof, of many ACPE educators throughout his career. "Many seem to be in it for the power, not for their spiritual growth or professional development. We have to take some major steps toward healing wounds, and this will require revamping most of our processes."

"Power gone awry and unchecked" is what a now-retired CPE educator identified as the cause of the damage. This educator, whom I shall refer to as "Educator Z" for protection and confidentiality purposes, worked in two separate CPE centers where another CPE educator had allegedly sexually exploited CPE students. In both cases, hospital administration fired the educators after receiving the alleged evidence, and no student pressed criminal charges nor filed complaints with ACPE, reportedly out of fear of personal and career damage. Both the educators continued to function in other ministry roles without repercussions or public knowledge of the incidents. Educator Z found this personally devastating to watch and felt it was further disempowering due to the added personal risk of liability regarding speaking publicly about these cases. "If I had to theoretically formulate why and how all this happened, what strikes me is the reluctant adjustment on the part of all these white men with power issues who never wanted to transition from supervisor-centered CPE to student-centered CPE," stated Educator Z, who is a white male. He cited Duane Parker's 1978 article "Student-Centered CPE" as an important article that highlighted the need for this transition.[5]

"The intersection of when CPE began, with World War II military mindsets and early ethical psychoanalytic issues, led to 'Well, what he did, I just have to accept it.' These intersecting histories have generated a movement with decades of anger and hostility to show for it," said Educator Z. "What got lost is tragic. It was a true transformational breakdown. These early supervisors fashioned themselves as key to the students'

learning; they didn't see the process as key. And this just kept getting handed down as theory."

Educator Z noted the numerous attempts made through CPE literature and resources along the way to change CPE culture but said these attempts never landed enough for authentic or lasting change. Joan Hemenway's important work *Inside the Circle: A Historical and Practical Inquiry Concerning Process Groups in Clinical Pastoral Education* demonstrated that "there has to be respect for group process," he said.[6] Hemenway's work outlines the differing outcomes when the focus is on individual students versus the group as a whole, he noted. Educator Z also commented that resources for creating a safe culture are easily accessible, such as Eric Law's "Respectful Communication Guidelines," but many colleagues have not seemed to seriously consider using such resources.[7]

"The focus on individual students became dangerous," Educator Z stated, offering details of the machinations of how these inadequately and falsely adapted psychodynamic processes broke down and became damaging in CPE. "Confrontation in the group was almost always supervisor-generated. It fed their egos, and it brought out vulnerability. These supervisors looked for vulnerability, a tender spot that led to traumatic experiences coming out in the students' stories. That's the process these supervisors were looking for to target specific students, who became victims of all forms of cruelty. They could pick up on it in the interviews and even the application essay and accept those students into their program."

Educator Z's mention of "all forms of cruelty" resonates with the many stories that form the "CPE horror story" lexicon of physical, psychological, and emotional unsafety. Scrivener, Carnish, Gaffney, and other ACPE members and leaders, including former executive director Trace Haythorn, noted all the cracks in the ethics processes for the whole of the CPE movement and history. Overall, these processes have failed to consistently address problematic educators and programs. Three of my interviewees, ironically, used the same expression to describe what was and is still not functioning well enough to address these issues: "The ethics process has had no teeth."

Scrivener explained this directly: "It's not enough to have a Professional Code of Ethics and just say, 'See, we said don't do this.' The code is written the way it is because of all these issues." He and others agree that the processes are not robust enough to address all issues, whether they lead to complaints or not.

Haythorn noted a number of factors for ethical process breakdowns based on what he culled from the records during his years of being executive director of ACPE, from 2013 to 2022: "There definitely seemed to be a buddy system, where members of the regional ethics committees felt their hands were tied and they looked the other way."

Haythorn believed that this buddy-system mentality was one of the core reasons why the regions had to be disbanded. "Problematic educators would be moved to different regions. People were 'taking care of their own,' so to speak, so it wouldn't

become public. That practice of moving people to other regions ultimately led to major legal questions and risks if we didn't do something dramatic to dismantle that process."

