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REVIEW ARTICLES

Sacred Spaces: Advancing Culturally Sustainable Healing in the Mental Health Landscape

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This conceptual article proposes a culturally sustainable counseling framework grounded in Critical Race Theory, Liberation Psychology, and Ecological Systems Theory, positioning counterspaces as vital infrastructures for healing, identity development, and systemic change. Framed as "sacred spaces," Black- and minority-centered environments at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are reimagined as justice-oriented ecosystems that challenge Eurocentric paradigms and affirm cultural identity. These spaces serve as multidimensional interventions, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological, addressing mental health disparities and promoting belonging, resilience, and resistance. Rooted in the 2024 NOHS Ethical Standards and aligned with Social Determinants of Health, this model advances inclusive pedagogy, relational mentoring, and institutional transformation. Through a synthesis of scholarship, theoretical grounding, and applied practice, the paper calls for the intentional integration and institutionalization of counterspaces across counselor education and human services programs. Ultimately, these sacred spaces function not as supplements but as ethical imperatives essential to reimagining mental health care and education through a culturally sustaining, equity-driven lens.

Culturally sustainable counseling is an emerging and urgent framework that merges cultural responsiveness, equity, and community-based healing to reimagine mental health practices for historically underserved populations (Sue & Sue, 2022). At its core, this approach challenges the dominant Eurocentric paradigms that have historically excluded or pathologized Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color. Drawing on liberation psychology and ecological systems thinking, this paper conceptualizes culturally sustaining mental health environments as "sacred spaces", intentional, affirming, and justice-oriented ecosystems that center identity, lived experience, and relational care. These sacred spaces are more than just sites of healing; they are engines for resistance, empowerment, and systemic transformation. This framework is not only innovative but ethically grounded in the 2024 National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) Ethical Standards (Snow et al., 2025), particularly those emphasizing cultural humility (Standard 11), social justice (Standard 16), and the development of inclusive systems (Standard 37).

The relevance of this framework is particularly pronounced in the face of persistent mental health disparities and structural inequities in the U.S. mental health system (Cupid & Tomlin, 2023; Harris & Sullivan, 2017). Across the U.S., the need is especially critical, with significant gaps in access to culturally competent care, underrepresentation in the counseling profession, and a lack of sustained institutional accountability (Alang et al., 2021; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Recent studies affirm that systemic racism directly exacerbates disparities in mental health access and outcomes among Black and Indigenous communities (Pitner & Cooper, 2024). As counseling programs and institutions strive to meet evolving ethical and accreditation standards, culturally sustainable counseling offers a transformative model rooted in both theory and action. Such transformation directly aligns with NOHS Ethical Standard 25, which calls for professionals to seek the education and training necessary to ensure effective, culturally competent practice.

This conceptual paper presents a framework that positions Black- and minority-centered counterspaces as vital infrastructures for culturally sustainable healing in counselor education. Grounded in Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), the 2024 NOHS Ethical Standards, and aligned with CACREP competencies, this model affirms counterspaces as sacred, culturally responsive environments that foster equity, collective care, and professional transformation. This manuscript reviews current scholarship on counterspaces at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), offers a theoretical foundation, unpacks the model's core components, and explores implications for practice, education, and institutional reform.

Literature Review

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) have historically been spaces where students of color experience isolation, racial microaggressions, and a lack of institutional responsiveness to their needs (Nadal et al., 2014). A PWI has been defined as a college or university where much of the student population is Caucasian, more specifically, an institution of higher education where Caucasians account for more than 50% of total student enrollment (Brown & Dancy, 2010; Rice, 2020). Many well-known colleges and universities in the United States fall into this category. Harper and Hurtado (2007) describe these environments as 'campus racial climates,' conditions that invisibilize or pathologize minoritized students through structural neglect. Building on this, Cupid and Tomlin (2023) and Keels (2020) show how Black and other underrepresented students navigating PWIs often face the dual burdens of academic performance and racial survival, frequently without the support systems necessary to thrive. Qualitative research from Black students at PWIs further illustrates how repeated racialized encounters diminish emotional well-being and necessitate the creation of healing-centered counterspaces (Lewis et al., 2025). Scholars have argued that these hostile and inequitable conditions necessitate the development of counterspaces, as intentional, culturally sustaining

environments where historically marginalized students can find refuge, affirmation, cohesion, and resistance. Creating and sustaining these spaces is an ethical obligation outlined in NOHS Standards 10 and 15, which require human service professionals to ensure inclusive service delivery and to identify and advocate for the needs of marginalized groups.

