Introduction:

Ethics is something that is an unavoidable topic that surfaces in counseling. It is a grey area that drives counselors crazy deciding what is the best decision to make for their client. Often times the ethical
issue dealing with confidentiality arises and the counselor must decide whether the golden rule that is the basis for trust in a counseling relationship should be broken in order to protect the client or someone else, or if this sacred contract between the counselor and the client should be maintained in order to preserve the relationship as well as assure that no harm is being done to the client and the work that has been done thus far.

Dealing with an ethical decision is something that can be very stressful for a counselor, but is also unfortunately unavoidable. There are different steps and tools in place to help get them through the process and make it as painless as possible. Although there are many ethical decision making models that can be followed the one that will be used in this paper is Welfel’s Ethical Decision Making Model (2006). This model, similar in structure to the other models, has nine steps that are used to aid the counselor throughout this process. Even though it is not an easy process to go through with the structure of this model and the support within the agency the counselor is able to get through the situation at hand with the clients best interest in mind.

**Step 1: Develop Ethical Sensitivity**

During the first step it is important to assure that the client has ethical sensitivity. Ways that this is possible is that they can be constantly keeping up with their education in ethics. This is an important subject and would be a smart idea to keep up on the issues by taking classes in this topic. Even if a counselor has taken classes before it is never a bad idea to take a refresher course. Failure to keep up with the ethical standards would violate the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) C.1. Knowledge of Standards stating that Counselors have a responsibility to read, understand, and follow the ACA Code of Ethics and adhere to applicable laws and regulations. It is so important for a counselor to make sure they are always having these regulations and restrictions in mind while practicing with their clients. Also according to C.2.F. Continuing Education counselors are required to maintain competency of the skills and information available for counseling.

Another thing a counselor can do in order to maintain their ethical sensitivity is to remember the reason why they entered into this profession in the first place. At times it might seem like things are hard
and that all of your clients are stuck, but remember why you entered into this professions, for example to help save adolescents, then it becomes worth it. It needs to be made clear that a counselor will not be able to help and save everyone, but if you help just one person you’ve made a difference not just to that person, but everyone in their life as well.

**Step 2: Define the Dilemma and Options**

In the case of Sarah she wants to attend a “pharm” party which is where all the kids who are attending take medications from their parents’ medicine cabinet and when they get to the party put them in a community bowl. They then proceed to take random amounts of unknown medications which they are also mixing with alcohol. This is something that is a very controversial event because it is putting everyone that is at that party at risk for severe medical damages, or even worse death. This is also an issue because these adolescents are also taking medication that might be crucial to someone in their households well being. By taking the medications from this family member may also be putting that family member at risk for severe medical complications.

At this point the damages that could occur as a result of this “pharm” party go far beyond just the effects that it can have on Sarah. There are going to be other members from the school that are there, as well as all of their family members who are now missing their medications that may be imperative to their health or even lives.

At this point one of the options would be to breach the confidentiality with Sarah and tell her parents what her intentions on Friday night really are. Doing this would be going favor off the ASCA (2010) Ethical Standards A.7. This is saying that it is the counselor’s duty to warn the authorities when the student might potentially be a threat to themselves or others, which in this case this party would be a threat to everyone who is there. It also shows that the counselor has an obligation to report risk to the parents in order to prevent anything from happening.

Another option would be to talk to Sarah and try and talk her out of going to this party. This could possibly go against B.1.c. stating that a counselor is not allowed to share the information without sound legal or ethical justification. This, again, can be a sticky situation because a counselor can be
reported for breaking the code of ethics and their license can be questioned if a client feels that the code of ethics was not followed and their confidentiality was unjustly broken. Also in doing this option it might also go against A.2.c Confidentially in ASCA (2010). This says that a counselor should promote autonomy and independence of students and limiting breaching of this confidentiality. And that if a breach must take place that it is the least intrusive way possible. This is such a grey area because where would you draw the line with this type of situation? Some might think that by informing Sarah’s parents is enough, and others might think the authorities should be informed in order to break up the party once it starts. The counselor must use their best judgment in order to determine what should be done.

