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Residencies in an Online Doctoral Program

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Abstract

Online learning has become increasingly popular. With online learning, academic programs are combining residency experiences to support the development of key competency skills needed for learning. Doctoral programs in counselor education require an opportunity for professors to directly monitor and evaluate students' development of essential skills required for proficiency. This article shares three online doctoral students' reflections and experiences attending their residencies.

During the fall semester of 2010, there were 6.1 million students taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Additionally, 31% of all higher education students are taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In the recent State of the Union address, President Obama discussed his plan to increase the rate of college graduates from 40% to 60% by 2012 (Sturgis, 2012). In order to maximize our nation's graduation rates, President Obama wants colleges to increase online learning availability (Sturgis, 2012).

Traditional "brick and mortar" universities are currently offering more classes and even entire graduate programs online (Lee & Nguyen, 2007). In addition, there are some universities that offer 100% online programs. Although these programs are not plentiful, more schools are leaning towards offering an increased number of classes online with 65% of educational organizations emphasizing long-term strategic plans of incorporating online classes (Lee & Nguyen, 2007).

Strengths and Limitations of Online Learning

The availability of online programs is very enticing for many prospective students. One reason individuals choose the online format is because they can still maintain their day-to-day jobs and tend to their families (Schrire, 2006). Second, online programs offer students further flexibility and time to complete their assignments or edit them as needed, as well as the opportunity to work at their own pace (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011). Third, online programs promote the versatility of getting an education regardless of where one lives in the world. This allows students to increase one's understanding of different cultures as the diversity in online classes may be higher than traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

While online programs may be appealing to many individuals, this modality also entails a central drawback. The most common challenge discussed in the literature refers to students' feelings of isolation. Erichsen and Bollinger (2011) found that many international students feel isolated from their peers in online programs. Participants shared their feelings of being isolated from the university and the social opportunities that many undergraduate programs offer (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011). Isolation in online programs is then associated with lower satisfaction for students, increased attrition, and a decreased ability to measure the student's learning outcome (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). A study by Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) found 71% of participants were less satisfied with online learning as compared to traditional classroom learning specifically due to lack of community in the classroom.

Quality of Online Learning

Individuals who are unfamiliar with online learning may find themselves wondering if the quality of education is the same as traditional brick-and-mortar institutes. For counseling programs in particular, the quality can be substantiated by integrating the Council for Accreditation of Counselor Education and Supervision (CACREP; 2009) Standards as the student learning outcomes. CACREP Standards (2009) can be infused into the learning environment regardless of where the learning takes place.

Learning Outcomes in Online vs. Traditional Settings

Even though the CACREP Standards (2009) can be integrated into both online and traditional settings, some individuals may still be skeptical regarding the ability to master those standards given an online modality. For example, can students achieve the same understanding of the material, application of the material, or other areas that are deemed essential for course mastery? It was found that 67% of educational leaders felt that the learning outcomes for online classes were the same if not superior to traditional classes (Allen & Seaman, 2011, p. 5).

The learning outcomes for both traditional and online programs may vary depending on the strategies used to master the knowledge and skills. Unlike traditional schools where the students rely heavily on the professor for information, online programs require more reliance on course materials, course design, and interaction with other students (Kelly, Ponton, & Rovai, 2007). Brown and Green (2007) discussed that

traditional schools tend to rely heavily on facilitating group discussions and lecturing. On the other hand, online programs often require students to participate in a combination of activities on a weekly basis to include: assigned readings, discussion posts and responses, quizzes/tests, and assigned papers/projects (Brown & Green, 2007). Wang and Woo (2007) found that students in online programs were more comfortable, less aggressive, and offered more equal opportunities for group members to voice their opinions. All of these activities combined may promote increased communication skills (Smith & Shwalb, 2007) for students who attend online programs.

Learning Communities

One of the important aspects of online education is the creation of a learning community. Porter (2004) defined a learning community as “a group of people who communicate with each other across the Internet to share information, learn more about a topic, or work on a project of mutual interest” (p. 193). Students who engage in a learning community report feeling supported in the program (Glassmeyer, Dibbs, & Thomas Jensen, 2011). These communities in the online educational programs are often centered on sharing information, collaborating on projects, and engaging with peers. These activities then foster cooperation and mutual peer support (Baghdadi, 2011; McClure, 2007), which is critical to the students feeling that they belong to a community (Hudson, Hudson, & Steel, 2006). Hudson et al. (2006) found that students’ feelings of belonging were directly linked to their overall success and adjustment.

