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Counselor Educators' Experiences of Gatekeeping in Online Counselor Education Programs

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Abstract

Counselor educators serve as gatekeepers by ensuring that only those students who meet standards of competence enter the counseling field. This qualitative study explored the gatekeeping experiences of seven counselor educators in online Master's-level counseling programs. The resulting themes offer implications for counselor education, administration, and research.

Keywords

gatekeeping, counseling competence, online counselor education

Author's Notes

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Counseling professionals have warned that some students are graduating from counselor education programs deficient in the core competencies needed to provide effective mental health counseling to the public (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002, 2006; Palmer, White, & Chung, 2008; Rosenberg, Getzelman, Arcinue, & Oren, 2005). Several studies investigating the prevalence of counseling students advancing through programs who do not meet professional standards of competence have yielded disturbing findings (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002, 2006; Palmer et al., 2008). Gaubatz and Vera (2002) reported faculty estimates of students who were “poorly or marginally suited for the counseling field” ranged from 10% to an alarming 75% of students currently enrolled (p. 298). Palmer et al. (2008) replicated this study and found 10.9% to 20% of currently enrolled students rated as poorly or marginally suited for counseling. Gaubatz and Vera (2006) extended their earlier (2002) work by surveying both faculty and Master’s-level counseling students from 30 different programs and found 8.9% to 21% of currently enrolled students to be deficient in core counseling competencies. In a study of 389 counselor education students, Brown-Rice and Furr (2013) found that 68% reported that they were impacted negatively by peers with problems of professional competency. These findings among both students and faculty suggest that concerns expressed by counseling professionals who fear that counselors-in-training may be graduating without the necessary competencies are merited.

Counselor educators shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that graduating students have the necessary skills, knowledge, and personal attributes to be successful and competent counselors (ACA, 2014; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015; Homrich, 2009; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Yet multiple researchers have found that some faculty are reluctant to perform gatekeeping for a variety of reasons, including the complexity of the gatekeeping process, uncertainty about

gatekeeping concepts, unclear criteria for evaluating students, the time and energy required to work with problematic students, the emotional stress of implementing gatekeeping interventions, the contradiction in roles between supervisor and evaluator, and a fear of litigation (Bemak, Epp, & Keys, 1999; Brown, 2013; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; DeDiego & Burgin, 2016; Forrest, Elman, Gizara, & Vacha-Haase, 1999; Foster & McAdams, 2009; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; Kerl & Eichler, 2005; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Sowbel, 2012; Vacha-Haase, Davenport, & Kerewsky, 2004; Wissel, 2011; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). If this vital gatekeeper role is not fulfilled, the public may be at risk of harm from counselors who are deficient in critical counseling competencies (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Homrich, 2009; Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013). In addition, the integrity of the counseling profession may be impacted if incompetent students are not prevented from entering the profession (Fouad et al., 2009; Homrich, 2009; Sowbel, 2012). Therefore, it is critical to understand counselor educators' experiences of gatekeeping to promote effective gatekeeping practices, protect clients, and guard the integrity of the profession.

The emergence of programs offering a distance learning format has added a new dimension to discussions regarding the preparedness of counselors-in-training for entering the counseling field (Burt, Gonzalez, Swank, Ascher, & Cunningham, 2011; Hall, Nielsen, Nelson, & Buchholz, 2010; Jones & Karper, 2000). Some are not convinced that online education is equivalent to traditional face-to-face instruction (Burt et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2010; Jones & Karper, 2000). Others have questioned the efficacy of teaching counseling skills from a distance (Burt et al., 2011; Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Jones & Karper, 2000; Wantz, Tromski, Mortsolf, Yoxtheimer, Brill, & Cuellar, 2004). Currently, there is a dearth of empirical research informing the training, evaluation, remediation, and supervision of counselors-in-training in distance environments (Burt

et al., 2011; Ekong, 2006; Flamez, 2010; Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Robey, 2009), and little is known about the challenges and complexities of gatekeeping in an online modality (Burt et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2010; Mandernach, Mason, Forrest, & Hackathorn, 2012; Robey, 2009; Wantz et al., 2004). The increase in online counselor education programs combined with the negative perceptions of counselor preparedness warrant scholarly inquiry to inform online gatekeeping. This study addressed this gap in the professional literature by exploring the lived experiences of counselor educators in online CACREP-accredited Master's-level counseling programs.

The research questions guiding this study were: (a) What are counselor educators' lived experiences of gatekeeping in online CACREP-accredited Master's-level counseling programs? (b) How are counselor educators prepared, if at all, for their roles as gatekeepers in online CACREP-accredited Master's-level programs? (c) How are counselor educators encouraged and discouraged in performing their gatekeeping responsibilities in online CACREP-accredited Master's-level programs? (d) How do counselor educators perceive and describe the differences between gatekeeping in online CACREP-accredited Master's-level programs and gatekeeping in face-to-face CACREP-accredited Master's-level counseling programs?

Method

Research Design

We chose a qualitative research design utilizing a phenomenological tradition to gain a holistic understanding of the essence of participants' experiences of gatekeeping (Creswell, 2012). In addressing researcher bias (Hays & Singh, 2012), we acknowledge that we have all taught in online CACREP-accredited Master's-level counseling programs and had gatekeeping experiences that influenced how we understood and made meaning of the data. We addressed this bias by discussing and setting aside our presuppositions and viewing the experiences of our participants

from a fresh and open perspective. We also utilized a research team and peer debriefer to hold us accountable to our methodology and encourage us to consider alternative interpretations of the data. Additional measures to support trustworthiness are described below.