A last option would be to do nothing at all. One could say that kids will be kids and that this kind of thing happens all of the time. Sarah said that she hardly drinks and that her boyfriend will be there to make sure she is safe, so perhaps the counselor could find themselves completely over thinking this entire situation and stressing about it for no reason. There are parties every single week in high school and if peoples parents were called for every single party or the authorities were called, eventually the students would find a way to just sneak around anyways. A counselor can’t act like every situation is life or death so they have to pick their battles. Unfortunately if the counselor fails to report anything and something does happen to Sarah then there is a question of breaking B.2.a Dander and Legal Requirements from the ACA (2005) code of ethics. This is saying that if there is danger to the client then confidentiality should be broken in order to protect the client and others.

**Step 3: Refer to Professional Standards**

During this phase the counselor would go over all of the ethical standards in the ACA code of ethics as well as the ASCA Ethical Standards that may be broken depending on which decision they make. As stated before some of the concerns would be breaking the client’s confidentiality. Doing this might completely break the client’s trust and end up causing them damage. Other things that might be broken if the counselor chooses to break the clients confidentiality is the independence and autonomy of Sarah, which is something that if broken during the developmental state is something that may never be fixed.
On the other hand, failure to do anything about this situation can also result in breaking ethical standards that are expected of counselors. Counselors are bound to the ACA Code of Ethics and school counselors are also held to the ASCA Ethical Standards. In both of these sets of rules, it says if there is harm to the client or to someone else that the counselor is ethically responsible to warn the people in danger, or in this case, since they are minors, their parents or the authorities may be informed. All of this falls into the grey area counseling creates.

**Step 4: Search Out Ethics Scholarships**

During this step, the counselor would go to the literature and see if they could get any advice on what would be the most ethical decision to make. One article the counselor might choose to reference in this specific case with Sarah might be *Privacy and Confidentiality in School Counseling* (Special Issue: Legal and Ethical Issues in School Counseling) by Harriet L. Glosoff and Robert H. Pate Jr. In this article, the ethical as well as legal issues are discussed that might be faced to a school counselor are discussed. This article is also a great refresher for counselors that might need a touch up on the ethical code that they are bound to as well. This article does a great job going over the different rules and regulations that counselors should follow. It is specific to school counselors and also touches upon the fact of working with minors. Although this article is very informative, it does not make the decision for the counselor any easier since it still puts everything in that grey area that was discussed earlier.

Another article that might be referenced is *Confidentiality with Minors: Mental Health Counselors’ Attitudes Toward Breaching or Preserving Confidentiality* by Madelyn L. Isaacs and Carolyn Stone. Throughout this article, the fact of confidentiality is further discussed explaining how it is the most important relationship between a counselor and a client. The article also goes on to discuss how with minor clients, there is such a grey area because their parents or guardians have a legal right which is again where the grey area in counseling comes into play here again.

Although consulting the research can be an informative tool that the counselor can use, it is not something that is going to solve all of their problems. Using this information might be something that is
helpful if the counselor has a question that they needed clarified, or they might even be able to find out what previous people have done in similar situations, but the overall decision on what to do still falls in the counselors lap.

**Step 5: Apply Ethical Principles to Situation**

During this step the counselor would take the ethical principles from Welfel’s ethical decision making model and apply them to the situation. The first principle is respect for autonomy. During this principle the counselor must remember and respect that the client is entitled to independent freedom so by breaching their confidentiality you are in a sense taking that away from them. The next principle is nonmaleficence this is basically saying that the counselor should do nothing to harm the client but only to heal them. Next is beneficence which is the responsibility to do good. The fourth ethical principle that the counselor is required to follow and consult is justice which is the obligation of the counselor to act fairly.

The fifth principle is fidelity which is the faithfulness and the promises that the counselor made to tell the truth to the client. Next is when ethical principles conflict which deals with when different principles seem to contradict each other. The last principle is dealing with ethical theories which, according to Welfel, is where the counselor would take into consideration the theories that are at the core of religious, social, and political institutions. The ethical theories describe different things that may be assumed about moral behavior.

The counselor would go through all of these different principles and debate what is going on in the case of Sarah. There are many things that might come up while they are applying these principles since at this point in time they might still be unsure what pathway they should take with handling this situation. This step might help them to help weigh out some of the pros and cons of each path they thought about taking.