One way to create an environment focused on building learning communities is through social interactions, which is an essential element in how people gain knowledge (Brook & Oliver, 2003). Many programs integrate discussion boards to increase the learning community between the graduate students (Glassmeyer et al., 2011). This in turn may increase the quality of the education by allowing students to engage in different perspectives (Glassmeyer et al., 2011) and decrease dropout rates among graduate students (Lui, Magjuka, Bonk, & Seung-hee, 2007). Although using discussion boards as a means of building a successful learning community building may be beneficial, Dow (2008) found that students find it overwhelming to read all of the posts for the entire class and actually resent others for posting just to get points.

Another strategy online programs may use, particularly online counseling programs, is a residential colloquia. The creation of residential colloquia or residencies provides students with the social interaction that many crave, as well as the opportunity for faculty to evaluate, engage, and collaborate with students. Specifically, residencies promote the ability to “develop collaborative relationships with program faculty in teaching, supervision, research, professional writing, and service to the profession and the public (CACREP, 2009, Counselor Education and Supervision, Section II, Standard B.2). Due to the importance of building a learning community and meeting CACREP Standards, this study will focus on the integration of residencies in doctoral counselor education and supervision programs.

Residencies

One effort to increase a learning community and thus increase learning outcomes is to intertwine face-to-face components. Doctoral residencies in particular offer students a chance to demonstrate their knowledge in supervision, teaching, research and scholarship, counseling, and leadership and advocacy (CACREP, 2009, CES, Section IV, Doctoral Learning Outcomes). A residency is a set amount of time that a student must spend at a particular site in order to complete the educational program. Residencies can vary in length and are dependent on the enrolled program. There are different residency options to include: limited residency, extensive residency, and blended learning (Littlefield, 2012). The first option, limited residency, entails that the student attend a face-to-face requirement that lasts less than one semester such as weekend seminars or summer programs. Extensive residency may require much more from the student and ask for attendance in face-to-face classes for at least one semester. Finally, blended learning is a combination of both online and traditional learning classes (Littlefield, 2012). Despite the literature and research compiled on online learning, there is no known research specifically on residencies; therefore, this article will broaden the understanding of a residency as experienced by three doctoral level students in a counselor education and supervision program.

Social Learning Theory: Bandura

Albert Bandura (1986) introduced social learning theory with the basic understanding that people learn within social contexts through modeling and observation of behaviors. The process of imitation provided learners with a method for then engaging in desired behaviors and an introduction into new behaviors. Bandura developed three models to support his theory of learning: live model, verbal instruction, and symbolic. Live model refers to a person demonstrating a desired behavior, while verbal instruction is the description of the desired behavior in detail with instruction to the participant in how to engage in the behavior. Symbolic model of learning follows the idea of modeling, but it uses additional means of media to provide the demonstration (e.g., television, Internet, literature, and radio) and may be a real or fictional person.

Bandura (1986) also recognized that a learner's behavior, environment, and personal qualities reciprocally influence each other. He coined this reciprocal determinism, which is an important factor in social learning theory. The creation of four steps to achieve the new learned behavior begins with attention, which simply refers to attention being given to the features of the modeled behavior. Retention is the ability to remember the details and then reproduce the behavior. Reproduction reflects a learner's ability to organize his or her responses to the new modeled behavior to reproduce it. The development of the new behavior can be improved with practice. Finally, the most important component of motivation is required. It has been found that even with attention, retention, and reproduction, if motivation is not present, then the learner will not engage in the behavior (Boyce, 2011).

The application of social learning theory to residency experiences in the online learning community shows the importance of modeling skills and behaviors for online learners (Greener, 2009; Hrastinski, 2009; Salanova, Llorens, & Schaufeli, 2011; Sinclair

& Ferguson, 2009). Therefore, the simulated practice that residency programs in counselor education provide to students, with the verbal instruction provided prior to the attendance and throughout the residency program, could be expected to increase efficacy in these doctoral students. Regardless of online programs, the use of modeling is still required and important in online or blended programs and needs to be incorporated in order to continue to develop students as they enter the professional field (Greener, 2009). The use of residency programs for online educational programs allows the incorporation of verbal instruction with modeling of behaviors. Students also are provided with videos that discuss concepts throughout their coursework to provide another element of learning through the online program.