Participants

Seven counselor educators, ranging in age from 31 to 48 years old, participated in this study. Four were females and three were males. Four participants were Caucasian, one was Caucasian/Hispanic, one was Hispanic, and one was African American. Participants held doctoral degrees in Counselor Education from CACREP-accredited programs and were teaching in online CACREP-accredited Master's-level counseling programs at the time of this study. Participants' teaching experiences ranged from three to nine years in online Master's-level CACREP-accredited programs and three to 12 years teaching full time in Master's-level CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Every participant had at least two years' experience teaching in a traditional face-to-face Master's-level CACREP-accredited program. All participants had experienced the phenomenon of gatekeeping in online and face-to-face learning environments. Five participants agreed to a 60-minute audio-taped interview and two participants completed an online survey posing the same questions as the interviews. Two participants were from one university, and there was one participant from each of three other universities. The online participants were not asked to identify their universities.

A risk for participants who took part in this study was the potential that they could be identified, given that there were only 6 online programs that were CACREP-accredited at the time of the study. Therefore, we chose to protect the confidentiality of the participants by refraining from further details that might reveal their identities.

Procedures

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval for the study, we utilized purposive sampling procedures and a screening instrument to select participants for this study. We identified potential participants by accessing the list of institutions with fully online accredited Master's-level programs from the CACREP directory (CACREP, 2013) and obtained faculty e-mail addresses from institutional websites. We initially refrained from asking personal colleagues to avoid skewing our results. We e-mailed each counselor educator a personal invitation to participate in the study. Due to the poor response rate, we posted two invitations on the CESNET listserv and approached our professional contacts for assistance in identifying participants. We received feedback that qualified counselor educators were fearful of being identified, and that led to the low response rate. We recruited five participants for interviews. Due to this low number, and as a measure of triangulating our data sources, we decided to offer an online/anonymous way for participants to share gatekeeping experiences. We posted a SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey, 2009) questionnaire to the CESNET listserv with the same questions as the interview protocol. Twelve people responded to the online survey, but only two met our criteria and completed the surveys. This brought our total number of participants to seven.

Thus, we collected data via 60-minute semi-structured interviews and written online surveys. Five participants were interviewed online via Skype and four of these agreed to a follow-up interview. Two participants completed anonymous online qualitative surveys. The interview questions consisted of six open-ended questions and additional probe questions designed to elicit rich, thick descriptions. The online survey included all six open-ended interview questions plus one additional question that assessed willingness to share gatekeeping experiences. Interview protocol and survey forms are provided in the Appendix.

Our research team consisted of five doctoral students, a peer debriefer, and an auditor. All research team members were either enrolled in a counseling doctoral program or held doctoral degrees in Counselor Education and Supervision. A professional transcriptionist and research team members transcribed the interviews and surveys.

Data Analysis

We conducted data analysis according to Moustakas' (1994) modification of the van Kaam (1959) method of analysis for phenomenological data. We began by listening to recordings and reviewing surveys to gain a holistic sense of the data. We then read transcripts and identified non-overlapping meaning units. We assigned codes to these meaning units and then met to discuss and reach consensus on the codes and their definitions. We created a codebook that we used to code the transcripts a second time. We identified seven primary themes which we then reduced to individual essences for each participant. Finally, we combined these into a composite essence of the phenomenon of gatekeeping for counselor educators in online CACREP-accredited Master's-level counselor education programs.

We addressed trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012) via reflexive journaling and memoing, logging an audit trail, recording field notes, member checking, triangulation of research team members, triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, thick descriptions, referential adequacy, negative case analysis, collaborating with the participant to accurately portray voice, and achieving sampling adequacy. Additionally, we adhered to the American Counseling Association's (2014) ethical guidelines for research.

Results

We identified seven major themes among the interview transcriptions and surveys we collected. We member-checked these with the five participants who were interviewed to ensure

that their voices were accurately portrayed. In order to differentiate anonymous online survey participants from interviewees, we added the prefix *Cyber* to their pseudonyms (e.g., CyberJack or CyberSofia).

Theme 1: Online Gatekeeping is an Urgent Professional Responsibility

Participants held a strong conviction that online gatekeeping is a vital and imperative professional obligation that serves to uphold the integrity of the profession and protect the public from harm. A salient aspect of this theme is the belief expressed by participants that gatekeeping is particularly essential in online counseling programs. Betsy contributed to this theme by speaking about her conviction that her role as gatekeeper is urgent and important:

I think a couple things that stand out for me is that in an online program it feels even more important. It feels even more urgent that my role as a gatekeeper is one that I am firmly rooted in and taking very seriously and paying attention to-at all aspects of the program.

Cadance echoed Betsy's conviction that counselor educators need to be especially attentive to their gatekeeping responsibilities in an online learning environment:

When I think of gatekeeping in an online program what stands out the most is that we have to be incredibly mindful because they are in an online program. That there's a lot of skeptics out there who...how do you teach counseling online and in turn how do you evaluate their fit to the profession?