As both Cupid and Tomlin (2023) and Keels (2020) argue, these hostile and inequitable conditions make counterspaces essential as intentional, culturally sustaining environments where historically marginalized students can find refuge, affirmation, cohesion, and resistance. Across higher education contexts, research has consistently demonstrated that counterspaces buffer students from racial microaggressions, foster belonging, affirm identity, and cultivate resilience and leadership (Case & Hunter, 2012; Lewis et al., 2025; Strayhorn, 2018). Collectively, these benefits position counterspaces as multidimensional interventions that support both individual well-being and institutional equity.

Defining Counterspaces: Origins and Functions

Originally conceptualized by Solórzano et al. (2000), counterspaces are physical or metaphorical environments intentionally designed to resist dominant ideologies and cultivate community among marginalized individuals. Within higher education, counterspaces serve as vital sanctuaries that buffer against racially hostile climates, facilitate critical dialogue around shared experiences, and foster identity development and personal agency (Case & Hunter, 2012). Masta (2021) expands this concept within doctoral education, framing classrooms as pedagogical counterspaces that actively challenge White, Eurocentric curricula by centering Indigenous and other historically excluded voices. These spaces become transformative arenas where cultural identity is affirmed, solidarity is built, and resistance is nurtured healthily and intentionally. Such functions exemplify the ethical call outlined in NOHS Standard 34, which urges professionals to maintain cultural awareness and deliver services informed by an understanding of identity, systemic bias, and power dynamics. Therefore, counterspaces are not only responsive but they are also revolutionary, offering a strategic blueprint for equity-driven practice and education.

Mentoring as a Relational Counterspace

Mentoring is a cornerstone of effective counterspace development, particularly when rooted in shared cultural understanding, relational trust, and emotional attunement. Anthony's (2025) qualitative study on African American male students highlights how culturally responsive mentorship fosters academic motivation, resilience, and a strong sense of self. These mentoring relationships are not merely transactional; they are transformational, grounded in mutual respect and cultural affirmation (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Grier-Reed's (2010) African American Student Network (AASN) exemplifies this model by providing sustainable peer-based mentoring that promotes self-efficacy, reduces racialized stress, and

strengthens students' connection to their institutions. Prior studies underscore the power of mentorship as a relational counterspace, one that nurtures belonging and empowerment through culturally attuned support. In alignment with NOHS Standard 37, which encourages pedagogical practices that reflect and respond to diverse student backgrounds, such mentoring models offer a critical pathway for advancing equity and inclusion within educational environments.

Gendered and Intersectional Counterspaces

Intersectionality is essential to understanding how counterspaces are both experienced and constructed, particularly for individuals navigating multiple marginalized identities. Beasley and colleagues (2022) highlight the significance of academic counterspaces designed specifically for Black collegiate women, who often encounter compounded challenges at the crossroads of race and gender. These spaces create opportunities for students to name and process experiences of racialized sexism, engage in shared storytelling, and assert intellectual and emotional presence within institutions that frequently render them invisible. Similarly, Keels' (2022) synthesis of research on the experiences of Latinx and Black students illustrates how race, ethnicity, and class intersect to shape the need for safe, identity-affirming communities. These findings affirm the importance of designing counterspaces that reflect the complexity of lived experiences, aligning with NOHS Standards 10 and 16, which emphasize the need to recognize intersectionality and advocate for inclusive, systemic change.