Salanova et al. (2011) found that enthusiasm as a positive affect had the strongest effect on activity engagement, and efficacy beliefs increased over time due to engagement and positive affect. This can be applied to residency experiences, providing evidence that students who have a positive experience, which may increase their self-efficacy of engaging in teaching, supervising, and group counseling skills may continue their involvement in the academic program and field. Importantly, as Bandura (1986) noted the essential component of motivation, Salanova et al. (2011) found that enthusiasm was a central component to increased levels of self-efficacy. Hrastinski (2009) acknowledged the physical and psychological tools that are required for the online learner and the need to move beyond talking and writing, even in these spaces. The increased engagement in activities that supports the online program will enhance the online learner.

Lived Experience of Attending Residencies

This self-reflection will discuss the experience of three students partaking in a limited residency for an online doctoral program. The three students were all female and ages ranged from 29–34. The experiences shared were reflections after participating in the various residencies required in the program.

Residency Duration

The requirements of this particular program entailed three residencies for a total of 20 credit hours: one 4-day residency and two 8-day residencies. The initial residency focused on meeting the professors and introducing various aspects of the online program requirements to the students; therefore, it is not vital to the topic at hand. Of particular interest for this article are the two intensive residencies that each occurred over 8 days. The use of the 8-day residency is representative in the field of counseling and appears typical. At the conclusion of this article, implications for doctoral students will be discussed as well as implications for online educators utilizing a residency format.

Program structure of residency. This online doctoral program integrated three residencies throughout the program of study. The first residency, which was 4 days in length, was required during the initial 3 months of enrollment in the doctoral program. The focus of this residency addressed the overall degree and general introduction to the program. While the residency did not require students to demonstrate any specific learning outcomes, it did provide students with their first opportunity to socialize with other doctoral students in the program and begin forming learning communities.

The second and third residencies were much more intensive in nature. They focused heavily on building learning communities and demonstrating specific CACREP (2009) Counselor Education and Supervision learning outcomes (teaching, supervision, counseling, research and scholarship, and leadership and advocacy). The second residency occurred at the middle of the students' program of study, while the last residency was integrated at the end of the three students' course requirements (prior to the dissertation process) for the program. Specific prerequisites were required to be completed prior to participating in both residencies. Due to the large emphasis on demonstrating the skills/practices for teaching and supervision (CACREP, 2009, Section IV, Standards B.1-2; D.1-3) during residency two, the teaching and supervision courses were prerequisites. These courses provided students with the educational components, knowledge base, and opportunity to develop one's personal supervision style.

Daily residency schedule. The typical schedule for a day during residency two for these students' experiences was approximately 10 hours long with minimal breaks between seminars. During this residency, the students received hands-on experience in being an effective gatekeeper for the profession. The co-teacher modeled how to properly employ certain techniques and skills relevant to handling difficult students, documenting and effectively addressing issues that were not related to academia (students who are not a good fit for the counseling field, inappropriate language or behavior during residency, etc.), and serving as the guiding force on how to be effective gatekeepers for the profession. In addition to the teaching, supervision, and educational seminars, the three students spent on average 5 hours per day preparing to teach the next day or completing coursework required in their other online classes.

The third residency was more intense than the second with the average number of hours spent during the day equating to 11. Parallel to residency two, the three students engaged in seminars, teaching, and supervision; however, the duration of weighted time spent completing each of the activities changed. For example, the number of hours spent teaching and supervising the master's-level students increased while the number of hours spent in educational seminars decreased only slightly. The last residency further integrated the CACREP (2009) learning outcomes associated with demonstrating skills in counseling, research and scholarship, and leadership and advocacy. In order to demonstrate these skills/practices, students were required to co-lead a group counseling process group with the master's level students, present an overview of their dissertation proposal, and attend faculty meetings to discuss the current needs of the master's-level students. Throughout the 8 days, the students received daily feedback both from their co-teachers as well as two formal feedback sessions with the doctoral faculty. When the three students were not actively engaged in the structured day-to-day activities, they completed on average 5 additional hours per day preparing for the following day's teaching and group counseling activities, the dissertations proposal that was presented to faculty members (doctoral and master's-level faculty attended based on their interest of the topic) and peers, as well as completing academic requirements for other course-related work.

Specific experience during third residency. The first day of residency began with a check-in where each student needed to sign in and collect their nametags and programs for the residency. The program provided an explicit schedule for each student dictating where they needed to be each day of the residency. Shortly after check-in ended,

the program began at 3:00 p.m. with a welcome meeting followed by a workshop that targeted professional identity.

