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Article 25

Reconnecting Science to Practice: An Innovative Model for Supporting a Counseling Research Identity

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Within the converging identities of the 21st century counselor and counselor educator lays the focus of a research identity. Traditionally and contemporarily the counseling field has placed great emphasis on empiricism as a vehicle of academic training, which illustrates the underlying reciprocal role that practice and research share (Murdock, 2006). Complimenting this paradigm, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP, 2001) encourages counselors to develop an understanding of research methods, program evaluations, and statistical analyses. However, as the role of the counselor educator and counselor has changed in response to the fluid nature of the field, so does the change occur in establishing and redefining a research identity.

Reformulating a research identity arrives at a time in the counseling profession when the incongruence between counseling and research has gained salient attention (e.g., Bishop & Bieschke, 1998; Borders & Bloss, 1994; Lundervold & Belwood, 2000; O'Brien, 1995; Okech, Astramovich, Johnson, Hoskins, & Rubel, 2006; Reisetter et al., 2004). The factors contributing to the

divergence between counseling and research have been suggested to stem from the humanistic identity inherent in counseling (Reisetter et al., 2004). Moreover, current research practices and methodologies may represent an impractical area of research informed practice (Lundervold & Belwood, 2004; Murdock, 2006). These discrepancies may lead to the further estrangement of practitioners from traditional methods of epistemology and thus reinforce the boundaries between both disciplines (Murdock, 2006; Reisetter et al., 2004).

However, in the face of these identity challenges, the field of counseling has attempted to answer these schismatic concerns. As the field of postmodernism expands within the profession, certain research methodologies offer an insight into capturing a constructivist epistemology. The increase of qualitative research designs provides counselors with the opportunity to utilize a vast amount of research methods, which may reconnect practice and research (Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005; Reisetter et al., 2004). Concurrently, mixed-method paradigms, which combine the strategies of both quantitative and qualitative methods, offer a new avenue of research adherence (Hanson et al., 2005). However, it should be noted that one method or the combination of methods should not be conceptualized as providing the best solution for the chosen research method, but rather the research question should guide the selection of the research design (Hanson et al., 2005).

Furthermore, researchers have attempted to identify the various factors associated with counselor research productivity and the interaction of these variables to increase research productivity. Findings suggest that the interplay amongst research-related variables has been illustrated through a suggested person and environment fit (e.g., Brown, Lent, Ryan, & McPartland, 1996; Gelso, 2006; Gelso, Mallinckrodt, & Judge, 1996; Kahn & Scott, 1997; Mallinckrodt & Gelso, 2002). The influence of these person and environmental variables either directly or indirectly predicts subsequent research productivity (i.e., publications, presentations, etc.). The conceptualization of how these variables interact may be best understood through a reciprocal path analysis.

The use of a path analysis model illustrates the causal paths of predictive variables (i.e., independent variables) and their effect on research productivity (i.e., dependent variable). In addition, the path analysis provides the opportunity to view how the predictive variables are indirectly influenced by their effect on research productivity. Specifically, the research training environment offers itself as one of the major variables associated with research productivity. Gelso (2006) proposed that the graduate training environment is the most suitable atmosphere in which to shape and guide the research attitudes of students. Moreover, Gelso suggested that early exposure and integration of students into research is critical for training and subsequent productivity.

The purpose of the present paper is to describe an innovative research organization which specifically addresses the role of counseling and research. The organization, known as the Counselor Education Research Consortium (CERC), represents a counseling society that is dedicated to creating a positive and reinforcing environment intended to foster the research identity of counselors. The creation of CERC brings faculty and counseling students together in a collaborative effort to increase research productivity and research self-efficacy in counseling students, as well as support research agendas of counseling faculty. Consequently, the article's authors expound the mission and structure, intended benefits, and implications of CERC. It is the hope of this article that through the creation of such a society, the reconnection of research and practice can be obtained, supported, and maintained.

Mission and Structure of CERC

CERC's mission is to promote the scholarly productivity of research as well as increase individuals' research self-efficacy. CERC has been established in the Counselor Education Program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. The development of CERC was driven primarily by the positive variables (e.g., research productivity, connectedness, etc.) associated with the creation of a research training environment (Gelso, 2006). Moreover, one of the

longstanding visions of CERC is the facilitation of the professional development and support of a research counseling identity. These long term goals are intended to be accomplished through the collaborative efforts of faculty and counseling students, which in turn may create a positive cascade of events that support the practitioner as well as the investigator identity of counselors.

CERC's structure is grounded within a developmental trajectory which identifies individuals in their current research-related abilities and acts to encourage these individuals to participate in research focus groups. Although the developmental progression of research skills is inherent within the structure of CERC, so is the sense of equality. Equality creates and fosters an environment of collaboration and positive reinforcement. These concepts provide individuals within the group the opportunity to be active within the organization as well as develop their research abilities. Furthermore, the essential elements of CERC's foundation are the creation of a non-threatening and reinforcing environment.

