

Article 8

Gatekeeping in Counselor Education: Experiences of Terminating Students for Nonacademic Concerns

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Abstract

Counselor educators are required by both the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2005) as well as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2009) to serve as gatekeepers to the counseling profession. In this role, counselor educators ensure the safety of future clients and the counseling profession, meaning they have the responsibility to prevent students of concern from entering the counseling profession. While this duty of counseling educators is necessary, it is not often easy. This phenomenological study explored the experiences of five counselor educators from across the country with gatekeeping (terminating) a counselor-in-training for nonacademic concerns.

In order to prepare students for their future as mental health providers, counselor educators are responsible for academic and skill-based competence of counselors-in-training. Perhaps the most significant yet least objective role for counselor educators is determining their students' personal, ethical, and emotional suitability to the practice of counseling. Bernard and Goodyear (2004) refer to this role as that of *gatekeeper*. For the purposes of this study, *gatekeeping* is defined as the process of terminating a counselor-in-training from a master's level counseling training program for nonacademic reasons, thereby impacting the student's ability to enter the counseling profession.

The role of gatekeeper has been mandated by both the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The ACA Code of Ethics (2005) requires counselor educators to serve as gatekeepers for the profession. Specifically, Section A.1.a indicates the primary responsibility of a counselor is to, "Respect the dignity and promote the welfare of clients" (p. 4). Additionally, Section A.4.a., requires "counselors act to avoid harming their clients, trainees, and research participants and to minimize or to remedy unavoidable or unanticipated harm" (2005, p. 4). Section F.9.a. requires counselor educators to provide ongoing feedback throughout the training program. As part of this, Section F.9.b. indicates counselor educators offer support when a counselor-in-training is

demonstrating difficulty through a remediation plan or consultation in a timely manner. The CACREP standards (2009) require that when “evaluations indicate that a student is not appropriate for the program, faculty members help facilitate the student’s transition out of the program and, if possible, into a more appropriate area of study” (p. 5).

According to the research, it is likely that counselor educators will be required to serve as gatekeepers at some point in their careers (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). Available gatekeeping research uses quantitative methodology and tends to focus on the ethics associated with gatekeeping and the remediation of students who have been acknowledged as “impaired” by faculty (Bradey & Post 1991; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; McAdams & Foster, 2007; Wilkerson 2006). While these discussions are relevant to the topic and performance of gatekeeping, there is a lack of research that addresses the subjective experiences of counselor educators as they enact that role.

Conceptual Framework and Existing Literature

Defining Impaired Counselors-in-Training

Bernard and Goodyear (2004) described counselor-in-training impairment as those “nonacademic traits that interfere significantly with trainee performance” (p. 39). They further defined impairment as, “[n]ot only a reversal of previously adequate functioning, but incompetence or the inability to attain minimal performance standards” (p. 39), which includes ethics as well as professional behavior.

Supervision in Counselor Education

Supervision is a process of self-regulation for the profession, in which “the professions control who is admitted to practice, set standards for members’ behavior, and discipline incompetent or unethical members” (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004, p. 2). Additionally, supervision “provides a means to impart necessary skills, socialize novices into the profession’s values and ethics, protect clients, and monitor readiness of supervisees to be admitted to the profession” (p. 2). Supervision helps to maintain the standards of the field. Bernard and Goodyear (2004) further defined supervision as “an intervention provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior member or members of that same profession... serving as a gatekeeper for those who are to enter the particular profession” (p. 8). There are two purposes of providing supervision to counselors-in-training: to promote the wellbeing of the client and to support the supervisee’s development as a counselor (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004).

Gatekeeping Role and Models

McAdams, Foster, and Ward (2007) argued counselor educators are “mandated to serve as ‘gatekeepers’ for the profession, protecting the rights of counseling service consumers by ensuring that only those students who are qualified are permitted to matriculate toward a graduate degree and licensure” (p. 213). Gaubatz and Vera (2002) maintained that perhaps the role of gatekeeper is not being enforced, as their research suggests 4-5% of counselors-in-training have insufficient interpersonal skills or psychological health to provide safe and effective care to clients. They argue that many other students who would be considered impaired are “untouched by gatekeeping procedures” (p. 294). Gaubatz and Vera further reported more incidents of “gateslipping”

by faculty who reported more concern about being sued or receiving blemished teaching evaluations, in addition to institutional pressures not to screen (p. 299). Also of interest, the researchers' findings suggested non-tenured faculty reported greater concerns of institutional pressures and threats of poor teaching evaluations, while both tenured and non-tenured expressed the concern of legal ramifications. They also argued that CACREP accredited programs with more formal processes experienced gateslipping rates of 2.5% of their students, compared to 6.6% of non-CACREP accredited programs. Therefore, they conclude that formal evaluation procedures are imperative for "ethically sound professional training" (p.304).