The next 6 days of residency followed a rigorous schedule. Doctoral students focused on increasing their teaching and supervision skills by being pre-assigned to a faculty member from the master's program in mental health counseling. Students were expected to meet with their supervisor in their free time to plan the teaching topics for each day. Every morning started by 8:00 a.m. and consisted mostly of teaching counseling skills to master's students. During this time, faculty members from the doctoral program would conduct spontaneous observations of the doctoral students teaching. The second half of the mornings consisted of attending workshops to further develop their skills as educators, supervisors, and researchers. After a break for lunch, the afternoon consisted of more workshops on similar topics, supervising the master's-level students, running a 2-hour processing group with the master's-level students' clinical taped sessions, and attending daily faculty meetings. Some evenings also included workshops, presentations, or additional meetings with faculty members.

After all of the daily requirements for the residency were completed, the doctoral students had little downtime. One of their nightly responsibilities included planning for the following day activities to deliver during their classes or group counseling sessions with the master's-level students. In addition to this preparation, students needed to continue their weekly responsibilities for their non-residency classes, which included weekly discussions and papers. Finally, students attending the third CES residency had to prepare and deliver a culminating oral presentation that focused on the student's upcoming dissertation research. The presentation served as the final evaluation of each doctoral student; therefore, it was essential to deliver a thorough, research-based presentation.

The last day of residency was a half-day and was concluded by noon. The last morning consisted of one-on-one meetings with each doctoral student and two to three faculty members. The faculty members evaluated each student's ability to demonstrate all of the required student learning outcomes effectively and communicated the feedback to each student. The faculty presented evaluations for both the student's teaching, supervision, and oral presentation as well as informed the CES student if they passed the residency or needed to complete further requirements before receiving a satisfactory grade. After all of the individual meetings were finished, there was a culminating activity for the CES students.

Self-Reflections

This self-reflection provided insight to the following questions: What is the lived experience of a residency program in an online counselor education and supervision doctoral program? Does the residency experience provide students with the learning community interactions similar to that of a brick-and-mortar experience?

Strengths of a Residency

Sense of a learning community. The online learning environment can lack a certain sense of camaraderie or sense of belonging that is created in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. In this case study, the faculty members did their best to create a learning

community during the residency experience through one-on-one discussions with each student and topic sessions to discuss ideas or process their experiences. This opportunity allowed the students a chance to match faces with their professors' names who taught some of their classes. In addition, it helped the students to understand the professors are more than people responding to our posts and grading our assignments.

The ability to see the professors as friendly and approachable allowed the three students to feel comfortable talking to them about their own strengths and areas for growth. This in turn created a long-term sense of support once the student returned home. The sense of a learning community that was established over the seemingly short 8 days of residency was difficult to leave and return to "normal" everyday life. The residency created an environment where the students were surrounded by peers and faculty who had similar interests and commonalities.

Although the opportunities for collaborative discussions were short and did not occur often, they were great opportunities to share and exchange ideas. Sometimes the students discussed with faculty or each other more professional topics such as research interests or interventions to use with clients and students (from those who have experience with teaching at the college level). Other times, the students desired more of a friendship with peers in the program and chose to facilitate those connections through personal conversations. Each of these interactions provided the students with a sense of community by providing a support system of peers who were going through a similar experience. The students related to each other and discussed how the residency experience positively and negatively affected their lives.

Networking. An important piece of the residency experience was the relationships, both personally and professionally, that were created. During the day when the students were presenting their topic sessions and interacting with faculty members and master's-level students, they were provided opportunities to network with others. Due to the limited time allotted for the residency, a lot of information was presented and all the hours in the day were maximally utilized. As the official residency day ended, students only had small amounts of time to network and get to know one another on a more personal basis. The students in this case study shared dinner and lunch together, exchanged clinical experiences, and shared personal stories, which encouraged both a collegial and friendly relationship.

Challenges of a Residency

New experiences can often induce feelings of anxiety and uneasiness. The residency experience was several days long, academically challenging, and skill development was evaluated during every aspect of the experience. While the students academically engaged for more than 10 hours a day in the residency experience, they also continued coursework and professional work responsibilities and balanced family responsibilities while away at the residency. As a result of the juggling of these equally important roles, challenges arose at the residency experiences.

Emotional challenges. During the 8-day residency, it was expected that the students would engage in teaching opportunities and some supervisory opportunities with master's-level students, who were also receiving face-to-face opportunities. While co-teaching, co-counseling, and co-supervising were great opportunities for the students to develop their skills, it was significantly challenging for students who had no prior

experience, specifically in teaching. The teaching experience in general produced anxiety, nervousness, and ambiguity for those who had not taught.