Noel echoed this sentiment saying, "I feel a responsibility...a high responsibility...for this [gatekeeping]." He went on to talk about his belief that the image and survival of his profession is contingent upon effective gatekeeping:

And then the bigger issue of, you know, it's imperative for our profession to survive and get – and get the respect that it deserves. So that motivates me a lot in that I don't want to

be cranking-out students just to crank-out students and water down our services nor give us a bad name.

One element that was strongly supported by participants and summed up by Cybersofia was that performing their gatekeeping responsibilities “protects future clients from harm.” Betsy shared her motivation to gatekeep by her concern for the welfare of clients who may be served by the students she trains:

I think one thing, in particular, is I’m always thinking about, at any stage of counselor training, whether they’re a new student in the program or starting to move into their field work, would I be comfortable with this person counseling my son?...People are taking a big risk when they come to see a professional counselor to talk about something difficult...So I think that that person, or those people - those potential clients at the end of the line - are always a really big motivator for me.

Theme 2: Distinctive Nature of Gatekeeping in an Online Modality

This theme represents the unique aspects of gatekeeping in a distance learning environment that differ from gatekeeping in a traditional learning environment. Brian described his view that traditional gatekeeping methods do not transfer smoothly to an online classroom:

I assumed that I could apply the gatekeeping procedure and process online the same way that I would in a face-to-face classroom or a face-to-face setting. You know, which isn’t uncommon, you know a lot of people who teach online assume that they can just take a face-to-face class and put it online. And-and that’s not the case.

Betsy talked about her view that the transition from a traditional classroom to an online modality required some adaptation to the new learning environment:

I don't think that's an easy thing for people to do and I don't think it's always an easy transition for people to make who've taught in traditional environments, you know, that it takes a little while to learn the nuances of teaching online and how to really engage and how to really build relationships.

She described her approach to gatekeeping online as being more attentive and purposeful:

And in an online program, you have to be so intentional about looking for opportunities to be a gatekeeper, looking for – even in your regular didactic classes online, you know, - looking for just those squirrely posts or discussion responses or themes that are problematic or troubling, you know, that those are things I wanna pay extra close attention to in an online program.

Cadance agreed that intentionality was a key element in identifying problematic students who might otherwise go unnoticed, “In an online program I think you have to be really careful to not, to not let students slip through the cracks because you're not seeing them, you're not being exposed to them on a regular basis per se.”

Other participants highlighted the unique aspects of the online learning environment including (a) the presence or absence of physical presence; (b) the influence of technology; (c) faculty and student relational interactions at a distance; (d) bridging that distance; and (e) the importance of residency. Noel highlighted how viewing student tapes online makes gatekeeping more difficult:

It's harder-it's just harder to catch stuff because you're getting' one dimensional stuff...we're basically listening and looking at them, but we can't see what they're-they could be possibly missing with their client. So it's a little bit harder to do.

Rachel talked about interactions between faculty and students and how they differ online:

There's maybe a different kind of filter. You know, people may be more open and expressive online, but you-they also get a chance to edit their thoughts, you know, present themselves in a way that they want to present themselves...

She went on to say that residency is important for identifying interpersonal issues that may not be as apparent in a virtual classroom, "Our students have to come to campus twice for, intensive classes...And I would say that a lot of times interpersonal type issues pop-up in the intensives that haven't been caught in the online courses."

Cadance felt it was important to be intentional about finding opportunities to connect with online students to bridge the distance:

I think I probably go above and beyond. . . I meet with them at conferences, when they live in that area. I speak with them on the phone, when they need help. So I really really seek out that-that connection with the ones that want it.

Theme 3: Challenges of Online Gatekeeping

This theme includes those elements of gatekeeping that are complex or difficult and that may discourage or deter counselor educators from performing gatekeeping duties. All participants experienced gatekeeping challenges and struggled to overcome them. Cadance talked about the fear and struggle associated with making gatekeeping decisions:

I think that's where the fear comes from and that's where, you know, I-I run to a colleague. And then when I do make a decision, like, oh, I feel pretty secure. I feel pretty secure that this is the right decision, this is the right choice. Then I doubt that. I mean it's-it's a constant struggle – an internal struggle of did I do the right thing.

Betsy expressed her concerns that gatekeeping challenges could impede her ability to identify competency issues and respond appropriately:

I think some of the things that are discouraging are that we eh-that many of these programs are very large. And we only have so many faculty and sometimes it's just a scalability issue. You know, are we really in a position to catch everything that we need to catch and act appropriately?

Brian reported that one of his challenges was feeling unprepared to gatekeep, "I wasn't prepared for gatekeeping in my doctoral studies in any way, shape or form." Noel was candid about his insufficient training for gatekeeping in an online program:

When I hear you talk about this the first knee-jerk reaction is we don't get any training on this gatekeeping thing. We do things-we take the classes but no one ever trains us how to do it. I mean, we take a counselor educator's class, but we don't talk about gatekeepin' other than it's important.

When asked if his employing institution formally prepared him to gatekeep, Noel replied, "Oh, absolutely not. No...I can say that very easily, no.

Cadance provided an example of participants' view that gatekeeping concepts are not well-defined and unclear:

...it seems like a very abstract-when I think of gatekeeping, I think of in a very abstract concept. You know, I think that I know gatekeeping means that it's-it's my role and responsibility to ensure that we're producing, or-or letting into the field counselors that are competent and have the skills to practice competently. But in terms of, it just seems like a very abstract concept.