Haythorn was one of several leaders I interviewed who confirmed that the records show that problematic educators were moved into different regions to avoid publicity, particularly for the most egregious violations. Leaders also noted that there had been a small percentage of complaints against female educators related to harassment and psychologically and emotionally unsafe supervisory practices.

In his resignation announcement and letter in the October 2022 *ACPE Newsletter*, Haythorn referenced key changes in his list of accomplishments during his tenure, which included a "complete restructuring and bringing financial management processes into full compliance with legal and accounting standards." While many ACPE Certified Educators appreciated the changes Haythorn initiated and instituted, he was also aware of the innocent and not-so-innocent criticism that was hurled at him for disbanding the regions. He attributed some of the anger to the fact that he was not an ACPE Certified Educator and therefore was viewed as "an outsider."

And yet, Haythorn said he still had hope that the work will be done to change CPE culture. The hope, he said, lies not only in ACPE looking within to make changes but more importantly in its working outside of itself to collaborate and partner and help heal. He emphasized, "This is why it felt so important to me to work with the cognate groups. The damage done between Association of Professional Chaplains [APC] members and ACPE from the abusive supervisory practices is a huge part of the reason for all the rifts, divisions and breakdowns. Huge!" Haythorn cited the APC and ACPE merger failure in 2021 as an instance when communications were tense between the two organizations' members and leaders and there was an evident need for relationship repair.

Former ACPE executive director Teresa E. Snorton, who held that position for twelve years, from 2000–2012, is a bishop with the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, an APC board-certified chaplain, a seminary professor, and a retired ACPE Certified Educator. She has focused much of her mentorship and leadership energy in both ACPE and APC. She noted that, based on candid conversations she has had with APC members over the years who have completed ACPE CPE units, "Many APC members feel they have been abused by us (ACPE). The majority of it may not be the worst forms of physical harm, but emotional trauma is very bad and it stays with you. That has damaged our relationships."

Snorton also pointed to the issue of accountability.

> Processes need to change. How do you get people to take ownership for something they don't feel responsible for? This is part of what must change. ACPE has to enhance accountability. Way back then there were no real professional ethics processes in the regions. Complaints would go on for years before they were addressed. ACPE must own its history in order to move forward. Current leaders must take bold and brave steps to do so.

When asked directly about safety in CPE, Snorton said, "I don't think we've ever taken safety seriously. First of all, we're not honest enough with students even about what CPE is and what it entails. They're often walking through the door blind. That in itself generates a level of trauma. Pastoral identity becomes a vulnerable point, which then gets picked apart in IPR."

In relation to safety, Snorton also pointed to ACPE's history. "As an organization, it has been primarily male dominated with a 'transformation through trauma' lens." When women began getting certified, she said it was harrowing for most. "I still remember when I met the Candidacy Committee and I said, 'I am exploring the mystique of being a Black woman educator in ministry.' To this day I can still see their faces. They were looking at me confused, thinking, 'What does that mean?'" She said she felt empowered to make a difference.

Scrivener, Snorton, and other interviewees noted that many of the emotional traumas and "head games" of CPE took place in IPR. To return to a quote by Timothy R. Clark mentioned in my main article in this volume, "Nothing can shut down curiosity and exploratory inquiry faster than a small dose of ridicule administered at just the right moment."[8]

A prime example is what I once heard a staff chaplain say to CPE summer interns about IPR. The chaplain reported that this description was passed around as a funny/not funny joke: "IPR: that's when you sit in a circle uncomfortably staring at each other's socks and shoes because you don't dare speak."

Several interviewees shared an eerily similar and deeply disturbing and traumatizing example and analysis of a practice from the 1970s, '80s, and '90s and apparently even the 2000s in some CPE programs. This "exercise" could occur during IPR or as a mid-unit or final-evaluation group exercise. It looked like this: each student took a turn standing in the center of the circle or against a wall, either sitting in a chair or standing (and in at least one case, standing on top of a table), and all of their peers were forced by the educator to deliver harsh criticisms and name the worst characteristics of their peer, who had to remain where they were and take the vitriol without responding. And, as stated by several interviewees, if a student did not say "Thank you" in some way at the end of this attack, then they were labeled a coward.

