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Gatekeeping in Counselor Education Programs: An Examination of Current Trends

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Abstract

This study examined gatekeeping policies of CACREP-accredited counselor education programs by reviewing gatekeeping procedures as published on or within their web sites. Content analysis was used to examine the published materials of 257 CACREP-accredited programs specifically looking at their policies in the areas of admission, evaluation, remediation, and dismissal.

The Gatekeeping Literature

Introduction

Counselor educators are ethically obligated to serve as gatekeepers to their profession and to train competent professionals. That said, the process of gatekeeping is complex, and multiple gates exist within programs to manage the progression of students from application to graduation. This article explores current gatekeeping procedures in Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP) master's programs to determine how closely programs are currently following best practices as suggested within the literature. Program web sites were examined for evidence of gatekeeping criteria and procedures in the areas of admission, evaluation, remediation, and dismissal.

The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) Ethical Standards for Counseling Supervisors were originally developed in 1991 and later incorporated within the 2005 American Counseling Association's (ACA) Code of Ethics (ACES, n.d.). Four different areas of the ACA code relate directly to gatekeeping responsibilities. First, Section F.4.a, Informed Consent for Supervision, directs

supervisors to inform their supervisees of any policies or procedures for which they are responsible, as well as “the mechanism for due process appeal of individual supervisor action” (p. 14). Counseling Supervision, Evaluation, Remediation and Endorsement, (Section F.4.) contains several mandates related to ongoing evaluation, periodic formal evaluation, and systematic feedback to students regarding their performance including a directive that “supervisors do not endorse supervisees whom they believe to be impaired” (p. 14). Section F.7. deals with student welfare and directs counselor educators to orient prospective students to programmatic expectations in seven different areas. Finally, Evaluation and Remediation of Students (Section F. 9.) outlines specific directives in the treatment of students who are experiencing difficulties, including expectations for communicating with students, remediating, and when necessary dismissing supervisees from the program (ACA, 2005).

The CACREP 2009 Standards (CACREP, 2009) address gatekeeping responsibilities in several of the standards. Section I.K guides programs to consider applicant abilities in three specific areas (i.e., aptitude, career goals as they relate to the program, and interpersonal skills) when faculty make their admission decisions. Section I.L clearly delineates program responsibilities in communicating expectations to students including an orientation and dissemination of a handbook informing students of program objectives, endorsement policies, remediation and dismissal procedures, and their rights to appeal. Section I.P outlines evaluation expectations for programs, such as a systematic evaluation of students throughout their program, and evaluation of “academic performance, professional development, and personal development” (p. 5).

Admission

The most proactive gate available to counselor educators is the admission process. It seems logical to presume that a well-conceived, effective screening of applicants prior to admission would reduce the need to address problematic student behaviors through remediation and dismissal after they are in program (Wilkerson, 2006). In the past, admission procedures for counselor education programs have focused upon undergraduate grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or the Millers Analogy Test (MAT), a personal interview, and some form of a personal statement (Bradley & Post, 1991).

Smaby, Maddux, Richmond, Lepkowski, and Packman (2005) investigated the predictive validity of GRE scores and undergraduate GPAs with regard to counseling graduates’ scores on the Skilled Counselor Scale (SCS), the Counselor Skills and Personal Development Rating Form (CSPD-RF), and the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination (CPCE). Results from this study found that undergraduate GPA and GRE scores did predict success on the CPCE and the acquisition of counseling skills as measured by the SCS. The authors cautioned, however, that while GPA and GRE scores could predict knowledge acquisition, skill acquisition and academic motivation, they were not helpful in predicting personal development of counseling candidates.

In a study by Procidano, Busch-Rossnagel, Reznikoff, and Geisinger (1995), the majority of programs surveyed (87%) reported using some type of screening to identify inappropriate applicants with the most popular screening procedures being interviewing (75%) and examination of letters of recommendation (38%). Findings suggested that

programs who interviewed were less likely to consider other applicant data in the decision-making process. In addition, results from this study also found no evidence that interviewing reduced the prevalence of students identified with clinical-skill deficits later on in their program. Nagpal and Ritchie (2002) interviewed counselor educators with regard to the application and interview process in their programs. Their qualitative study found considerable agreement between the counselor educators when it came to the evaluation characteristics assessed during the selection interview. Similarities diverged, however, when it came to the decision-making process itself as some counselor educators relied more on objective data while others also utilized subjective judgment.