Brian provided an illustration of the fear of consequences that was common for many of the participants:

I think that fear piece, lack of support wondering, you know, what are the-what are the potential consequences of this? How's this going to negatively affect me? Am I going to lose my job? Am I going to get sued? Is this going to tarnish my reputation? You know, are people going to talk about me?...In this, you know like, this day and age of-of social media and networking and you know like ratemyprofessor.com and all these sorts of things, I think that there's a very real chance of getting, kind of, getting your name dragged through the mud.

Theme 4: Implementation of Gatekeeping Procedures

This theme points to the challenges and uncertainty that counselor educators experience in the execution of gatekeeping responsibilities and the ways in which they respond to them. This theme includes (a) ensuring due process; (b) collaboration among faculty; (c) ways in which faculty respond to student deficiencies; (d) gatekeeping inconsistency among faculty; (e) student reaction to interventions; and (f) concerns about failed gatekeeping attempts. Participants talked about various ways in which they implemented gatekeeping procedures. Rachel described how screening procedures during the admissions process are crucial to identifying students who are suited for the counseling field:

I'm involved in admissions. So, definitely admissions stands out to me, in terms of, you know, making sure we're accepting people in who can be successful in the program and be good counselors. So, so yeah, the admissions side is definitely an important part of gatekeeping to me.

Cadance elaborated on the gatekeeping procedures utilized in the evaluation of students:

So we have rubrics. We have benchmarks. We have, you know, we're assessing and evaluating students, you know, when you're looking at a student and you're saying, "Can

this student connect? Do they show the foundational skills of counseling?" I can't go off of my hunch on that. You know, I can get a sense of it. But then I have to formally evaluate that based off the rubrics and the checkpoints that are put in place, within our department.

Participants held a strong conviction that collaborating with faculty was a key component for effective gatekeeping in online programs. Betsy shared how she views faculty collaboration:

...it becomes a learning opportunity, I think, for the rest of the faculty, you know, for us to really talk through and then also to say, "Well, how might we handle that differently in the future?" Or, you know, "What did we learn from that? What's our take-aways?" So, our faculty tends to be really supportive and collaborative when one of us faces a challenge.

Cadance described how faculty collaboration was an intentional process that helped identify students who otherwise might not be appropriately gatekept:

I think in an online program, especially with our online program, we've created a very collaborative relationship as faculty. And so we carve out the time to collaborate with one another regarding student issues. That way, online students, you know, if they're struggling in my class, they may be doing fine in another person's class or we might be seeing the same things...And I think that that's a huge component in the online (unintelligible). We just all have to be able to be on the same page, and that way these students aren't falling through the cracks.

Participants talked about the various ways they addressed student competency issues. Brian gave an example of his response to student competence issues, "I try to work with a student to help them identify ways in which they need to remediate. And if that's not something that they're willing to do, that's when I have to take it to the next level." Rachel talked about approaching remedial intervention in a positive way:

Remediation obviously does become a part of that sometimes that, you know, if a student is having-had multiple problems in multiple classes or has a constant pattern, you know that we need to intervene. And-and I think we do try and frame that, again, as, you know, we want you to be successful. We want you to feel prepared when we send you out to internship. So what do we need to do to get there?

Noel gave an example of a student's negative reaction to his gatekeeping interventions, "What was her response? ...she was defensive – is the word. Now she would not say she was defensive, but she sounded defensive to me, you know."

Some participants reported incidences in which they failed to gatekeep. Rachel talked about the temptation to allow problematic students who are advanced to complete the program, "It's definitely hard when -- especially when they're so close to finishing. Like it-it feels tempting just to kind of push them through and just come what may, like, kind of see what happens." She went on to explain, "You know they've done-they have done a lot of hard work and if things fall apart at the end it-it is really hard to kind of, you know, to not look the other way." CyberSophia shared her opinion about the reason some faculty fail to gatekeep:

Faculty are treated like employees in a corporate world and are hired or fired based on student evaluations in some cases. This creates a dilemma - keep your job by bending over backwards at times and turning a blind eye to most issues or gatekeeping.

Theme 5: Emotional Response to Online Gatekeeping

This theme illuminates the visceral reactions of faculty and students to circumstances related to gatekeeping. Betsy described the stress she felt when working with a student who exhibited mental health concerns:

I think with this young woman, once it was aware that there was something much more to the story, it's sort of a mix of some anxiety and stress because I'm feeling a lot of responsibility both for her well-being but then...that this woman is not in front of potential clients...So, certainly, I think there was some anxiety around that and wanting to be sure we moved appropriately. And, you know, in an online environment, for me, there's always a little bit of stress because I'm also really aware that if we think a Gatekeeping situation is gonna turn into this person potentially needs to not be in the program, I know in our environment I've got to start documenting like crazy.

Cadance shared:

I was scared. Honestly. It was a scary time. And it was scary just thinking, "Did I do the right thing?" I mean, at one point, he had a lawyer sending me information. So, you know there's this-these moments of fear, you know, am I doing the right thing?

Brian talked about his emotional encounter with a student who challenged her failing grade on a plagiarized paper:

I remember being really concerned for this student, and even more so, I guess... it was being scared about the clients that this student would work with, you know like, this is something unrelated to clinical work and if a student can be that aggressive and angry, I guess in a way, I maybe started to feel a little bit of anger...