Ethical Considerations in Gatekeeping

There are a number of ethical considerations when discussing the issue of gatekeeping in counselor education. The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2005) outlines key guidelines for counselor educators in working with counselors-in-training, with the specific intention of promoting the welfare of the counselors' future clients (Section F.1.a). As means to do this, the Code addresses the welfare of counselors-in-training and in so doing, requires supervisors to inform students of the policies, procedures, and their due process rights as students (Section F.4.a). The Code also requires counselors-in-training to be informed of their progress in their training program through which, "[s]upervisors document and provide supervisees with ongoing performance appraisal and evaluation feedback and schedule periodic formal evaluative sessions throughout the supervisory relationship" (Section F.5.a; p. 14; ACA, 2005). In addition, counselor educators must explicitly detail the "levels of competency expected, appraisal methods, and timing of evaluations" (Section F.9.a; p. 15, ACA, 2005). Through this role, supervisors become aware of the limitations of supervisees that might impede performance and provide remediation when necessary. This also provides an opportunity for the counselors-in-training to make any necessary changes in their performance and/or behavior. Section F.9.b requires counselor educators to assist counselors-in-training who demonstrate difficulty in attaining the competencies necessary to be an effective counselor. Counselor educators should "assist students in securing remedial assistance when needed, seek professional consultation and document their decision to dismiss or refer students for assistance, and ensure that students have recourse in a timely manner to address decisions to require them to seek assistance or to dismiss them and provide students with due process according to institutional policies and procedures" (p. 16). The Code also requires counselor educators to provide counseling referrals to students, if counseling is a required component of the student's remediation (Section F.9.c, ACA, 2005).

Also critical are the ethical considerations for students. Section F.8.b of the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2005) requires counselors-in-training to obtain professional services for themselves when their "physical, mental, or emotional problems are likely to harm a client" (p. 14). They should resist from seeing clients during this time and inform their supervisor. Should the counselor-in-training not satisfy the requirements set out by the Code and recommended by their faculty, supervisors may recommend the student for termination from the program, and/or refuse a student for licensure.

Conceptual Framework Summary

There is a gap in the research related to the unique and subjective experiences of counselor educators in gatekeeping. This includes the difficulties in balancing competing ethical and institutional demands and the intrapersonal issues that arise from the act of gatekeeping, etc. It is to be hoped that this and other qualitative research will aid future and current counselor educators in understanding the myriad complexities of this essential responsibility.

Method

A phenomenological approach was used in this study to uncover the experiences and the essence of the experiences of the participants. For the purposes of this study, Max van Manen's (1990) Hermeneutical approach to phenomenology was used. To this end, the researcher was "[o]riented toward lived experience and interpreting the 'texts' of life" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59), and facilitated an understanding of what it is "really like" (van Manen, 1990, p. 42) to experience gatekeeping as a counselor educator.

Purposive sampling was used to identify and select five participants for this phenomenological study. The following criteria were necessary for participation:

1. Be employed full-time as faculty member at a CACREP accredited counselor training program;
2. Have an experience in gatekeeping a counselor-in-training for nonacademic concerns; and
3. Willingness to participate in two or more recorded telephone interviews and member checks.

In an attempt to minimize threats to the validity or trustworthiness of a qualitative study, triangulation, reflexivity, thick description, clarifying researcher bias, and member checks were utilized to reduce threats to the trustworthiness of the results (Maxwell, 2005).

First round interviews were conducted with each of the participants over the phone. The first round of interviews focused on one broad question: What is your experience in gatekeeping a counselor-in-training for nonacademic concerns?

