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Carol A. Erbes  
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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF  
GATEKEEPING AMONG PhD COUNSELOR EDUCATORS

By

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

COUNSELING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY  
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*A small group of thoughtful people could change the world.  
Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

**Margaret Mead**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first of all like to thank my participants, for without them there would have been no dissertation. They voluntarily took time out of their busy schedules to set down with me and discuss their experiences as PhD counselor gatekeepers. I appreciate their concerns with gatekeeping and thank them most of all for their honesty in discussing with me a myriad of experiences. Without them, this project could not have been completed.

I would also like to thank my dissertation committee, especially my chair, Dr. McAuliffe, for his endless patience and editing. Dr. Levingston kept me on track with the methodology and I appreciate her diligence. And Dr. Remley, for always being there in the background when I needed him. This work could not have come to fruition without them.

I have a personal interest in gatekeeping in the counseling profession due to exposure to several very poor counselors and clinicians at various workplaces. In a few cases, quite a bit of damage was done to clients before there was anything done by the supervisors at those work places. So I have seen examples of what I would consider "impaired" counselors and always wondered "How on earth did they ever get into the field?" This dissertation began with a journey to discover the reasons and concluded with no real, concrete answer. But the information obtained from my participants highlighted the difficulties and challenges in the work of being a gatekeeper, something as counselors, educators, and supervisors, we really did not receive much if any, training in. It may sound strange, but I thank these "impaired" counselors the most, for they

started me on this journey of discovery.

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the gatekeeping experiences of a group of PhD counselor educators, by utilizing a phenomenological approach. This design was chosen as it could best examine the lived experiences of the participants. Nine PhD counselor educators participated in this study through a series of two interviews. All of the participants had a general definition of gatekeeping and all were able to express clearly how important the process was in ensuring as much as possible that only qualified students enter their programs, graduate from their programs, and enter the field as effective counselors. Each participant also shared several what they called “horror stories” of students they had worked with and the issues involved, as well as what the results of their gatekeeping efforts were. It was in these stories that some of the challenges, frustrations, and stresses of gatekeeping emerged. Some of the challenges involved non-supportive departments, the difficulty of being able to actually quantify impairment issues, having to decide if the student would be able to mature and improve over time in the program, and what to do with students whose grades are good or adequate but whose skill levels are not. These challenges, frustrations and stressors were greatly mitigated, though, by supportive departments and colleagues.

The stories of the participants in this study provided some important

details and “color” about what it is like to be a PhD counselor educator, to be ultimately responsible for ensuring that only qualified, effective counseling students leave their program and enter the counseling field. The challenges, rewards, and ultimately the satisfaction of playing a role in the development of future counselors are clearly seen.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Overview of the research problem

The practice of gatekeeping is critical for the training of competent professionals in many disciplines, including counseling, social work, and psychology. This is due to the fact that much harm can be done to clients if a student enters the field either unprepared or ill suited for the work. As stated by Henderson (2010), the term gatekeeping means “to restrict access to a desired objective (p.2)”. According to Koerin and Miller (1995), gatekeeping is the effort to prevent “the graduation of students who are not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice (p.247).”

Gatekeeping is also an element in determining whether a student should enter a specific field or not. It generally involves some kind of an initial screening through advising and continues thorough the completion of course work. According to Moore (1991), “Gatekeeping is an ongoing process that begins with guarding the entrance, included providing responsible education, and concludes with guarding the exit” (p.9).

In the context of this study, gatekeeping involves faculty members screening counseling students for successful completion of program requirements, and especially identifying any students who are impaired in a way that might affect their safe interaction with future clients. It also involves the process of making decisions about the future of such students in the counseling



program.

There is a lack of qualitative research being done on the issue of gatekeeping. The majority of the studies done are quantitative, and are not able to portray richly three important phenomena: what it is like to be a gatekeeper, how the experiences and stresses involved impact the gatekeepers, and how they process these experiences. Thus the use of a qualitative methodology (phenomenology) might better define and explore the practice of gatekeeping, as experienced and lived by participants who teach and supervise counseling students.

It is most likely that the gatekeeping experiences, both positive and negative, impact each individual PhD counselor educator somewhat differently. This study will attempt to discover, through a phenomenological approach, what those impacts are. This knowledge can then be shared with other counselor educators, in hopes of helping them process their own experiences and improve their gatekeeping efforts.

#### Brief Summary of Relevant Literature

The concept of gatekeeping and its practice is not a recent development. The origins of the procedure of gatekeeping, as noted by Campbell (2009), originated in antiquity, in the early practice of medicine. In the counseling profession, it is carried forward through the ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2005) and in CACREP standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, CACREP, 2001). In spite of its long history and critical importance in the helping

professions, the literature provides examples of professionals who support the practice, as well as those who have criticisms.

One of the broader issues involving the practice of gatekeeping is the need to define impairment. Psychology has used the term impairment to describe trainees whose behavior does not meet the minimum standards of professional competence (Elman & Forest, 2007). Elman and Forrest (2007), proposed a definition which includes three concepts: problems, professional, and competence, and is grounded in emerging trends in psychology. There is considerable literature focusing on the issue of counselor impairment among professionals already in the field. The ACA Task Force on Counselor Wellness and Impairment (2004), noted that impairment occurs when there is a major negative impact on a counselor's functioning that might potentially be harmful to clients; this could be due to substance abuse, mental illness, personal crises or trauma of some kind.

There are also problems noted with how impairment and competence are defined. Emerson (1996) acknowledged that we think we know competence when we see it but also that severe cases are relatively rare. Blatant problems such as substance abuse, clear personality disorders and/or prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes and values are easier to identify. While, according to Sussman (1992) the less obvious ones can include "interpersonal insensitivity, the need for narcissistic idealization, a pathological desire to 'parent,' the striving for sublimated sexual gratification, projected sadism, acting on irrational fantasies of being a rescuer or savior, the need to be omniscient, and the desire to

exercise complete control over another (p.53).”

Impairment should also not be equated with counselors who are stressed or distressed and whose work has not been significantly impacted. The 2004 ACA Taskforce on Counselor Wellness and Impairment assumed that an impaired counselor has at some point in the past had a sufficient level of professional competence, which has since become diminished due to some circumstances. Impairment also does not necessarily imply unethical behavior. This type of behavior may be a symptom of impairment or may occur in counselors who are not impaired (ACA, 2004).

There is general agreement concerning the need to identify areas of impairment (Sheffield, 1998; Emerson, 1996; Halinski, 2009). But researchers have shown that counselor educators have not yet identified an adequate means of predicting which applicants will or will not be successful in counseling programs or become effective professionals (Sheffield, 1998).

In the counseling profession, one of the important effects of impairment is its documented effect on the acquisition of basic counseling skills, such as emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, and multicultural competency (Leech, 1998). Leech indicated that it is important to understand the developmental nature of empathy, as empathy is difficult to teach in formal counselor education.

As concerns the development of multicultural competency as a basic counseling skill, it is important to include it in the issue of gatekeeping. Ziomek-Daigle & Bailey (2008) acknowledged that it is critical to include a multicultural component in the gatekeeping process, as culturally sensitive practices are

sometimes missing in programs of counselor education. They addressed the importance of culturally responsive gatekeeping practices, in response to the criticism that gatekeeping can be a mechanism to promote elitism (Tam & Kwok, 2007). They acknowledged the need for more research on the influence of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, SES and disability in relation to the issues of impairment and incompetence in counseling students

Research identifying gatekeeping issues in the fields of psychology, social work, and counseling indicates the need for policies and procedures that would quantify and clarify gatekeeping practices. Homrich (2009) discussed how academic and clinical ability can best be established through quantitative standards and assessment instruments. Barlow and Coleman (2003) identified the lack of policies and guidelines for managing failing and problematic trainees in practicum as well as in classroom settings in social work programs in Canada. Cole and Lewis (1993) also discussed the legal complications of the gatekeeping process and examined court cases and their legal and ethical ramifications for social work students' academic and disciplinary dismissals. They found that termination guidelines were not consistent and that behavioral and ethical criteria for making termination decisions are not always clear or consistent. They recommended that termination guidelines be developed and applied consistently. And that research on actual legal cases continue, as it provides evidence of problems in the process.

Graduate counseling, social work, and psychology programs play a crucial role in the training of effective professionals, as well as in the gatekeeping

process. Given the increased awareness of the possible damage caused by counselors who do not possess the personal qualities and requisite skills, faculty and supervisors may be expected to serve as gatekeepers in counseling programs. Brear and Dorrian (2010) conducted a national survey of counselor educators in Australian undergraduate and postgraduate academic training programs to determine how counselor educators view and experience gatekeeping programs in order to assist educators in the gatekeeping process. They identified some significant problems in the practice of gatekeeping, resulting in gate slipping---getting through the process and into the field. They found that more than half of the respondents stated that they had passed a student who they felt was unsuitable for the counseling profession. It was felt by the authors that results indicated there is often no clear evidence of the issues and biases in programs, as well as the sense that gatekeeping is sometimes not supported by written policies and procedures. The authors felt that more needs to be done on developing a systematic and objective process of assessment, that gatekeeping procedures need to be more formalized, that faculty members can be better educated and supported in their efforts. They also recommended more qualitative work to advance the knowledge about gatekeeping.

Capps (2008) in her dissertation, developed a grounded theory that sought to provide understanding about faculty's experience working with impaired counseling students. She examined the factors that impact and interact with faculty's screening, review, remediation, retention, and removal of impaired counseling students. She also sought to determine the factors involved in making

the decisions about impaired students either easier or more difficult. “An ecological theory including societal ideologies and values, institutional and systemic beliefs, interpersonal, and personal and psychological levels was uncovered (p.130).”