In addition to the feelings associated with teaching, the students experienced a lot of fear and apprehension because they were constantly under the scope of professors watching them. Since many students had never met the faculty members evaluating them, it was often nerve-racking and debilitating. Since residencies were the only opportunities for students to exhibit the necessary skills required to be a successful counselor educator and scholar practitioner, the level of pressure that was present was extremely high. This intense pressure potentially skewed the students' ability to illustrate all of their skills because they may have "messed up" due to the stressful circumstances in which they were evaluated.

There were emotional challenges faced during the teaching and evaluation components of the residency and also the difficulties the students faced balancing the roles of student, parent, husband or wife, family member, counselor, and all other roles that are held by the individual. As CES students who had other family and work obligations, the amount of energy that was expended during residency sometimes impeded the students' personal life and responsibilities by making them physically and emotionally absent. This sometimes led the student to feeling guilt ridden for prioritizing their needs before their work and family needs. Although the residency was filled with excitement and rejuvenation that came from engaging in new experiences and meeting new people, the students rode an emotional rollercoaster. This was created by an internal conflict for the individual, leading to a bittersweet experience.

Physical challenges. In addition to the mental and emotional challenges of residency was also the physical energy required from the student. The student's role in residency three was an amplification of their role in residency two. Due to the timing of residency three, the student was expected to lead a minimum of 2 days of teaching as well as facilitate daily group counseling sessions with the master's-level students for the entire duration of the residency. The faculty member whom was paired with the student was required to evaluate them on various elements such as their ability to lead the teaching segments and present material in a way that is absorbed by a diverse culture of adult learners, facilitate group sessions, and co-supervise the students on their skills as well as professionalism. The last residency was a time for the CES students to exhibit their skills prior to entering the internship experience; thus the evaluation was much more critical and imperative for the student to excel.

Along with these responsibilities, the student was required to attend their own educational sessions that provided information needed to begin the dissertation process. At this time, the doctoral students were working tirelessly on the preparation of a PowerPoint presentation for their dissertation topic that was presented to the faculty members and residency two students. Essentially this presentation was the foundation of their dissertation; thus it required a lot of preparation for the student on top of the heavily packed days of teaching, supervising, group counseling, and attending sessions. In addition to these responsibilities, students have additional course-related assignments that must be completed at the same time as residency occurs. The long hours and demands of the residency and course-related requirements left the students physically drained. The students sometimes felt sick from a lack of sleep and inability to take care of their physical needs.

Financial challenges. The last challenge for the students who attended the third residency was the overwhelming financial strains that occurred in order to attend the residency. For many students who were already in debt due to their education, the students also had family obligations such as paying mortgages and feeding their families. With all of these other financial commitments occurring at the same time, attending a residency further strained the economic stability of the students and their families. There were upfront costs to attend residency as well as the cost to fly to the residency (which was halfway across the country), the hotel stay for 8 days, and the food expenses for that time period. For the students in this case study, there was an overwhelming financial strain, which increased anxiety and stress levels.

Implications for Counselor Educators

The lived experience of the three authors supports the use of residencies as part of compliance with program standards as outlined by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2009). Counselor educators must evaluate the student learning outcomes as dictated by CACREP (2009); therefore, residencies afford this opportunity. Students must pass residencies or follow a remediation plan to address any skill deficit as identified by the program faculty at residency.

The use of residencies for online educational programs is essential, especially in counselor educator programs. Residencies provide an opportunity for the faculty to meet the students and ensure the responsibility of gatekeeping in the field (Foster & McAdams, 2009). It also allows for the students to engage in a learning community through a multitude of social interactions such as collegial support, friendships, employment contacts, publishing and presenting opportunities, establishment of dissertation committee, and the exchange of resources to successfully complete the program. As Bandura (1986) clearly identified and researched, motivation is a key component to social learning. For the current authors, the social interactions between the three individuals motivated them forward in the acquisition of their academic goals.

It is important for future studies to investigate the need to maximize the experience of residencies to effectively facilitate learning communities. For students who are making numerous sacrifices in their lives to attend residency, the actual residency experience should meet the needs of the students. Therefore, future studies are recommended to examine the most important components of residencies as identified by students. The integration of these needs, along with the program goals, can then be achieved to produce a thorough residency attendance.

Conclusion

The experience of residencies can vary from student to student. Regardless of the intensity of each day, the residencies can provide positive opportunities for CES students. The residencies allow students to interface with other people who share similar interests, aspirations, and who understand the requirements of the program. By allowing students to have a clear understanding of the residency experience, it can reduce some levels of stress and allow the student to engage in the many layers of networking that the residency

experience offers. Most importantly, it adds competent professionals into the field of counselor education.

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