Results

First Round Thematic Analysis Results

As a result of the thematic analysis, the experiences described by the five participants in this study resulted in the identification of three essential themes – *support*, *responsibility*, and *discomfort as a result of role dissonance*. Collectively, these experiences provided a deeper understanding of the experience of gatekeeping a counselor-in-training for nonacademic concerns.

Support/validation. It became apparent through conversations with participants that support/validation was an essential theme in their experience of gatekeeping a student for nonacademic concerns. Whether the discussion was grounded in the desire for additional support during their individual experiences, or sheer gratitude for the support participants' received in their experience, it appeared a critical part of each of the

participant's experiences. The themes of support/validation are expanded by the subthemes—from faculty members, from students, and from others.

From faculty members. *Edward:* This was literally my second semester as a faculty member. Frankly, [I had] some insecurity about where I stood on some of the questions, which is why it was nice to always have another faculty member there to bounce things off of and compare notes. One of the faculty members gave me feedback, 'at the end of the day, they pay you for your professional judgment. And if, in your judgment, that student shouldn't be a counselor, that's really all we need to know.' That was an incredible relief just to have it framed that way.

From students. *Charlotte:* The student was almost harmful to clients, which were at that time other master's of counseling students complaining about their counselor. So there was a lot more evidence just around what I was seeing from others' perspectives, and I think that also made it easier to follow through with areas that I was concerned about.

From others. *Dot:* We also have a lot of resistance from our graduate college to eliminate anyone from our program. We get no support from them. We don't like to draw a lot of attention to these cases because we know it's right, but yet we know we don't get any support going to the chain of command. I think a lot of it comes down to, they (graduate school) don't want a lawsuit, they don't want any bad press especially right now in these economic times, the last thing the university needs is any student saying, "Why won't you let me stay?"

Responsibility. Also significant to the participants' experiences was the theme of *responsibility*. As counselor educators, the participants in this study felt the demands of the various responsibilities associated with gatekeeping a counselor-in-training for nonacademic concerns. Participants identified responsibility *for self*, *for the student* (with nonacademic concerns), *for future clients/profession*, and one participant specifically mentioned the responsibility for the *greater community*.

For self. *Edward:* The parts that I was less deterred about initially were where should that threshold be for me? Does it have to be that this doesn't feel right? Or this doesn't feel right and I've seen new examples of poor behavior twice or three times? What exactly is the tipping point when I say, enough is enough? I think that over time, that part of it has gotten a little bit clearer, but on the front end it is still that gut feeling, this doesn't feel right initially. The take home message for me in a lot of ways is that as counselors and counselor educators, we really do need to trust our gut. And it's nice and important to be able to back that gut up with evidence, but that really might be the best barometer for me... this doesn't feel right and so I need to pay closer attention and see where it takes me.

For the student. *Dot:* ...you could tell the student was angry and I would be, too, if I were in her shoes, putting that much energy into something, thinking that's what I was going to do... we don't take pleasure in failing students out...

For future clients/profession. *Bob:* ...we felt that it's more important, the gatekeeping role is so crucial... that we prioritize that over whether or not we were going to get sued by the student... this person is not a good match for what we are expecting, because this is somebody who then would go out and be working with clients in the world. And I was concerned about the student's ability to do that. I wanted to prevent harm from taking place... the student ended up getting into one of the other helping

professional programs on campus, like marriage and family therapy program or something... which was an issue for us, because we didn't have a release of information to communicate with that program about our concerns.

For greater community. *Edward:* One of the real challenges in some of the CACREP language is about counseling folks into another line of work. We try to have that conversation with people, but my hunch is that more often than not, what happens is that people look for someplace else that they can go. I would be a little bit surprised if somebody said, you know, so I'm not going to become a counselor because of your feedback, instead I'm going to become a computer engineer or something. My hunch is that they're going to hear what they want to hear from that which is, this program isn't a good fit for you, rather than this isn't the right profession for you...

Discomfort as a result of role dissonance. The final essential theme identified in the first round of interviews was the experience of discomfort as a result of role dissonance. This particular theme included some of the areas that participants had difficulty talking about because it essentially captured the complexity of balancing the importance of advocating for the student with the ethical obligation to protect future counseling clients. The struggle between the two resulted in a sense of role dissonance among the participants, which ultimately led to a level of discomfort about the situation.