CERC's operation provides individuals with the opportunity to develop research focus groups within the main organization. These focus groups operate in order to identify potential research interests and avenues of exploration. Agreed upon group facilitators work to establish a research agenda in order to provide a tentative timeline for the completion of the various components of the agreed upon research. Group members additionally develop a provisional agreement between members regarding areas of delegated work and authorship concerns. It is essential for the smaller focus groups of CERC to establish these informal bylaws in order to promote and maintain ethical research considerations.

Upon completion of these agenda items, the focus groups meet with the entirety of CERC and present the areas of interest. The executive committee of the group consists of elected representatives (e.g., faculty advisors, president, etc.). These representatives facilitate the functional meetings of CERC to open discussions regarding focus groups' research and provide a collaborative environment for feedback and additional considerations.

CERC's executive board primarily functions in order to foster the creation of focus groups as well as support the research endeavors of these entities. Furthermore, the executive board functions within a mediating role in order to resolve possible communication and interpersonal problems. Members of CERC have the opportunity to be actively involved in the structural components of the organization (i.e., elections, voting, etc.) as well as offer feedback to the executive board. As with any organization, the development and function of the elected officials provides structure and governance for the collective; however, in the essence of counseling, these structures are open for change and improvement.

Another component of CERC which offers itself to its innovative properties is the area of technology. CERC operates on the World Wide Web and is accessible for registration to individuals who are interested in research collaboration. The web site operates as a registration based foundation that allows individuals the opportunity to obtain usernames and passwords, as well as identify areas of research interest. Upon completion of registration, individuals have the opportunity to search the web site database according to research interests, locations, and universities. The ability to search according to research interests provides a connection between individuals from virtually any location to others who share similar interests. The result of such an association offers the ability to develop international, national, and regional projects and data sharing.

Intended Benefits of CERC

CERC offers a vast amount of systemic benefits that operate in order to enhance the research training environment and productivity of counseling departments. Furthermore, the benefits of CERC are not limited to those areas related to research but rather have far reaching effects. The creation of a positive and structured environment that brings students and faculty together provides a greater sense of connectedness. Additionally, the opportunity to develop mentoring relationships may be obtained among faculty, advanced students, and

novice students. Mentoring opportunities may be formed within the research organization; however, the effects of such relationships may be carried over to other areas of counselor preparation as well as faculty and pre-tenured faculty relationships.

CERC provides the opportunity for students to overcome a previous fear of research as well as to increase enthusiasm for research. The modeling of supportive behaviors as a function of faculty, and possibly advanced students, provides a necessary form of support for beginning student involvement. The participation of novice counseling students may prove critical to the adoption of research-relevant attitudes as they continue with their career. These attitudes are invaluable for individuals who are only seeking terminal masters' degrees and enter the field as practitioners. Furthermore, CERC provides individuals with the opportunity to have others involved in their thesis and dissertation endeavors. The support offered to complete these projects decreases completion time and strengthens positive attitudes toward these academic hallmarks.

As befits the essence of counseling, CERC also provides members with opportunities to enhance communication and group process skills. Moreover, individuals have the opportunity to become involved in projects they find personally relevant, thus supporting introspective abilities. Individuals can surround themselves with others who support their research identities, thus fostering professional development and networking.

Through involvement in the various components of the research process, CERC members may be exposed to regional and national conferences. The ability to participate within these environments provides increased networking opportunities. Furthermore, based on the agreed upon mission of the focus group, the intended project may result in manuscript submission. These opportunities provide individuals with valuable professional experiences. The intended benefits of CERC's development are far reaching and may be specifically tailored to meet the needs of various departments and universities. CERC's inherent malleability offers individuals the opportunity to shape and guide the organization's impact relevant to their department's mission and vision.

Future Research and Implications

The future research and implications of CERC provide opportunities to identify the longitudinal influence of a structured research-based organization on research productivity. The identification of such influences creates a more thorough understanding of the processes which may foster and support a counseling research identity. CERC's organizational format and the standardized assessments created in order to study related research variables offer additional empirical support for previous research findings. Furthermore, the portability of the CERC organization may make it possible for other counseling departments and institutions to adopt the CERC model for their students and subsequent research may be gathered regarding their reported outcomes.

The collaboration between universities through the development of CERC acts as a catalyst in the counseling profession to adopt the CERC model. The adoption of such a model potentially leads to the recognition of a counseling research identity as being parallel to that of a practitioner identity. The promotion of research through the vehicle of the CERC model leads to the enhancement of counseling and counselor education departments' research productivity. The ramifications of such productivity have beneficial effects for the reconnection of science and practice. The provision of best practices for clients has been traditionally and contemporarily informed by practice, thus suggesting that increased research within the counseling field would greatly contribute to clients' well-being.

It is within the scope of CERC to create a positive environment for students and faculty wishing to pursue similar research interests. The pursuit of such interests grounded within the framework of CERC offers numerous benefits for the professional and personal development of its members. The increased sense of connectedness within counseling departments, as well as between students and faculty, provides a setting to enhance the overall effectiveness in the preparation of counselors. CERC is an organization that strives to support a counseling research identity as

well as a sense of community. Mutually, these goals have far reaching implications for the counseling profession and all colleges and universities who wish to join this innovative organization.

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