The work of being a gatekeeper in the counseling profession can be challenging. Supervisors may not be prepared to identify and intervene with impaired trainees (Gizare & Forrest, 2004). Some supervisors identified issues that impacted their ability to intervene appropriately with impaired trainees; these included a lack of training for the evaluative component of supervision, as well as the degree of agency and collegial support for supervisors in their programs. Finally, supervisors were hesitant to intervene due to the emotional difficulty of intervening.

The literature also indicates that counselor educators may be hesitant to screen students for non-academic reasons (Bradley, 1991). The decision to do so may be subjective rather than objective, due to the reality that one gatekeeper’s perception may be different from another’s. It is also seen that many faculty members struggle with the process of gatekeeping. Grady (2009), in an ethnographic format, presented the stories of one social work faculty member and one student who failed his/her class, which resulted in automatic expulsion. This approach resulted in a glimpse into the issues and stresses involved in the gatekeeping process from both sides.

Some factors appear to inhibit gatekeeping among counselor educators. Keri and Eichler (2005) identified these as fear of retribution, loss or damage and

fear of legal action; one of the most common reactions was a feeling of being attacked. In their study, they documented some of the emotional and personal costs of being a gatekeeper through the utilization of several case studies of professionals in the counseling field.

The concept of the “loss of innocence” has been used to address the emotional cost to gatekeepers in the counseling profession (Keri & Eichler, 2005). They discovered feelings of denial, lower feelings of entitlement, self-blame, and reduced feelings of control in a group of supervisors. A group of gatekeepers were asked to identify their experiences with words. Words used included “betrayal, vulnerability, fear, outrage, shock, disbelief, bitterness” (p.84).

In the field of social work, Tam (2004), examined social work field instructors' attitudes about and experiences with gatekeeping and sought to identify evaluation criteria for suitable students. Her results indicated that gatekeeping in the field of social work is controversial and that some field instructors are reluctant to fail an inadequate student. She found that some groups of field instructors have higher professional suitability to be gatekeepers than others; this would indicate the need for more education and training for those in this role.

Many researchers found that faculty are sometimes unwilling to address inadequate performance issues out of fears stemming from the likelihood of an adversarial relationship developing, the time already put into supervising students, the potential for time-demanding supervision, and the threat of legal action by students (Bradey & Post, 1991; Gizara, 1997; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991; Tedesco,

1982; Vacha-Haase, 1995).

### Conceptual Framework

The theoretical tradition or orientation selected for this study is the qualitative perspective of phenomenology. This design was selected in order to research the lived experiences of PhD counselor educators who perform gatekeeping functions; it is believed that this approach will best enable the researcher to record and understand the personal experiences of the participants. The intent was to interview and record the stories of a number of PhD counselor educators from universities in the eastern United States. It is felt that this method will allow for a free flow of information from the subjects and hopefully result in an in depth view of what it is like to be a gatekeeper. The subjects will encouraged to discuss their personal beliefs and feelings surrounding the practice of gatekeeping, discuss and elaborate on their own personal experiences with impaired counseling students, and to describe what the process has been like for them. The professors who will be selected have a long history with their universities and will have participated in developing numerous remediation plans, which seek to reduce or eliminate the specific impairment. A goal is to understand what their experiences and their perceptions of their experiences are in order to better describe what it is like to be a gatekeeper in the counselor education field.

It is felt that this design strategy was the most effective because it allows the researcher to record the personal experiences of the subjects in their own words. It will assist in achieving an understanding of some core questions:



How do they, as gatekeepers, determine which students are impaired or potentially impaired? What have they done once this has been determined?

Are some professors reluctant to practice gatekeeping? If so, why?

How does the disciplinary aspect of being a gatekeeper fit with the supportive aspect of being a counselor educator?

How do the subjects see themselves in this role? What has it been like for them? What do they feel about it? What stressors are involved?

### Rationale for the Study

The primary purpose and focus of this study was to describe the process of counselor educators gatekeeping impaired counseling students, as seen through the experiences of those who are responsible for this critical job. This was a qualitative, in-depth study of the gatekeeping knowledge, practices, experiences, and beliefs of PhD level counseling education professors at several large universities in the eastern United States. The goal was to record and examine the experiences, beliefs, and feelings that surround the performance of gatekeeping functions, paying special attention to how the participants remember it and feel about it. It was hoped that expanding the research base on this issue will allow more counselor educators to tell their stories and for others to benefit from them.

### Overview of Methodology

Qualitative interviewing was selected for this the project, as it would enable the researcher and reader to enter into another person's perspective (Patton, 2002). This methodology identifies the perspective of another as being

“meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind, to gather their stories” (Patton, p.341). A series of three interviews were planned, to average 45 minutes to an hour each. In the end, though, only two rounds of interviews were held as all participants indicated at the conclusion of the second interview that they had no further thoughts or information to add. This was interpreted to mean that the subject had been exhausted, as is the procedure with phenomenology (Patton, 2002).

The general interview guide approach was utilized as it provided a list of concepts intended to help explore the participant’s experiences as gatekeepers in a graduate counseling program. The guide was based on themes identified in the literature, as well as on the researcher’s interest in the effects of gatekeeping on counselor educators, and on suggestions from colleagues. Each participant was interviewed loosely following the guide but they were encouraged to add other information they felt was important. This interviewer asked new questions that arose in the course of the interview, to help clarify or elaborate on what was said. This approach was also selected because it would keep the interviewer on track with the goal of the project---to explore the experience of gatekeeping.

Some demographic data was obtained but no statistics were utilized as this is a purely qualitative study. But it is believed that some patterns may emerge from the demographic information that would inform the study. During the course of the interview process, several of the participants made it very clear

that they were concerned that they would be identified as being participants, that what they said might get back to their colleagues and their school. Due to this, the kinds of demographic data eventually collected was very basic---sex, age range, race/ethnicity, number of years in the field, year doctorate earned, and any other credentials. This would at least give a basic picture of the participants but it is understood that some very important and informative data could not be collected and utilized. But the participant's concerns for confidentiality were paramount.

The participants of the study were nine PhD counselor educators from seven universities in the eastern United States. Entrée involved contacting a list of thirty-three potential participants by email; their names and email addresses were obtained from their university websites. An email explaining the focus and purpose of the study and requesting their participation was sent. It was explained that a series in-depth interviews about their experiences as gatekeepers in their profession would be held. The subjects were not paid or compensated for their participation. It is believed that these subjects occupy a very important position in the gatekeeping process and that their experiences, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs would be an invaluable addition to the knowledge and practice of gatekeeping in the counseling profession.

Criterion sampling was employed as it was essential that the subjects be PhD counselor educators who have been actively involved in the gatekeeping process. They were also all selected from CACREP-accredited schools, in order to provided standardization of qualifications. It was believed that subjects with

these characteristics are the most likely to be involved in the gatekeeping process for college level counseling students. It was expected that they will have the greatest depth of experience and knowledge of the gatekeeping process.

Convenience sampling was also utilized. Requests for interviews were emailed to the potential pool of thirty-three subjects, and the hope was that ten to twelve would respond with agreements to participate. Those who did agree to participate comprised the sample. In the end, only eleven responded and of those, nine followed through with interviews. It is understood that this sampling technique is neither purposeful nor strategic, but it is convenient and cost effective and meet the needs of this study. In addition, it is understood that the small sample size (n=9) means that the information obtained may not be representative of PhD counselor educators in general.

Information from the subjects was obtained utilizing an in depth interview process. The approach was a naturalistic study, with no control exercised. Each subject was interviewed two times, the interviews recorded and then transcribed. The first round of interviews averaged 45 minutes to an hour. The second round of interviews was used to clarify patterns that emerged in the first interview and generally were much shorter, averaging 20 to 25 minutes. As indicated earlier, a third planned round of interviews was not held, as the participants indicated that the topic had been exhausted. The interviews were recorded utilizing a digital recorder, a Smart pen (computer pen), and an ipad. The files were then sent to a professional transcriptionist in order to obtain the most accurate transcription and ensure a more effective analysis of the interviews. The *atlas.ti* program was

utilized for the coding process once the interviews had been transcribed. One peer debriber and a monitor were used in the analysis process in order to increase inter-rater reliability and to supervise the data analysis process.

Because the interest was in the participant's point of view, the following research questions were the foundations of this study:

1. What is it like to be a gatekeeper?
2. How does the experience of gatekeeping impact counselor educators?
3. How do gatekeepers process the experiences?
4. What particular stressors are experienced as a gatekeeper, if any?

These broad research questions were explored utilizing an interview guide format (see Appendix C for the initial interview and Appendix D for the follow up interview). The guide was the foundation of the interviews, but any and all other information provided by the participants were included in the data analysis.

Issues involved in the data collection concerned the inability to obtain the level of participation hoped for, i.e., ten to twelve PhD level counselor educators. There were only two responses to the initial set of 33 emails sent; a second one resulted in an additional nine responses. Of these eleven, though, only nine followed through with the initial interview. There were some issues with the design of the interview guide itself; in a test run, one volunteer appeared to have problems with wording, clarity and focus. Interestingly, this did not seem to be the case with the second volunteer. The guide was modified accordingly in order to clarify the concepts to be addressed. In addition, three methods of recording

were utilized, a digital recorder, and a Smart pen, and an ipad, in case one failed. During two interviews, the digital recorder did have some issues and failed to work properly. But redundant systems allowed the interviews to proceed.

With qualitative interviewing, as well as direct observation, the information obtained by definition was highly subjective. Credibility of findings were enhanced, though, by making sure interview guide questions were clearly stated and that the researcher honestly tried to bracket her biases. The sample size was also limited, but acceptable for this type of research method.

Another issue was the subjective nature of the analysis and coding. Utilization of inter-rater assistance (a peer debriefer) was important in order to enhance the credibility of the analysis. Even though the categories may appear to this researcher to be very obvious, others may find additional ones; this will no doubt lead to an enhancement of the results. The use of a third person to act as a monitor over the coding and analysis process ensured that proper techniques and procedures were followed.