Most interviewees who described this exercise named it as part of the "break you down to build you up" method and a "hazing" practice.

Many stories highlight that just as IPR group sessions began uncomfortably with anxious silence, they ended with equally uncomfortable defensive and emotionally withdrawn silence. Then CPE educators would trot out their theories on "resistance" and put students under a microscope. Among themselves, educators would use common phrases such as "What are they hiding?" and "The group's not doing its work." Similarly, after contriving to inject conflict and confrontation into the group dynamics and then not being able to "resolve" it, educators would turn to alternative "bibles" in the clinical

academic literature for answers: Mueller and Kell's *Coping with Conflict* and Eckstein and Wallerstein's *The Teaching and Learning of Psychotherapy*.[9] The CPE educators would then quip, "I think the group has reached an impasse." Actually, the impasse was likely caused by the educator and their unsafe, unsound, and harmful supervisory practices. Sometimes the educator *is* the impasse.

All of these tactics are "pseudo-psychoanalytic," to quote Pittsburgh-based Hospice Chaplain Samuel Blair, who holds a master's degree in pre-professional psychiatry. In 2016, he posted, "Is CPE Broken? Reconsidering the CPE Horror Story" in his blog *The Chaplain's Report: Journeys in Faith and Work.*[10] The blog entry begins: "Anyone having flashbacks to their CPE supervisor's office? If you Google 'CPE' chances are pretty good that it will start autofilling 'horror stories' in the search box. It seems like there are much more stories about bad experiences in CPE than good. Perhaps this is just bias toward the negative, but it certainly does seem to be that CPE is not a good experience for many. If you follow that search you'll see why."

Blair carries an eclectic array of CPE stories due to his career path trajectory and his participation in three different chaplain and CPE cognate groups. In addition to his psychiatry background and master of divinity degree, he completed his CPE units in ACPE-accredited programs, went on to hold regional leadership positions in the College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy, and became a board-certified chaplain through the Spiritual Care Association.

In an interview, Blair stated that although his own CPE experiences were good and he had a "largely positive" ACPE CPE experience, he could not help but notice the continuous barrage of traumatic and negative CPE stories he heard from peers and colleagues over the years, which is what compelled him to write the blog post. He characterized most of the comments as being in the "emotional and psychological abuse" category. He also noted that this particular blog entry likely received "the highest number of hits" of any entry he had posted, and individual comments from readers continued loading for several years, with the most recent comment posted in 2023.

This is a small sampling from the dozens of blistering comments posted in response to Blair's blog entry by individuals who have completed CPE:

- "We come to 'class' to engage in petty fault-finding with each other."
- "I have been left wondering how people called to a healing ministry, one which directs others towards God, could with good [conscience] use emotional abuse as a means towards directing others. It needs to be said, the negative stories are . . . *abuse* . . . the supervisors should be discredited . . . not able to practice. I really do not believe that God is OK with it. I was reluctant to enter into a CPE unit because of horror stories."
- "I see unethical, even illegal, behavior by my supervisor (outright racism)."

- "The [supervisor] engaged in a series of micro-aggressions and put-downs of the sort that are difficult to prove in an institutional environment."
- "No one in such a position of power should require that their student 'open up' about personal issues. . . . Students are not patients. They are placed in an academic institution to learn."
- "I was dealing with unchecked projections and uncalled for accusations from my supervisor. . . . He used the idea that I have unfinished business to avoid confronting how he would invalidate and excuse harassment in the group. In essence, he used my past to excuse his present behaviors . . . resorting to psychoanalyzing rather than feeling and having boundaries."
- "I tend to think that CPE Supervision is not broken but the people who provide it are."
- "I just quit my CPE program due to the abusive behavior of my supervisor; my other peers had also said he was 'like that' but that I should just play the game and just let him pound and question every little gesture and comments in IPR and written verbatims. I played 'the game' allowing him to tear me apart and feeling like (just don't take him seriously). I suspected that he saw how strong and unshaken I was and unbothered by his needless nitpicking. . . . When he tired of my nonreaction, he started name calling me and doing personal attacks and shaming me. I confronted him in front of another supervisor and he was quieted because I was intense and 'put him in his place.' The other supervisor said that 'he does that every year to at least one minority' (mostly women)."