Embodied Relationships and Informal Counterspaces

Not all counterspaces are formalized through programs or policies; rather, many take shape through every day, relational interactions. Luedke (2023) introduces the concept of "embodied counterspaces," where consistent, affirming relationships between students of color and supportive faculty or staff serve as vital sources of identity validation and emotional safety. These informal, often invisible connections operate outside traditional institutional structures but offer powerful forms of support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. Cupid and Tomlin (2023) and Museus and Ravello (2021) highlight how trusted networks and interpersonal bonds function as protective buffers against institutional racism, reinforcing students' presence and value within environments that may otherwise feel isolating. These embodied and informal counterspaces reflect the ethics of care emphasized in NOHS Standard 7, which calls on professionals to avoid imposing biases and instead foster culturally affirming, respectful, and inclusive relationships that promote well-being and belonging.

From Grassroots Practice to Institutional Strategy

Although counterspaces often begin as grassroots responses to unmet needs, scholars increasingly emphasize the importance of embedding their principles into the fabric of institutional systems. Kezar and colleagues (2025)

highlight equity-centered Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a promising model, where faculty and administrators collaboratively engage in racial equity dialogues, reflective practice, and curriculum reform. These PLCs mirror the spirit of counterspaces by promoting cultural humility, shared accountability, and institutional transformation from within. Similarly, Hoffman et al. (2006) and Caplan et al. (1994) offer feminist and multicultural consultation models that advocate for systemic change through relational ethics, inclusion, and collaborative advocacy. These foundational research studies have shown the importance of these models for over three decades; however, we are still coming up against the same complex systemic concerns. Nonetheless, these frameworks extend the ethos of counterspaces beyond individual experiences and into institutional strategy, positioning them not just as supportive environments but as catalysts for long-term, structural equity in mental health and educational settings.

Ethical Foundations of Counterspaces in Human Services and Counseling

Culturally sustainable human services and counseling is an emerging and urgent framework that merges cultural responsiveness, equity, and community-based healing to reimagine mental health practices for historically marginalized populations. Central to this approach is the understanding that healing must be contextualized within the lived realities of racism, poverty, displacement, and systemic exclusion, conditions which are widely recognized by the World Health Organization and U.S. public health policy as key SDOH. These determinants, including access to education, socioeconomic stability, neighborhood safety, and cultural connectedness, are deeply intertwined with mental health outcomes, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color. The development of counterspaces reflects this contextualized approach, offering culturally grounded, healing-centered environments where identity, resistance, and belonging are not only affirmed, but encouraged for sustainability. These spaces challenge dominant norms of whiteness, individualism, and pathologization that pervade traditional counseling models, replacing them with relational, community-oriented, and culturally sustaining pathways to wellness. Aligned with the 2024 NOHS Ethical Standards, counterspaces embody ethical imperatives such as advocating for social inclusion and equitable access (Standard 6), practicing cultural humility and lifelong learning (Standard 11), and engaging in transformative social justice work (Standard 37). Whether situated in academic, community, or clinical contexts, counterspaces are not only ethically sound but strategically essential for addressing institutional neglect, reducing disparities, and advancing public mental health and well-being across populations impacted by systemic inequity.

Counterspaces as Multidimensional Interventions

Existing literature suggests that counterspaces function as multidimensional interventions for historically marginalized students at PWIs. Whether in the form of formal mentoring programs (Anthony, 2025), structured classroom environments (Hoffman et al., 2006; Masta, 2021), identity-centered networks (Grier-Reed, 2010), or embodied relational ties (Luedke, 2023), these spaces promote belonging, identity development, and collective resilience. Crucially, counterspaces operate on three levels: 1) interpersonal (i.e., strengthening connection, empathy, and emotional safety); 2) institutional (i.e., challenging exclusionary structures in academia and professional preparation); and 3) ideological (i.e., confronting dominant narratives of meritocracy, neutrality, and individualism that marginalize non-dominant worldviews). By engaging these multifaceted levels, counterspaces contribute directly to mitigating the harmful impacts of structural oppression, echoing both the ethical mandates in human services and the priorities within SDOH models. These structural levels help close opportunity gaps, reduce psychological distress from racial trauma, and foster a culturally sustaining sense of personal and professional identity.

