

2017

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Recommended Citation

Henderson, K. L., & Dufrene, R. L. (2018). Remedial Interventions Used with Students Enrolled in Counseling Graduate Programs. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 10(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jcps/vol10/iss1/7>

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Remedial Interventions Used with Students Enrolled in Counseling Graduate Programs

Abstract

An exploratory qualitative content analysis was completed on documentation submitted from 12 CACREP counseling programs regarding student remediation. The analysis focused on remedial interventions used with students that resulted in four main themes and eight subthemes: (a) personal counseling; (b) courses (subthemes: clinical courses, related to clinical courses, and didactic courses); (c) assignments (subthemes: workshops, readings, and written assignments); and (d) remediation procedures (subthemes: meetings with faculty, and status in program).

Author's Notes

This study was supported by a Research Grant Award from the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES).

Keywords

student competence, gatekeeping, remediation, interventions, counselor education

Counselor educators and supervisors are responsible for remediating students, as articulated in both the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards (2016) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) *Code of Ethics* (2014). Growing scholarship and recent court cases support the mandates from CACREP and ACA regarding the need to remediate students. However these sources do not explicate *how* or *what* to remediate in students. Existing empirical research has examined the behavioral problems with students that most often need remediation (Duba, Paez, & Kindsvatter, 2010; Henderson & Dufrene, 2013; Homrich, DeLorenzi, Bloom, & Godbee, 2014). While the responsibility to remediate students is clear, how to implement remediation to address problem behaviors is not. Research is needed to provide greater detail of the interventions counselor education programs are using when remediating students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how faculty members are remediating students in counseling graduate programs.

Relevant Scholarship

Building on the foundation of ACA and CACREP regarding faculty and supervisors' responsibility to remediate students when necessary, remediation also has been highlighted by Gaubatz and Vera (2006), who examined perceptions of student competence both in faculty and students and found higher rates of peers identifying concerns than faculty. Noting this gap, the authors posited that students with competency concerns were "gateslipping" through programs without being remediated by faculty (p. 36). Likewise, Brown-Rice and Furr (2013) underscored the existing need for remediation, finding that other students were aware of peers with competency problems who disrupted their learning environment and were concerned when these peers were allowed to graduate and enter the field as professional counselors. An added dimension was students' apparent lack of knowledge of gatekeeping and remediation policies in graduate

programs (Foster, Leppma, & Hutchinson, 2014; Parker et al., 2014), sparking concern as to whether students are aware of competency expectations. Moreover, the need to remediate students was reflected in the wake of lawsuits brought against counselor education programs for dismissing students with competency concerns, such as at Augusta State University (now Augusta University [*Keeton v. Anderson-Wiley*, 2010]), Eastern Michigan University (*Ward v. Wilbanks*, 2010), and the College of William and Mary (McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007). Despite the well-established need to remediate students based on the perspective of both faculty and students, a paucity of empirical research exists on remedial interventions that can be used with students.

A related consideration regarding remediation is the language of how we dialogue about problematic student behaviors, which has been widely inconsistent and has varied in the literature from impaired, deficient, challenges, and problematic. Criticism of the term ‘impaired’ has arisen over several different issues, including the ambiguous and unclear nature of the term and its narrow association with disabilities and diagnosable disorders (Bemak, Epp, & Keys, 1999; Bhat, 2005; Elman & Forrest, 2007; Gilfoyle, 2008). In order to address these concerns, Elman and Forrest recommended using adaptations of “problems of professional competence” (p. 508). Their language focused on the identified problems with competence rather than the reasons that possibly are causing the problematic performance. They suggested avoiding language that can be perceived as pejorative by students (e.g., incompetent, impaired).

While research is lacking on remedial interventions, several conceptual models addressed gatekeeping and the dismissal of students, with remediation mentioned as a step in the gatekeeping models (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Kerl, Garcia, McCullough, & Maxwell, 2002; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; McAdams et al., 2007; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Common recommendations for gatekeeping policies and procedures from the models included: (a) notifying

students of the dismissal policy and evaluative criteria, (b) evaluating students' performance to identify competency concerns, and (c) notifying and meeting with students who were evaluated with competency concerns to determine how to address these concerns. Within these models, remediation and remediation plans frequently were mentioned as a possible way to address concerns. However emphasis was on dismissal procedures, not on remediation as a process.

Regarding the remediation process, scholars offered best practice recommendations for constructing remediation plans (Henderson & Dufrene, 2011; Kress & Protivank, 2009; McAdams & Foster, 2007). Suggested remedial interventions to use in plans included increasing supervision, repeating or withdrawing from courses, adding academic assignments, and seeking personal counseling (Henderson & Dufrene, 2011; Kress & Protivank, 2009; McAdams & Foster, 2007; Russell & Peterson, 2003; Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013). Additionally, a common recommendation was emphasis on documentation during the overall remediation process (Dufrene & Henderson, 2009; Kress & Protivnak, 2009; McAdams & Foster, 2007). The discussion of remedial interventions from these sources appeared as a series of possible interventions to use, but without in-depth discussion, lacking context or description of how to implement the interventions with students. Brown's (2013) content analysis of doctoral program handbooks found a similarly brief review of remedial interventions that reflected those discussed in the literature, which also included gatekeeping responses such as formal probation or dismissal. While the majority of remedial interventions have not been explored conceptually, an exception was personal counseling.

Personal counseling has received the most scrutiny as a remedial intervention and also appears in the ethical code. The *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) guides faculty to provide assistance to students in identifying appropriate clinicians if personal counseling is requested or suggested as

part of remediation. In an exploratory qualitative study of 14 training directors of psychology programs, Elman and Forrest (2004) identified two approaches to how personal counseling is implemented during remediation, which they termed hands-on or hands-off. The hands-on approach was characterized by *requiring* personal counseling versus the hands-off approach of *recommending* counseling. Criticism of using personal counseling as a remedial intervention has included balancing student accountability to the program with confidentiality, questioning faculty's role in goal setting within students' counseling sessions, and the lack of research indicating the effectiveness of personal counseling as a remedial intervention (Elman & Forrest, 2004; Kaslow et al., 2007; Rust et al., 2013).

In the professional dialogue on gatekeeping and remediation, growing scholarship supported the mandates regarding the need to remediate students. While scholars and counselor educators have recognized the importance of gatekeeping models and remediation plans, empirical research is lacking regarding the interventions used during remediation. Considering the lack of research examining remedial interventions, faculty members are without evidence-informed resources to consult for guidance when remediating. In order to address this need, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study on student remediation in counselor education programs.

Method

The initial purpose of this study was to explore how counselor educators are remediating students in CACREP-accredited programs. An exploratory qualitative content analysis was utilized to identify themes within the textual data. A qualitative content analysis approach was chosen because of its appropriateness to examine pre-existing documents as a data source (Schreier, 2012), such as documented remediation plans. The original research question was: How are CACREP-accredited programs implementing student remediation policies, procedures, and

accompanying documentation? Due to the unexpected plethora of documents received, data analysis focused on the specific interventions used during remediation. Hence, the research question evolved to: What interventions are CACREP-accredited programs using to remediate students?

Procedure

A purposive sampling approach was used to identify sources to supply gatekeeping and remediation documents used in practice with students. The two counselor educators on the research team identified potential sources of documents from the following: presenters at professional conferences, CESNET emails, and authors of journal articles on gatekeeping or remediation. All potential participants were from CACREP-accredited programs who were actively implementing remediation with students. Potential counseling faculty were contacted via email to request their program's participation in the study. CACREP-accredited programs were chosen due to the peer review self-study evaluation process that requires consistency in standards and requirements across programs. Faculty were asked to provide all available documents from their counselor education programs that related to gatekeeping and remediation, including student handbooks, policies, evaluation forms, de-identified remediation plans, or other related documents available. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was requested and approved by one researcher's institution, the other researcher's institution determined the study did not involve human subjects. In order to avoid potential subjectivity or challenges with bracketing, the two researchers' counselor education programs were not included in the sample.

Data Sources

Based on the purposive sampling for document sources, a total of 12 CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs submitted 63 documents for the qualitative content analysis. The

sample of 63 documents included 213 pages of textual data comprised of student handbooks, gatekeeping policies, evaluation forms, remediation plans used with students, emails, and letters associated with student remediation plans. Anonymity of programs was adhered to by de-identifying all of the names of counselor education programs and individuals from all of the documents provided.

Faculty were asked to provide demographic data on their programs; one program did not submit the demographic form. The 12 programs represented five regions from the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES): Southern Association ACES (SACES) $n = 5$; North Central ACES (NCACES) $n = 2$; North Atlantic Region ACES (NARACES) $n = 2$; and Rocky Mountain ACES (RAMACES) $n = 1$, with missing data $n = 2$. The largest number of programs were from the SACES region, which could be because SACES has the largest membership of the five regions, as well as both researchers were SACES members. The number of full-time faculty in each counseling program ranged from 4 to 13. The levels of degree offered by the programs were master's degree programs ($n = 8$) and doctoral programs ($n = 3$). Enrollment for the master's programs was 62 to 90 students ($n = 4$); 200 to 350 students ($n = 4$); and 110 to 140 students ($n = 3$). Enrollment for the doctoral programs was 25 to 30 students ($n = 3$).

Content Data Analysis

Considering the emergence of student remediation in the counseling field, a qualitative content analysis was used to understand the contextually rich topic of remediation, which allows for a search of emergent themes (Creswell, 2007). In the initial stage of the research, an assistant electronically imported all 63 documents (213 pages) into Nvivo and the first author developed a codebook for our data analysis. We analyzed the textual data by employing a coding framework as “a descriptive method of summarizing what [was] in the data” with “...deductive, concept-

driven categories” (Schreier, 2012, p. 41). The coding team (the two authors) each used the memo function in Nvivo independently as a journaling source for discussion during our follow-up meetings to arrive at agreement on our codings. Our research team meetings involved reviewing the codes and discussing differences to reach agreement, which reduced coding conflicts to improve the validity of our coding frame, thereby also providing consistency. When in agreement, the codes were combined during this process and linked to a main theme and subtheme that was descriptive of the data from the codes. Schreier (2012) recommended having at least two coders to “use the same coding frame to analyze the same units of coding, and they do so independently of each other” which can provide validity and reliability for the codings (p. 167).

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure trustworthiness and bracket potential assumptions or bias during data analysis (Creswell, 2007), the research team examined our own beliefs regarding student remediation. We each believe that student remediation is required and necessary, and that the main goal of remediation is to provide students with alternate ways to achieve success or address problems that have been displayed. We agree that the purpose of remediation should be educative and corrective, not punitive. In order to increase trustworthiness of the data analysis process, we coded the data independently using Nvivo then compared all codings. In addition, we confirmed our findings through different data sources as suggested by Creswell, such as student handbooks and individual remediation plans. We also employed thick verbatim descriptions as recommended by Creswell from the document sources that were included in quotations when reporting the results.

Results

Four main themes were identified in the findings related to remedial interventions, which also included eight subthemes: (a) personal counseling (no subthemes); (b) courses (subthemes; clinical courses, related to clinical courses, and didactic courses); (c) assignments (subthemes; workshops, readings, and written assignments); and (d) remediation procedures (subthemes; meetings with faculty and status in program).

Personal Counseling

Within the 63 sample documents, a consistent theme was that students were to obtain personal counseling as part of their remediation, whether required or recommended as an intervention. Multiple cases specified how many sessions were required, along with requiring documentation from the treating counselor verifying attendance of counseling sessions. For example, one program documented that the student, "... will attend counseling on a bi-weekly basis to address personal issues and work to diminish their possible impact on clients. She will ask her counselor to provide notice of the number of biweekly sessions attended by sending an email to Faculty ..." by a specific date. Another document required that the treating counselor "... provide a letter attesting to your mental well-being." Other related examples included requiring the student to sign a release for the faculty advisor to consult with the treating therapist, and relatedly, required the student to provide progress (clinical case) notes from the treating counselor to faculty members. The remedial documents also specified the type of mental health professional who needed to provide the counseling to students and identified issues to be addressed in counseling, such as "... work on setting appropriate boundaries and limits, time management, and resolving issues from the past." In this example, the faculty required that the student share the letter from the program including the details of the remediation plan with the treating counselor

and provide a letter from the treating counselor acknowledging receipt of the letter and plan. In another instance, the student was required to obtain a formal psychological assessment and provide the results of the assessment to faculty members.

Courses

Findings in the sample documents indicated that students' course work was addressed during remediation in a variety of ways. As a result, the main theme of courses was separated into three subthemes comprising: (a) clinical courses, (b) related to clinical courses, and (c) didactic courses.

Clinical courses. General interventions included limiting or restricting students' registration in clinical courses, such as dropping practicum or withdrawing from internship. Examples from the data for restricting access to clinical courses included that a student: "Take a semester off from practicum ... in order to attend to the above requirements and repeat Practicum II," "...will not be allowed to apply for ... Counseling Practicum until she has consistently demonstrated the professional behaviors named above as evidenced by professors through classroom interactions and performance and until this remediation plan is completed," and drop practicum/internship or receive an I [incomplete] grade. One program also specified in their documentation which section of internship the student should enroll with a particular faculty member as the instructor.

Related to clinical courses. Additional interventions found in the 63 documents included detailed requirements for students while enrolled in their clinical courses. One example required that if the student failed to comply with the remediation plan, the student would be removed from the clinical site. Another program's documentation indicated that "Every Monday you [student] will bring ... a copy of the attached progress report. ... your placement supervisor will indicate the

progress you have made during the prior week. Failure to comply ... will result in you being removed from your internship placement.” A second example required a student to receive “a positive evaluation from his site supervisor in order to proceed to an Internship placement” and, when there was a pattern of absences, the student was required to make-up missed internship classes and not miss any more; if more classes were missed, the student would be dropped from internship and required to retake internship with successful completion of the course to graduate from the program.

Didactic courses. Remedial interventions that focused on content courses included limiting students’ enrollment per semester, specifying enrollment in specific courses, or retaking courses. Examples from the documents included: “... [the] student may only take up to 1 other course with the required remediation plan; the additional course must be approved by the ... Committee;” “[the] student will take no more than two courses per semester until significant improvement is seen in her writing skills;” and “... [the student must] refrain from taking classes during the summer.” Programs also required that students complete the identified courses with a certain grade by a deadline.

Assignments

Findings from the sample documents indicated that students were required to complete assignments as part of their remediation process. The theme of assignments included three subthemes: (a) workshops, (b) readings, and (c) written assignments.

Workshops. An intervention required students to attend workshops, sometimes on specific topics. Examples from the data included: the student “will attend at least three workshops prior to the end of the...semester on [a specific topic] and ... will provide ... evidence in the form

of attendance certificate.” Other examples included completing empathy training and taking writing workshops.

Readings. Students were required to complete specific readings as part of remediation, such as: “Continue to develop ... knowledge ... by outside reading on the topic. ... [and] will read at least ten articles.” Similarly, remedial documentation instructed the student to “Follow your own excellent plan ... of reading the books and attending the workshops, learning the knowledge and skills, and practicing the skills you learn so that they are clearly evident to the faculty and peers in your classroom participation and professional/personal interactions.”

Written assignments. Programs required that students complete papers tailored to the specific competency problem displayed. Examples from the data included that the student: “will submit a two-page reflection to her advisor that summarizes what she learned from her research regarding ...,” and “... construct [a] post graduate plan-of-action.” Students were also required to develop and write a wellness plan and to write specifically on upholding the ACA *Code of Ethics*. Another related intervention was the recommendation for the student to find an editor to help with his or her writing; the editor could be a peer.

Remediation Procedures

Within the main theme of remediation procedures, two subthemes reflected part of a program’s overall gatekeeping process: (a) meetings with faculty and (b) status in program.

Meetings with faculty. Follow-up meetings were documented as a requirement in remediation to review student progress. For example, one document had a description that indicated the advisor must meet with the student, which would be followed by a full faculty review of the student’s progress. Other required meetings with students included: “Meet with site supervisor and course instructor to review remediation plan.” and “Meet with [faculty member]

for [a] certain number of sessions to discuss such issues as boundaries, dealing with feedback/implementation of feedback, transference/countertransference and other issues pertaining to the internship/professional role.” One program documented that the student attend meetings with faculty members for advanced instruction/supervision. Another document had that a faculty member work with the student and meet to discuss different styles of communication.

Status in the program. Students’ official status within the program was sometimes altered during the remediation process, including placing students on probation or withdrawing students from active status until the plan was completed and documented. Another program stipulated that the student could not enroll in classes until he or she attended a meeting with faculty and signed the remediation plan. Related actions included deferring the faculty’s decision on endorsing a student’s graduation that current semester while placing the student on probation, and requiring a student to cancel attending a professional conference.

Discussion

The results of this study provided exploratory qualitative data on remedial interventions used by a sample of counselor educators with students during remediation. The study’s results included remedial interventions discussed in the conceptual literature, such as personal counseling, withdrawing from courses, and additional academic assignments (Henderson & Dufrene, 2011; Kress & Protivank, 2009; McAdams & Foster, 2007; Russell & Peterson, 2003; Rust et al., 2013). Overall, the findings of the study further elucidated how a small sample of counseling programs are implementing remedial interventions in practice, which was previously lacking in the literature.

For example, personal counseling was implemented in a variety of ways. Several uses of this intervention by participants reflected the ‘hands-on’ approach recommended by Elman and Forrest (2004), such as requiring counseling rather than recommending counseling and identifying

issues that the student needed to address during counseling sessions. The desire to be more directly involved in students' personal counseling seemed reflected in interventions requiring copies of case notes and requiring permission to communicate with the treating clinician. The theme of personal counseling included interventions seeking an outside mental health clinician's opinion of a student, such as providing faculty with a copy of the student's psychological evaluation or providing a letter from the treating counselor verifying the student's mental well-being. The approach to using personal counseling as an intervention appears to value accountability to a program over the student's confidentiality as a client, a challenge discussed by scholars (Elman & Forrest, 2004; Kaslow et al., 2007; Rust et al., 2013). An overlapping consideration is to remain within the boundaries of being a counselor educator or supervisor and not adopt a clinical perspective with students. As advised by Gilfoyle (2008) faculty should focus on behaviors displayed by students in an observational and factual way as a strategy to avoid diagnosing students. Other recommendations for using personal counseling as a remedial intervention included that faculty stipulate the necessary outcome of attending therapy for a student's remediation plan and how a therapy outcome will be communicated to the program (Elman & Forrest, 2004; Kaslow et al., 2007). Additional recommendations from the literature were to establish the proficiency of the treating counselor (Elman & Forrest, 2004) and to review ethical considerations with the treating counselor and student (Gilfoyle, 2008). While the study's results indicated that personal counseling as a remedial intervention is being used by counseling programs, how to frame the requirements of this intervention within the limits of student confidentiality enrolled in a counseling program is still needed.

While increased supervision did not appear as a distinct theme in the findings, the spirit of more frequent contact with the student by a supervisor was reflected. As mentioned in several

gatekeeping models, such as Frame and Stevens-Smith (1995) and in the present data, information on the student's level of competency is needed, which might be ascertained through increased supervision. The intervention of requiring regular meetings with a faculty member for remedial instruction can be interpreted as increased contact with the student, while also addressing observed competency problems in specific knowledge areas when faculty interact with the student. However, seeking additional information on student's competency was reflected twice in the present data: both in related to clinical courses and personal counseling. Interventions related to clinical courses that sought additional information on students' performance included requiring a positive site supervisor evaluation and, in another example, progress reports from the site supervisor on the student's performance were required every other week.

An overarching idea that emerged from the data was requiring documentation of completed remedial interventions, which also was evident in the plethora of documents we received for the study. The hands-on approach that was suggested by Elman and Forrest (2004) was evident of requiring counseling with documentation between the counseling program and the treating clinician. Documentation also appeared in the workshops subtheme, which required evidence of student attendance. The basic nature of requiring written assignments also fulfills the notion of producing objective evidence in documentation. The requirement of obtaining bi-weekly site supervisor evaluations on a provided form incorporates the idea of documentation. And, the document of a remediation plan itself provides a form of documentation.

Another overarching impression from the findings is the time consuming nature of implementing remediation with students, both for faculty and for students being remediated. Being aware of the time requirement and acknowledging the time commitment could be part of the dialogue among colleagues in programs. Whether providing increased supervision as discussed in

the conceptual literature (Henderson & Dufrene, 2011; Kress & Protivank, 2009; McAdams & Foster, 2007; Russell & Peterson, 2003; Rust et al., 2013), or whether participating in regular meetings with students to provide remedial instruction as identified in the results; both approaches require additional time devoted to remediation outside of the 'typical' structure of class time or advising. The theme of courses included several examples of interventions that would require more time from students, such as repeating coursework or postponing practicum. The time consuming aspect of remediation could be an element influencing faculty's choices to pursue remediation with students and any potential natural consequences students may encounter, such as delayed graduation.

While students' fear and resistance to remediation are typical, an aspect of remediation that might appeal to students is a focus on interventions that represent clear objectives and concrete tasks, which would contribute to transparency of remediation and the accompanying assessment process (Foster & McAdams, 2009; Foster et al., 2014). The present study's results included task-oriented interventions that can be measured and observed as being completed, such as attending workshops or completing readings. Students may like these interventions because they resemble assignments in courses and follow a concrete list similar to what might be found in a syllabus. Students may experience security in understanding what is expected of them during remediation in a concrete and measurable way that contributes to the objectivity of the process (Foster & McAdams, 2009; Foster et al., 2014).

Limitations

For the present study, we identified what interventions counselor education programs are using to remediate students; however, limitations exist. First, our sample of documents was obtained from a purposeful sampling approach from 12 CACREP-accredited counseling programs.

The number of programs represented in the present study was limited. However, the amount of 63 sample documents totaling 213 pages of textual data is typical for qualitative content analysis. Another limitation included the requirement for participating in this study that CACREP programs be actively engaging in remediation. A resulting assumption is that faculty in the programs might be more familiar with remediation, which could influence their choice of interventions used with students and how the interventions were implemented. Additionally, given that this study was a qualitative design, the findings may not be transferable. Another limitation was that all documents gathered from the counseling programs was self-report via email and electronic attachments to emails. Consequently, documentation could have been excluded by programs and not included in our data. Finally, though we engaged in strategies to limit our subjective influence, our biases and expectations while acting as the coding team may have influenced our data analysis. The team of researchers addressed this threat to validity by conducting several meetings to discuss the codings and theme analysis and we monitored our reflections via journaling to assist with bracketing.

Implications

The findings from this study provide an empirical resource for counselor educators and supervisors for consideration when remediating students. The results might be used to stimulate dialogue on various interventions that are aligned or not aligned with faculty perspectives on remediation. For instance, when we presented the findings at professional conferences, attendees voiced strong opinions of polarized views regarding the use of interventions which relied on outside clinician's reports (such as requiring a psychological evaluation) and the approach of valuing accountability to the program over the student's confidentiality in personal counseling. Also, chosen interventions could be reviewed with university legal counsel prior to implementation to assure support for specific interventions by the program and institution in case of potential

challenge from a legal perspective. Another implication could be to initiate dialogue with students about known remedial interventions to seek student feedback or suggestions for new or alternative interventions so that awareness of possible cultural issues are addressed. Finally, consultation and collaboration with all stakeholders such as deans, university attorneys, and all counseling faculty in the university setting, as well as in the clinical setting such as site supervisors, would allow for best practices when choosing specific remediation interventions that address students' interpersonal, intrapersonal, and professional behaviors that need remediation.

Conclusion

The results of this study offer faculty remedial interventions when working with students' problem behaviors that are impacting their progression in counseling programs. A readiness of faculty to provide remedial interventions that address student problem behaviors is an important part of the remediation process. Interventions should be crafted specifically for a student's demonstrated need and aligned with program policies and procedures. While students or even other professionals may fear remediation, having a list of resources and methods that can be used as remedial interventions can assist students when they are unable to comply with the requirements of counseling programs.

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