The comments in Blair's blog entry are chilling. Although there have been incredible legacies and successes to celebrate in the hundred-year history of CPE, there is much work to be done to address the trauma that has been perpetrated. That work can be done.

CREATING A SAFETY CULTURE IN CPE

> What matters is the quality and sincerity of the repair attempts. By intentionally addressing these ruptures, we not only mitigate harm but often build relationships even stronger and more resilient than before. In other words, it's not the rupture that defines a relationship, but how we repair it. Rebuilding psychological safety takes time. It may be slower than you'd like. Trust must be earned and re-earned, but it can't be forced or rushed. Sometimes what matters most is simply continuing to show up, staying curious and keeping communication channels open. These consistent, reliable, small gestures become the new data points people use to assess whether it's safe.

—Jade Garratt[11]

In contrast to the comments in Blair's blog entries, and as a point of hope and to offer a prototype, here are excerpts from Appreciative Inquiry CPE Unit exit interviews with Professional Advisory Group members from the last three units I supervised in the current program I manage at Lankenau Medical Center in Pennsylvania. These comments demonstrate clear integration of a culture of safety into the program, full administrative support and alliance, and collaboration with the Spiritual Care Department.

- "The tone for a culture of safety was set from the very beginning. In addition, there was openness, accountability and above all else, RESPECT. Respect from our peers and the ACPE Educator was evident everywhere you turned."
- The interviewer summarized, "The students appreciated the emphasis placed on patient-centered care. . . . Nurses and social workers were helpful in their learning."
- "There was flexibility in the program," which helped the overall learning environment, the interviewer wrote.
- The interviewer noted the strong communication between the ACPE Educator and the ACPE Preceptors, leading to students knowing they always had someone to call during difficult clinical encounters.
- "Our group worked well together because we were willing to be vulnerable."
- "There was a sense of support, bonding and camaraderie within the group."
- "I felt very supported by my Educator and the Preceptors. I believed I could come to them with help about anything. I never felt judged or shamed."
- "The Educators and Preceptors are supportive and kind, understanding in giving space, nurturing, relational and encouraging."
- "I felt like I could be curious and take risks."
- Verbatims are a joy!"

The students gave the following reasons they would recommend this program to other students:

- "I highly doubt you'll find a more supportive and safe environment."
- "This was a great mix between being humane and challenging."
- "It's okay to allow yourself to be a beginner and make mistakes. The team wants you to succeed."
- "This is an educational program. This isn't a 'throw you to the wolves' program."
- "Lynne wants us to feel like students, not just cheap labor."

These comments suggest safe practices from the student's entry to their exit from the program. Gaffney's goal that every ACPE structure must be examined and changed to increase accountability and make it lasting should include the entry point into programs. Educator Z honed in on a key point about students who are victimized: they are first targeted through their responses to ACPE application essay questions.

I included a note about the essay questions in my standards change recommendations in 2024, stating the 2023 revisions were inadequate. I contend the questions need to be revised to encourage psychological safety and boundaries. Of particular focus is the first essay question: "A reasonably full account of your life. Include, for example, significant and important persons and events, especially as they have impacted, or continue to impact, your personal growth and development. Describe your family of origin, current family relationships, and important and supportive social relationships."