Theoretical Framework

This conceptual framework is grounded in three overarching theories, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Liberation Psychology, and Ecological Systems Theory, each offering a distinct yet interconnected lens for addressing the systemic inequities that shape mental health and educational experiences. CRT centers the role of race and racism, viewing them as structurally embedded in laws, institutions, and cultural narratives, while challenging dominant ideologies by elevating the lived experiences and counter-narratives of people of color. Liberation Psychology builds on this by advocating for the decolonization of mental health practices, emphasizing collective healing, historical awareness, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. It encourages practitioners to engage with clients' sociopolitical realities and act in solidarity with their struggles. Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner, adds a multi-layered understanding of how individuals exist within nested systems, from immediate environments like family and school to broader cultural, institutional, and societal influences, shaping wellness, identity, and opportunity. Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a holistic foundation for culturally sustainable counseling and the development of counterspaces. Additionally, they align with key 2024 NOHS Ethical Standards, including Standard 1 (client strengths), Standard 16 (social justice), and Standard 11 (cultural humility). As outlined in the literature review, counterspaces already serve as crucial supports for belonging and resilience; this framework extends their role by highlighting their potential as catalysts for systemic transformation within educational, clinical, and institutional settings.

Core Components of the Theoretical Framework

This conceptual framework centers around four interrelated components that operationalize its theoretical foundation: critical pedagogy, culturally responsive and relational mentoring, feminist and multicultural consultation models, and structural and institutional transformation. Each component offers a distinct approach to disrupting oppressive systems, affirming historically marginalized identities, and promoting collective healing, while working together to support the creation and sustainability of counterspaces in counseling, human services, and educational environments.

Critical Pedagogy

Rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy conceptualizes education as a liberatory practice aimed at dismantling dominant power structures and validating the voices and experiences of historically marginalized groups (Shih, 2018; Shor, 2002) . Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of knowledge, this approach encourages them to become active participants in their learning and the co-construction of meaning. This approach reflects NOHS Standard 37, which emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive and inclusive pedagogical approaches. In the context of counterspaces, critical pedagogy provides the ideological backbone for fostering critical consciousness and intellectual agency. Masta (2021) and Beasley et al. (2022) illustrate how classroom-based counterspaces enable students of color to interrogate racialized experiences, challenge hegemonic narratives, and connect their realities to broader social and political structures. These learning environments function not only as places of refuge, but also as transformative sites where knowledge becomes a tool for resistance, identity formation, and empowerment.

Culturally Responsive and Relational Mentoring

Mentorship, when grounded in cultural responsiveness and authentic relationships, serves as a powerful vehicle for support, identity development, and resilience among marginalized students. Drawing from the lived experiences of students and faculty of color, this component builds on Anthony's (2025) research on African American male students and Luedke's (2023) exploration of embodied relational mentoring. Both studies highlight the critical role of shared cultural values, emotional attunement, and trust in facilitating meaningful mentorship experiences. Kuo et al. (2023) found that cultural immersion significantly increases multicultural awareness and empathy in counselor trainees, further validating the need for experiential learning embedded in mentoring relationships. Such relational care aligns with NOHS Standard 34, which encourages professionals to maintain self-awareness about their values and biases while delivering culturally competent services, as well as Standard 25, which emphasizes the importance of cultural training and preparation. Grier-Reed's (2010) African American Student Network (AASN) further exemplifies how peer-led, culturally congruent

spaces foster a sense of belonging, reduce racial stress, and increase self-efficacy. When embedded within educational and clinical training programs, these mentoring relationships can act as counterspaces that disrupt isolation, model success, and support students in navigating predominantly White institutional contexts.