### Summary

A goal of this research was to provide counseling educators with a vehicle in which to tell their stories about being gatekeepers in a graduate counseling program. It is clear from the literature, as well as from antidotal evidence, that there are some important issues surrounding the practice of gatekeeping. This study chose not to focus on issues of defining gatekeeping or impairment, quantifying characteristics of impaired students or on other important issues.

Professionals can be, and are, impacted personally by the experience of being gatekeepers. This was the identified focus of this research---to explore the experience of gatekeeping, as seen through the eyes of PhD counselor educators. It is hoped that the results of the study will help inform the field about the impact of the gatekeeping process on those who perform these important duties.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The practice of gatekeeping is critical for the training of competent professionals in many disciplines, including counseling, social work, and psychology. This is due to the fact that much harm can be done to clients if a student enters the field either unprepared or ill suited for the work.

#### Relevant Literature

##### *Definitions of Gatekeeping*

The concept of gatekeeping and its practice is not a recent development. The origins of the procedure of gatekeeping, as noted by Campbell (2009), originated in antiquity, in the early practice of medicine. In the counseling profession, it is carried forward through the ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2005) and in CACREP standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, CACREP, 2001). In spite of its long history and critical importance in the helping professions, the literature provides examples of professionals who support the practice, as well as those who have criticisms.

There are varying definitions of what is considered gatekeeping but all include an element of evaluating suitability for practice. According to Koerin and Miller (1995), gatekeeping is the effort to prevent the graduation of students who are not equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and values needed for



professional practice. A more specific definition of gatekeeping (Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 2008) is the process of evaluating the suitability of students for private practice. Gatekeeping is also an element in determining whether a student should enter a specific field or not. It generally involves some kind of an initial screening through advising and continues thorough the completion of course work. According to Moore (1991), gatekeeping involves a process which begins at admission into a program and concludes with an evaluation of suitability at the end of a program.

### *Definitions of Impairment*

One of the broader issues involving the practice of gatekeeping is the need to define impairment, whether among students or professionals already in the field. Psychology has used the term impairment to describe behavior that does not meet the minimum standards of professional competence (Elman & Forest, 2007). Elman and Forrest (2007) proposed a definition that includes three notions, namely problems, professionalism, and competence, and is grounded in emerging trends in psychology. They preferred to use the phrase “problems of professional competence” rather than the term impairment.

There is considerable literature focusing on the issue of counselor impairment among professionals already in the field. The ACA Task Force on Counselor Wellness and Impairment (2004) noted that impairment involves a negative impact on counselor functioning that impacts client care. Identified impairments include substance abuse or chemical dependence, mental illness,

personal crisis (traumatic events or vicarious trauma, burnout, life crisis, physical illness or debilitation). Emerson (1996) acknowledged that we think we know incompetence when we see it but also that severe cases are relatively rare. Blatant problems such as substance abuse, clear personality disorders and/or prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes and values are easy to identify but subtler, less obvious ones are not. Sussman (1992) identified such problems as interpersonal insensitivity, personality disorders, beliefs of being a savior or rescuer, or having control issues.

Impairment should also not be equated with counselors who are merely stressed or distressed and whose work has not been significantly impacted. The ACA Taskforce on Counselor Wellness and Impairment (2004) assumed that an impaired counselor has at some point in the past had a sufficient level of professional competence, which has since become diminished due to some circumstances. Impairment also does not necessarily imply unethical behavior. This type of behavior may be a symptom of impairment or may occur in counselors who are not impaired (ACA, 2004).

Thus there is general agreement concerning the need to identify areas of impairment (Sheffield, 1998; Emerson, 1996; Halinski, 2009). But researchers have shown that counselor educators have not yet identified an adequate means of predicting which applicants will or will not be successful in counseling programs or become effective professionals (Sheffield, 1998). This highlights the critical nature of gatekeeping as a mechanism for identification of those persons

in the field, or preparing for the field, who are not suitable to enter practice.

### *Risk Factors for Impairment*

The literature indicates that, whatever definition of impairment is utilized, there are a number of characteristics of counselors and elements of the work they do that make them especially vulnerable. Cerney (1995) identified such primary risk factors as over empathizing with others, exposure to the struggles and suffering of their clients, and being an instrument of change. Skovholt (2001) identified what he calls "high touch" hazards, including the fact that some client problems are unsolvable, our inability to say no, the stress of one way caring, and maintaining a state of constant empathy.

Skovholt also discussed some organizational factors that lead to counselor impairment, such as maintaining large caseloads, having caseloads of seriously disturbed clients, being told that you need to work more hours, and seeing more clients daily, along with not having adequate supervision. Personal risk factors (Skovholt, 2001) include lack of preparedness for the work, current stressors in counselors' lives outside work, personal history of trauma, and belief systems that do not support seeking help. He defined another important experience that impacts many counselors that involves vicarious traumatization, the experience of sharing a client's trauma in the process of connecting and empathizing with them.

Another serious issue is the fact that there are some very real barriers to reporting and/or seeking help. These barriers to reporting other impaired

professionals can include fear of denial by others, the stigma attached to impairment, fear of reprisal, and lack of awareness of procedures or programs that might assist the struggling professional (Olsheski, 1996). In addition, the barriers to reporting are identical to those involved in seeking help. A common myth in the helping field is “counselor heal thyself.” This can conceivably explain why some practitioners do not seek professional help when they need to do so (Olsheski, 1996).

### *Effects of Impairment*

In the counseling profession, one of the important effects of impairment, in addition to the direct harm it can cause clients, is its deleterious impact on the acquisition of basic counseling skills, such as emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, and multicultural competency (Leech, 1998). Leech indicated that it is important to understand that empathy has a developmental aspect, that is a degree of it needs to be present initially in the individual, and then it can then be enhanced through education and training. It is not simply a skill that can be learned.

There also appears to be a psychological component to impairment. A study by White and Franzoni (1990) noted that a significant number of beginning counselors in training had higher scores of psychological disturbance as measured in the MMPI than does the general population. They suggested that psychological testing or some other form of evaluation of level of impairment occur at the time of entrance into a program. This would hopefully reduce the

numbers of students who have psychological problems entering the field. This kind of impairment could have severe consequences to clients.

CACREP standards require counselor educators to systematically review a student's progress considering academic performance, professional development, and personal development (CACREP, 1988). In practice, academic success such as GPA or performance on standard achievement tests usually suffice (Leech, 1998). If these criteria are the main ones used by counselor education programs, it is conceivable that numbers of impaired students could easily enter the field.

Lack of skills in the area of cultural competency can also be considered a type of impairment that can have serious consequences for clients. Concerning the development of multicultural competency as a basic counseling skill, it is important to include cultural alertness in the practice of gatekeeping. Ziomek-Daigle & Bailey (2008) noted that culturally sensitive gatekeeping practices are sometimes missing in programs of counselor education. It has also been suggested that gatekeeping can be a mechanism to promote elitism (Tam & Kwok, 2007). They acknowledged the need for more research on the influence of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, SES, and disability in relation to the issues of impairment and incompetence in counseling students.

### *Impairment During Internship*

Graduate counseling, social work, and psychology programs play a crucial role in the training of effective professionals. It is not enough to assess academic

abilities as measured by grades and GRE scores. One of the phases of the education process where assessment of impairment can effectively be done is in the practicum or internship phase of a counseling student's program. A student's personal characteristics and clinical skills must be assessed (Lumadue & Duffey, 1999). Each of these characteristics have implications for gatekeeping.

Trainee impairment among graduate students is an interference in professional functioning that is reflected in one or more of the following ways: (a) an inability and/or unwillingness to acquire and integrate professional standards into one's repertoire of professional behavior, (b) an inability to acquire professional skills to reach an acceptable level of competency, and (c) an inability to control personal stress, psychological dysfunction and/or excessive emotional reactions that interfere with professional functioning (Lamb et, 1987). These issues may not be reflected in academic abilities, thus emphasizing the importance of utilizing other criteria in the gatekeeping process. Lamb acknowledged that there has been little done regarding how to deal with impairment early in the professional career and that a pre-doctoral internship is a critical stage in which to assess and deal with impairment.

Internship is a primary time for professional training but Bowles (2009) indicated that there are important stresses involved which may put counseling interns at risk for impairment issues. These include being in a therapeutic relationship with a client for the first time, lacking experience, being idealistic about the work, and having personal problems or having questions about

programs' gatekeeping policies (p.12). Interns are at risk of compassion fatigue (a gradual lessening of compassion over time) and burnout. Some interns reported low levels of compassion satisfaction (pleasure derived from being able to do your work) and believed that their programs were not educating them well enough about personal wellness or about the programs' gatekeeping policies. Bowles also noted that counselor impairment occurs during training and that there is a need to educate counseling students about impairment issues and wellness strategies. He further indicated that strengthening or restructuring while supporting the efforts and growth of their students is essential.

Supervisors may not be prepared to identify and intervene with impaired trainees (Gizare & Forrest, 2004). Some supervisors identified issues that impacted their ability to intervene appropriately with impaired trainees. These included their lack of training for the evaluative component of supervision. In addition, the degree of agency and collegial support for supervisors in their programs affected their effectiveness. Finally, supervisors were hesitant to intervene due to the emotional difficulty of intervening. They concluded that it was important to discover how skilled supervisors deal with serious impairment and competence problems among internship students. Those supervisors can illustrate how best to perform gatekeeping functions.

### *Assessment of Competency*

The issue of suitability for practice does not just involve the issue of identifying impairment. There is also a need to assess competence in the social

services field. There is some difficulty in defining competencies in precise and measurable terms, as well as establishing tools for their assessment (Litchenberg & Portnoy, 2007). But there is some general consensus in the literature that determining competence should include assessing for the knowledge base, skills, and attitudes (and their integration), determining appropriate agreed-upon minimal levels of competence for individuals at different levels of professional development, ascertaining when “competence problems” exist for individuals, assuring the fidelity of competency assessments, and establishing mechanisms for providing effective evaluative feedback and remediation. Effective gatekeeping practices must involve assessment of competence, along with providing support to those students who have been deemed impaired to some degree. Or at the extreme, it includes procedures for a student’s dismissal from a program.

#### *Policies and Procedures in Gatekeeping*

Another issue surrounding gatekeeping involves policies and procedures. Research identifying gatekeeping issues in the fields of psychology, social work, and counseling indicates the need for policies and procedures that would quantify and clarify gatekeeping practices. Tam and Kwok (2007), in their study of gatekeeping in the field of social work, identified arguments that support gatekeeping policies. These include the fact that professionals in the helping fields are expected to provide high quality services, demonstrate competence in practice, and be accountable to clients as well as to the public. Social work has



specific educational objectives such as learning essential knowledge, skills, and values. Students interested in the social work field must be considered potential professionals rather than clients. It is expected that they do not have any impairments that would negatively impact their work with future clients. Gaubatz and Vera (2002) found that formalized gatekeeping procedures, along with program-wide training standards, resulted in more efficient screening of deficient trainees. Effective gatekeeping policies and procedures are thus critical.

Not all programs have policies or procedures which function as part of the gatekeeping process. Barlow and Coleman (2003) identified the lack of policies and guidelines for managing failing and problematic trainees in practicum as well as in classroom settings in social work programs in Canada. One of the conclusions of this study was that some schools had policies in place, while others were either working on them or did not have them. Interestingly, four of the schools that did not have any policies indicated that the best way to weed students out of the field was through their performance in practicum (Barlow, 2003).

The literature identifies that some deterrents to gatekeeping exist in practice. These involve the effectiveness of program policies and procedures. Though many acknowledge that gatekeeping is an essential element of the helping professions, Gaubatz and Vera (2002) found that existing formal policies and procedures are not always effective in keeping impaired students from completing their programs. They ascribe that finding to the fact that some

counselor educators experience pressures to ignore potentially impaired students, fear being sued or receiving negative teaching evaluations. In spite of this finding, they concluded that formalized gatekeeping policies and procedures, when they occur, do improve the quality of counseling program graduates.

Several studies focus on the locations involved in the gatekeeping process and on the policies and procedures utilized there. Campbell (2010) identified seven “gates” that counselor trainees must pass through in order to graduate. They are the admission gate, the skills gate, the classroom behavior gate, the relationship gate, the internship gate, the national examination gate, and the ethics gate. Her data indicated that counselor educators are most strict at the admissions gate, unless they have had experience as professional counselors beforehand. Those who have had such experience tended to believe that a student is involved in a process of growth and change during the education process and that this should be taken into account. She found that application of policies and procedures thus varied by experience level of the counselor educators she studied.

Another study focused on the admissions process as one of the first and primary points or “gates” at which gatekeeping policies should be applied. Thomas (2004) evaluated the admissions processes of several doctoral counselor education programs. She designed an assessment instrument, the Admissions Criteria and Procedure Evaluation Survey, to gather data about what admissions criteria were used, how they were used, and how the practices were

interpreted by the faculty of the counseling program. Results indicated that traditional criteria (such as the GRE) were not weighted as heavily as in the past, and that more holistic approaches, such as video demonstrations of counseling skills, writing samples, and experiential group activities were becoming more common. Her study indicated that the personal interview was the most beneficial assessment tool in the admissions process. This indicates that some criteria were more important to consider than simply grades or GRE scores.

### *Controversy Around Gatekeeping*

There is also some controversy surrounding the practice of gatekeeping. The following controversies are notable (Tam & Kwok, 2007). First, some people believe gatekeeping promotes elitism by maintaining a monopoly on who can and cannot enter the field. Second, gatekeeping may deprive some people of a college education if they do not meet the standards set up by the university for admission into a counseling program. A third controversy lies in the argument that it can be contrary to the helping profession's belief in self-determination and respect for individual rights. An additional controversy concerning gatekeeping at the university level is that it does not predict competence in the workplace. Another criticism is that universities already have policies in place that address student misbehavior and that additional ones are not needed. Finally, it is said that gatekeeping also may make students uncomfortable and inhibit learning (Tam & Kwok (2007).

### *Legal Issues*

There is a significant legal component to the gatekeeping issue. Cole (1991) acknowledged the importance of program staff being well versed in the legal aspects of gatekeeping. Proper gatekeeping relies on elements which should already be in the admission process--- equal protection for all applicants, no arbitrary decisions, follow established standards, no discrimination based on race, sex, handicapped or not, etc. He indicated that following established policies should reduce the risk of legal problems for programs and staff but also that the most effective means of reducing the risk of liability is maintaining harmonious faculty-student relationships.

Actual court cases involving gatekeeping have been examined in some studies. Cole and Lewis (1993) discussed the legal implications of the gatekeeping process by examining court cases and their legal and ethical ramifications for social work students' academic and disciplinary dismissals. They found that termination guidelines were not consistent and that this has resulted in legal action in some cases. In particular, behavioral and ethical criteria for making termination decisions are not always clear or consistent. They recommended that termination guidelines be developed and applied consistently. To further the understanding of the legal aspect of gatekeeping, they also suggested that research on actual legal cases continue, as it provides evidence of problems in the process.

Terminating an impaired student is a potential outcome of the gatekeeping process and can result in legal complications. Currier and Atherton (2008)

examined the termination policies of several universities in England and Australia. They concluded that terminating training for some students is necessary but often difficult. They indicated the significance of honesty, the importance of judgment, an emphasis on self-awareness and the importance of trying to keep personal responses and empathy out of the judgment as ways of reducing potential legal action by terminated students.

#### *Problems for Those Who Do Gatekeeping*

Although it is generally acknowledged that gatekeeping is a crucial component of many disciplines, it presents some significant problems for those who are charged with performing it. These include legal concerns, the difficulty of terminating students for non-academic reasons, and the implementation and effectiveness of gatekeeping policies and procedures. The legal concerns about terminating students have previously been noted; they mostly focus on fears of lawsuits and financial costs.

As regards terminating students for non-academic reasons, Koerin (1995) acknowledged that some social work educators admit concern over terminating students for deficiencies not academic in nature. Part of the problem is the subjective nature of these qualities and the lack of means to measure them objectively. For example, Moore and Urwin (1990) noted that the most identifiable student problems are lack of maturity and limited intellectual capacity, both of which they acknowledge lack objective assessment measures.

A particular type of student presents the greatest challenge to

gatekeeping. Moore and Urwin (1990) acknowledged that students who are either strong or weak in both academic and non-academic criteria present few challenges to the gatekeeping function. However, academically borderline students who have strong practice abilities and professional values, or academically outstanding students with unsatisfactory field performance, present a “gatekeeping dilemma” (p.123).

Another issue involves the implementation of gatekeeping policies and procedures. Bradley (1991) found that even though counselor educators have developed and used initial screening procedures, they are less certain about implementing them and dismissing impaired students once they are in the program. But in spite of the presence of gatekeeping policies and procedures, impaired students still complete the program and graduate. A study by Elman and Forrest (2008) discussed the issue of allowing problem students to graduate from a program. They found reluctance to apply rules that might result in dismissal unless the offense is very serious. They concluded that it is every faculty member's responsibility to make sure trainees are not defective in any way. The effectiveness of policies and procedures is also an important problem. Gaubatz and Vera (2002), in a study on the effectiveness of gatekeeping, attempted to determine if formalized gatekeeping procedures impacted the graduation rates of deficient trainees in counseling programs, that is, whether gatekeeping procedures were effective in either retaining or removing students from counseling programs. The participants were asked to estimate the

proportions of students who were involved in gatekeeping and the percentage of problematic students in their programs overall. This was done in an effort to determine the amount of “gateslipping” that occurred. The authors recommended that qualitative research continue, especially in defining the specific variables involved in describing deficient students, faculty estimates, and the level of faculty (full time versus adjunct) in order to better quantify the many elements involved to truly determine if gatekeeping procedures are effective.

#### *How Counselor Educators Experience Gatekeeping*

The lived experience of gatekeeping among counselor educators is the focus of this research. There is a limited amount research that seeks to identify and explore the experience of being a gatekeeper. But there have been some attempts to explore it. Brear and Dorrian (2010) conducted a national survey of counselor educators in Australian undergraduate and postgraduate academic training programs to determine how counselor educators view and experience gatekeeping programs in order to assist educators in the gatekeeping process. They identified some significant problems in the practice of gatekeeping which result in “gate slipping”, that is, allowing impaired students to get through the program and into the field. They found that more than half of the respondents stated that they had passed a student who they felt was unsuitable for the counseling profession. But the study did not determine the reasons for this nor how the respondents felt about knowingly retaining impaired students.

Counselor educators may be hesitant to screen students for non-academic reasons. Bradley (1991) found that it can be more difficult to identify students with mental health problems than those with academic problems. This decision may be subjective rather than objective. In addition, one faculty member's perception may be different from another's. Students may learn to mask their problems by limiting self-disclosure in class or interactions with particular faculty members---this can create uncertainty about nature and degree of the problem. Bradley stated that this reluctance might be due to fear of legal action, lack of definitive evidence, and lack of support by administrative elements in the department.

There have been some attempts at quantifying how counselor educators perceive gatekeeping. Campbell (2010) examined the attitudes and beliefs of counselor educators toward gatekeeping and at which gates which type of staff (i.e., full-time faculty, field supervisors, etc) was strictest. Full time faculty with many prior years of experience as counselor educators made less stringent gatekeeping decisions. But her work did not include personal interviews that would shed light on what this meant to the counselor educators themselves. Some characteristics that seemed to be significant for gatekeepers were identified by Currier and Atherton (2008). These included honesty, the importance of judgment, emphasis on self awareness, and the importance of trying to keep personal responses and empathy out of judgment. But their research did not include work on how these affect the gatekeeper's perceptions



of their work.

There has been at least one attempt to develop a theory surrounding faculty's experiences with gatekeeping. Capps (2008), in her dissertation, developed a grounded theory that sought to provide understanding about faculty members' experience working with impaired counseling students. She examined the factors that impact and interact with faculty's screening, review, remediation, retention, and removal of impaired counseling students. She also sought to determine the factors involved in making the decisions about impaired students either easier or more difficult. Her work did not provide insight into how the experience of being a gatekeeper impacted the faculty.

Perceptions of the gatekeeping process by counselor educators was examined by Zoimek-Daigle in her 2005 dissertation. It was noted that, in spite of ethical and professional guidelines, not all counselor education programs hold annual reviews of student progress and performance. The author also addressed the legal and ethical challenges to the gatekeeping process such as fear of lawsuits and the belief that support and encouragement are important elements of the counselor educator-student relationship, whereas challenge and criticism may be more difficult to do. She was able to present a clear picture of counselor educator's perceptions of the gatekeeping process. She also discussed the need for more qualitative research on gatekeeping from the perspective of the counselor educator.

There are several important studies that are mostly qualitative in nature.

There is evidence that many faculty members struggle with the process of gatekeeping, even while acknowledging its importance (Grady, 2009). Utilizing an ethnographic format, Grady presented the stories of one social work faculty member and one student who failed his/her class, which resulted in automatic expulsion. This approach provided a glimpse into the issues and stresses involved in gatekeeping process from both sides. Interviews with both subjects captured the concerns, fears, and uncertainties of the interactions between faculty member and student during the gatekeeping process.

Factors in counselor educators that inhibit gatekeeping were identified by Keri and Eichler (2005) in a qualitative study. Some of these factors include fear of retribution, loss, or damage, which have previously been discussed. But these have to be balanced with potential damage that can occur to clients and the counseling profession if gatekeeping is not practiced as it should be. The researchers documented some of the emotional and personal costs of being a gatekeeper in the counseling profession through the utilization various case studies of professionals in the field. The authors developed what they characterized as a creative method to help gatekeepers deal with their issues surrounding what they do. First, this involved discussing the experiences with colleagues and looking for some creative ways of coping. One of the most common reactions was a feeling of being attacked, so a way of healing needed to be practiced. The authors sought to fit the gatekeepers' experiences into some

existing counseling models, such as trauma, death and dying, rape, and PTSD. They found that using these models alone did not suffice so they added the component of “loss of innocence”. This term includes a gatekeeper’s feelings of disillusionment and loss, which affects their self-respect. The hope of the authors is that counselor educators “find connection, safety, and authentic expression when they suffer from this form of ‘on the job injury” (p.85).

This concept of “the loss of innocence” addresses the emotional cost to gatekeepers in the counseling profession. Keri and Eichler (2005) discovered feelings of denial, lower feelings of entitlement, self-blame, and reduced feelings of control in a group of supervisors. A group of gatekeepers were asked to identify their experiences with words; the results included emotion-based words such as:

...betrayal, vulnerability, fear, outrage, shock, disbelief, and bitterness. Also present, however, were hope, eagerness, and trust. Many were action words: distancing, caution, avoidance, learning, strategy, and connecting. Others were descriptive words: lies, gall, district attorney, who cares, I can’t do it, and what now? (p.84).

There have been some efforts to examine social work field instructors’ attitudes about and experiences with gatekeeping and to identify evaluation criteria for suitable students. Tam (2005) found that gatekeeping in the field of social work is controversial and that some field instructors are reluctant to fail an

inadequate student, as other research has confirmed. She found that some groups of field instructors have higher professional suitability to be gatekeepers than others; this would indicate the need for more education and training for those in this role. She did not, though, provide a clear picture on the impact of being a gatekeeper.

The reaction of their peers and colleagues to a gatekeeper's efforts was examined in a study by Barlow and Coleman (2003). They found that colleagues who were supported by their peers and department in believing that a student's strengths will emerge in time with adequate support and resources were less likely to screen out problematic students. It was determined that those colleagues who propose screening out were seen as reluctant to work with students where they were and might be seen as not willing to go far enough to ensure student success.

A qualitative study on the effects of the termination process on supervisors and students found that students and supervisors alike experienced trauma because of the termination process and were equally in need of institutional support during and after this process (Samec, 1995). Other studies by Bradey and Post (1991), Gizara (1997) and Vacha-Haase (1995) all found that disagreement among faculty and/or supervisors about what constituted inadequacy or impairment was a major barrier in addressing impaired trainees.

Many researchers found that faculty are sometimes unwilling to address

inadequate performance issues out of fears stemming from the likelihood of an adversarial relationship developing, the time already put into supervising students, the potential for time-demanding supervision, and the threat of legal action by students (Bradey & Post, 1991; Gizara, 1997; Olkin & Gaughen, 1991; Tedesco, 1982; Vacha-Haase, 1995). Capps (2005) concluded that being a gatekeeping agent can cause some distress to faculty but that it is important to do it in order to protect both the field and potential clients.

In spite of the importance of the studies just discussed, none of them focuses exclusively on the actual experiences of gatekeeping and how these experiences impact the gatekeepers, in this case, PhD counselor educators. This research, through the use of interviews with a group of PhD counselor educators, seeks to inform the field even further, especially as to how gatekeeping work affects those who perform those essential functions.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The practice of gatekeeping is critical for the training of competent professionals in many disciplines, including counseling, social work, and psychology. If a student enters the field either unprepared or ill-suited for the work the potential for harm is increased. According to Koerin and Miller (1995), gatekeeping is the effort to prevent “the graduation of students who are not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice (p.247).” In 2008, gatekeeping was further defined by Brear, Dorrian, and Luscri (2008), as:

the evaluation of student suitability for professional practice. It is a mechanism that aims to ensure the health of the profession by controlling access to it. It involves the identification of evaluative criteria and process, and the accountability of the gatekeeper to apply the criteria and take responsibility for the evaluative decisions (pp. 93-94).

Gatekeeping includes policies and procedures intended to protect professions as well as potential clients. In addition, those who perform gatekeeping functions must be willing to enforce those policies and procedures

and take responsibility for their actions.

In the context of this study, gatekeeping involves faculty members screening counseling students for successful completion of program requirements and identifying any students who are impaired in a way that might affect their safe interaction with future clients. It also involves the process of making decisions about the future of such students in the counseling program.

Even though there is acknowledgement of the importance of gatekeeping in the counseling profession, there is a noticeable lack of qualitative research, especially on the experiences of being a gatekeeper. The majority of the studies are quantitative in nature. Such research has not been able to richly portray three important phenomena: what it is like to be a gatekeeper, how the experiences and stressors involved impact the gatekeepers, and how gatekeepers react to the experiences of gatekeeping. Thus, the use of a qualitative methodology will better define and explore the practice of gatekeeping, especially as experienced and lived by participants who teach and supervise counseling students.

It may be that gatekeeping experiences, both positive and negative, impact individual PhD counselor educators somewhat differently. This study will attempt to discover, through a phenomenological approach, how gatekeeping personally affects the participants. The results will potentially inform the practice of gatekeeping and have implications for future gatekeepers.

#### Rationale for Using Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodology has been selected for this study as a means of

examining the experiences of PhD counselor educators. As previously mentioned, the majority of the work involving gatekeeping in the counseling profession has been quantitative in nature. Some studies focus on the issue of counselor impairment (Elman & Forest, 2007; Emerson, 1996; Sussman, 1992). These studies have attempted to define impairment and competence as well as provide scales with which to measure impairment and competence. Gibbons, et al (2007) examined the use of several assessments such as the Mojac Moral Orientation Scale and the Narcissism, Aloofness, Confidence, Empathy Scale in attempt to examine empathy in a group of students. Homrich (2009) focused on the need for policies and procedures that would quantify and clarify gatekeeping practices and found that in general there is a need for more clarification and standardization. Another study discussed the legal and ethical ramifications of gatekeeping (Cole & Lewis, 1993). A 2010 study by Brear and Dorrian indicated a significant problem they called "gate slipping," which involves unsuitable counseling students getting through the gatekeeping process and into the field. Their study was quantitative in nature and they recommended more qualitative work on the practice of "gate slipping."

Some recent quantitative studies have included a qualitative element. Campbell, in her 2009 dissertation, attempted to identify attitudes and beliefs of counselor educators utilizing scenarios given to the participants. It was only in the last part of her study that she asked the participants to share their thoughts about their experiences as gatekeepers. Currier and Atherton (2008) also used



the technique of analyzing case studies to investigate the decision making process in the gatekeeping and found that it was very difficult to be objective when it comes to suitability or fitness of counseling students.

Though effective and informative, a predominantly quantitative approach is not able to capture the complexity of the experiences of gatekeeping. Through a rich analysis, qualitative methods are able to capture the stories of the participants and thus enhance knowledge and understanding of a specific experience or set of experiences. There have been several important qualitative studies of the practice of gatekeeping. Ziomek-Daigle (2005) examined the perceptions of the gatekeeping process by counselor educators and identified ethical and professional guidelines, but did not elaborate on the actual experiences of being a gatekeeper. Ziomek-Daigle and Bailey (2008) conducted a study to examine culturally responsive gatekeeping practices in counselor education; they interviewed participants and found that it was critical to include a multicultural component but did not examine the actual experience itself. In 2010, Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen presented a theory of gatekeeping practices, and although it is important, the theory still does not focus on the experiences of gatekeeping.

