

BSC Counseling Services

Client Confidentiality, Privacy & Records Policy

Policy:

It is the policy of Counseling Services at Birmingham-Southern College to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all clients who use our services, and to protect the security of any records related to the utilization of our services. This protection exists for students, faculty and staff members of BSC, regarding any counseling, consultations, and referrals. However, there are limits to the protection of confidentiality and privacy. These situations include: 1) suspected child, or elderly person abuse; 2) if someone becomes a clear and imminent danger to themselves; 3) if someone reports their intent to physically harm someone else; or 4) when otherwise required by law or court order. With these exceptions, unless the client specifically signs a release of information authorizing the counselor to talk with someone, all communications will be kept confidential. The privilege and exceptions for confidentiality are outlined in the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics and in Alabama State Law.

Philosophy:

The counseling relationship is one in which the privacy and confidentiality of what is discussed is paramount in order for clients to trust they are in a safe environment to work on the concerns brought to counseling. It is within this context that a counselor and client are able to effectively address and collaborate on steps to work toward the client's goals. Every effort is made to guard the client's confidentiality from the moment an appointment is scheduled and beyond. The security of all records is critical in maintaining this trust and every effort is also made to ensure their safety in the offices of the counseling staff. These records are kept separate from any other student files including health records and college educational records.

The need for policies regarding confidentiality and the security of records enables clients to know that they are able to discuss any concerns freely and will be provided a safe environment to do so. Security of records and confidentiality is standard practice for any counseling relationship and is an integral part of establishing trust with the clients. Students may fear that counseling files are part of their student record and may not seek appropriate support if they are unaware of this distinction.

Procedures:

All active and inactive student counseling files are kept in locked filing cabinets in the offices of the Counselors on staff. Only the Counselors have access to client files. Their offices are locked at all times when left unattended and any client files are locked separately within these offices. Any client notes are typed or written and stored in the student files. No electronic copies of notes related to counseling are saved on the computer. Files are kept on students for up to seven years from the last counseling date.

Appointments for the Counseling staff are kept on an Outlook Calendar and only the Office Assistant and Counselors have access to these calendars. Client names are on the calendar but are removed each year after annual statistics are compiled and reports are completed. Access to the Outlook Calendar is two password protected. The Counselors and Office Assistant have their calendars shut down when not in use so that no one else has access to this information.

The Counselors provide each client with an intake form which outlines the areas of confidentiality and exceptions to it. Clients must sign this form to begin a counseling relationship. Information is exchanged with other appropriate professional staff only if it is necessary for the ongoing safety and care for the physical and/or mental health of the student. If a release is needed from the student to discuss prior mental health history or if a student referral is made off campus and records need to be shared with the new mental health professional, the student signs a Release of Information form with the appropriate entity. Students may request a copy or summary of their file to be shared with another mental health professional after ending their counseling at BSC. These requests must be accompanied by an authorization signed by the student requesting said files.

Responsible Individuals

Cara Blakes, Director of Counseling Services; 205-226-4727; cblakes@bsc.edu

David Eberhardt, Vice President of Student Development; 205-226-4731; deberhar@bsc.edu

Applicable Regulations & Reference Documents

Alabama State Law

Code of Alabama, 1975

- Title 34 Professions and Businesses, Chapter 8A Counselors, Section 34-8A-21 Privileged Communications

Alabama Board of Examiners in Counseling

Laws and Rules and Code of Alabama

- § 34-8A-21 Privileged communications, p. 14

Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice

- Chapter 255-X-11, Section B.1: Confidentiality/Right to Privacy, pgs. 8-9

American Counseling Association

Code of Ethics, 2014

- Section B - Confidentiality and Privacy, pgs. 6-8

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

Principles of Accreditation, 2017

- Section 12 – Academic and Student Support Services, pg. 27

Revision Dates: October 2013; September 2018; October 2019