**Step 6: Consult with Supervisor and Peers**
During this step the counselor would consult with their supervisor as well as their peers, such as the other members of the guidance department on what they think should be done. According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) F.4.c. Standards for Supervisees the supervisor would be required to make sure that their supervisee is aware of professional and ethical standards that they are being held to. During this time of supervision, which is something that should be happening every week anyways, the counselor would have a chance to further weigh out the pros and cons and see the opinions and views of someone else. This could be a very beneficial step because perhaps the supervisor, or someone else in the department, has seen this case before and would have suggestions on what works and what might fail at the attempt to right this situation.

**Step 7: Deliberate and Decide**

During this step the counselor would have to take all of their information that they have gathered over the last six stems and come up with what decision that they find is best. In this instance the best step to take would probably be to talk with Sarah first. This whole situation might be elevated by just talking to Sarah and making her see that this is not something that she wants to get involved with. She has just decided on her top picks for college and something like this could really devastate her future plans. Also by showing Sarah the physical and medical toll this could take on her body might be enough to get her to steer clear. She is a smart girl with a good head on her shoulders and hopefully the counselor would be able to make her see she is about to make a stupid mistake.

If that attempt didn’t work the next thing the counselor should probably follow through with would be to inform her parents of the events that are about to take place. Even though this is a risky move because Sarah would be very angry at the counselor, they would inform her before this took place and remind her that they are unable to keep something a secret when her safety is at risk. It is understandable that she will be mad and upset, but at this point the counselor should be satisfied with the decision that they did their job to protect their client rather than risk the fact that something would happen to her or even worse if she died and the counselor did nothing about it.

**Step 8: Inform Supervisor and Take Action**
At this point, since the supervisor has already informed of the situation the plan that the counselor has decided to take must be told to them. The reason for this is that it is important to get the feedback from them to assure you are sticking to the principles of ethics and not causing harm to your client, but also that your supervisor would also be a mandated reporter and if they felt this was a serious enough situation that there was duty to warn Sarah’s parents, but the counselor did not feel that way, the supervisor might be responsible to take the action into their own hands.

The counselor would then put their plan into action by calling Sarah down to their office and discussing the plan that they developed in step 6. This would start with talking to Sarah trying to get her change her mind. If that didn’t work then she would be informed that her parents would be informed in her best interest.

**Step 9: Reflect on the Experience**

During this time of Welfel’s ethical decision making model the counselor would ask themselves the following questions: Did I attend to the ethical dimensions of the situation as soon as they arose? Did I know enough about the ethics codes to sue them effectively? What ethical literature do I need to keep in my person library for easier access the next time it is needed? How effectively did I consult? What could I have improved? How well did I identify the competing values and other pressures affecting my decision making? What could I have done better? What could I have done differently? What am I proud of doing? How has this situation changed me as a professional and a person? How can I use this experience to assist others in my work faces with similar problems?

After answering these questions the counselor would be able to asses the situation that they had to deal with and know better what they should change for next time. It is also a time for the counselor to congratulate themselves on what went well with their decision and what they will use again next time an ethical dilemma arises. The counselor should be happy at the end of the day that their client Sarah is safe, which was their main priority and concern of the counselor all along.

**Conclusion:**
This assignment definitely had a lot to offer. Even though it wasn’t a real client that I was dealing with throughout this paper I found myself being completely torn in every direction. I was completely immersed in this case study and could feel myself ripping in half over what to do. I gave each step a lot of thought and as difficult as it was truly enjoyed going through the steps of the decision making model. If I had not had the guidelines from the model to go by then I think it would have been a much harder and confusing process and I would have been all over the place. The decision making model gave me a structure to follow and allowed my thoughts to be organized.

I think the counselor made the proper decision because in the end the welfare and safety of the client is really what the counselor’s main concern should be. There are going to be many situations that counselors have to deal with that might fall under that grey area but by going through these steps and keeping in mind what is truly important in the larger picture it helps to make the decisions not so overwhelming. It is easy to get confused and flustered when dealing with ethical decisions in counseling but by using all of the resources available the counselor should feel confident with their final decision.
References