Feminist and Multicultural Consultation Models

The integration of feminist and multicultural consultation models extends the application of counterspace principles beyond individual relationships and into broader institutional practice. Hoffman et al. (2005), Caplan et al. (1994), and Pham et al. (2022) advocate for approaches that foreground systemic equity, community collaboration, and intersectional awareness in both consultation and advocacy. These models prioritize cultural humility, shared power, and a commitment to disrupting the status quo within organizational structures. The deeply engrained values of these models reflect NOHS Standards 16 and 29, which emphasize systemic advocacy and interdisciplinary collaboration in the pursuit of social justice. When applied to human services and counseling programs, they guide the development of culturally sustaining practices that validate identity, promote justice, and hold institutions accountable. Through these frameworks, counterspaces become not just supportive environments for students but also strategic tools for reshaping institutional culture, guiding inclusive decision-making, and embedding equity into professional development and counseling interventions.

Structural and Institutional Transformation

Beyond individual and interpersonal impact, counterspaces play a critical role in advancing systemic change within higher education and mental health settings. Scholars such as Kezar et al. (2025), Keels (2020), and Cupid & Tomlin (2023) emphasize that counterspaces, when supported and institutionalized, can catalyze a broader cultural shift. Initiatives such as equity-focused PLCs, peer-led programming, and culturally rooted campus initiatives not only foster belonging but also actively challenge dominant norms and inequitable structures. These institutional transformations are in direct alignment with NOHS Standard 15, which calls on professionals to identify needs and advocate for clients at all levels, and Standard 30, which commits professionals to the ongoing development of the field through research and advocacy. These efforts reflect the potential of counterspaces to influence policy, curriculum design, faculty development, and institutional accountability. By embedding the philosophy of counterspaces into the core operations of counseling programs and academic institutions, these environments transition from isolated practices to integral components of sustainable, justice-oriented systems.

Purpose and Scope

This conceptual article aims to advance a conceptual framework that positions Black- and minority-centered counterspaces at PWIs as sacred, culturally sustaining environments essential to mental health equity in human services and counselor education. Rather than viewing these spaces as supplementary supports, this paper argues that counterspaces are foundational to fostering identity development, belonging, and collective healing for students of color. Grounded in Critical Race Theory, Liberation Psychology, and Ecological Systems Theory, the framework highlights counterspaces as multidimensional interventions that affirm lived experience and challenge systemic oppression. By situating counterspaces within ethical mandates from the 2024 NOHS Code of Ethics and the broader landscape of SDOH, this article calls for their intentional integration into counselor education, human services, and institutional systems as both ethically necessary and radically transformative.

Discussion and Application of the Framework

This article presents a conceptual framework that reimagines counselor education and human services through an equity-centered lens, one that intentionally supports historically marginalized communities, with a focus on Black and minoritized students in PWIs. By centering culturally sustainable human services and counseling with the intentional development of counterspaces, the framework challenges deficit-based paradigms and instead advances a strength-based, justice-driven model grounded in healing, resistance, and systemic transformation. At its core is the understanding that healing is not solely a clinical or individual act, but a sacred, collective process embedded in cultural identity, historical awareness, and relational care. When paired with identity-affirming environments, mindfulness-based interventions have also shown promise in enhancing student resilience and emotional regulation in higher education (Deroche et al., 2025). This vision aligns with key SDOH, particularly in the areas of education access, community belonging, and healthcare quality, and is reinforced by the 2024 NOHS Ethical Standards, especially Standard 6 (equity & inclusion), Standard 11 (cultural humility), Standard 13 (awareness of social issues), Standard 16 (social justice advocacy), Standard 30 (professional growth), Standard 36 (field readiness & quality), Standard 37 (inclusive pedagogy), and Standard 41 (commitment to equity), which emphasize cultural humility, equity, advocacy, and lifelong learning.

