Doctoral-level CES Students' Lived Experiences Pursuing Courses in an Online Learning Environment

Sara Bender
Central Washington University, benders@cwu.edu

Jennifer Werries
New Pathways Counseling Services, LLC, dr.jennifer.werries@gmail.com

Doctoral-level CES Students' Lived Experiences Pursuing Courses in an Online Learning Environment

Abstract

The increase in accredited online CES doctoral programs coupled with established online learning guidelines suggests that counselor educators understand the value of the online medium in training emerging counselor educators. Given the elevated level of nuanced learning that occurs within graduate studies, it is fair to assume that doctoral-level learning experiences and outcomes are likely to vary by field. To date, there remains minimal published research related to understanding the dynamics within online counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral programs. The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to understand the experiences of doctoral CES students pursuing a degree from an online CACREP-accredited program. Three primary themes emerged that encapsulate the fundamental components of this type of learning endeavor. These themes include: accessibility, connection, and perception. Limitations and implications for learning and teaching are discussed.

The presence, importance, and role of online courses and programs cannot be ignored in the landscape of higher education. From 2012 to 2016, the number of students enrolled in distance courses increased by 17.2%, while on-campus enrollment decreased by 6.4% (Seaman et al., 2018). Students often pursue online courses due to their flexibility, the ability to spend less time away from work and family, reduced costs associated with traveling to class, and the ability to obtain a reputable and accredited degree without having to manage the logistics of an on-campus program (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012). Online courses also provide educational opportunities to those bound by disability and/or location as well (Sells et al., 2012; Snow et al., 2018).

Past literature indicates that some faculty and administrators are resistant to online learning, citing concerns regarding the efficacy of its practice, including students' ability to master learning outcomes in an online environment (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Perry, 2017; Snow et al., 2018). Subsequent research refutes such assertions, indicating that the achievement of learning outcomes is comparable between online and face-to-face academic environments (Redpath, 2012), suggesting that online learning is a viable practice. Consequently, many institutions have shifted their focus from the provision of stand-alone distance courses to the development of comprehensive online curricula and programs (Deshpande, 2017). The field of counseling follows this trend. From 2014 to 2019, there was an 151.9% increase in online programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2019), including a 75% increase in accredited online Counselor Education and Supervision (CES) doctoral programs (CACREP, 2019). This growth prompted the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Technology Interest Network (ACES; 2017) to establish guidelines for best practices within online curricula. The accreditation of online counselor education programs coupled with the development of the ACES Guidelines for Online Learning (ACES, 2017)

suggests that counselor educators value the online program format as an effective means of formal professional training.

Graduate students constitute approximately 1/5 of all online enrollments (Seaman et al., 2018). Accordingly, much of the published empirical research describing online learning reflects trends in undergraduate education, specifically. The albeit limited research regarding graduate-level online learning suggests, however, that this mode of instruction may be an effective means of delivering advanced training, especially in the education of emerging helping professionals. Cummings et al. (2013), for example, studied 100 students enrolled in a social work course, of which one-third were in an online section and two-thirds in a face-to-face section. They found the learning outcomes between the two learning modalities to be equivalent, and also discovered that online students felt more positive about their experiences. Similarly, more specific to the field of counseling, Watson (2012) found that master's level students enrolled in an online counseling skills course displayed higher levels of self-efficacy than their face-to-face counterparts, a potential outcome of self-paced learning and increased time invested in reviewing materials, which is common to online courses.

Given the elevated level of nuanced learning that occurs within graduate studies, it is fair to assume that doctoral-level learning experiences and outcomes are likely to vary by field. To date, there remains minimal published research related to understanding the dynamics within online counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral programs. Provided the increased rate of accredited online CES programs coupled with profound effect graduates from these programs may have on the future training of emerging counseling professionals, it is important to formally investigate the impact of such educational opportunities. With this in mind, the primary research question guiding the current study was: How do CES students experience online studies? The

purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of doctoral students pursuing a degree from an online CACREP-accredited CES program.

Literature review

Doctoral Attrition

Common factors impacting doctoral program attrition rates across disciplines include: a lack of self-efficacy (Maher et al., 2017), a perceived lack of faculty investment (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005), external obligations, a lack of motivation, or a change of professional priorities (Mahar et al., 2017). Conversely, the support of others, including family, friends, and faculty serves to mitigate such challenges, promoting program completion (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Kumar & Cole, 2017).

Within traditional campus-based CES programs specifically, researchers have found that aligning faculty mentorship style with learning style is one factor that contributes to students' success (Baltrinic et al., 2018). Closely related to this is preserving the working relationship between a student and his or her dissertation chair (Willis & Carmichel, 2011). Protivnak and Foss (2009) determined that departmental culture, mentoring, academics, support systems, and personal issues also affect CES students' program persistence.

Online Doctoral Experiences

Within the empirically-based literature, researchers have confirmed that learning outcomes, including concept and skills mastery, are analogous between traditional online and face-to-face graduate learning environments (Thompson, 2000). Terrell et al. (2012) maintain, however, that many online students are non-traditional, balancing academic studies with familial and professional obligations in a potentially less connected and supportive environment. As such, they cannot be approached in the same manner as traditional or on-campus students.