Edward: ...consistent for me was that sort of uneasiness about having to take a deep breath and say, let's sit down and talk about this because you are not measuring up... the worst part of the process for me is to have the first conversation because you can almost read it on the student's face that they are either angry and resistant to the idea or absolutely have no sense of it and are sort of crestfallen because of it. I don't enjoy having those conversations. It might also be that this was so clear that we not only had that gut feeling but also several different point of data to be able to say these are the issues that you don't seem to be recognizing or responding to... it's still difficult.

Second Round Thematic Analysis Results

Participants were asked the following questions: 1) Reflecting on the identified themes and subthemes, is this what the experience was really like for you? 2) What more do you have to say about your experience in gatekeeping counselors-in-training for non-academic concerns?

The results of the second round thematic analysis uncovered additional significant details related to each participant's experience in gatekeeping counselors-in-training for nonacademic concerns. Participants described more information with regard to the three identified essential themes – support/validation, responsibility, and discomfort as a result of role dissonance. In an effort to capture their total experience, participants were also given the opportunity to further reflect on the subthemes identified by the researcher – *of faculty, of students, and of others* with regard to support/validation. Additional subthemes were explored under the essential theme of responsibility – *for self, for the student of concern, for future clients/profession, and for greater community/others*. The use of direct participant experience is critical for the selected methodology. For the sake of brevity, the following participant experiences were included to further illustrate the specific themes and subthemes identified by all participants.

Support/validation.

Of faculty. *Edward:* It was very much about finding support from some of the more senior faculty – what was their perspective on it? I think that that validation, you can trust your own judgment. That was probably the greatest support that I got from them – comparing notes about what we have seen in other classes. I think in some way that was a way for them to say, you’re not in this on your own. That’s the kind of support that I think was most meaningful from the other faculty. No one person is going to make these decisions or should make these decisions.

Of students. *Charlotte:* Students would not want to be their [student of concern] partner. They would not want to be in partnerships or dyads with other students that struggled. And those were students that struggled not just because they struggled with a couple skills in that area, but it’s because interpersonally all around. The students were maybe setting up defenses or very guarded and the other students did not want to work with them for that purpose, or they didn’t want to work with them because they had no boundaries whatsoever at all. It definitely was a threat across many settings when students struggled in regards to their counseling skills and counseling demonstrations.

Of others. *Dot:* I still stay in contact with mentors from other universities. Sometimes I’ll call them on a case. That’s very validating when I hear somebody else at another university that’s right or someone who knows CACREP really well or at a conference.

Responsibility.

For self. *Edward:* When I find myself literally losing sleep over something, whether this was in clinical practice, or now as a faculty member, if I’m losing sleep over a client or a student, something is amiss. That was one of those cues and it’s a very clear one that I need to take some action. I’m not saying that I’m going to dismiss everybody in the program that I’m worried about that might cause me to lose a night of sleep, but that one was really weighing on me. I think in some ways that was a signal for myself that I needed to be sure that I was paying closer attention to doing the things I needed to do. The question that I often pose to people when we’re talking about gatekeeping and when I’m doing trainings about gatekeeping and supervision is, ‘would you refer a family member to this person as a counselor?’ If I can’t see sending somebody that I care about to go to this person for counseling, then they shouldn’t be graduating from the program.

For the student of concern. *Charlotte:* I really wanted them (student) to be successful and succeed, and I felt like I had a personal investment in that. Then having to come to the realization that this isn’t going to happen and so now you need to put your energies in a different direction of in a sense consulting with the person and helping them see other paths that they can be successful in was really a difficult thing to do. That was really difficult and took a lot of time.

For future clients/profession. *Dot:* I don’t have the luxury to be a student advocate because I have to be their clients’ advocate for their future clients. I definitely have a responsibility to do that.

For greater community/others. *Amelia:* For other students as well because I think that there’s a bit of, it’s just very – he [the student of concern] was very toxic and so I’ve felt compelled and responsible to kind of contain him a little bit so he didn’t have just a negative impact on students as well. The students that he was in the class with because I know it was really, that was a rough stretch when he was in that class and some students

really had a hard time with that as well. So I think I did feel a responsibility as a professor to those other students in the class as well.