This article argues that Black- and minority-centered counterspaces are not optional add-ons to student success; rather, they are foundational. These environments, whether found in classrooms, mentoring relationships, or peer networks, cultivate belonging, identity development, and agency. They function as protective buffers against racial stressors, developmental platforms for leadership, and political spaces that challenge oppressive structures. For example, imagine human services and counselor education programs

collaborate at a mid-sized PWI that develops a recurring peer-led discussion group called "Rooted Voices." This group meets bi-weekly and offers Black and Latinx counseling students a dedicated space to share experiences, reflect on racialized dynamics in their practicum sites, and co-develop advocacy strategies. Faculty serve as culturally attuned facilitators rather than supervisors, creating a collaborative and non-hierarchical dynamic. Over time, the group becomes a site of professional identity development, community care, and resistance, demonstrating the power of counterspaces to transform student experience within dominant institutional structures. To maximize their impact, counterspaces must be institutionalized, adequately resourced, and woven into the fabric of counselor education, across supervision, curriculum, training, and faculty development (Oh et al., 2025). NOHS Standard 13 reinforces this call by encouraging professionals to remain informed about current social issues that directly affect the communities they serve.

Existing research demonstrates that counterspaces operate on three interconnected levels interpersonal (fostering empathy and affirmation), pedagogical (promoting critical consciousness), and structural (catalyzing equity-driven reform). These dimensions reflect the ethical heart of the counseling profession, which values advocacy, cultural responsiveness, and inclusive practice. Embedding counterspace principles into human services and counselor education not only prepares students to work with diverse populations but also equips them to co-create liberatory environments in clinical and educational settings. This aligns with NOHS Standards 36 and 41, which emphasize field readiness and quality, as well as the need for continuous professional development rooted in justice and equity.

As mental health disparities and racial inequities deepen, this framework offers a timely and actionable path forward. Yet, it also calls for honest self-examination within counselor education: Are we creating spaces where minoritized students truly belong? Are we preparing human services and counseling professionals to disrupt systemic harm, not just navigate it? Are we committed to transformational, not just performative, equity? Ultimately, culturally sustainable human services and counseling, grounded in critical pedagogy, relational mentoring, and institutional transformation, offer a blueprint for building more just, healing-centered systems of care and education. When supported systemically, counterspaces become sacred spaces where identity is affirmed, resistance is cultivated, and collective healing takes root, fulfilling the highest ethical aspirations of the human services and counseling professions.

Future Research

Future research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the conceptual framework outlined in this paper, which positions Black- and minority-centered counterspaces at PWIs as essential to student persistence, identity development, and systemic change. While grounded in Critical Race Theory, Liberation Psychology, and Ecological Systems Theory, the model requires

empirical support to assess its impact. Qualitative studies should explore the lived experiences of students engaged in counterspaces, particularly how these environments promote resilience, cultural identity, psychological safety, and a sense of belonging, key aspects tied to the SDOH, including social and community context, education access, and mental well-being. Quantitative research can assess measurable outcomes such as academic success, retention, psychological health, and professional identity, thereby speaking to the SDOH domains of education access and healthcare quality. Longitudinal studies are also essential for understanding how sustained engagement with counterspaces influences career trajectories and economic stability over time. Additionally, future research should investigate how counterspaces contribute to structural change, including their influence on institutional policies, equity practices, and inclusive educational environments, aligning with the SDOH's emphasis on addressing systemic inequities. Ultimately, such research will bridge theory and practice, demonstrating how counterspaces benefit individual students and serve as catalysts for institutional transformation and public health equity.

Limitations

While this conceptual framework offers a compelling vision for culturally sustainable healing in mental health spaces, it is not without limitations. As an aspirational model, it lacks empirical validation and assumes institutional readiness for critical self-reflection and systemic change, an assumption that may not hold across diverse settings. Institutional resistance, entrenched norms, and politicized climates often lead to performative rather than substantive efforts. Many human services and counseling programs also face faculty representation and training gaps, limiting the depth of anti-oppressive practices. Additionally, the context-specific nature of counterspaces may hinder their generalizability and sustaining them often falls disproportionately on Black and other underrepresented students and faculty, risking burnout without adequate support. Measuring constructs like belonging and identity development poses challenges for traditional research paradigms, and tensions between accreditation standards (e.g., CACREP) and transformative pedagogies may further restrict implementation. These limitations highlight the need for ongoing research, institutional commitment, and intentional strategies to ensure that culturally sustainable practices move from theory to lasting impact.