Within the available literature, mentorship, quality feedback, cultural sensitivity, peer support, and a sense of community were identified to be aspects that support student satisfaction, retention, and success in online doctoral programs (Berry, 2017; Byrd, 2016; Deshpande, 2016; 2017; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Murdock & Williams, 2011; Sells et al., 2011). Intentional instructor-learner interaction was identified as another foundational factor associated with high-caliber online doctoral experiences (Thompson et al., 2018). Collectively, this body of research suggests that a high level of structure and effective classroom management skills are particularly critical in online graduate environments; however the needs of online doctoral students may not be assumed to be standardized across disciplines. More formal investigations to understand how to effectively facilitate meaningful learning experiences within each field is warranted (Deshpande, 2017; Templeton et al., 2015)

While the available literature offers limited insight into online doctoral experiences, there remains a shortage of literature dedicated to providing insight into online CES programs in particular (Goodrich et al., 2011). Thus far, much of the available literature pertaining to online CES education is theoretical in nature, including that which: (a) recommends frameworks for teaching, (b) addresses pedagogy and best practices in distance education, (c) attends to ethical issues associated with the use of technology, and/or (d) focuses on facilitating the online classroom environment (Albrecht & Jones, 2004). More narrow examinations of components unique to CES curriculums are also available. For example, several studies regarding the efficacy of clinical supervision, a foundational component of CES curricula (e.g Bender & Dykeman, 2016; Renfro-Michel et al, 2016) are also available. Despite these developments in the literature, there remain no comprehensive studies examining how students experience online CES programs. Due to the steady growth of distance learning, the increasing prevalence of entirely online doctoral programs,

and the impact their graduates have on future counselors-in-training and client care, it is essential to examine this topic. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of doctoral CES students pursuing a degree from an online CACREP-accredited program.

Methods

Given the desire to better understand doctoral students' experiences engaging in online education, we pursued a qualitative research design. Specifically, we used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to better understand doctoral CES students' experiences within online education while simultaneously identifying how their understanding of these circumstances influenced their perceptions of the profession and their own professional development (Fade, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). IPA is particularly appropriate for this study because it combines attention to the lived experiences of participants with consideration to the influence that the researchers' personal beliefs may have on the interpretation of such occurrences (Smith et al., 2009). Given our own experiences as counselor educators with experience teaching classes both in-person and online, we recognized that we maintain several biases regarding principles of andragogy, best practices in counselor education, and online learning. Both researchers believe online learning to be a viable mode of teaching and learning within counselor education provided that educators establish a strong rapport with students, create well-developed learning activities, and engage in strong classroom management practices.

Once approval from the institutional review board was obtained, 25 doctoral level students enrolled in online CACREP-accredited counselor education programs (17 women, 8 men, age range: 23-57 years) were recruited to participate in one of three online focus groups. While focus groups are not typical within phenomenological research, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2009) suggest that this approach to data collection may be valuable when trying to stimulate open discussions for

the purpose of understanding context. Combining their own experiences with insights offered by others, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2009) assert that focus groups within phenomenology may offer the advantages of (a) facilitating more enriched dialogue, (b) providing opportunity to seek clarifications, and (c) confirming participants' understanding in real-time.

Each of the focus groups consisted of 6-10 participants, well within the proscribed recommendation that focus groups consist of between 5 and 12 participants (Krueger, 1994). We sought participants with variable ages, diverse endorsed demographics, and assorted professional experiences in an effort to ensure contrasting perspectives, allowing us a more in-depth understanding of the pursuit of online CES education. Despite our efforts to recruit a diverse participant pool, our sample remained fairly homogenous in some ways. All participants were (a) licensed mental health counselors, (b) actively enrolled in a CES doctoral program at a CACREP-accredited institution, and (c) pursuing their studies via an online program. Krueger (1994) suggested that some level of similarity across participants may be beneficial within focus groups, as participants may be more apt to engage in honest dialogue more readily when they perceive commonalities with others.

Participants resided throughout the country, making it impractical to conduct the focus groups in-person. Therefore, each of the three focus groups occurred via the Zoom™ platform with a Business Associate Agreement (BAA) in place as per HIPAA-HITECH guidelines. Prior to the scheduled focus group meetings, potential participants were sent an explanation of the study, a summary of participants' rights, as well as the link to the Zoom™ room, allowing them to determine the constraints of the study so that they could make an informed decision regarding their desire to participate.

The primary author served as the moderator for each of the three focus groups. As with all focus group designs, the primary author served in a peripheral role, facilitating a conversation between participants rather than serving as the nucleus of the data-gathering process via direct interactions with participants in an interview exchange (Palmer et al., 2010). Each focus group was recorded. Recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim and analyzed, first via open coding and then axial coding. Both members of the research team engaged in line-by-line coding of the transcripts, noting participants' experiences, concerns, and understandings (Smith et al., 2009). Then, we reviewed the data across transcripts, noting emerging themes. Finally, we discussed participants' concerns and experiences as embedded within the context of the online learning environment. Throughout this dialogue, we referred to Palmer et al.'s (2010) protocol to serve as a framework for reflection and catalyst for discussion, heeding their advice that their established protocol was not meant to serve as a formula to apply to other studies' data, but rather as prompts for reflection.

Results

Three themes emerged, which encapsulated the fundamental components of students' experiences pursuing an online Ph.D. in counselor education. They include accessibility, connection, and perception.

Accessibility

Participant students identified increased accessibility as one of the core elements that influenced their experiences pursuing an online CES program. Most participants across focus groups indicated that the online medium served as the single factor that allowed them to pursue doctoral-level training, which would have been unavailable to them otherwise. Many of the study's participants indicated that online education was the only option for achieving their long-term goals.

Comments such as, "I would not be able to pursue this degree if it weren't for the online option" and "If it weren't for online options, I would not be able to enroll in a CACREP program…, which is what I will need to work in higher education" were frequent.

Location

Location and student status were identified as primary barriers to pursuing doctoral-level CES studies in traditional brick-and-mortar programs. In some cases, students referenced being place-bound as an obstacle to pursuing face-to-face studies. Some participants indicated that their physical location afforded few to no options to pursue an accredited CES degree. One participant described her permanent residence as problematic. She explained, "In the state of Connecticut, there are no CACREP-accredited programs available to attend. There are actually no CES Ph.D. programs in the area." Citing access to accredited programs, in particular, another participant added, "There are a lot of people, like myself, who simply don't have a CACREP program around – [online] is the only way to pursue a CACREP program." Other factors related to placement also influenced some student participants' choice to pursue online education. One participant explained, "…being a military spouse, I don't stay in one state long enough to do a brick and mortar program."