A comprehensive screening process was used in a study by Stone and Hanson (2002) in order to “select graduate students who have the greatest promise of becoming leaders, advocates and change agents in the school” (p. 175). First, selection teams were used comprised of not only counselor educators but also school teachers and administrators, parents, and students in program. The application portfolio included the typical academic criteria (i.e., GPA and test scores), letters of recommendation, interviews, and a goal statement. In addition, these applicants signed an informed consent document describing program expectations, a written response to an assigned reading, as well as a four minute speech on the achievement gap.

Evaluation

Counselor educators are charged with monitoring and evaluating the competency of student counselors, and this assessment includes not only academic ability, but also personal traits and clinical skills (Hensley, Smith, & Thompson, 2003; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991). Past literature includes various recommendations and suggested criteria to incorporate in the evaluation process as well as evaluation instruments created and implemented by programs (Frame and Stevens-Smith, 1995; Hensley et al., 2003; Kerl, Garcia, McCullough, & Maxwell, 2002; McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007; Wilkerson, 2006). Bemak, Epp, and Keys (1999) encouraged programs to create and implement evaluation policies and procedures and identify specific criteria for the purpose of gatekeeping. Furthermore, best practice requires that programs disseminate this information to students (Bemak et al., 1999; Hensley et al., 2003; Knoff & Prout, 1985; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991) and afford the students an avenue to receive formal feedback regarding their evaluations (Bemak et al., 1999; Knoff & Prout, 1985; Wilkerson, 2006).

Bradley and Post (1991) studied counselor education programs with respect to their student evaluation procedures. While 65% of programs did report some type of ongoing assessment of students, evaluations were primarily academic in nature. In a study by Olkin and Gaughen (1991) only 28% of the programs stated that they had some type of formal evaluation procedure in place. Studies of doctoral-level psychology programs by Vacha-Haase (1995) and Procidano et al. (1995) found a lack of formalized evaluation of students by nearly half of all programs surveyed. Gaubatz and Vera (2002) surveyed counselor educators regarding gatekeeping procedures, and responses suggested the majority of respondents believed their program used formalized procedures for reviewing and evaluating student counselor fitness.

In a very fundamental sense, structured and formalized evaluation of student counselors is best practice as it relates to the ethical and legal obligations of counselor

educators. First, systematic evaluation is a safeguard for student due process rights, (Hensley et al., 2003) and is pedagogically best practice. Likewise, systematic evaluation reduces the number of deficient students graduated by counselor education programs (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002) and identifies students with problems earlier in program, rather than during their clinical work, when considerable time and money have been invested in their education (Hensley et al., 2003). Adequate communication of the evaluation procedures, faculty expectations, and the importance of the feedback process improves student trust and orients them as future professionals (Foster & McAdams, 2009). Finally, both CACREP and ACA require programs to implement formalized evaluation and feedback procedures (ACA, 2005; CACREP, 2009).

Remediation

Identifying and remediating counselor trainees who demonstrate problematic behaviors goes to the very heart of gatekeeping. The implementation of a systematic evaluation protocol will lead to the identification of students who present with deficiencies, problematic behaviors, or other performance problems that may be developmental in nature, or more serious in etiology (McAdams & Foster, 2007; Wilkerson, 2006). Previous literature has identified these students as impaired (Bemak et al., 1999; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002) but others caution against this terminology, as describing a student as impaired suggests a disability as defined by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Kress & Protivnak, 2009; Vacha-Haase, Davenport, & Kerewsky, 2004). Once a student is identified, counselor educators must navigate multiple stakeholders, ethical duties, and institutional policies in an effort to create an appropriate solution for all.

Past studies have estimated deficient trainee rates at approximately 3-10% (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; Kerl et al., 2002; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991). Procidano et al. (1995) found two-thirds of the programs in their study had written professional deficiency policies, including due process while a similar study by Vacha-Haase et al. (1995) discovered that 53% of the programs in their study did not have any written remediation plan. Recent literature has extended this subject by offering tangible remediation plans for consideration (see Kress & Protivnak, 2009) and due process considerations in preparing just and fair remediation (see McAdams & Foster, 2007). Consensus of past literature suggests programs develop comprehensive remediation plans that take into consideration due process, include specific timelines, outcome measurements, and faculty support, develop a variety of remediation strategies or an intervention bank, and are behaviorally-based and measurable (Kress & Protivnak, 2009; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Procidano et al. 1995; Vacha-Haase et al., 1995; Wilkerson, 2006)