In the fifteen years I have been an ACPE Certified Educator, I have received a plethora of student applications that contain personal stories of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or other forms of acute trauma in the first paragraph of the first essay. I suggested a significant change to the essay questions, not just a tweak, conjecturing that after students disclose such trauma in the first paragraph, they hold the anxiety of sending their application to an educator they more than likely have never met and do not know. In many cases, other spiritual care staff, administrative assistants, and Professional Advisory Group members may be reading these essays, calling into deeper question the ethical and confidentiality concerns of the application process.

Further, when the students show up for an interview that may include other staff, their unconscious and conscious knowledge of their disclosure could trigger more than normal anxiety and emotional withdrawal in students as they engage in the interview process. In a parallel process, such students may show up for the first day of their CPE unit in the same heightened state. They might surmise that they have automatically entered an unsafe environment.

Anecdotally, when discussing the application essay issue with colleagues, I generally hear one of two attitudes that shrug it off: (1) "If they don't write about these experiences, I wonder what they are hiding," and (2) "It's not up to us to give them a boundary. If they write about their trauma in the first paragraph, that says something about them and not about us. It's a flag."

From my comprehensive experience and education in trauma-informed care, culture of safety, and evidence-based clinical groupwork, those views are categorically wrong and misinformed. I am a mental health chaplain with vital experience running spirituality groups while consulting with clinical groupwork experts (for example, from 2005–2014 I ran a weekly spirituality group in frequent consultation with psychoanalyst

Otto Kernberg on the borderline personality disorder mental health unit he founded at NewYork-Presbyterian's Westchester Psychiatric Division). I have found, both experientially and in the literature, that when you facilitate and create safe, direct, and clear space and boundaries in a small group process, trauma histories are not encouraged to be revealed immediately, which allows each person to develop and learn with self-agency while being able to honestly assess the trustworthiness of the environment.[12]

Gaffney and Carnish see hope in creating a stronger and safer organization, not just through examining and changing processes and improving collaboration and dialogue with other organizations but also through looking at and addressing the specific individual health and wellbeing of each member of ACPE and its collective health.

Carnish is taking a deep dive into accreditation and certification processes—particularly to instill greater leadership training and professional development—as well as all ACPE manuals and governance processes and policies, working closely with Executive Director Lynnett Glass, the Board of Directors, commission and committee chairs, and national office leaders. He noted a declining interest over the years in members taking on leadership roles. "If you don't have an ethos of culture of safety, then people are missing the call to service. We need to connect values with leadership. We need to show the values and virtues. We need to better train people to be leaders," Carnish said.

Gaffney is taking on the task of re-envisioning the Communities of Practice (CoPs) and how they function. Gaffney noted that, until now, CoPs had not been overseen in any way by ACPE. "People who don't come to CoPs, there's an observation that they're perhaps marginalized or they tend toward isolation. It is clear the regions ended due to lack of safety. We never really addressed the issues of lack of safety, and so it just got kind of merged into the CoPs to deal with." Gaffney continued, "Here's where relationality and accountability intersect. In the interest of being relational, we tend not to hold people accountable. Whereas being relational requires accountability."

Gaffney and Carnish shared a list of items that they believe need to be addressed by ACPE leadership. For Gaffney, this included shoring up the CoP structure and all avenues to improve member wellbeing and health. Gaffney agreed that culture of safety methods, tools and practices could be of great assistance and would be fully congruent with this effort. Gaffney is also focused on recruitment efforts for CPE programming and Certified Educator Candidacy and greater dialogue with cognate groups as well as other CPE providers.

"Let us give people a new reason for choosing us. If we are a gold standard, it is because of the depth of humanity of our people," said Gaffney. "We can be healers and we can help heal—that's a choice. To come up in an abusive system and to be able to say, 'It ends with me!' is brave and amazing and hard. Yet, we have the membership that can do this. I believe we can work together to become a safer organization. That's what makes us gold."

NOTES

The Center for Leadership Studies, "How to Rebuild Trust with Your Team," September 16, 2025, https://situational.com/blog/how-to-rebuild-trust-with-your-team/.

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