Student Status

Student status, specifically that of being non-traditional students, also influenced participants' decisions to pursue online studies. Most participants endorsed simultaneously managing multiple roles such as full-time professional, parent, spouse, friend, etc. with that of student, indicating that the flexibility of online learning allows the ability to more efficiently balance the demands of each of these roles. One participant commented, "The flexibility that [online learning] affords me as a working professional and mom and all of the other roles that I

have in my life is key." Another added, "I've always been employed full-time, so I definitely needed it to fit around the work schedule, too." One participant commented, "The flexibility of being anywhere is key. I can be at home or traveling for work and still log-in, as required, and not miss anything."

Participants indicated that online programs allow them to pursue higher education without forcing them to compromise or give-up other key aspects of their lives. One participant explained, "In these types of programs, you're working with working adults and having the convenience of being able to do this at home, we can still…speaking personally…I could still get home, cook dinner, and make sure my kids are taken care of while still attending classes. Also, I have the piece-of-mind knowing I'm here. If there's an emergency, I can jump off and take care of it." The general consensus across focus group members was that the accessibility associated with online learning is more than a matter of convenience or flexibility; however, for some, it was a matter of basic opportunity. Common sentiments included statements such as "I would not be able to pursue this degree if it were not for the online option, you know?" and "If it was not online, I would never have joined a Ph.D. program in counselor education. Such an opportunity wasn't a realistic option for me."

Participants described accessing online programs as a matter of practicality beyond mere opportunity and flexibility, too. Some explained that online learning options might be particularly well-suited for those with limited resources. For example, one participated stated, "In my master's program, I had to commute an hour and a half- each way to attend class, so that took up a lot of time." Others commented in addition to saving time, pursuing online classes also allows students the opportunity to save on costs associated with gas and parking as well.

Diversity

Beyond accessing education in general, participants also discussed how the online medium allows them the opportunity to form relationships with a more diverse group of faculty and peers than would likely be found in a traditional brick-and-mortar program. One student who attends a smaller program commented, "[The university] is located in a rural area. It is difficult to lure great professors here and even harder to keep them here." Another participant expanded on this sentiment, stating, "Online education, to some extent, is democratizing and it allows the university to expand its global footprint, bringing people from all across the globe." Participants recognized that the online platform not only increases the diversity of potential faculty members but also expands the student pool as well. One commented, "It is less homogenous than all of the people in the area attending their local university program." Another participant reflected, "I look at my screen in class and amazed by who is in it. I have peers across the country and a couple even in other countries, like India, and my mind's just been expanded to hear their experiences." He added that this variability in perspectives is especially enriching to the study of counseling, as "it's easier to come in with blinders on and think, okay, this is how this process looks and how it must be practiced, but knowing other cultural practices helps us to reconsider that and inform our practice."

Although all participants across focus groups identified the potential diversity in online programs as a distinct advantage over traditional face-to-face programs, some recognized that being in different locations would require adjustment to the lack of familiarity with their peers' environment. One participant explained, "One challenge that I initially experienced, which I don't really see as a challenge anymore, is that everyone is in different locations. For me, I think that was hard because in my other studies, we had always discussed certain agencies that we all were

familiar with, and were able to actually put things together, and everyone was able to put in their piece".

Skills and Technology

Participants acknowledged that online learning is qualitatively different than other forms of learning. Via their dialogue, they identified the need for different learning skills and reliable technology as key components to their success in their online CES programs. In addition to the academic skills typical of graduate studies, such as the ability to access and synthesize literature, engage in critical thinking, etc., focus group participants suggested that they needed to increase their technological skills, to refine their time management, and to improve interpersonal communication skills to succeed in the online environment.

While technology serves as the conduit allowing access to their courses, participants simultaneously identified it as a frequent obstacle to their learning processes as well. Given their lack of control over their internet connections, some participants endorsed mild levels of anxiety regarding their ongoing ability to connect to synchronous class meetings. One participant commented, "The thing you can't get away from sometimes is internet connection. That is part of the technology. If I or the professor is somewhere where the reception is not very good, there's a lag, and that causes a lot of extra anxiety, whether it is me or them." Due to these circumstances, participants expressed some helplessness, as they relied on their Internet providers to facilitate their access to class. For those less proficient in navigating technology, this was especially stressful. Comments such as, "I also find it very challenging because I have a lot of anxiety about technology" were common across focus groups.

Connection

Another prominent theme that emerged was that of connection. One participant stated, "The ability to connect with our peers and with faculty is paramount." Participants commented that feeling connected with faculty and peers facilitates their learning experiences. One participant explained, "I'm a learner by discussion…by doing…by the social connection and interactions…. If I don't get it, my needs aren't met socially, and it compromises my learning processes." Another individual shared a similar sentiment, "It is very important to me to be able to have that interaction with everyone, especially as an extrovert…to stay motivated and to hear other people's ideas." In addition to facilitating the learning process, connection was also identified as a mediator against feelings of isolation. Isolation, for many participants, was a precursor for anxiety. One individual, who endorsed feeling disconnected from her university explained, "Right now, I feel like a feather in the wind. I'm not really sure what's happening…what's going on…there's a lot of uncertainty for me right now."

Establishing connections may be particularly difficult in the absence of real-time face-to-face interactions typical to brick-and-mortar programs. Participants recognized that establishing connections with others in an online CES program is possible but requires more explicit efforts than might be required in a traditional academic setting. Comments such as, "It is harder to get to know your classmates" were frequent across focus groups. The lack of opportunities for more informal organic interactions was also identified as an obstacle to establishing connection. One participant explained, "...Some of the best learning happens after you've had that 'aha' moment in class, and then you're talking to students or even the professor about it after." Another expanded, "In a traditional brick and mortar, we would have been able to walk out of class together and walk the halls and talk. It's a little bit, I feel, unnatural in the online world."

Communication patterns, competent faculty, access to synchronous interactions, and telepresence (a non-mediated virtual sense of presence in another location) (Lombard & Ditton, 1997) impacted participants' perceived levels of connection to their programs and universities. In general, participants expressed greater levels of satisfaction with their universities, an increased sense of commitment to their programs, and a stronger commitment to their learning processes when they were in frequent communication with peers and faculty, and also perceived higher levels of telepresence amongst their peers and faculty. These circumstances were typically facilitated by virtual synchronous interactions.

Communication

Communication patterns affected participants' feelings of connection with others in their respective online CES programs. One participant explained, "Trying to get things clarified through a distance is hard, especially...yes, you have their email, you have their phone number, but it's not the same…." A comment that reflects the general sentiments expressed by multiple group members was, "The communication often feels very one-sided." Participants expressed frustration with the non-organic nature of email communication, which they often had to pursue to connect with peers or faculty. A combination of response time, the amount of effort it takes to draft comprehensive email, and some hesitation due to concerns about bothering the person on the other end of the online connection, served as factors affecting such communications. Participants endorsed frequently feeling helpless in their ability to seek additional guidance regarding course materials, professional development opportunities, and general advising in a timely manner. One participant described her experience "I can't just go knock on someone's door. I can't show up at office hours, and when I've sent multiple emails, and they're not responding…. that's been huge for me". Other participants agreed, stating things such as "I agree not being able to go knock on

the door and just, like, stalk someone and wait until they come back to their office makes it harder."

Participants suggested that a lack of communication, especially by faculty and administration, not only compromises their sense of connection, but sometimes explicitly impedes their progress as well. One participant summarized this feeling, "I feel held hostage to others' communication, or lack thereof."

Group members described ineffective communication within online CES programs as especially ironic given that two primary functions of CES programs are to (a) train professionals to serve as advanced clinicians, and (b) prepare students to serve as future faculty members. Comments such as "counseling is all about proper communication" were frequent. Participants lamented that CES faculty have a professional obligation to consistently demonstrate high-caliber counseling skills, including active listening and appropriate responses. Similarly, participants emphasized the fact that as students in online CES programs they were not only learning course content but also actively considering what works in a CES classroom and what does not by observing faculty. One clarified, "…We learn teaching styles through this, too, and we are having professors model behavior for us, whether it is email communication, how active we are in class discussions, or whatever. That part is important, too, for all of us. We're watching every step that everybody makes."

Telepresence

Faculty communication patterns, mentorship, and the ability to navigate technology effectively facilitate students' sense of connection with their online CES programs. Per the participants, strong faculty telepresence often mitigates the effects of physical separation. Faculty's frequent and timely participation in asynchronous communication and authentic presentation in synchronous sessions contributed their perceived telepresence. Participants

reported that when they felt fully connected with their professors online, rather than experiencing them "as a name on a screen," they felt more valued as students, more motivated, and calmer in their academic pursuits. Participants commented, "When it comes down to an online program, I think that faculty really matter," and "I can tell professors who've had experience in strictly brick-and-mortar, or both."

Competent Faculty

Participants endorsed the need for online CES faculty that are competent across multiple domains, including those of: (a) teaching, (b) counseling, (c) mentorship/advising, and (d) using technology. Collectively, they recognized that all but the last of these should be evident in any high-caliber CES program and not limited to an online program. Thus, the quality that sets effective online CES faculty apart from face-to-face CES faculty is their efficient use of technology. One participant commented, "When professors don't know how to work the technology, and we're teaching them how to use [it], that's really frustrating for me." Participants indicated that faculty and the institutions that employ them are obligated to ensure that those teaching courses have access to and a mastery of technology that will fully engage students in the learning process and help to ensure the facilitation of their success.

Synchronous v. Asynchronous

While faculty can establish a sense of telepresence, to some degree, via frequent engagement in asynchronous communications such as email and discussion board assignments, synchronous modalities, such as the use of Zoom^{TM}, Adobe Connect^{TM}, and similar platforms were strongly preferred by most participants. They endorsed real-time interaction, access to nonverbal communication, and the accountability of having to actively engage in their courses rather than passively complete them, as clear benefits of synchronous communications.

Participants took the care to consider how synchronous classrooms may compare between counselor education and other fields. The consensus among participants was that synchronous modalities would most likely benefit all online students but is particularly important in the delivery of courses related to the helping professions, including counselor education. This sentiment was demonstrated via comments such as:

- "Being a relational community discipline, the synchronous element is extremely valuable."

- "Unlike other disciplines….I can see if I was doing, say, a strictly mathematics Ph.D., or a computer database management Ph.D., where I can simply go on and read the materials, master the formulas, and ask questions, that might work, but I need the relational element in counseling, even if it is just two-dimensional via the computer screen."

Some participants reflected on their experiences pursuing strictly asynchronous courses. In general, they reported learning less and feeling less motivated than when engaged in synchronous courses. They made comments such as:

- "I had to take two asynchronous classes, and I didn't learn a thing."

- "I didn't really have a professor. To this day, I couldn't tell you who taught it. I exchanged emails with someone but didn't actually have a relationship."

- "In asynchronous courses, the expectations are fewer. I did my discussion boards, and I answered the questions. I read just enough to answer the questions, if at all"

- "I just felt like I was taking exams and uploading papers. In asynchronous courses, there's no one holding you accountable, really. I didn't put forth half the effort I do when I have a professor staring at me."

Conversely, participants described rich opportunities for learning in the context of their synchronous courses. One participant commented, "I think the synchronous classes and being

really able to see everybody and interact with everybody really hones in on those interpersonal skills that we really try to work on and develop." Another person added, "...In the synchronous forum, we're seeing each other's' spaces and interacting. I mean we can see non-verbals, we can talk, and we can chat in the chat box…that's even a bit extra that you don't have in a classroom. It is added value compared to a brick and mortar situation." Another stated, "…that feedback from others, having shared experiences….that's been very helpful…I like being challenged by my classmates and my professors, too. I like the opportunity to say, "Well, this is what I was thinking' and to watch people's eyeballs go up. Having real-time conversations really affects the meaning for me." Synchronous learning opportunities provided participants with ongoing informal and formal feedback and promoted motivation and academic discipline.

In addition to the potential of facilitating more dynamic learning opportunities, participants also indicated that the use of synchronous teaching methods, in particular, increased their sense of connection with peers as well. Participants referred to the ability to see into each other's spaces – whether they be living or professional workspaces, as one way to gain insight into each other's personalities. One participant commented, "I think we get a better sense of who everyone is to some degree, too, because they're more relaxed in their own spaces."

Synchronous technology also seems to facilitate mentoring by online CES faculty as well. Mentorship helps students prepare for their future careers by supporting the development of professional identity, providing research and publication opportunities, as well as offering teaching opportunities (via TA placements, etc.). Mentorship also aids students in navigating academic programs by providing insight into proscribed courses, university culture, practica and internship requirements as well as an orientation to the dissertation process. Participants suggested that the ability to engage with faculty in real-time interactions via synchronous technologies allowed them

the opportunity to collaborate effectively and seek clarification. A majority of participants discussed the importance of connecting with faculty advisors to seek guidance and ensure the best use of their time and resources while navigating through their respective programs.

Other participants spoke about the need for mentoring more broadly. For example, one participant remarked, "…I'm actually working on my counselor identity and working out those other qualities that are out there – cognitive complexity, empathy, etc. I'm working out all these different things, and we all learn by modeling as well. So, what is in the book is there and is conceptual, but I think what the challenge is and what's often missing is not having that mentorship and guidance regarding 'how do I go about and operationalize this thing?' Mentorship solidifies that for me – what it should all look like." Another added, "Yes, I really need a knowledgeable person to help direct me – not only on my program, but what happens in life once I'm done after the fact? Like, what is life after a CES program?" Participants suggested that faculty's competent use of technology can increase mentorship opportunities, which contributes to the richness of their academic endeavors.

Perception

Perception served as another factor that affected participants' experiences engaging in online CES programs. Participants reported their online CES experiences were often tainted by others' assumptions regarding the value of online learning. Despite their acknowledgment that (a) there is a rich history of distance learning and that (b) online learning is likely to be a strong element in the future landscape of academia, participants endorsed some trepidation regarding pursuing an online degree. Due to the historical existence of programs that may be best described as 'diploma mills,' participants indicated that stigma persists regarding this learning modality.

Consequently, participants reported that the value of their degrees and online programs, in general, maybe scrutinized more heavily than their brick-and-motor counterparts.

Some participants who are already working within higher education in a non-faculty capacity endorsed online learning as one strategy leveraged to stay relevant. One participant explained, "At the school where I work, we've talked about if the university does not get on board…its doors will close. So, I think online education is inevitable." Many participants indicated that they, too, assume that online education will be a cornerstone of the future of academia and suggested that participating in an online CES program provides them with student insight, which may serve to inform their future teaching endeavors. One explained, "I feel like it equips me to keep pace with where teaching is actually going…"

Despite their acknowledgment that online learning may serve as the foundation of the future of CES education, participants described an ongoing tension that clouds their current experiences. For example, one participant indicated, "When I'm talking to other folks who are already PhDs in CES, you get that furrowed brow that indicates 'who would pursue that online,' like it is less than that. Then, I feel like I need to justify it and say, 'no. It is CACREP-accredited by the same folks who accredited you, so the rigor is there." All participants agreed that they experienced a high level of rigor in their programs, which called on them to actively engage in their educational pursuits. One participant suggested that many ivy-league universities offer online programs, suggesting to him that increasing acceptance of online CES programs may, to some degree, be a matter of marketing. Indeed, others agreed that those who maintain bias against online CES programs might do so due to a lack of knowledge regarding accreditation, how technology facilitates meaningful learning experiences, and similar factors.

Participants described feeling frustrated and exhausted by having to justify or defend their educational environment. One participant indicated that he worries that the stigma traditionally attached to online learning may affect his future opportunities. He said, "So, one of my biggest fears is not getting a job, someone reading my resume and saying, 'Oh, you went to an online university.' Per participants, there seems to be a hierarchy amongst online CES programs as well, with those connected to a brick-and-mortar university perceived as more prestigious or valid than those available only online. Similarly, group consensus suggested that programs affiliated with non-profit institutions were often perceived as more legitimate than for-profit programs.

Participants' anxiety regarding the pursuit of online CES programs seems to be mitigated, in part, by accreditation (CACREP, in particular), the retention of high-caliber faculty, and the allocation of resources similar to those found in face-to-face programs. Participants suggested that CACREP-accreditation, in particular, ensured them that their programs met standardized academic learning objectives accepted within the field of counseling. Further, faculty that demonstrate high levels of clinical skills, maintain recognized professional credentials, serve as active researchers, and engage in best practices associated with online education reduce their concerns regarding the caliber of their programs. Faculty competency helps facilitate and ensure accessibility to high-caliber educational experiences. It also helps contribute to students' sense of connection to the program, institution, and profession. Per participants, faculty need to retain a high-level understanding of andragogy to fully appreciate the online CES student's unique needs and experiences. This understanding may inform their practices, which affect the student experience, etc. Participants commented that faculty skill level and understanding of online learning principles are evident in course design. They suggested the absence of such knowledge typically occurs to the detriment of students. One participant explained, "What they tend to do is try to make up for

the lack of face-to-face time." Another person added, "From those types of faculty we get double and triple the workload."

Discussion

With the increase in online CES programs comes the responsibility to understand how best to facilitate successful program matriculation (Lovitts, & Nelson, 2000; Rigler et al., 2017). Previous studies suggest that deeper investigations are needed to understand the experiences of doctoral students in general (e.g., Byrd, 2016; Jairam & Kahl, 2012) and within the field of CES, in particular (Bender et al., 2018; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Snow et al., 2018). We used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore and gain an increased understanding of the lived experiences of CES students pursuing online courses. Recognizing and bracketing our biases toward online learning, allowed us to gain insight into CES students' perceptions of their online learning experiences and their effects on their professional development.

Findings and Implications

The results of this study highlight that online learning opportunities provide greater accessibility within the field of counselor education for those limited by geographic access and life responsibilities. CES students pursue online learning opportunities due to their accessibility. In line with both undergraduate and graduate students across other disciplines, engaging in online courses allows CES students the ability to access learning opportunities unlikely to be otherwise available to them. The flexibility associated with the online medium allows students to maintain their professional statuses while simultaneously caring for families and completing their academic coursework. As in non-CES online doctoral programs (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Erichsen et al., 2014), students who lack access to on-campus programs may obtain a degree without spending time and money on travel, extra childcare, or missed work.

While some challenges related to educational pursuits may be reduced via online endeavors, they may be replaced by a new set of unique challenges related to the use of technology. This suggests that online CES program administrators may want to consider providing incoming students and faculty with explicit guidance regarding how to navigate an online learning environment most effectively in line with best online teaching practices (Snow et al., 2018). This aligns with Singleton and Session's (2011) suggestion that non-traditional distance programs need to be sure that faculty are supportive of the online modality, trained in the necessary technology, and understand the need for pedagogical differences in this environment. Formal training related to the utilization of technology among both faculty and students may be essential for successful matriculation through an online CES program, as appropriate use of technology also serves as a vehicle for facilitating connections with peers, faculty, and the university overall.

Online learning also provides students with access to a diverse set of faculty and peers (Sells et al., 2011). While access to diverging perspectives is valuable across academic fields, this may be particularly valuable within the field of counseling. Exposure to professionals with experience and knowledge of variable populations and niches may provide CES students with a broader indoctrination to clinical competencies and increase the richness of their training. A significant benefit of online CES courses and programs is that they offer a rich exposure to diverse student and faculty populations. Given that inclusion and diversity are central to professional counseling, online doctoral programs in CES may be stronger suited to provide such training by nature of the format as enrollment is not hindered by geographic accessibility.

In line with literature pertaining to non-CES studies that support the need for regular and on-going communication (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Protivnak & Foss, 2009), maintaining a felt connection as facilitated by clear communication, a strong sense of telepresence, faculty

competency, as well as the ability to connect with others in real-time affects online CES students' educational experiences. Students feel more motivated, valued, and confident in their academic pursuits when regularly connected to faculty and peers (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). They want to feel they have a relationship, rather than be a "name on a screen." Additionally, increased connection, specifically synchronous learning, enhances accountability, more active learning, and a sense of faculty mentorship, which are vital to professional development (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). This relational bond may be heightened within online CES programs due to the nuances associated with training emerging professionals to engage in deep interpersonal dynamics within the counseling context as well as the essential facilitation of a well-developed counselor professional identity. Such training is dependent on a sense of trust between educators and their trainees, which must be cultivated purposefully throughout the learning process. Further, refining one's clinical, teaching, and supervision skills is often dependent on thorough and real-time feedback provided by a more experienced clinician and educator as well as via the process of modeling. Therefore, competent faculty use of technology may improve learning outcomes and mitigate CES students feeling overwhelmed and isolated by increasing a sense of connection via timely and regular communication, preferably with synchronous meetings, but also through coursework and email correspondence (ACES, 2017). In all these areas, students are observing and learning from the example set by the faculty.

Online learning has long been critiqued for its perceived validity (Sell et al., 2011; Snow et al., 2018) and concern for the ability to facilitate the development of clinical skills (Snow et al., 2018). Online CES students seem aware of biases against online learning and wonder how such stigma may affect their future professional trajectory. While CACREP online programs continue

to increase, student participants endorsed concern that despite their accreditation, noted rigor, and popularity, degrees earned via an online environment may be viewed as 'less than' those earned in an on-campus degree environment, which may in turn compromise future employment. Those participating in the study felt that high caliber faculty with solid technical skills, an understanding of andragogy, and the online environment would positively impact the educational experience and potentially mitigate long-term stigma. Academic leaders across disciplines show a favorable and equitable view of online programs, especially, when they offer online education (Allen & Seaman, 2016). In line with this, it may be prudent of CACREP to emphasize that the accreditation of various delivery formats are different in delivery, but equal in meeting the core standards expected in all programs. There is also opportunity for counselor educators to advocate for improved perception of this learning modality.

Limitations

There are three notable limitations associated with this study. First, student participants were enrolled in several different graduate programs across the United States. While this variability in perspective likely added to the richness of the discussion, it may have diluted the impact of specific program culture. It is plausible that students' experiences navigating online CES programs were influenced more by specific program dynamics rather than program delivery specifically. Perhaps an in-depth exploration of several participants' experiences completing the same program would minimize the impact of this potential confound, providing a clearer exploration of the online modality's impact on CES students' experiences.

Second, researchers failed to ask participants about available campus resources. As such, it is unclear if participants' knowledge and use of supplemental institutional supports impacted their experiences. Some participants' statuses as non-traditional off-campus students may have

limited their familiarity with on-campus resources available to them as online students (access to software, tutoring services, student support services, etc.), which could enhance their experiences in an online environment and affect their lived experiences within the online CES program. More explicit questioning regarding broad institutional interactions may provide additional insight into online CES students' experiences traversing their programs; therefore, providing insight into how they were impacted by institutional support.

Third, during recruitment and data collection efforts, students' positions within their online CES program were not considered. Most likely, participants were at varying stages of their doctoral journeys, with some working on their preliminary coursework, others pursuing their comprehensive exams, or engaged in dissertation work. An exploration of how one's developmental stage within the doctoral journey affects one's perceptions of the online medium may also provide additional insight into the experience of pursuing an online CES degree.

Future Research

While the popularity of online learning continues to increase, our knowledge of its long-term impact within the field of counselor education remains limited. The results of the current study, for example, suggest that mentorship and synchronous meetings influence students' experiences within online doctoral CES programs. Future researchers may want to investigate how online faculty may most effectively mentor online CES students. Similarly, a more formal exploration of the impact of synchronous meetings may also be warranted. Researchers may want to determine, for example, the degree to which synchronous meetings influence student satisfaction across courses. An examination of the relationship between synchronicity and student achievement is warranted as well. Some online doctoral programs require students to attend residencies. Future researchers may want to study how these residency requirements affect

students' experiences and perhaps more specifically, their sense of connection, as this was a prominent theme that emerged from this study. Researchers may want to determine if this need for connection is heightened within counselor education or if it presented differently than in different fields of study. Likewise, a comparison of CES students' feelings of connection with online faculty compared to those established in a face-to-face environment may also provide additional insight into how curriculum delivery impacts student outcomes. A comparison of academic outcomes across programs that require residencies vs. those that leverage synchronous meetings vs. those that employ an asynchronous model may also yield insight into the influences affecting online CES doctoral students' experiences. Finally, it is assumed that master's level programs utilize many similar key components for effective learning; therefore, future research may investigate their level of significance in supporting learning in master's level counseling programs.

Conclusion

Distance learning continues to gain momentum within the field of counselor education, which has led to the development of numerous online doctoral CES programs. Given the impact that graduates from these programs will have on future counselors-in-training and client care, it is important to examine the factors impacting the efficacy of the online learning modality within this context. The available scholarly literature indicates that the online platform is an effective medium for clinical training and facilitating professional development. Parallel to other disciplines, it appears intentional instructor-learner interactions greatly affects learning outcomes within online CES Ph.D. programs, with accessibility, connection, and perception all impacting their educational experiences. Online instructional delivery provides students who may otherwise be unable to access traditional face-to-face CES programs with the ability to engage in formal educational pursuits with a diverse set of peers and mentors. Successful online learning is predicated on the

ability to access and utilize technology effectively, which is a challenge unique to the virtual environment. Online CES faculty have the opportunity to help students acclimate to the online learning environment by aiding in their sense of connection with their programs and institutions. By engaging in frequent high-caliber synchronous and asynchronous communication, maintaining a strong telepresence, and demonstrating their own proficiencies with classroom technology, faculty can leverage the online learning environment to establish meaningful rapport with and provide valuable learning for their students. Faculty's ability to effectively connect with students and demonstrate high levels of proficiency across professional competencies affirms students' confidence in the online learning process, which contributes to student success and satisfaction. Considering the current landscape of higher education learning formats, this and future research is essential to understanding and enhancing online CES programs in order to provide high quality professional training.

References

Albrecht, A. C., & Jones, D. G. (2004). Planning for cyberlearning: A framework for counselor educators. In J. W. Bloom & G. R. Walz (Ed.), *Cybercounseling and cyberlearning: An encore* (pp. 57-76). CAPS Press.

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2016). *Online report card: Tracking online education in the United States.* Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group. https://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/onlinereportcard.pdf

Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Technology Interest Network. (2017). *ACES guidelines for online learning in counselor education*. https://acesonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ACES-Guidelines-for-Online-Learning-2017-1.pdf

Baltrinic, E. R., Moate, R. M., Hinkle, M. G., Jencius, M., & Taylor, J. Z. (2018). Counselor educators' teaching mentorship styles: A Q-Methodology study. *The Professional Counselor*, *8*(1), 46-59. https://doi.org/10.15241/erb.8.1.46

Bender, S., & Dykeman, C. (2016). Supervisees' perceptions of effective supervision: A comparison of fully synchronous cybersupervision to traditional methods. *Journal of Technology in Human Services,* *34*(4), 326-337. https://doi.org/10.1080/15228835.2016.1250026

Bender, S., Rubel, D. J., & Dykeman, C. (2018). An interpretive phenomenological analysis of doctoral counselor education students' experience of receiving cybersupervision. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision,* *11*(1). Retrieved from https://repository.wcsu.edu/jcps/vol11/iss1/7

Berry, S. (2017). Building community in online doctoral classrooms: Instructor practices that support community. *Online Learning, 21*(2). https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v21i2.875

Bolliger, D. U., & Halupa, C. (2012). Student perceptions of satisfaction and anxiety in an online doctoral program. *Distance Education*, *33*(1), 81-98. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2012.667961

Bradbury-Jones, C., Sambrook, S., & Irvine, F. (2009) The phenomenological focus group: An oxymoron? *Journal of Advanced Nursing 65*(3), 663-671. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2008.04922.x