Implications

The conceptual framework of culturally sustainable counseling holds significant implications for counselor education, human services, and mental health systems. It emphasizes the need to center marginalized voices not only in direct practice but also in the development of curriculum, supervision, policy, and institutional culture. Grounded in Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and TribalCrit, this approach encourages a shift from deficit-based models to asset-based, justice-oriented frameworks that affirm

cultural identity and lived experience. Implementing this framework requires institutions to examine and reform exclusionary policies and practices while embedding equity and relational care across professional preparation and service delivery. The following sections explore how this framework can reshape counseling interventions, human services practice, and retention strategies to foster long-term, systemic change.

Implications for the Human Services Field

The framework of culturally sustainable counseling and counterspaces carries significant implications for the human services profession, directly aligning with the ethical commitments outlined in the 2024 NOHS Ethical Standards. It underscores the profession's responsibility to move beyond surface-level inclusion and toward transformative, justice-centered practice. Specifically, it reinforces core ethical imperatives: delivering equitable and culturally inclusive services (Standards 10 and 11), advocating for systemic change and addressing structural barriers (Standards 15 and 16), and engaging in ongoing cultural competency development (Standard 25). It also calls for continuous self-reflection and critical examination of bias and privilege (Standard 34), as well as a dedication to lifelong learning and the advancement of socially just practices (Standards 30 and 36). Supporting counterspaces enables human service professionals to fulfill these obligations by creating environments that affirm identity, empower marginalized voices, and foster collective healing. In doing so, they help to reimagine human services as a field that not only responds to oppression but actively works to dismantle it, one rooted in relational care, equity, and cultural sustainability.

While this paper emphasizes implications for human services and counselor education at PWIs, the counterspace framework also holds significant relevance for broader human services and public mental health contexts. Community-based organizations, nonprofit agencies, and wellness centers that serve historically marginalized populations can adapt counterspace principles to create affirming, identity-centered environments that resist systemic exclusion. For example, advocacy-based mental health programs might establish peer-led healing circles as counterspaces that not only provide emotional support but also cultivate collective agency for policy change. Similarly, nonprofit youth development organizations can structure mentoring programs as counterspaces that affirm cultural identity and build resilience. In public mental health, community wellness centers can embed counterspace practices into group interventions, ensuring that services explicitly honor lived experience and cultural knowledge. These applications extend the counterspace model beyond higher education and align with NOHS Standards 6 (equity & inclusion), 15 (advocacy for marginalized groups), and 25 (cultural competency training), underscoring its value for human services professionals working across diverse settings.

Implications for Human Services and Counseling Interventions

This framework reimagines human services and counseling interventions as collective, culturally grounded, and liberation-focused. By integrating culturally sustaining pedagogy into clinical supervision, human services, and counselor education programs can better prepare future clinicians to recognize systemic oppression, engage in culturally responsive care, and support identity development in their clients. Supervisors must be trained to identify and interrupt racial microaggressions, implicit biases, and power imbalances within supervisory and practicum settings. Human services and counselor training should also incorporate trauma-informed and liberation-centered practices, including addressing intergenerational and racial trauma, affirming cultural identity, and incorporating spiritual and community-based healing approaches when appropriate. Innovative models for transforming mental health systems in higher education recommend scalable, culturally grounded interventions aligned with liberation-based frameworks (Brown et al., 2024). Healing justice frameworks are particularly vital when working with historically underserved populations. Furthermore, students should be equipped with systems-level skills, advocacy, coalition-building, and consultation that enable them to engage meaningfully with communities and drive structural change. Partnering with culturally specific organizations during fieldwork helps bridge theory and practice, reinforcing the human services and counselors' role as both practitioners and social justice advocates. For instance, consider a scenario in which a human services and counseling graduate program partners with a local Native community center to create a cultural immersion practicum for counseling interns. Students not only provide services but also participate in weekly dialogue circles facilitated by tribal elders, where they explore themes of cultural resilience, historical trauma, and community healing. These gatherings act as informal counterspaces, affirming identity, challenging Western counseling assumptions, and enriching students' cultural humility. Such a model not only fosters systems-level advocacy but also centers Indigenous knowledge in counselor preparation, aligning closely with NOHS Standards 11 (cultural humility), 16 (social justice advocacy), and 34 (self-awareness of bias).