Discomfort as a result of role dissonance. *Charlotte:* I think there's so many different levels of discomfort. One is communicating the process to other faculty members and wondering what the support will look like for the first few times that I experience it. Second discomfort was how much am I ruining their (the student's) life in this moment, even though I believe everything happens for a reason and we grow from these experiences where we maybe aren't as successful, that that's where the real growth in life occurs. Students would reflect or state really directly, 'you're ruining my life.' That would feel, for me, very horrible, just horrible because I'm a very sensitive person and so thinking that in some way I'm responsible for ruining someone's life, which I know I'm not the sole responsible person for this event and it's not just based on one particular event and really it's a pattern that the student has presented over time.

Participants were given the opportunity to provide further information not identified in the first round of interviews related to their experiences, and none of the participants articulated anything new that required the identification of a new theme or subtheme. Therefore, the second round interviews and thematic analysis further established the significance of the essential themes and subthemes for each participant's experience in gatekeeping a counselor-in-training for nonacademic concerns.

Implications

The result of the current study found that gatekeeping counselors-in-training for nonacademic concerns can be extremely difficult and a heavy responsibility. The counselor educators in this study experienced discomfort as a result of the role dissonance and responsibility. Having a better understanding of this should inform curriculum at the doctoral level in gatekeeping students from the counseling profession. At the doctoral level, students may utilize the results of this study to more fully understand the implications and experiences of the ultimate form of gatekeeping, in order to better prepare for their role as gatekeeper. Additionally, counselor educators training students in a doctoral training program may utilize this study to begin discussions surrounding the potential difficulties they may encounter as a faculty member as well as a discussion of balancing the responsibilities of the counselor educator to the parties identified by the participants. Because gatekeeping is such a critical element of the role of counselor educator, doctoral students pursuing a career in the field need to be educated to be better prepared.

This study may also inform departmental gatekeeping policies and procedures, including the need for support of faculty members involved in gatekeeping a student for nonacademic concerns. On an individual level, this study may provide individual counselor educators the opportunity to connect to another individual's experience, thereby normalizing thoughts and feelings related to his or her individual experience.

Limitations

While the intent of this qualitative study was not generalizability of the results, a larger sample size may have provided additional insights and experiences with regard to

gatekeeping counselors-in-training for nonacademic concerns that could have further enhanced the study. Current results should be considered as a starting point for additional research and the initial themes identified may serve as a guide. While a larger sample may have uncovered additional themes, the current themes were identified through saturation of the 5 participants' experiences, which was the goal of the current study. A second potential limitation was that each of the interviews was conducted over the phone. An opportunity for face-to-face interaction may have been helpful in order to more fully gauge and respond to nonverbal body language. Additionally, the face-to-face opportunity through the use of Skype or other technologies may have helped established a different relationship with each participant, instead of simply building a relationship over the telephone.

Conclusion

Gatekeeping is an essential role of a counselor educator. Understanding the lived experience of the difficult and emotion-filled event of ultimately dismissing a student from a counseling program may be helpful to current and future counselor educators. For current counselor educators, understanding the experience of gatekeeping a student may provide insight into something they have yet to experience. It may also provide current counselor educators the opportunity to evaluate their current practices when working with students of concern and consider how they may manage the experience differently. Lastly, current faculty educators currently involved in the gatekeeping experience may benefit from the results of this study in that it may help to normalize their feelings and experiences. With regard to future counselor educators, the results of this study may help them prepare for their role as a gatekeeper to the counseling profession.

According to the results of this study, five counselor educators at a CACREP accredited counselor education training programs identified three essential themes and subthemes that described the experiences of the participants in gatekeeping a counselor-in-training for nonacademic concerns—support/validation (*of faculty, of students, of others*), responsibility (*for self, for the student of concern, for future clients/profession, and for the greater community/others*), and discomfort as a result of role dissonance.

Research suggests that counselor educators will likely have to gatekeep a student during their career (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006). Gatekeeping counselors-in-training for nonacademic concerns is a difficult but required role of a counselor educator. This study described the experiences of five counselor educators in gatekeeping and provided readers the opportunity to more fully understand the lived experiences of five counselor educators.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm