An Emergent Theory of Gatekeeping Practices in Counselor Education

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This article summarizes findings from a qualitative study involving 8 counselor educators who taught in master's programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Data analysis revealed an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices that includes 4 phases: preadmission, postadmission, remediation, and remediation outcome. The authors detail each phase and relate this process to counselor education. They outline implications of the findings for standards proposed by CACREP (2009) and American Counseling Association (2005) guidelines and offer suggestions for future research.

Professional standards and codes of ethics require counselor educators to adhere to gatekeeping policies (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009). Gatekeeping has been described as the process of monitoring and evaluating a counselor trainee's competence to enter the counseling profession (Corey, Haynes, & Moulton, 2003). Lumadue and Duffey (1999) noted that graduate programs play a vital role in gatekeeping. Gatekeeping has been defined as the process whereby counselor educators intervene when students are not prepared with knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the practice of counseling (Ziomek-Daigle & Bailey, 2010).

Both CACREP and ACA require counselor educators to serve as gatekeepers for the counseling profession and to provide remedial assistance to students, which may include guidance in choosing another area of study (ACA, 2005; CACREP, 2009). Moore and Urwin (1991) and Bernard and Goodyear (2004) commented that counselor educators are gatekeepers; thus, they are decision makers regarding whether students are competent enough to receive their graduate degrees and enter the counseling profession and whether students have deficiencies that warrant intervention and potential dismissal.

Gatekeeping practices, namely student selection, retention, and remediation, have been intermittently discussed in the counselor education and counseling psychology literature for the past 40 years (Baldo, Sofitas-Nall, & Shaw, 1997; Bernard, 1975; Bradley & Post, 1991; Forrest, Elman, Gizara, & Vacha-Haase, 1999; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Keppers, 1960; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991; Sweeney, 1969; Vacha-Haase, 1995). In fact, Bernard (1975) described due process procedures to dismiss unsuitable students and recommended that students be provided with written program manuals upon admittance. Iovacchini (1981) examined the impact of academic due process decisions and provided competencies and characteristics that students should be able to demonstrate. A decade later, gatekeeping practices and procedures (Baldo et al., 1997; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991) emerged in the counselor education literature.

Olkin and Gaughen (1991) suggested a process for identifying and evaluating students who have academic deficits and offered recommendations for due process and dismissal of students who were deemed incompetent. Similarly, Frame and Stevens-Smith (1995) developed a framework related to gatekeeping and an evaluation form that is included in student handbooks and referenced in course syllabi. Finally, Baldo et al. (1997) encouraged the use of faculty review committees to facilitate a process through which faculty members might identify and report students' progress without becoming the target of students' reactions; this was a more extensive process than those previously proposed, requiring consistent tracking of students' progress and ongoing feedback from the faculty.

Lumadue and Duffey (1999) incorporated the advantages of the previous practices and added a behavior-specific student evaluation instrument. Faculty at Southwest Texas State University (see Lumadue & Duffey, 1999, p. 105) went a step further and devised an instrument that was based on standards of the 1995 ACA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995). Although several authors (e.g., Baldo et al., 1997; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991) have expanded on existing practices with the hope of improving the gatekeeping process, few researchers have explored these practices through research, much less investigated faculty members' perceptions and experiences regarding the process of gatekeeping in counselor education. This lack of depth in the research is the basis of the rationale for this study.

Despite ethical and professional mandates that necessitate gatekeeping, not all counseling program faculty engage in adequate gatekeeping procedures, and the practice of gatekeeping varies across programs (Bradley & Post, 1991; Forrest et al., 1999; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991; Vacha-Haase, 2000).

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Journal of Counseling & Development • Fall 2010 • Volume 88
Fifteen program coordinators or their designees responded accredited master's-level programs in the southeast region of courses offered and programs of studies. Thus, ensuring compatibility among program standards, this study included being a counselor educator who was currently teaching in a master's-level, CACREP-accredited program. Consequently, criteria for participation in this study included having a career as a gatekeeper in the counseling profession.

Method

Qualitative Inquiry

Researchers have attested to the “goodness of fit” of qualitative methodology with the field of counseling and counselor education (Merchant, 1997; Newsome, Hays, & Christensen, 2008). According to Gay and Airasian (2000), qualitative research should be used when researchers are interested in describing a particular occurrence or capturing the essence of participants’ perspectives of a specific phenomenon in terms of their beliefs, behaviors, and practices. Because naturalistic inquiry is also suited for exploratory research about which little is known, qualitative methodology, in particular grounded theory, is appropriate for use when gathering information and constructing a theoretical explanation of a phenomenon based on participants’ lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Consequently, criteria for participation in this study included being a counselor educator who was currently teaching in a master's-level, CACREP-accredited program, thus ensuring compatibility among program standards, courses offered, and programs of studies.

At the beginning of this investigation, we used electronic mail to contact all program coordinators in CACREP-accredited master's-level programs in the southeast region of the United States and asked them to participate in this study. Fifteen program coordinators or their designees responded that they were interested. Of the 15 respondents, we chose eight participants to take part in this research on the basis of their demographic information and availability for in-person interviews at a regional conference.

Of the eight participants who volunteered, five were female and three were male. Six of the participants were Caucasian, one was African American, and one was Asian. All eight participants held doctoral degrees in counselor education and were employed as full-time faculty members at CACREP-accredited master's-level counseling programs. Their experience ranged from 3 to 14 years as counselor educators and from 6 to 20 years as counselors. The participants listed a wide range of specialty areas and indicated that they provided both individual and group clinical supervision to between five and 13 master's-level students per semester. In addition, participants served as academic advisers for between five and 30 students each semester.

Data Collection

All eight of the participants who volunteered for this study were assigned pseudonyms and participated in initial face-to-face interviews (60 to 90 minutes long) that were conducted at a regional counselor education conference. The primary researcher (first author) audiotaped and transcribed the interviews for the purpose of data analysis. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), initial research interview questions should be broad and open-ended as a means to facilitate candid dialogue among researchers and participants. The following initial research interview questions were based on a review of literature pertaining to gatekeeping and were designed to solicit information on counselor educators’ practices when serving as gatekeepers in CACREP-accredited, master's-level graduate programs: (a) How do you define gatekeeping and its purpose? (b) How do you describe how you perform gatekeeping functions? (c) How do you describe how you make gatekeeping decisions? and (d) How do you describe your role as a gatekeeper in the counseling profession?

Analysis of participants’ responses to the initial questions yielded several initial themes related to a theory of gatekeeping. Thus, follow-up interviews were scheduled with all eight of the participants involved in this study. Because participants were located in various states, electronic mail was used to disseminate questions that were designed to clarify and expand on the initial themes. Follow-up interview questions were also designed to allow for the emergence of new themes (Glesne, 1999). Questions for the second round of interviews were (a) How would you describe the process of gatekeeping? (b) How do you describe your experiences with gatekeeping? (c) What are your perceptions about what the gatekeeping process entails for you, your program, and the institution where you are employed? and (d) What are your perceptions about how multiculturalism pertains to the gatekeeping process?

Analysis of data from follow-up interviews supported an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices in counselor education. Therefore, questions for the third and final round of data
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collection were (a) How do you describe your perceptions of the identified gatekeeping process? (b) How might you restructure themes that have emerged? and (c) How might you change specific words and language used to describe your experiences with the process of gatekeeping? As was done in the second round of interviews, e-mail was used to solicit participants' responses, and only six of the eight chose to participate in the final round of data collection.

Data Analysis
After each round of interviews, a series of coding procedures (i.e., open, axial, and selective) was used to identify themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding involved several readings of the transcripts of participants' word-for-word responses from their initial interviews. After reviewing these transcripts several times, common words, phrases, and meanings were separated into a series of themes, which were then categorized into properties according to the meanings they conveyed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, axial coding (i.e., a process of relating categories and concepts) was used to link themes and add depth to the descriptions of the categories and properties that had emerged through open coding. Figure 1 illustrates how displays and matrices that had been developed during axial coding were used to offer visual representations of each category and property and to illustrate interactions and relationships among categories and properties. Finally, selective coding was incorporated to organize categories around a central concept or core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). On the basis of these coding procedures, categories were integrated to build a theoretical framework that resulted in an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices in counselor education.

Researcher's Subjectivity and Triangulation Procedures
From a constructivist perspective, no research is value free, and participants and researchers actively coconstruct meaning and reality throughout the research process (Newsome et al., 2008). Thus, qualitative researchers state their biases at the onset of inquiry and take measures to ensure that their biases do not interfere with the data collection and analysis. Throughout this investigation, several strategies were used to detect researcher biases or subjectivity. In particular, triangulation procedures were used to contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings from this investigation and to strengthen the grounding of theory (Glesne, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of results as they emerged from this investigation or the slices of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) included keeping a reflective journal, documents reviews, member checks, and consultation with a peer debriefer to explore findings after each round of data analysis occurred. The first author kept a reflective journal wherein she recorded detailed observations (e.g., incongruity of participant verbal and nonverbal responses or incongruity of triangulated data) as they occurred throughout data collection and analysis processes. The reflective journal informed the data analysis process and the interpretation of results by detailing any incongruities or gaps in the research protocol or with the primary investigator's knowledge base (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Pertinent documents, such as application materials, student handbooks, and website information, were collected and reviewed to provide additional sources of credible information, and this procedure complemented the participants' practices by verifying the accuracy of the information obtained.

FIGURE 1
Results of Axial Coding From the Second Round of Data Analysis

Note. GPA = grade point average.
in the interviews. The first author also used member checks during the third round of data collection, which involved sharing transcripts, analytical thoughts, and interpretations with participants to ensure that their ideas were recorded and represented accurately (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Member checking also confirmed that all participants supported the data representation. The peer debriefer, a counselor educator with experience in conducting qualitative research, reviewed and confirmed the integrity of the progress of this research, including all data collection and analyses procedures, as well as the contents of the reflective journal.

Results

The analysis of participants’ responses indicated that the counselor educators interviewed for this study consistently described gatekeeping as a process that included four phases: preadmission screening, postadmission screening, remediation plan, and remediation outcome. We included these four phases in an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices. In the section that follows, participants’ words are used to describe each of these phases.

Phase 1: Preadmission Screening

The review of participants’ responses and the related documents indicated that preadmission screening consisted of counselor educators’ reviews of applicants’ academic aptitude and interpersonal interaction criteria. The evaluation of academic aptitude was based on the information that applicants submitted per the admission requirements, and interpersonal interaction criteria were nonacademic factors assessed during interviews and observations that occurred in person.

Academic aptitude. Counselor educators’ responses overwhelmingly indicated that their programs and universities used academic aptitude criteria (e.g., undergraduate grade point average, standardized test scores, recommendation letters, personal or goal statements, additional education, and prior work experience) as a basis for admission and that such criteria were evident during the initial application process. The choice and importance of specific academic aptitude criteria varied according to university and departmental policies. For example, the undergraduate grade point average requirements ranged from 2.5 to 3.0, and the Graduate Record Examination or the Miller’s Analogy Exam were measures of academic aptitude that all counselor educators identified as used most often. Recommendation letters were required, and additional education was considered if applicants had already earned an advanced degree. Counselor educators also indicated that an applicant’s previous work experience was explored, but not required. As indicated by one counselor educator, Stacy, a personal or goal statement was often a requirement because such statements contribute information about applicants’ motives and objectives. “We require a goal statement so we can get an understanding of individuals’ perceptions of the counseling profession and their intentions.”

Interpersonal interaction. According to the counselor educators who participated in this study, individual and/or group interviews were used to explore applicants’ interaction styles, and these interviews typically followed the initial screening of applicants’ performance criteria. Counselor educators identified various methods to explore interpersonal criteria that consisted of non-academic measures used to evaluate applicants. For example, role-play vignettes, specific questions, and informal discussions were conducted throughout the applicants’ interviews to evaluate their interpersonal skills and cultural sensitivity. As illustrated by Wendy, counselor educators overwhelmingly indicated that they perceived the interviews as more significant than other criteria when evaluating applicants: “The interview is really key. They can look good on paper, and we would be so close to admitting them. Then we meet and it all changes.” Although all counselor educators indicated that preadmission screening involved an interview, their experiences differed in terms of interview format and content. According to Fred, whose program used individual interviews, the interview was not limited to assessing the applicant but was also a means to disseminate information about the counseling program: “I like to spend individual time with each applicant to convey from the very beginning that this program is very hands on. I feel it is my responsibility to make that statement in the interview.” However, Alan’s program preferred group interviews, “I like to interview the applicants as a group so I can observe their interpersonal skills, flexibility, and openness to others.”

Other counselor educators indicated that role-play vignettes were part of the interview format. Stacy stated, “I have the applicants role-play because then you get a sense of who they are as a person. I need to have a sense that they have a caring heart, rational mind, and [they] are trainable.” Likewise, Nedra illustrated how her program also used role plays as a method to assess multiculturalism: “We use the role plays to help identify some aspects of prospective students’ level of cultural sensitivity.”

All counselor educators noted the importance of informal discussions that took place during preadmission screening as well as the overall process of gatekeeping. Fred indicated that his program often used a meet and greet to become familiar with applicants: “When individuals show an interest in the program, I arrange a meet and greet with our current students. I believe that personal contact and multiple interactions are essential to the gatekeeping process.”

Phase 2: Postadmission Screening

Counselor educators revealed the importance of continued evaluation throughout the student’s graduate program. In fact, counselor educators indicated that even though students had been accepted, their status was provisional until certain academic and interpersonal standards were met.

Academic aptitude. Counselor educators indicated that academic aptitude should continue to be monitored in terms
of grades for course work. However, some counselor educators noted their concern regarding this form of postadmission screening. According to Nate, there is an overabundance of As and Bs assigned as grades in counseling:

I think grade inflation is out of control. Counselor educators don’t want to hurt students because they are naturally humanistic. They want to see students grow and blossom. But, from a practical standpoint there is a flaw here and an accountability piece.

Some counselor educators noted that course grades assist in monitoring students’ strengths and weaknesses. For example, Nedra explained:

It is important to differentiate skills courses and all other course work. Students might do well in theories but their skills are lacking, or vice versa. We need to pay special attention to their skills but also their work in multicultural [competencies] and ethics, which should also be embedded in other courses.

Counselor educators also expressed that standardized tests such as the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination and the Praxis Series Tests were necessary to measure students’ knowledge base. However, some stressed that students must be academically prepared before sitting for such examinations. For example, Fred expressed that academic deficiencies must be addressed before students take comprehensive examinations and added, “I hope that I make students aware of their deficiencies before they test at local and national levels. To me, that is a gatekeeping function.”

Interpersonal interaction. Counselor educators’ responses in this study indicated that certain interpersonal interaction criteria should be met regarding how students interact with faculty members, site supervisors, and their peers. All counselor educators highlighted the fact that interpersonal interactions during supervision, practicum and internship experiences, and discussions with professors often revealed favorable and unfavorable personality characteristics that would otherwise not have been noticed if faculty used grades and test scores as the only criteria to assess students’ appropriateness for the counseling profession.

Many counselor educators offered information about how they personally evaluated students’ interpersonal skills via interactions in supervision. Nate commented that he used supervision to “measure the personal and professional growth of a student and observe whether certain feedback [had] been put into action.” Counselor educators also revealed that discussions in various settings, including classrooms, conferences, meetings, and social gatherings, offered additional opportunities to assess students’ interpersonal interactions. For example, Vicki stated, “A student once told me that he enrolled in our program because a diploma from my university would look great on his wall. His attitude was all about self-interest, and it changed my view of him.”

As counselor educators reflected on recommendations for students, they discussed the importance of wording a recommendation letter appropriately. For example, Helen voiced her concern about endorsing one student for a counseling position, saying the following:

I was asked to write a letter of recommendation for a student and didn’t want to put my reputation on the line. I wrote a very factual statement of when the person started the program and so on, . . . to not fully recommend the student for employment.

Phase 3: Remediation Plan

All counselor educators in this study confirmed that remediation plans were initiated when students were not performing well or were in need of additional assistance. Counselor educators’ responses, as well as documents reviewed by the researcher (first author), indicated that intensified supervision and personal development were two components addressed in remediation plans. In addition to recognizing student limitations and developing a remediation plan consisting of intensified supervision and personal development, counselor educators also noted that they were responsible for (a) assisting students in securing remedial assistance, (b) providing consultation about and documentation of all dismissals and referrals, and (c) ensuring that students have recourse and due process in the event of dismissal.

Intensified supervision. According to the counselor educators in this study, intensified supervision was geared toward students who were struggling academically or personally, and it often included requiring additional clinical tapes for supervision and review, extra supervision sessions, repeating course work, and/or reassignment to another supervisor or faculty member when necessary. Some of the counselor educators noted that a written plan or contract detailing specific behaviors to be addressed or assignments that needed to be completed for the student to matriculate were required. Fred stated, “When I develop behavior-oriented remediation plans and evaluations, I personally meet with the students, request their feedback, and it is ongoing. I assess their growth in the determined areas.”

Another example of intensified supervision was requiring students to repeat specific course work. Alan explained, “As a part of a remediation plan, students will take courses over. This requirement is also a way to document that we have addressed this issue with students and have made them aware of their deficiencies.” Some participating counselor educators noted that another means to monitor remediation and address nonacademic issues was to reassign a student to another university supervisor or faculty member. As noted by Wendy, the reassignment of supervisors might be an effective way to address potential personality conflicts: “I wasn’t effective
with a student any more, so another faculty member stepped in. We do hand off students that way to have a better match.”

Personal development. In their responses, counselor educators noted that remediation plans often included a means to address students’ personal development, such as (a) a leave of absence, (b) personal counseling, and (c) counseling regarding their status within the program or encouragement to withdraw from the program. Helen offered an example of a time when she recommended a leave of absence: “I had numerous problems with a student, so I suggested she take a leave from the program. I thought that time on her own might do her good.”

All eight counselor educators in the study indicated that they had recommended that a student pursue personal counseling as a remediation strategy. Alan described how he and his program handled this situation: “It was real obvious that one of my students needed to work through some personal issues. The department met with the student and recommended counseling as a requirement for continuing in the program.”

According to counselor educators’ responses, if faculty encountered students who disagreed with the assigned remediation, faculty offered these students consultation and guidance regarding their qualifications for or appropriate “fit” within the counseling field. This was an example of remediation involving counseling regarding their status within the program or encouragement to withdraw from the program. Counselor educators noted that students often withdrew from their programs when encouraged to do so. For example, Vicki reported, “It is quite obvious when students know that this field is not for them. It’s important to process it and, most times, the students will self-select themselves out of the program so we won’t have to.”

Phase 4: Remediation Outcome
According to counselor educators’ responses in this study, the gatekeeping process included a fourth phase designed to evaluate the assigned remediation for a counseling student who was not succeeding in the program. The fourth phase was named remediation outcome and included three main categories: (a) successful (b) unsuccessful, and (c) indifferent or neutral.

Successful remediation. Counselor educators in this study reported that some students experienced successful remediation when they followed the appropriate procedures and completed assigned recommendations. These students presented with notable changes in designated areas, thus they were allowed to remain in the program, as illustrated by Helen: “Successful remediation for us includes having students retake the skills course or increase their supervision sessions. Many of these students were eventually successful [in the program]; it just took them a bit longer than the rest.”

Unsuccessful remediation. Responding counselor educators also indicated that unsuccessful remediation occurred when students did not complete the plan that faculty outlined or when they completed remediation but without noticeable changes in designated areas. When remediation was unsuccessful, counselor educator respondents indicated that students either were dismissed or they decided to leave the program after they underwent career advisement. Wendy offered a prime example of this:

I’ve had students self-select themselves out of the program once they have been remediated. They are not too invested and see that the field is not for them. The best case scenario is to have students decide to leave for themselves. But, there have been times when we have dismissed, and I’ve wondered what route the student will take.

Indifferent or neutral remediation. In some instances, counselor educators in the study indicated that remediation yielded marginal results. Nate explained,

We can assign a remediation plan to students who may only marginally improve. If they complete what has been assigned, how can we still hold them back? It will reflect in their letters of recommendation, and it will be obvious to employers, I hope.

Some counselor educators in the study noted concern for themselves or their program when remediation had an indifferent result. Stacy remarked, “I often wonder about individual and institutional liability when students have graduated and there are questions about their competence. I wonder if their incompetence will come back to haunt me.”

Discussion
Despite the unknowns related to student dismissal from a counseling program, possible related litigation, and harm to the program and university reputation (McAdams et al., 2007), research participants in this study noted that they cannot avoid their role as gatekeepers of the counseling profession. In fact, participants involved in this study described an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices that included four phases: (a) preadmission screening, (b) postadmission screening, (c) remediation plan, and (d) remediation outcome.

Preadmission screening practices consisted of counselor educators’ reviews of applicants’ academic aptitude (e.g., undergraduate grade point average, Graduate Record Examination scores) and interpersonal interactions that were nonacademic factors assessed during interviews, observations, and other interactions that occurred in person. Applicants might then be admitted to the desired program, placed on a wait list, or denied, with some participants reporting that they strongly encouraged these applicants to reapply. If applicants were admitted to the program, they were then considered counseling students.

Much like preadmission screening, postadmission screening practices included a review of counseling students’ academic aptitude and interpersonal interactions. Measures of academic
aptitude included the program offerings of developmental, sequential course work, taking standardized tests such as the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination and the Praxis Series Tests, and site or university supervisor feedback. This practice is supported by the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2005), Standard F.9.a., which states, “counselor educators provide students with ongoing performance appraisal and evaluation feedback throughout the training program” (pp. 15–16). In addition, McAdams and Foster (2007) contended that students should be made aware of the ongoing evaluation process at several points in the program, including new student orientation and semester reviews. As participants in this study pointed out, complex courses that may reveal students’ personal character, such as cross-cultural counseling and ethics, should be sequential and retaken if a student does not do well in these foundational courses. This finding is consistent with McAdams et al.’s (2007) assertion that counseling courses should be developmentally sequenced to promote a greater understanding and integration of counseling theories, skills, and ethics but also to allow students to gain insight not only about counseling but also about the self. By intentionally focusing on student development and disclosure in these higher order thinking courses, counselor educators may be better able to assess a students’ intellectual and personal strengths in addition to their fit within the counseling profession.

During the postadmission phase of gatekeeping, participants noted that they also assessed students’ interpersonal development through means such as observations during supervision, practicum/internship supervisor feedback, and informal discussions. This finding supports Remley and Herlihy’s (2005) assertion that students may possess strong intellectual ability but lack the personal characteristics to be an effective counselor. Counselor educators can better assess students’ progress by offering developmental, sequential course work that builds on knowledge and theory and by meeting with students regularly and offering feedback regarding their strengths and areas where growth is needed.

All eight counselor educators in this study confirmed that remediation was required when students were in need of additional assistance in academic or interpersonal domains. Remediation plans consisted of two components: intensified supervision (e.g., additional tapping and supervision sessions, repeating course work, reassignment to another supervisor/faculty member) and personal development (e.g., a leave of absence, personal counseling, advising to withdraw). These findings are in accord with Corey et al.’s (2003) recommendation to offer several types of remediation to foster students’ academic and interpersonal growth. In contrast to the solution in a recent court case reported in McAdams et al. (2007) in which a student was offered only one semester to improve performance before being dismissed, participants in this study offered students two semesters to address their remediation plan. The feasibility of this recommendation would depend on a program’s part-time or full-time status and graduation requirements. Finally, some participants used behavior-oriented remediation plans and evaluations that were aligned with the most recent gatekeeping and remediation literature (Baldo et al., 1997; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; McAdams & Foster, 2007; McAdams et al., 2007).

The last phase of the gatekeeping process was remediation outcome, which involved the evaluation of the assigned remediation and the student’s progress in meeting its requirements as being successful, unsuccessful, or indifferent/neutral. Successful remediation allowed the student to continue in the program. Counselor educators in the study noted that students were dismissed if the remediation was unsuccessful and that, for this evaluation judgment, required detailed documentation related to the postadmissions and remediation plan phases. Reflecting the situations alluded to by McAdams et al. (2007), some counselor educators voiced concern regarding liability and potential repercussions when student remediation plans yielded only marginal results. Counselor educators’ concerns about liability seem warranted given situations like a suit filed against Louisiana Tech University in which it was argued that a student had graduated without sufficient training and that the program had an obligation to the public to ensure that the person graduating was competent in the area in which the degree was granted (Custer, 1994).

Overall, results from this investigation have revealed a comprehensive gatekeeping process that can assist counselor educators in their obligation to perform gatekeeping functions in their field.

Study Limitations

Although triangulation procedures were followed and other measures were taken to ensure the credibility, trustworthiness, and dependability of findings, as with all research, this study has limitations. Although generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research, it should be noted that participants’ descriptions of gatekeeping might not be reflective of all counselor educators’ perceptions of and practices regarding gatekeeping. In fact, participants in this study were selected from CACREP-accredited counselor education programs located only in the southeastern region of the United States. Therefore, findings might not be reflective of counselor educators who teach in CACREP-accredited doctoral programs or non-CACREP-accredited programs in other parts of the country.

A final limitation of this investigation pertains to the use of electronic mail as the primary means of collecting data during the second and third rounds of individual interviews. Because counselor educators who participated wrote their responses to questions, there was room for dissonance between what counselor educators had experienced and what they actually wrote about the gatekeeping process. Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face interaction between interviewers and those interviewed subsequent to the initial interview precluded the
use of qualitative interview techniques, such as probing and attending to nonverbal cues, that would have yielded more information.

Suggestions for Further Research

The results of this investigation offer insight into issues related to gatekeeping and represent a foundation on which future researchers might base their work. Because this is the first qualitative study to address gatekeeping in counselor education, additional research is needed. Future qualitative studies could expand on findings from this research, begin the formulation and development of behavior-specific academic and interpersonal expectations, and include CACREP-accredited programs located outside the southeastern region of the United States. Both qualitative and quantitative methods could be used to address various aspects of gatekeeping. In particular, researchers could explore how gatekeeping procedures or performance may differ across any number of variables, including (a) master's-level versus doctoral-level programs (b) CACREP-accredited versus non-CACREP-accredited programs, (c) programs in large urban versus small rural universities, and (d) pretenured versus tenured faculty members.

Study Implications

The results of this study provide an emergent theory that is grounded in the perceptions and experiences of counselor educators who teach in master's-level CACREP-accredited counseling programs in the southeast region of the United States. Therefore, implications can be made as they pertain to counselor education programs, standards proposed by CACREP, and guidelines set forth by ACA.

Counselor Education Programs

The gatekeeping theory that emerged from this research reveals how counselor educators perceive themselves as applying gatekeeping procedures in a comprehensive way that begins before students are admitted into their graduate programs. Although previous literature has presented a framework (Baldo et al., 1997; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; McAdams et al., 2007), findings from this investigation illuminate what some counselor educators actually do as a function of gatekeeping. Thus, counselor educators can use findings from this investigation to develop a model or to incorporate parts of the identified process into the gatekeeping procedures that they currently use. Information from this research might also offer support to counselor educators and supervisors who are struggling with specific students or issues related to the process of gatekeeping. Furthermore, these results can support counselor educators and supervisors who fear or are faced with litigation related to their decisions regarding gatekeeping and remediation because these results are representative of the standard of practice within the field of counseling.

CACREP and ACA

CACREP and ACA are dedicated to maintaining the integrity of the counseling profession, and results of this investigation illustrate how some counselor educators actively adhere to the standards and recommendations of these organizations regarding gatekeeping. In particular, the gatekeeping theory that emerged from this research closely adheres to CACREP (2009) standards that outline program development and student monitoring and retention, thus these findings might offer specific strategies and guidelines for counselor educators. Because guidelines related to the process of gatekeeping can often be vague or ambiguous, professional credentialing bodies may use the findings from this study to develop a model of gatekeeping or to provide more detailed information for dissemination or advisement. Furthermore, ACA standards address gatekeeping (ACA, 2005; Standards F.9.a and F.9.b.); therefore, findings offered in this research might be incorporated into future iterations of the ACA ethical standards.

References


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