Byrd, J. C. (2016). Understanding the online doctoral learning experience: Factors that contribute to students' sense of community. *Journal of Educators Online, 13*(2), 102-135. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1106735

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). (2019). *Program directory*. http://www.cacrep.org/directory/

Cummings, S. M., Foels, L., & Chaffin, K. M. (2013). Comparative analysis of distance education and classroom-based formats for a clinical social work practice course. *Social Work Education*, *32*(1), 68-80. https://doi.org/10/fx9c6s

Deshpande, A. (2016). A qualitative examination of challenges influencing doctoral students in an online doctoral program. *International Education Studies, 9*(6), 139-149. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1103528.pdf

Deshpande, A. (2017). Faculty best practices to support students in the 'virtual doctoral land.' *Higher Education for the Future*, *4*(1), 12-30. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347631116681211

Erichsen, E. A., Bolliger, D. U., & Halupa, C. (2014). Student satisfaction with graduate supervision in doctoral programs primarily delivered in distance education settings. *Studies in Higher Education*, *39*(2), 321-338. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.709496

Fade, S. (2004). Using interpretive phenomenological analysis for public health nutrition and dietetic research: A practical guide. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society, 63*, 647-653. https://doi.org/10.1079/PNS2004398

Goodrich, K.M., Shin, R.Q., & Smith, L.C. (2011). The doctorate in counselor education. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, 33* (3), 184-195. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-011-9123-7

Hoskins, C. M., & Goldberg, A. D. (2005). Doctoral student persistence in counselor education programs: Student-program match. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 44*(3), 175-188. https://doi.org/10/fz2dp7

Jairam, D., & Kahl Jr., D. H. (2012). Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *7*, 311-329. https://doi.org/10/gf5htd

Kumar, S., & Coe, C. (2017). Mentoring and student support in online doctoral programs. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *31*(2), 128-142. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2017.1300464

Kumar, S., & Dawson, K. (2012). Theory to practice: Implementation and initial impact of an online doctoral program. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 15* (1). https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring151/kumar_dawson.html

Lovitts, B. E., & Nelson, C. (2000). The hidden crisis in graduate education: Attrition from Ph.D. programs. *Academe*, *86*(6), 44-50. https://doi.org/10/c8w84p

Maher, M. A., Wofford, A. M., Roksa, J., & Feldon, D. F. (2017). Exploring early exits: Doctoral attrition in the biomedical sciences. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025117736871

Murdock, J. L., & Williams, A. M. (2011). Creating an online learning community: Is it possible? *Innovative Higher Education*, *36*(5), 305-315. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-011-9188-6

Palmer, M., Larking, deVisser, R., & Fadden, G. (2010). Developing an interpretive phenomenological approach to focus group data. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 7* (2), 99-121. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880802513194

Perry, E. J. (2017). *Counselor education unplugged? An exploration of current attitudes surrounding the use of online learning as a modality in graduate counselor education* (Doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University). http://search.proquest.com/docview/1901471432/abstract/D7BA6C1DEF1B49B3PQ/1

Protivnak, J. J., & Foss, L. L. (2009). An exploration of themes that influence the counselor education doctoral student experience. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *48*(4), 239-256. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2009.tb00078.x

Redpath, L. (2012). Confronting the bias against on-line learning in management education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education, 11*(1), 125-140. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2010.0044

Renfro-Michel, E., Rousmaniere, T., & Spinella, L. (2016). Technological Innovations in Clinical Supervision: Promises and Challenges. In *Using Technology to Enhance Clinical Supervision* (pp. 1-18). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119268499.ch01

Rigler, K. L., Bowlin, L. K., Sweat, K., Watts, S., & Throne, R. (2017). Agency, socialization, and support: A critical review of doctoral student attrition. *Online Submission. Paper presented at the International Conference on Doctoral Education.* https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED580853

Seaman, J. E., Allen, I. E., Seaman, J., & Babson Survey Research Group. (2018). Grade increase: Tracking distance education in the United States. *Babson Survey Research Group.* Babson Survey Research Group. https://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradeincrease.pdf

Sells, J., Tan, A., Brogan, J., Dahlen, U., & Stupart, Y. (2012). Preparing international counselor educators through online distance learning. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, *34*(1), 39-54. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-011-9126-4

Singleton, H. W., & Session, C. L. (2011). Faculty concerns related to distance learning within nontraditional doctoral programs. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, (129), 31-41. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.398

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretive phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage Publications

Snow, W. H., Lamar, M. R., Hinkle, J. S., & Speciale, M. (2018). Current practices in online counselor education. *Professional Counselor, 8*(2), 131-145. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1193678

Templeton, N. R. Ballenger, J. N. & Thompson, J. R., (2015). Examining the elements of online learning quality in a fully online doctoral program. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, *18*(4), 1-9. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1085169

Terrell, S. R., Snyder, M. M., Dringus, L. P., & Maddrey, E. (2012). A grounded theory of connectivity and persistence in a limited residency doctoral program. *The Qualitative Report, 17*(31), 1-14. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol17/iss31/2

Thompson, J. R., Ballenger, J. N., & Templeton, N. R. (2018). Examining quality elements in a high education fully online doctoral program: Doctoral students' perceptions. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 13*(1), 51-63. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1186051

Thompson, P.A. (2000). *A follow-up study comparing the outcomes of the residential and distance learning counselor education graduates of an eastern university*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sarasota). https://www.learntechlib.org/p/123832/

Watson, J. C. (2012). Online learning and the development of counseling self-efficacy beliefs. *Professional Counselor*, *2*(2), 143-151. https://doi.org/10/gf5vbw

Willis, B., & Carmichael, K. D. (2011). The lived experience of late-stage doctoral student attrition in counselor education. *Qualitative Report*, *16*(1), 192-207.