Dismissal

Dismissing student counselors from their program and course of study is a serious obligation inherent within the ethical mandate of gatekeeping. Faculty may be hesitant to carry forward with this obligation out of concern that students will pursue legal recourse (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1999; Vacha-Haase et al., 1995). Past litigation in this area would suggest that the courts typically support faculty decisions in this area, as long as

due process was followed (Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1999; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; Kerl et al., 2002). Due process involves substantive due process (i.e., not dismissed for arbitrary reasons), procedural due process (i.e., student was adequately informed and was afforded opportunity to appeal), and fundamental fairness (i.e., impartiality in terms of how due process was conducted; Kerl et al., 2002; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; McAdams & Foster, 2007). While the majority of terminations are not contested (Vacha-Haase, Davenport & Kerewsky, 2004) programs benefit tremendously by creating solid gatekeeping procedures in all areas mentioned previously following best practice to insure a strong case if challenged (McAdams et al., 2007).

A review of the literature clearly supports the importance of gatekeeping to the counseling profession. Previous publications also illuminate the challenges the profession has experienced in the past with regard to effectively managing this mandate. Considering the recent changes to the CACREP standards and with that more attention to gatekeeping procedures, including an emphasis on advertising these to students, it makes sense that programs would be placing their policies and procedures online as a part of their departmental page within their university web site. Therefore, this study examined the gatekeeping procedures of CACREP-accredited master's programs as advertised on their web pages. This archival research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the admission procedures for CACREP-accredited master's programs?
2. Do CACREP-accredited master's programs have published evaluation procedures?
3. How often do CACREP-accredited master's programs evaluate students in program?
4. Do CACREP-accredited master's programs publish remediation as a part of the program?
5. Do CACREP-accredited master's programs have a specific, published remediation plan?
6. Do CACREP-accredited master's programs publish dismissal policies?

Methods

Data Sources

Archival data were collected from a recent list of CACREP-accredited programs published on the CACREP web site. Every program was included in this study, so the participant group was a census (i.e., the complete population under study) rather than a sample. A total of 257 university programs were included in this study, consisting of 81 clinical mental health programs, 155 community mental health programs, 212 school counseling programs, 26 student affairs programs, 36 marriage and family programs, 8 career counseling programs, and 16 college counseling programs. Web site links for each program were available from the CACREP program list provided on CACREP's web site.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to examine the published information on the program web sites. Specifically, this study looked for published procedures and policies in the areas of admission, evaluation, remediation, and dismissal. The research questions guided

the selection of published data gathered for this study, with a focus on the availability of information (i.e., if we were able to obtain the information via the web site, then the current or future students of the program would also have access to the information). In contrast, if the program had a policy but did not make it available on the web site, then it could not be included in this study. All relevant webpages for each program were explored, including student handbooks, in order to locate the published information needed for this study.

All relevant pages for each program's web site were printed out to complete the analysis. Each author independently analyzed the program web sites, identifying and coding the specific policies and procedures predetermined by the research questions. Field notes were also kept by the first author to record any extraneous information not included in the database that could be relevant upon further analyses. Next, the authors' analyses were compared and discrepancies reviewed until consensus was obtained. Descriptive analysis of the policies and procedures was conducted to determine the prevalence of the gatekeeping procedures and policies published on the departmental web sites.

Results

Admission Procedures

As noted previously in the literature, common admission criteria are academic abilities (i.e., GPA or GRE scores), some type of personal writing (i.e., personal statement or career objectives), interviews (either individual or group), and letters of recommendation. This study found 25 different criteria mentioned in the published admission requirements on the departmental web sites. Admission criteria that were general to the graduate school requirements for the university were not included in this analysis.

This study found 238 (92.6%) of the programs had admission criteria published on their web site. The most frequently published admission criterion was letters of recommendation (n = 195, 75.9%) followed by personal statement (n = 172, 66.9%) with 56.4% (n = 145) requiring the GRE or MAT, and 55.6 % requiring an interview (n = 143). In some cases the interview was required as part of an initial screening, and in other programs it was a second tier requirement after an initial screening of other material. No distinction was made between group and individual interviews in this study. Just over half of the programs (50.2%, n = 129) had a hard and fast GPA requirement that was specific to the department without a possibility of a provisional admission.

A second tier of admission requirements contained just two criteria. Resumes were requested for 73 of the CACREP programs (28.4%) while 53 programs (20.6%) had a criterion that was coded as other. Examples of the data found under other include teaching certificate, six semester hours in Bible, program survey, or a signed retention statement. The final tier of admission requirements consisted of 17 other requirements with low frequencies for each. See Table 1 for additional information on the remaining criteria.

Table 1

Admission Procedures Published on CACREP Program Web Sites

Admission Procedure	<i>N</i>	%
Letters of Recommendation	195	75.9
Personal Statement	172	66.9
GRE/MAT	145	56.4
Interview	143	55.6
GPA Requirement (department specific)	129	50.2
Resume	73	28.4
Other	53	20.6
Experience in the Field	29	11.3
TOEFL (when applicable)	22	8.6
Prerequisite Courses	20	7.8
Writing Sample	14	5.4
Praxis or Basic Skills Test	14	5.4
GRE if the GPA is Below a Certain Point	11	4.3
Hours of Psychology	11	4.3
Writing Response Assignment	8	3.1
Hours in Behavioral Sciences	8	3.1
Background Check	7	2.7
Informed Consent	4	1.6
Orientation	4	1.6
Moral Character Attestation	3	1.2
MMPI/Personality Test	2	0.8
CAAP Test	2	0.8
Agreement Contract	2	0.8
Research Experience	2	0.8

Evaluation

An examination of counseling program web sites found just over half (56.4%) had something published on their web site that addressed student evaluation procedures. Of the 145 programs that published student evaluations as part of program procedure, nine of these did not publish when or how these evaluations took place. In contrast, 23 of the programs had multiple evaluation procedures published. The most frequently cited schedule for student evaluations was every semester ($n = 55$, 21.4%). Twenty-six program evaluation schedules were placed in the “other” category and examples include evaluation periods that came after a certain number of hours, that were performed monthly, with 10 students each month, or after the student’s first semester and then only if there is faculty concern. Twenty-four programs (9.3%) evaluated students annually while 23 programs (8.9%) labeled their evaluation procedure as informal or ongoing. While some programs mentioned evaluations during practicum and internship as part of the evaluation process, these were not included in this analysis since these evaluations are part of CACREP standards specific to those clinical experiences. While best practice also requires that students receive timely feedback and be oriented to the departmental

evaluations, we did not research those areas for this study, so no data are available. See Table 2 for additional evaluation categories.

Table 2

Timeframes Given for Systematic Student Program Evaluations

Timeframe	N	%
Every Semester (not including summer)	55	21.4
Other	26	10.1
Annually	24	9.3
Informally or Ongoing Evaluations	23	8.9
Prior to Clinicals (i.e., Practica or Internship)	15	5.8
Pre-candidacy	13	5.1
During Certain Courses Within the Program	11	4.3

Remediation

As stated earlier, a well-structured remediation plan is essential in order to afford students due process and to protect faculty involved as they work with students who have been identified as having problematic behaviors. This study found remediation mentioned on the web sites of 50.2% ($n = 129$) of the CACREP programs. Ninety program web sites (35.0%) had specific steps and/or a detailed plan delineated on their web site (usually found within the student handbook) with another 33 programs (12.8%) intimating that a specific procedure might exist, but was not published in any of the web site materials.

Dismissal

As part of the gatekeeping ethical and legal obligation, and to ensure due process, students should be oriented to the possibility that, under certain conditions, they could be dismissed from the program. Many of the departmental web sites had information regarding dismissal that was specific to grades (and these were often tied to graduate college policy). For the purpose of this study, policies that were grade specific were not included in the data since these did not come specifically from the counseling department. Instead, this study was looking for mention of dismissal procedures originating from the counseling program. One hundred and three (40.1%) CACREP-accredited programs did publish dismissal procedures on their departmental web site and of those, 65 (25.3%) included the student's right to appeal within the dismissal procedures or placed in close proximity (in the handbook) to the dismissal procedures.

Discussion

The majority of program web sites published their admission criteria, either directly on their web site or within their student handbook. The most popular criteria used as part of the admission portfolios were letters of recommendation, personal statements, submission of test scores from the GRE or MAT, a rigid GPA requirement, and an interview. As stated earlier, within the CACREP 2009 Standards is the requirement that programs make admission decisions after reviewing applicants academic abilities, such as GPA and GRE/MAT scores, career goals and their match with the program, which might

be assessed through a personal statement, and interpersonal skills, which may be assessed via the interview process. Clearly over half of the programs are using these criteria, and they match up fairly well with CACREP standards.

Letters of recommendation emerged as the most frequently utilized admission criterion yet there is little in the literature to suggest that they are the most helpful criterion a program can use when reviewing candidates. Studies examining the manner in which these letters are used in the admission process, and perhaps their weight relative to other criteria, would be helpful. What is perhaps most striking is the fact that many counselor education programs are currently not using the criteria for admission considered best practice for gatekeeping. Since admission is the first, and perhaps most efficient place to make thoughtful and ethical decisions as gatekeepers, the large number of programs that are not yet employing the methods considered optimal by CACREP and the literature is a concern. Future research might explore reasons why programs choose to omit these standard admission practices or examine any possible relationship between reported problematic student behavior and admission criteria.

Both the CACREP 2009 Standards and ACA Code of Ethics dictate that programs evaluate their students in a systematic fashion, that the programs orient their students to the process, and that they have a mechanism in place for giving students feedback from the evaluations conducted by faculty (ACA, 2005; CACREP, 2009.). In this study, slightly over half of the programs had published evaluation policies on their departmental web sites. While it isn't possible to extrapolate that programs who chose not to publish evaluation procedures in fact do not evaluate their students, it is puzzling since student handbooks (posted online) were also reviewed for this study. Therefore, best estimates are that nearly half of the students in CACREP-accredited programs at the time of this study may not have had easy access to information regarding evaluation procedures, or may not be oriented to the process and future research may wish to study current or past counseling students to determine their knowledge of and experience with systematic evaluation while in program.

For over two decades now the literature has discussed and addressed possible evaluation policies, procedures, and criteria. Systematic evaluation of students, with orientation and feedback is best practice and integral to meeting the expectation of gatekeeping by counselor educators. Of those programs who published evaluation procedures, the most frequent schedule for evaluations was every semester. Evaluating students regularly and early in program does make the most sense for all concerned. Future studies may wish to compare different evaluation schedules (i.e., each semester vs. ongoing) to tease out the efficacy of different timetables. By definition, ongoing evaluation, whatever that may mean, does not suggest that evaluations are being conducted systematically. Examining the process of ongoing evaluations would also merit consideration.

A well-structured remediation plan for counseling students is mentioned several times in both the ACA Code of Ethics as well as the CACREP 2009 Standards. While half of the programs did have some mention of a remediation policy published, far less had a specific plan outlining procedures and student rights published on their web sites. Since all of the programs studied were CACREP programs, results may suggest that many of these programs are not yet currently operating at the standards set forth in the CACREP 2009 Standards. Even so, remediation expectations (formerly published by

ACES and within ACA's code for some time now) make the lack of cogent plans found within departmental publications somewhat troubling. The profession would benefit from future studies examining remediation processes considered successful by their programs, as well as additional articles sharing possible remediation designs such as those found in Kress and Protivnak (2009).

The majority of web sites (60%, $n = 154$) were without mention of a dismissal procedure, or even the possibility of dismissal. In many programs students may not currently be adequately oriented to the process of gatekeeping as it applies to counseling trainees, or the fact that gatekeeping can result in their dismissal from a program of study they are pursuing. As counselor educators, and simply for the sake of due process, we should be orienting students to the possibility that evaluations may lead to remediation and remediation may lead to dismissal. By advising them of the gatekeeping process, we are not only treating them in a respectful and ethical manner, but we are also modeling for our students how they should treat the people they will be counseling in the future. Programs should improve their transparency in this area and publish these policies on websites.

Limitations

This study used published data found on the websites of counseling programs. Therefore, a significant limitation to this study would be the fact that researchers may not have found published policies for some programs even though those policies exist, but either were not published via the web, or were too difficult to locate during data collection. In addition, this study only examined CACREP programs, therefore results may not generalize to programs that are not accredited.

Conclusion

Gatekeeping is a solemn and serious obligation in the counseling profession. Standards and best practices for counselor educators have been present in the literature, as well as within the CACREP standards and ACA Ethical Code for a number of years. The new CACREP standards require programs not currently implementing adequate gatekeeping policies to improve these procedures before their reaccreditation. This article offers an overview of accredited counseling programs' policies in the areas of admission, evaluation, remediation and dismissal. With adequate procedures in place, programs will be better equipped to address problematic student behavior, and afford all students respectful treatment, transparency, and the feedback they deserve.

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