Cadance shared her experience with the emotional reaction of a student who was resisting gatekeeping interventions:

I had been emailing everything that we had spoke on the phone about to have that, you know, as documentation. And he was just really upset that-he felt like he should be able to keep going and the circumstances were all beyond his control. At one point, when we were

on the phone, he was cursing at me and I had to hang-up on him, and let him know that we wouldn't communicate via phone anymore due to his unprofessional nature.

Theme 6: Systemic Influences

Each separate institution and department have a unique influence on the ways in which counselor educators approach gatekeeping. Betsy provided an example of this theme, "But I do think that sometimes the system in which I work can create challenges to feel like we're doing that [gatekeeping] effectively and with everybody that we need to do it with." Noel reported the pressure he felt from his institution to retain students:

But then we need-we need the bodies. So, we need to do whatever it takes to pass 'em. That doesn't mean they want you to just pass them, but that might mean that you need to spend an exorbitant amount of time trying to pass them.

Cadance provided an example of her department's positive influence on gatekeeping:

I think what else motivates and encourages me as a gatekeeper is just to be the-the standard that's set within our department. You know, I think that we've done a great job of outlining what needs to be done at which point and there's been a standard set, in terms of rigor.

CyberSofia suggested that universities differed in their support based on the learning environment, "Face to face universities have typically been very supportive of the [gatekeeping] process...Online universities-gatekeeping tends to be discouraged."

Theme 7: Gatekeeping is a Taboo Topic

This refers to counselor educators' perceptions that in some circumstances discussions about gatekeeping are discouraged or unwelcome. Brian expressed:

I don't even think I talked about it [gatekeeping] with other faculty members because it seemed like it was this taboo, quiet, you know, you didn't talk about type thing...I think

that because of that, you know, because it's been somewhat taboo, that obviously counselor educators, within the past ten years or so, you know, haven't really discussed gatekeeping.

Cadance talked about a similar experience:

I feel like it's one of those taboo things in higher ed that we don't want to talk about. And we don't wanna, you know, we don't wanna let other people know what we do 'cause what if that's wrong? And so it-it-it almost mirrors,,the sense of fear that I-I remember having from my gatekeeping experience.

Discussion

For more than a decade, professionals in the counseling field have reported concerns that some students may be graduating from counseling programs without achieving the level of competence needed to provide effective mental health services (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002, 2006; Palmer, White, & Chung, 2008; Rosenberg, Getzelman, Arcinue, & Oren, 2005). We sought to address those concerns by exploring the online gatekeeping experiences of counselor educators to (a) discover the ways in which counselor educators are currently performing their gatekeeper role; (b) elicit counselor educators' views on how they were prepared or not prepared to gatekeep; (c) learn what encourages and discourages a counselor educator to practice effective gatekeeping; (d) and determine what, if any, differences exist between gatekeeping in an online versus a face-to-face learning environment. Our findings align with current literature that examines the gatekeeping process. We also found novel concepts which inform the gatekeeper role that were not evident in current literature. Additionally, we identified focus areas for training, practice, and research necessary for moving forward. Specifically, three of our themes, endorsed by all seven participants, are well supported in the literature: *Gatekeeping is an Urgent Professional Responsibility* (ACA, 2014; Brear & Dorrian,

2010; Brown, 2013; CACREP, 2016; Kerl & Eichler, 2005; McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007; Sowbel, 2012; Vacha-Haase et al., 2004; Wissel, 2011); *Implementation of Gatekeeping Procedures* (Baldo & Softas-Nall, 1997; Bemak et al., 1999; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Kerl, Garcia, & McCullough, 2002; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; McAdams & Foster, 2007); and *Systemic Influences* (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; Hensley, Smith, & Thompson, 2003; Mandernach et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2008; Sowbel, 2012). These suggest that counselor educators, and the organizations in which they serve, view implementation of gatekeeping procedures to be essential for safeguarding the public and protecting the integrity of the counseling profession. It would seem reasonable, then, that counseling professionals and educators would be committed to engaging in activities and supporting programs that foster effective gatekeeping measures. Additionally, such agreement with the importance of gatekeeping would suggest that it be an integral part of doctoral-level training. However, Rapp, Moody and Stewart (2018) affirmed there was little understanding regarding the training of doctoral students in their role as gatekeepers and called for specific training in this area. Indeed, our participant counselor educators were not specifically trained in gatekeeping in their doctoral programs, and reported that they may in fact be reluctant to engage in some gatekeeping responsibilities because they lack knowledge, and support from their institutions, professional organizations, and the counseling profession as a whole. In fact one participant reported that her reluctance to gatekeep may have resulted in *gate slippage*, an event that occurs when a student identified with counseling deficiencies is allowed to advance without remediation (DeDiego & Burgin, 2016). DeDiego and Burgin (2016) propose that proper training and preparation of doctoral students in effective gatekeeping practices could prevent gate slippage of students who do not meet competency standards.

We found limited professional literature addressing the theme of the *Distinctive Nature of Gatekeeping in an Online Modality*. Though all seven of our participants, multiple researchers, and respected counseling professionals suggest that counselor education in a distance learning environment differs from counselor education in a face-to-face setting (ACES Technology Interest Network, 2017; Flamez, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Mandernach et al., 2012; Robey, 2009; Wantz et al., 2004), we found no research that explored gatekeeping in an online modality. As a result, counselor educators have no recommendations or guidelines for implementing gatekeeping in an online learning environment and must rely on trial-and-error methods to identify measures that are successful. Further, such trial and error processes are conducted in the face of significant challenges.

We found professional literature supporting the theme *Challenges of Online Gatekeeping* (endorsed by all seven of our participants) by suggesting that gatekeepers often face difficulties when performing their gatekeeping responsibilities (Bemak et al., 1999; Bhat, 2005; Wissel, 2011). However, we found no research that explored the specific challenges encountered by counselor educators in an online modality or how these challenges might impact performance of online gatekeeping duties (Wissel, 2011). Additionally, we found no research addressing ways in which Counselor Education doctoral programs prepare their students for their gatekeeper roles or the negative consequences that can result when enacting their gatekeeping duties. This dearth of research and the lack of preparation by doctoral programs leaves counselor educators in both online and face-to-face settings ill-prepared to manage the challenges of their gatekeeper roles.

We found minimal extant literature supporting the theme of *Emotional Response to Online Gatekeeping*, even though our participants clearly identified various fears about the process. We found some research that supported the stress and anxiety that counselor educators experience

when gatekeeping in traditional settings (Foster & McAdams, 2009; Kerl & Eichler, 2005) as well as studies that discussed counselor educators' experiences of frustration (Homrich, 2009; Rosenberg et al., 2005) when gatekeeping in a face-to-face learning environment. We did not find studies that discussed positive feelings of counselor educators towards their online gatekeeping responsibilities. In addition, we found no literature that explored student emotions that were associated with online gatekeeping interventions. Given that six of our participants discussed emotional responses of faculty and students to the gatekeeping process, we encourage additional empirical inquiry in order to understand counselor educators' willingness to perform gatekeeping responsibilities and to develop strategies that can be effective in remediating student deficiencies.

Our participants voiced a significant novel finding: *Gatekeeping is a Taboo Topic*. We found no professional literature that addressed this theme. Consequently, the absence of research addressing this topic appeared to lend some credence to participants' views that the topic of gatekeeping may be sidestepped by counseling professionals and leaders. This finding was particularly important because it helped explain some of the difficulty we had in finding participants who were willing to discuss their online gatekeeping experiences. It seems counterintuitive for counseling professionals to avoid discussing gatekeeping when they have endorsed the vital nature of the gatekeeper role. Yet when we considered the lack of training in gatekeeping competencies and the uncertainty that participants experienced when executing gatekeeping interventions, we wondered if counselor educators might be reluctant to discuss gatekeeping experiences due to the possibility of exposing deficiencies in performing their gatekeeping responsibilities.

Limitations

As instructors in counselor education programs, we brought our own biases and assumptions to the study, which might have influenced data analysis and interpretation. The low

number of participants limits the generalizability of our data. Utilizing online surveys did serve to triangulate the interview data, but we were not able to verify participant answers independently. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews allowed us to probe for more detail as we interviewed the first five participants, and the surveys did not. The lack of physical proximity to our participants and the absence of physical cues could have influenced our interpretation of the data collected. Finally, there was a selection bias in that all of our participants were graduates of CACREP-accredited institutions and taught in CACREP-accredited counseling programs, so their experiences may not be reflective of the experiences of counselor educators who did not graduate from CACREP-accredited institutions and who teach in non-CACREP-accredited programs. An additional selection bias is present in that the faculty who chose to participate could have had a variety of reasons for doing so, which could have impacted their responses.

Implications

Participants in this study considered their responsibility as gatekeepers for the counseling profession to be vital; however, our findings suggest multiple challenges that counselor educators must overcome in order to perform gatekeeping effectively including: (a) minimal training by doctoral programs and employing institutions in theory, methodology, and procedures for gatekeeping; (b) lack of clarity regarding standards and best practices for gatekeeping; (c) few valid measures for accurately evaluating students' counseling competence; (d) fear of repercussions when implementing gatekeeping; (e) paucity of research to inform the online gatekeeping process; (f) institutional pressure to retain students in programs; and (g) reticence to discuss certain aspects of gatekeeping by some in the counseling profession. Counselor educators should develop strategies to address gatekeeping challenges and support gatekeeping efforts to ensure that students deficient in core competencies are prevented from entering the counseling

field (Rapp et al, 2018). These strategies could include establishing empirically-based best practices for gatekeeping in traditional and distance learning environments, adopting an evidence-based gatekeeping model, establishing an agreed-upon definition for professional counseling competence, creating and validating assessments for student competence, developing theories for gatekeeping, and supporting research exploring gatekeeping issues and procedures. Those who teach online should consider identifying strategies specific to the online learning environment. These strategies could include creating a teaching philosophy and pedagogy uniquely suited for online instruction that utilizes technology and compensates for the lack of physicality.

A major finding of this study was participants' lack of training in gatekeeping knowledge and skills by their doctoral programs. This finding was affirmed by DeDiego and Burgin (2016) and Rapp et al. (2018). Therefore, doctoral programs should develop curriculum for gatekeeping theory and models, procedures for implementing gatekeeping in face-to-face and online modalities, assessment measures to evaluate student competency, supervision strategies for problematic students, strategies for ensuring due process, effective remediation procedures, ethical and multicultural considerations of gatekeeping, and dismissal from a legal perspective. In addition, doctoral programs should require mastery of gatekeeping competencies as a prerequisite for graduation. Accrediting bodies could include recommendations for training and evaluating doctoral students in gatekeeping constructs and expand current standards that address gatekeeping policies and procedures within institutions.

Some participants in this study did not feel supported or encouraged to gatekeep by their employing institutions. Universities should develop institutional gatekeeping policies and ensure that standards and policies are clearly defined and disseminated in catalogues, handbooks, and marketing tools. Our findings suggest that when counselor educators are supported in their

gatekeeper roles by administration, they are more motivated to implement effective gatekeeping practices. Therefore, program directors and department chairs should be intentional about creating a culture that encourages faculty to gatekeep. This support might include regular trainings on gatekeeping issues, partnering newly hired counselor educators with senior faculty for mentoring in gatekeeping, establishing committees to review student remediation and dismissals, and requiring residencies for students in distance learning formats.

A novel finding of this study described by four of our participants included experiences where they felt discouraged to discuss gatekeeping with other counselor educators. For this reason, all counseling organizations should make a commitment to model and encourage open dialogue regarding gatekeeping issues. Program directors and department chairs could promote collaboration of faculty with students who struggle with counseling deficiencies.

Our results highlighted that few researchers have explored best practices for gatekeeping, particularly in the online environment. Qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to expand the body of knowledge about the process and procedures of gatekeeping in online and face-to-face Master's-level counseling programs. These studies could investigate the influence of technology in counselor education, how collaboration among faculty informs gatekeeping, the effectiveness of teaching and supervising counseling skills online, the dynamics of faculty-to-student interactions during gatekeeping, the effects of physicality and absence of physicality in online gatekeeping, how residency facilitates online gatekeeping, the influence of CACREP-accreditation on gatekeeping, and incidences of failed gatekeeping. In addition, more research is needed that focuses on student reactions to gatekeeping interventions, counselor educators' fears of repercussions when implementing gatekeeping procedures, and the reticence of the counseling

profession to discuss openly the topic of gatekeeping in counselor education programs. Professional organizations could offer grants for new research on gatekeeping-related topics.

Conclusion

Prior to this study, no researchers had explored the ways in which counselor educators performed their gatekeeping responsibilities in distance learning environments. We identified seven themes that contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of gatekeeping in an online instruction modality. It is apparent from the findings of this study that counselor educators could benefit from more support in their gatekeeping efforts by researchers, institutions, professional organizations, and the counseling profession as a whole. As a result of the findings of this study, we recommend that all counselor educators advocate for (a) open communication regarding gatekeeping issues and practices within counseling programs and the counseling profession; (b) training in gatekeeping measures and best practices; and (c) research that addresses and advances knowledge in gatekeeping topics.

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Appendix A

Counselor Educators' Lived Experiences of Gatekeeping in Online Master's-level Counseling Programs Interview Instrument

Opening Remarks: Thank you for being willing to participate in this study. As a reminder, this study is exploring counselor educator gatekeeping experiences in online Master's-level CACREP-accredited counseling programs. I will be asking you to share your gatekeeping experiences and describe your thoughts, feelings, actions, and perceptions related to these experiences. I will also be asking you to compare your gatekeeping experiences in an online learning environment with your experiences of gatekeeping in a traditional classroom setting. Before we get started, I would like to provide you with two working definitions so that we have a common frame of reference. *(Provide definitions in written format as well.)*

Definition of Gatekeeping: Gatekeeping in counselor education programs is the process whereby faculty and supervisors educate, train, evaluate, supervise, and intervene to ensure that graduates of counseling programs meet standards of professional competence. Effective gatekeeping results in retention of those students who demonstrate professional counseling competencies, and remediation or dismissal of those students who do not meet the standards of professional competence critical to successful job performance as a mental health professional.

Definition of Professional Competence: Professional competence as it pertains to counselors is the knowledge, skills, abilities and personal attributes needed to successfully and effectively perform the role of counselor. This includes consistent and thoughtful use of communication, interpersonal skills, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served.

Observable and measurable behaviors demonstrate an overall commitment to the ideals, standards, ethics, and identity of the counseling profession.

Would you like further clarification about these definitions?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Beginning the Interview: I'd like you to take a moment to just sit back and relax. Try to clear your mind of distracting thoughts and focus on your experiences of gatekeeping. (Pause.) If you are ready, I would like to turn on the recorder. Do I have your permission to begin recording?

Interview Questions:

1. When thinking about your gatekeeping experiences in an online graduate counseling program, what aspects stand out for you?
2. Tell me about a gatekeeping experience that you had in an online graduate counseling program and try to remember everything you can about the situation, what you thought, felt, did, and said.
3. What encouraged you in performing your online gatekeeping responsibilities? What discouraged you in performing your online gatekeeping responsibilities?
4. Tell me about the differences between your experiences of gatekeeping in an online learning environment with your experiences of gatekeeping in a traditional classroom setting?
5. How were you prepared, if at all, for your role as gatekeeper in an online graduate counseling program?

6. When you think about gatekeeping in online counselor education programs, have you shared all that is significant for you about your experiences?

Optional Probe Questions

- What feelings did you experience when gatekeeping?
- What thoughts stand out for you?
- What physical sensations did you experience?
- Can you describe how others (student, administration, other faculty members) responded or reacted?
- How have you been affected by your gatekeeping experiences?
- What changes do you associate with your gatekeeping experiences?
- How do you experience your institution's support of the gatekeeping process?

Ending: After the transcript is completed, I would like to be able to have you check it for accuracy – would that be OK with you? Thank you very much for participating in this research study.

Appendix B

Online Qualitative Survey

Introduction to the Study

Your participation in this study is completely anonymous and your IP address will not be recorded. You will not be asked to provide information that will identify you or your institution. For privacy purposes, it is recommended that you consider completing this survey from a computer not located in your place of employment. The goal of the study is to determine how counselor educators experience the phenomenon of gatekeeping in online CACREP-accredited Master's level counseling programs, and how gatekeeping in a distance learning environment differs, if at all, from a traditional face-to-face learning environment. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to respond to several open-ended questions about your gatekeeping experiences as a counselor educator in an online counselor education program. There are no anticipated risks associated with completing this survey due to the strict confidentiality measures employed. There is no reward for participating in this study other than the satisfaction of knowing that you have contributed to the professional counseling literature by fostering a better understanding of gatekeeping in online counselor education programs. Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw, any information that has been collected about you will be destroyed. The results of this study, including direct quotations from participants, may be used in presentations and publications. We anticipate that the survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Eligibility Criteria:

Participants for this study must hold an earned doctoral degree in Counselor Education from a CACREP-accredited institution. Participants must have taught full time in a Master's level

CACREP-accredited counselor education program, with at least two years' experience teaching online and two years' experience teaching face-to-face. These experiences may be concurrent.

Thank you for your willingness to share your gatekeeping experiences. Clicking on the "Next" button below indicates your voluntary consent to participate in this study.

Screening Questions

- I hold a doctoral degree in Counselor Education Yes No
- My doctoral degree is from a CACREP-accredited institution Yes No
- I have taught full time in a Master's level CACREP-accredited counselor education program Yes No
- I have two years' experience teaching in an online Master's level CACREP-accredited counselor education program (may be concurrent with teaching face-to-face) Yes No
- I have two years' experience teaching in a face-to-face Master's level CACREP-accredited counselor education program (may be concurrent with teaching online) Yes No

Definition of Terms

Please review the following definitions utilized by this study before beginning the survey.

Definition of Gatekeeping:

Gatekeeping in counselor education programs is the process whereby faculty and supervisors educate, train, evaluate, supervise, and intervene to ensure that graduates of counseling programs

meet standards of professional competence. Effective gatekeeping results in retention of those students who demonstrate professional counseling competencies, and remediation or dismissal of those students who do not meet the standards of professional competence critical to successful job performance as a mental health professional.

Definition of Professional Competence:

Professional competence as it pertains to counselors is the knowledge, skills, abilities and personal attributes needed to successfully and effectively perform the role of counselor. This includes consistent and thoughtful use of communication, interpersonal skills, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served. Observable and measurable behaviors demonstrate an overall commitment to the ideals, standards, ethics, and identity of the counseling profession.

Gatekeeping in Online Counseling Programs

Please answer the following questions providing as much detail as your time allows.

- When thinking about your gatekeeping experiences in an online Master's level counseling program, what aspects stand out for you?
- Describe a gatekeeping experience that you had with a student in an online Master's level counseling program and try to recount everything you can remember about the situation: what you thought, felt, did, and said.
- What types of things encourage or motivate you to perform online gatekeeping responsibilities?
- What types of things discourage or deter you from performing online gatekeeping responsibilities?

- Describe the differences between your experiences of gatekeeping in an online learning environment with your experiences of gatekeeping in a traditional classroom setting.
- How were you prepared, if at all, by your doctoral program for your role as gatekeeper in an online Master's level counseling program?
- How were you prepared, if at all, by your institution for your role as gatekeeper in an online Master's level counseling program?
- How do you experience your institution's support of the gatekeeping process?
- What concerns, if any, do you have about sharing your gatekeeping experiences?
- What else would you be willing to share about your perspectives on gatekeeping in online environments?

Optional Demographic Questions

- Age Gender Ethnicity
- Number of years teaching full time in a Master's level counseling program?
- Number of years teaching Master's level counseling students online?

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Thank You Page

Thank you again for your participation in this research. If you would like to be informed of the outcome of this study, please e-mail Amy Gilbert at amygilb@regent.edu.

If you contact me, I will not know which participant you are in my study, so I will not be able to link your identity with any particular responses. I will take every precaution to keep any identifying information in your e-mail confidential. For further protection of yourself when contacting me with an inquiry related to this study, please use your personal e-mail address.

Disqualification Page

I truly appreciate your willingness to share your gatekeeping experiences; however, your responses indicate that you do not meet the eligibility criteria for this study. Thank you for your time and thank you for your service to our profession.

<i>The challenges and uncertainty that counselor educators experience in the execution of gatekeeping responsibilities.</i>								
Theme Five: Emotional Response to Online Gatekeeping <i>The visceral reactions of faculty and students to circumstances related to gatekeeping.</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X		6
Theme Six: Systemic Influences <i>The influence of an organization or organized group of people on the ways in which counselor educators implement or approach gatekeeping.</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Theme Seven: Gatekeeping is a Taboo Topic		X	X		X	X		4

<i>A counselor educator's perception that in some circumstances discussions about gatekeeping are discouraged or unwelcome.</i>								
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