Implications for Retention Practices

The success and well-being of Black, Indigenous, and other minoritized students in human services and counselor education programs are shaped by SDOH, including education access, economic stability, and exposure to systemic discrimination. Recent findings confirm that underrepresented students face persistent mental health challenges due to unresponsive campus environments, underscoring the need for proactive structural reforms (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2024). To support retention, programs must move beyond performative inclusion toward sustained institutional accountability. Embedding counterspaces, such as mentoring circles, identity-based groups, and culturally affirming dialogues, into the program infrastructure provides

critical protection against racial microaggressions and isolation, aligning with NOHS Standard 6 (equity & inclusion), Standard 8 (informed consent & rights), Standard 11 (cultural humility), and Standard 37 (inclusive pedagogy; Strayhorn, 2018). For instance, a graduate counseling program at a large urban university might develop a comprehensive retention initiative called "Pathways to Persistence," which includes affinity-based mentoring pods, facilitated counterspace dialogues, and a semester-long "Belonging and Wellness" seminar. These offerings are woven into the curriculum and co-curricular experience, rather than being add-ons or optional groups. Students are matched with culturally similar faculty or alumni mentors, and participate in structured activities that center identity, professional development, and collective care. Over several academic years, the program observes increased retention and graduation rates for Black and other underrepresented students, alongside more culturally confident practitioners entering the field. This model reflects NOHS Standard 6 (equity & inclusion), Standard 8 (informed consent & rights), Standard 11 (cultural humility), and Standard 37 (inclusive pedagogy), showing how counterspaces can move from theory into long-term institutional practice. These efforts must be supported through intentional funding, diverse faculty hiring, and equity-focused training in areas like inclusive mentorship and trauma-informed supervision (Standard 35). Holistic admissions, culturally responsive services, and accessible support structures further ensure that retention strategies promote structural equity and community belonging, following NOHS Standards 26 and 27. Collectively, these practices represent a shift toward ethically grounded, culturally sustaining systems that honor marginalized students' lived experiences and advance the profession's social justice mission.

Conclusion

Black- and minority-centered counterspaces at predominantly White institutions are not merely supportive; they are transformative, intersectional environments that affirm identity, foster resilience, and challenge systemic oppression. Grounded in culturally responsive mentoring, feminist consultation, and critical pedagogy, these spaces empower students to reclaim their voices and cultivate belonging. Aligned with Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) such as education access and community context, counterspaces provide the psychological safety and cultural affirmation needed to navigate and resist marginalization. By operationalizing principles of cultural competence, inclusive pedagogy, and social justice, counterspaces extend beyond individual support to influence classrooms, mentoring relationships, and institutional systems. Their intentional integration fulfills key ethical imperatives outlined in the 2024 NOHS Code of Ethics, advocating for equity (Standard 6), practicing cultural humility (Standard 11), staying informed on social issues (Standard 13), promoting justice (Standard 16), pursuing ongoing training (Standard 25), and ensuring inclusive, affirming service delivery (Standards 30, 34, 36, 37). Ongoing research is vital to assessing their long-term impact on student persistence,

identity development, and institutional change. Ultimately, counterspaces offer more than healing; they offer a roadmap for reimagining higher education and mental health systems as spaces of justice, cultural affirmation, and collective care. In doing so, the human services and counseling professions can more fully embody their ethical commitment to equity and transformation.

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