Other qualitative studies involved a variety of focuses, none of which addressed the actual experiences of being a gatekeeper. Duba, Paez, and Kindsvatter (2010) identified non-academic characteristics used to evaluate and retain counseling students; they found that there is some disagreement on which

personal characteristics should be evaluated and how to do that. They concluded that this lack of clarity results in added pressures on the gatekeeping faculty. They did not, though, include any data on the effects on gatekeepers. Grady (2009) utilized a narrative approach in examining gatekeeping from both the student and faculty point of view; though her sample consisted of only one social work faculty member and one student who failed his/her class, she did find that this one faculty member did struggle with the process of gatekeeping. One attempt at examining the emotional costs of serving as a gatekeeper (Keri & Eichler, 2005) used a series of case studies that were evaluated by faculty. The study found that several factors inhibit gatekeeping, including fear of retribution, loss or damage. The authors saw that the experiences of the faculty they studied fit well into existing models of trauma, death and dying, rape, and PTSD. They recommended that support systems and interventions be designed based on these therapy models.

No specific qualitative studies that focus exclusively on obtaining the stories of gatekeepers were found in the literature. Several studies have included minor elements of personal experiences, but none fully and richly address the impact of being a gatekeeper from a counselor educator's point of view. It is believed that this study will fill that void and provide important information on what it is actually like to experience and deal with the effects of being a gatekeeper.

The specific qualitative methodology selected for this study is

phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to discover the very nature of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). A central tenet of the phenomenological approach is the assumption that people share common experiences, thus core meanings are mutually understood. The main technique utilized in phenomenology involves in depth interviews with individuals who experience a certain phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). According to Hays and Singh (2012), when a phenomenological approach is applied to counseling research, it's primary value is in exploring the participant's perspectives of their problems. It is felt that a phenomenological analysis will capture the meaning and impact of the participants' experiences as gatekeepers of counseling students and that this method will result in a rich exploration of what it is like to be a gatekeeper. The participants will be encouraged to discuss their personal beliefs and feelings surrounding the practice of gatekeeping, discuss and elaborate on their own personal experiences with impaired counseling students and describe what the process has been like for them. The goal is to describe and understand what it is like to be a gatekeeper in the counselor education field.

### Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological approach, or phenomenology, has a lengthy history in both sociology and philosophy (Patton, 2002). There are various phenomenological approaches but all share an attempt to identify and explore how people experience a particular phenomenon. In this method, the experiences of different people are bracketed, examined, and compared in an

effort to find the patterns of the common experience. The goal is to identify the basic elements of the experience that are common to all members or all human beings. It is also focused on the value of subjective experience and the connection between the participant's self and world (Hays & Singh, 2012). In this approach, the researcher is committed to understanding a topic from the participant's perspective, discovering how the world is experienced through the eyes of that individual.

Patton (2002) identifies four overall steps in phenomenological analysis.

1. **Epoche:** the researcher examines his/her own biases and preconceptions and works to place them aside so that the information can be seen in a new way.
2. **Phenomenological reduction:** this involves "bracketing" out biases and preconceptions so that the pure data are visible.
3. **Imaginative variation:** this involves viewing all the data as having equal value and finding meaningful clusters, after eliminating repetitive and overlapping data. Themes will then be looked at from differing viewpoints by utilizing other raters.
4. **Synthesis of texture and structure:** this involves identifying the core or basic experience of the subjects, i.e., finding the "bones" of the gatekeeping experience. This will result in a synthesis of the meaning and essence of the experience.

Researchable Problem

The primary focus of this study was to describe the experiences of counselor educators who gatekeep impaired counseling students. The practice of gatekeeping is critical for the training of competent professionals in many disciplines, including counseling, social work, and psychology. Graduate counseling programs play a crucial role in the training of effective professionals, as well as in the gatekeeping process. It is thus important to gain the perspectives of counselor educators as they are among the last people to work with prospective counselors before they graduate and enter the field. They are the gatekeepers but are not unaffected by their gatekeeping duties.

The work of being a gatekeeper in the counseling profession can be challenging. It can be difficult work and requires a balance of discipline and support. A review of the literature in the helping profession field strongly supports the contention that being a gatekeeper involves additional pressures and stresses on those who are tasked with gatekeeping impaired counseling students. Brear and Dorrian, in their 2010 quantitative study, identified some significant problems in the practice of gatekeeping, resulting in "gate slipping," or allowing impaired students to get through the process and into the field. They found that more than half of the respondents stated that they had passed a student who they felt was unsuitable for the counseling profession, partly due to the fact that they felt they might not be supported by the department and their colleagues in their decision to fail a student. Capps (2008) examined the factors that impact a faculty member's screening, review, remediation, retention, and

removal of impaired counseling students, including factors involved in making the decisions about impaired students either easier or more difficult.

In addition to faculty as gatekeepers, supervisors of counseling students may not be prepared to identify and intervene with impaired trainees (Gizare & Forrest, 2004). Some supervisors identified issues that impacted their ability to intervene appropriately with impaired trainees. These included a lack of training for the evaluative component of supervision, the emotional difficulty of intervening, as well as the degree of agency and collegial support for supervisors in their programs (Gizare & Forrest, 2004).

The literature also indicates that counselor educators may be hesitant to screen students for non-academic reasons (Bradley, 1991). The decision to do so may be subjective rather than objective, due to the reality that one gatekeeper's perception may be different from another individual's perspective. It is also seen that many faculty members struggle with the process of gatekeeping. Grady (2009) presented the stories of one social work faculty member and one student who failed his/her class, which resulted in automatic expulsion. This ethnographic approach resulted in a glimpse into the issues and stresses involved in the gatekeeping process from both sides of the issue. Some specific factors appear to inhibit gatekeeping among counselor educators. Keri and Eichler (2005) identified these as fear of retribution, loss or damage and fear of legal action; one of the most common reactions was a feeling of being attacked. The concept of the "loss of innocence" has been used to address the

emotional cost to gatekeepers in the counseling profession (Keri & Eichler, 2005). This term encompasses the realities of being responsible for future clients and the counseling field itself as well as the struggle with the two polar dichotomies of support and challenge. They discovered feelings of denial, lower feelings of entitlement, self-blame, and reduced feelings of control in a group of supervisors. It is clear from studies such as these that there is a potential emotional toll on some of those who perform gatekeeping functions.

The literature includes few quantitative studies on the effects of gatekeeping on those who perform those functions. This may be due to the difficulties of trying to measure and quantify the experiences of counselor educators who gatekeep. It is believed that use of the qualitative methodology of phenomenology might better define and explore the practice of gatekeeping, especially as experienced and lived by counselor educators who teach and supervise counseling students.

### Research Questions

A phenomenological approach is designed to examine the experiences of the participants in a certain phenomenon, in this case, gatekeeping. The research questions were structured to elicit personal experiences and their impact. Because the interest was in the participant's point of view, the following research questions were the foundations of this study:

1. What is it like to be a gatekeeper?
2. How does the experience of gatekeeping impact counselor educators ?

3. How do gatekeepers process the experiences?
4. What particular stressors are experienced as a gatekeeper, if any?

These broad research questions were explored utilizing an interview guide format (see Appendices C and D). The guide is the foundation of the interviews, but any and all other information provided by the participants will be included in the data analysis.

### Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, and with a phenomenological approach specifically, the role of the researcher is to not only obtain data, but to collect the stories of the participants, to develop an understanding of how a particular experience (in this case gatekeeping) has affected them, and to identify common patterns in the experiences of all the participants (Patton, 2002). A decision was made to utilize a research team approach, as an additional method of trustworthiness (Hayes & Singh, 2012). By utilizing triangulation among the primary researcher, a peer debriefer, and a monitor, it was felt that this strategy would address issues of researcher reflexivity and subjectivity.

There are several important issues involving the role of the researcher that must be explored due to the critical impact he/she can have on the findings.

These include the following researcher biases.

### Researcher Assumptions and Biases

The topic of gatekeeping was selected by this researcher due to some



personal experiences in the field, both in clinical practice and in educational settings as an instructor and supervisor of master's level counseling students. I have seen faculty struggle with how to deal with students who are not "getting it"; plus I have worked with counselors who are ineffective and may be even toxic to their clients. In supervision, I have also seen a few Master's students who also do not appear to be empathic or who struggle with basic counseling skills.

I realize these experiences are biases and could impact my research. The technique of bracketing personal assumptions and prejudgments was utilized in order to minimize the impact of such biases (Patton 2002, Hayes & Singh, 2012). A list of preconceptions and opinions about impairment, gatekeeping, termination of impaired students, and personal experiences in the field was made in order to identify and keep them out of the analysis process. In addition, one peer debriefer and a monitor were used in analyzing the data in order to enhance inter-rater reliability. As noted by Hayes and Singh (2012), peer debriefing provides accountability that helps identify and understand the influence of the researcher. A monitor provides assurances that the analysis process is done according to established standards.

#### Researcher Objectivity

Even in qualitative research, it is imperative to remain as objective as possible. The stories of the participants are the primary focus and must come through clearly. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2002); this implies a direct involvement with the participants. Absolute objectivity

is impossible to obtain but it is possible for the investigator to adopt a stance of neutrality with regard to the phenomena being studied (Patton, 2002). This means that the researcher does not set out to prove something or manipulate data to arrive at a desired result. The goal is to understand the phenomenon as it exists. I worked to maintain my objectivity by keeping this in mind. A number of specific strategies were utilized to enhance researcher objectivity.

#### Strategies to Maintain Objectivity

The strategies of bracketing, utilizing a peer debriefer to search for themes in the data, the use of a monitor to oversee the analysis, and accurate transcription of the interviews were utilized to maintain objectivity. Bracketing involved writing down the assumptions, biases and prejudices of the researcher regarding the topic being studied. The intent was to consciously note these issues, write them down, and then continually refer to them during the analysis process, in order to reduce their impact on the analysis process (Patton, 2002).

The research team consisted of three individuals...the researcher, one peer debriefer who was a PhD counselor education student, and a monitor, selected for their general knowledge of the research process and whose task was to oversee methodological procedures. The purpose of using more than one person in the data analysis process was to not only reduce personal biases of the researcher, but to provide another person to code the data and to compare the patterns found and note those which are found by both individuals. Those categories which have been noted by only one debriefer may be the result of

personal biases, not an indication of something that really exists in the data.

The goal was to find common patterns among the responses of all the participants. The monitor functioned to review the process of coding, review the final codes, and assist with answering questions from the rest of the team.

An accurate transcription of the participant's interviews was critical to the reliability and validity of this qualitative approach. To assure that the most accurate transcription would be obtained, the interviews were recorded by a digital recorder, by a Smart Pen (a computerized pen), and at times, an ipad. The recorded interviews were burned to cds and given to a professional transcriptionist. These written interviews were then read by the researcher and peer debriefer as the digital recordings were replayed. This was designed to assure the accuracy of the transcriptions. Minor variations were discovered and corrected on the written transcript.

#### Researcher Subjectivity

As important as objectivity is in this research, it is clearly understood that due to personal experiences with the topic, this researcher has more than a personal interest in the topic of gatekeeping in the counseling profession. A neutral stance was taken in regards to the topic and the data collected, though this does not mandate total detachment from the subject matter (Patton, 2002). One of the values of qualitative methodology is the direct experiences and insights the researcher has concerning the research topic (Patton, 2002). But all efforts were made to remain objective and let the participants' stories speak for

themselves. It is important though, to acknowledge a personal interest in the topic.

### Strategies to Maintain Subjectivity

Qualitative research designs are by definition more subjective than are quantitative methodologies. An important element of qualitative inquiry is empathy, being able to understand the position, feelings, experiences, and world view of others (Patton, 2002). One of the goals of this researcher was to remain empathic towards the gatekeeping experiences of each the participant. This was accomplished by placing myself in their shoes in order to better understand their experiences.

The interview schedule was designed in such a way that the participants were able to discuss and share their experiences with the researcher. The schedule functioned as a guide, as a broad outline. Open-ended questions and opportunities to fully explain answers allowed the participants to relay their stories with minimal structure or guidance from the researcher. The interviews were held face to face rather than over the phone or in writing in order for the researcher to have an active and involved role in the process.

Accurate transcription was done in order to allow the participant's stories and experiences to be the focus of the work. The researcher and the peer debriefer were involved in bringing an accurate picture of each participant's gatekeeping experiences to the research. This redundancy should increase the reliability of the information and assure that the true stories come through.

## Research Plan

Once the research design was selected, participants identified, and the interview guide developed, the project was submitted to the ODU IRB committee for approval. Approval was obtained (Appendix A). A consent form (Appendix B) indicates the purpose of the study, the type of questions to be asked, confidentiality concerns, and the lack of risk or harm to the subjects.

### *Sampling Procedures*

In this qualitative inquiry, criterion sampling was employed. This type of sampling dictates that the individuals in the sample have certain specific characteristics in order to be included (Patton, 2002). It is important that the participants are PhD counselor educators who have been actively involved in the gatekeeping process at their respective universities because it is believed that participants with these characteristics will have extensive experience in the process of gatekeeping. It is also expected that they will have substantial knowledge of the characteristics of impaired counseling students, as well as the preferred characteristics of effective counseling students. They may also, variously, have performed as advisors, mentors, supervisors, and instructors. These diverse experiences could give them a breadth of knowledge at different levels and with different types of gatekeeping practices.

Convenience sampling was also utilized. Convenience sampling is non-random and includes those participants who agree to participate in the study

(Patton, 2002). Requests for interviews were emailed to the potential pool of participants, but it is understood that not all of them were able or willing to participate in the study. Those who did agree to participate constituted the sample. It was hoped that a sample of at least 10-12 would be involved in the study. It is understood that this sampling technique is neither purposeful nor strategic, but it is convenient and cost-effective and will thus meet the needs of this study.

### *Participant Selection Procedures*

A total of 33 potential participants were identified from their university's counseling department websites. An email explaining the focus and purpose of the study and requesting their participation was sent. It was explained that a series in-depth interviews about their experiences as gatekeepers in their profession would be held. It was hoped that the final number of participants would be 10-12 PhD counselor educators, selected at random from those who agree to participate. PhD level counselor educators were selected as participants because it is believed that they occupy a very important position in the gatekeeping process and that their experiences, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs will be an invaluable addition to the understanding of gatekeeping in the counseling profession. They are in a strategic position for gatekeeping because of their involvement in the educational process, as well as their roles as supervisors, instructors, and advisors. Each participant will have worked with many students over the years and therefore is considered to be an information-

rich participant.

The names and email addresses of the pool of 33 eligible participants were obtained from the counseling program websites of seven large universities on the east coast. An initial email detailing the specifics of the proposed study was sent to all of them, along with a request for their participation. Of those who consent to participate, it was planned to select 10-12 by randomly choosing their emails from the pile of responses. This would be done to avoid any personal biases that might exist if the participants were processed by name or other identifier. This procedure is related to the fact that this researcher may have been a student of or had interactions with potential participants.

Of the total of 33 initial emails that were sent out, no response was received from the majority of them. Two declined for various reasons, one replied they would be willing to participate, and the remainder did not respond at all. Due to this, a few weeks later a second email was sent out and the response rate was much improved. A total of eleven PhD counselor educators agreed to participate in the study. In the end, only nine actually did follow through with their participation.

The nine participants were sent another email with various forms attached, such as an informed consent document, consent to be recorded, and more information on the procedures that will be involved, such as audio recording and transcription. Appointments were made to conduct the interviews and all were held. Eight of the interviews were face to face, with the ninth one utilizing

Skype, as the participant had moved out of the area but was still employed at their university. It was anticipated that at least an hour would be needed for each interview and they for the most part averaged 45 minutes to an hour. Two follow-up interviews were planned as well, each 30 minutes to an hour in length. Only seven of the nine participants responded to attempts to schedule the second interview; two of the participants did not return several calls or emails. So they were not represented in the second round of interviews. At the end of the second interview while attempting to arrange the third and final interview, each of the participants indicated that they had really said all they could say about the topic of gatekeeping and did not really have anything else they wanted to add. Due to this, no third interviews were held. This was interpreted to mean that the subject had been exhausted, as is the procedure with phenomenology (Patton, 2002).

#### *Measures to Ensure Participant Confidentiality*

Assurances were given to the participants that there were no foreseeable risks involved in their participation in the study and that the research had been approved by the ODU Institutional Review Board committee. It was made clear to them that the study is not expected to be of any immediate benefit to them, but others in the future could potentially benefit from their experiences. The information was kept confidential and locked in a safe area, with the researcher only having access to it. They were also offered a copy of the completed report.

It was not anticipated that any financial resources would be needed. But a decision was made to hire a professional transcriptionist rather than have the



primary researcher do the transcription, mostly due to time constraints.

Additional personnel were utilized for the bracketing, theme identification processes, and monitoring. The research team consisted of the researcher, a peer debriefer who was in the PhD in counseling program at Old Dominion University, and a monitor who has experience in the research process. Due to the coding of the interviews, it was considered very unlikely that either the transcriptionist or the other members of the research team would be able to identify the participants.

Participant confidentiality was maintained by numbering the participants (1-9) rather than using their names or university of employment. Each round of interviews was coded to match the number given the participant. For example, 1-#1 refers to the first interview of participant #1, 1-#2 refers to the second interview of participant #1. Only the researcher herself has access to the master list of participants and which interviews came from which participant. During the interviews, several of the participants were very adamant that they had concerns about being identified in the study, that their universities or co-workers would recognize them. So in addition to the coding of participants and interviews, it was decided that it was necessary to eliminate the use of any identifiers. These included the size of the university, the general location (as in \_\_\_ area of the United States), race, sex, length of time in the field, program information given in the interview and anything else that might prove problematic. Two of the participants asked for a copy of the transcript so they could review it before the

coding began; this was done with no problem, with some additional information being removed as requested.

Each participant was also asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E). This included race, sex, age, number of years as a counselor education, as a counselor, and as a supervisor; year of PhD and any other credentials they held. The form was received back from all but two of the participants; one indicated that they preferred not to disclose any information and the other's email was returned and no new address could be found.

As a researcher, this was a bit of a surprise, that the concerns regarding confidentiality were so great with some of the participants that they said they were re-thinking their participation. It had been anticipated that only the names and schools would be removed. So there was some frustration that quite a bit of valuable information cannot be included in the study, especially demographical information. It may well be that there were some correlations with length of time in the field and easy of gatekeeping, for example. Several additional codes and patterns could have been included but the wishes of the participants were more important.

#### Data Collection Procedures

It was planned that the participants would be asked to complete a brief questionnaire consisting of demographic information, such as age, race, sex, length of time in the field, credentials, etc. But due to some of the concerns with confidentiality, this was removed from the study. It was recognized that some

valuable information might be lost but the concerns for the participants and their confidentiality came first.

The intent was then to conduct three rounds of open-ended interviews with each participant. Each participant would be interviewed for approximately one hour for each interview. In actuality, the interviews averaged 45 minutes to an hour. All nine participants completed the first round of interviews, seven of them completed the second, and of those seven, none felt the need for a third one. It was apparent that the subject had been exhausted as far as they were concerned. Due to this, no third interview was held.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed; a digital recorder, a computer pen (Smart Pen), and an iPad were used to record the interviews. This was to increase the accuracy of the transcription and to provide redundancy if something mechanical went wrong with one of the recording devices. The digital recordings were then burned to CDs and sent to a professional transcriptionist. She then emailed the completed documents to the researcher. The *atlas.ti* computer program was utilized to identify themes and patterns. This program is designed to assist in the analysis of interviews by facilitating the extraction, categorization, and linkage of segments of information in order to discover patterns in the data. Each pattern or set of data can then be given a code or name. The peer debriefer then replicated the analysis and coding process with the *atlas.ti* program to increase the degree of inter-rater reliability. The team monitor reviewed the process.

### *Initial Interviews*

The first round of interviews consisted of broad and general categories, utilizing an interview guide (See Appendix C) designed to elicit overall comments on the participants' experiences with and perceptions of gatekeeping. The questions were based on a review of the literature pertaining to gatekeeping. They included the participant's definition of gatekeeping, some of their experiences as gatekeepers, their understanding of their department's gatekeeping policies and procedures, how they identify impaired students, description of what the gatekeeping process has been like for them, and how they feel about their dual roles (support/challenge dichotomy), in addition to any other information they wanted to add. The initial responses were analyzed and themes determined by the researcher and the peer debriefer, utilizing the atlas.ti program. The major goal was to understand what their experiences and perceptions are in order to better understand what it is like to be a gatekeeper in the counselor education field.

### *Follow-Up Interviews*

The second round of interviews was held to help clarify and elaborate on the themes identified from the first round of interviews, utilizing a second interview guide (See Appendix D). The peer debriefer as well as the primary researcher identified several new themes that emerged from an analysis of the first interviews. These then were integrated into the second round of interviews. The predominant new theme that was explored was the concern with

confidentiality by several of the participants. Each participant was asked specifically about their concerns with being identified, if any, and if they could elaborate on them.

The third and final round of interviews would have been used to verify perceptions from the participants about the gatekeeping themes that have been identified in the first two rounds and to solicit any further comments. As mentioned previously, none of the seven participants who participated in the second round of interviews felt that a third one was necessary. They basically indicated that the first two interviews had thoroughly covered the topic and they had nothing new to add. Due to this, the third round of interviews was not held, since all indications were that the subject had been exhausted as far as these participants were concerned.

### Data Analysis

Once the interviews are transcribed, the process of analysis began. The following phenomenological framework was utilized (Patton,2002). This included the following:

- 1.Epoche: The researcher examined her own biases and preconceptions and placed them aside so that the information can be seen in a new way. This was accomplished by writing down all her preconceptions about gatekeeping, impaired students, PhD counselor educators, and any other beliefs and feelings related to the topic. Identifying biases was the first step

to recognizing them and working to reduce them for this project. This researcher had to refer to them several times, especially during the first round of interviews.

2. Phenomenological reduction: This involved “bracketing” out biases and preconceptions so that the pure data would be visible. This was done by finding key phrases and statements, interpreting the meaning of these, obtaining the participants’ interpretations of these, as well as interpreting these meanings in order to ascertain the essential elements of gatekeeping. Then a tentative statement about gatekeeping will be offered. This was accomplished by the coding process, utilizing the *atlas.ti* program.

3. Imaginative variation: This involved viewing all the data as having equal value and finding meaningful clusters, after eliminating repetitive and overlapping data. Themes were then looked at from differing viewpoints in order to expand them. The utilization of two coders, the researcher and the peer debriefer, resulted in final agreement on patterns and clusters.

4. Synthesis of texture and structure: This involved identifying the core or basic experience of the participants, i.e., finding the “bones” of the gatekeeping experience. This would result in a synthesis of the meaning and essence of the experience. The utilization of within-case displays and between case displays allowed for meanings and patterns to become clearer. A concept map was also constructed to visually display the relationships.

### *Data Displays*

The procedure of developing case displays was utilized as a means of graphically displaying the data derived from the individual interviews (Hays & Singh, 2012). Final codes and examples of quotes that applied to them were placed in a matrix. Initial case displays were developed for each participant's first and second interviews. These within-case displays allowed for important data for each code to organize the data.

A second type of case display, a cross-case display, was then constructed with sample data from all the individual case displays. This allowed for common patterns as well as discrepancies in comments to be easily visible. This cross-case display methodology facilitated the analysis of the massive amount of data involved. This analysis allowed for interpretation of the data.

A phenomenological approach utilizing these steps was designed to meet several challenges, including researcher subjectivity and incorrect analysis of a participant's experiences. These are elements that must be kept in mind constantly in order to assure that the result of the analysis is a true and accurate portrayal of the stories of the participant. The utilization of a monitor ensured that the two coders followed proper procedures and practices.

Hayes and Singh (2012) discuss some of the challenges of using qualitative software for data analysis. It was important for the researcher and peer debriefer to keep these in mind while utilizing the *atlas.ti* program. The challenges include the belief that such software implies increased manipulation

and control, thereby possibly influencing our understanding of the subject as we de-contextualized the data as the software would direct us to do. The second challenge is that a very linear coding process could result, and it is harder to go back and re-code things. A third challenge is that person to computer communication "are not analogous to face-to-face consensus coding." (Hayes & Singh, 335). It is believed that frequent consensus meetings and lengthy discussions during the coding process mitigated these challenges and that the data was analyzed thoroughly and as well as possible.

### *Coding Procedures*

Coding procedures were employed on the data obtained in each round of interviews. Coding involves developing a manageable classification system and is the first step of analysis (Patton 2002). The first type of coding employed was open coding and involved doing several readings of the transcripts in order to find common words, phrases and meanings. These were entered into the *atlas.ti* program and quotes which applied to the codes placed under each code heading. Codes were then grouped into categories based on the meanings they possess. Each coder (researcher and peer debriefer) completed the process independently. Several consensus meetings were held during which agreement was reached on what would constitute the primary codes, sub-codes, and operational definitions of each code. This process went fairly smoothly, as the primary researcher had basically envisioned macro-codes and the debriefer, sub-codes that fit well under those. There was discussion about the inclusion of some



initial codes, and if here was no general agreement reached, these codes were eliminated from the analysis.

Next, axial coding linked themes and added information to the categories that were established by the open coding process. This information consisted of specific quotes from each participant that pertained and best elucidated that code. An effort was made to include information from each participant, though some of the interviews did not touch on some of the final codes.

Finally, selective coding was used to organize categories around central concepts. A concept map was developed for each of the super-ordinate themes and sub themes identified in each set of interviews. Through this process of examining the interviews through these three coding processes, it was determined that a general understanding of the experiences of gatekeeping by PhD counselor educators emerged.

#### Verification Procedures

Because this was a qualitative study of gatekeeping, there is always the issue of confidence in the results. Patton (2002) defines three elements of credibility: rigorous methods, the credibility of the researcher, and a philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry. Rigorous methods involve doing fieldwork in such a way that it results in high-quality data than can be systematically analyzed. The credibility of the researcher is dependent upon training, experience, track record, and how the researcher presents himself. A philosophical belief in the value of qualitative research is basic and lies in a

fundamental appreciation of qualitative methodology. Attention to these elements will enhance the confidence in the research.

### *Credibility*

With qualitative interviewing, the information obtained by definition can be highly subjective. Credibility of findings were enhanced, though, by making sure interview questions were clearly stated and that the researcher and peer debriefers bracketed their biases. In order to control for biases, sample of the interview guide was reviewed by this researcher's dissertation committee. Any errors, ambiguities or problems were corrected.

### *Transferability*

Another issue with the use of phenomenology as a framework is its very subjective view of the subject matter, maybe even a slanted or biased one (Patton, 2002). But the goal is explore life experiences, which are by their nature highly subjective. It is recognized that the results will not be highly generalizable, due to small sample size, the use of only PhD level counselor educations, and the use of CACREP-only accredited schools, as well as the qualitative nature of the methodology.

### *Dependability*

The utilization of the same interview guide for each participant is intended to increase the dependability of the results. But it is possible that both the researcher and the participants may misunderstand questions or forget facts or details. By utilizing a round of three separate interviews, it was hoped that some

of these weaknesses would be reduced. There could be some limitations with the transcription process as well, such as misunderstanding of what was being said. That is why a professional transcriber was utilized. In addition, the researcher and peer debriefer compared the transcripts to the original recordings. Discrepancies were corrected. The use of the computer program *atlas.ti* simplified the establishment of categories of information. In addition the use of a research team helped insure the dependability of the coding categories procedures.

### *Confirmability*

An effort to increase confirmability was the use of only CACREP-accredited schools. It is widely recognized that the issue of gatekeeping affects all types of schools and programs, accredited or not, as well as other mental health disciplines. It was decided, for the sake of this study, to limit the participants to schools that are CACREP accredited because of the standardization of policies and procedures.

Utilizing a peer debriefer was an important element of this approach to studying gatekeeping. One additional PhD counseling student was involved in the theme identification process, thus increasing the reliability of the categories identified. Triangulation utilizing a research team of researcher, peer debriefer and monitor also improved the process. Also, several other tools were used in an effort to ensure the trustworthiness of the results, including a reflective journal, document reviews, and consultation with a peer debriefer who has experience in

qualitative research. The *atlas.ti* computer program for qualitative analysis was also utilized.

### Summary

It has been determined that a qualitative approach will elicit the specific type and quality of information that this researcher seeks in order to explore experiences in PhD counselor education gatekeeping. Ample and significant data can certainly be obtained utilizing quantitative methods and by doing complex statistical analyses. Thereby generalizable knowledge could be advanced. But the phenomenon of what it is like to do gatekeeping, to be responsible for the quality of counseling students entering the field, to struggle to support impaired students in the hope that they will become effective counselors, and to ultimately be responsible for terminating impaired students from a counseling program can be better understood through the use of qualitative research. Therefore a phenomenological approach, which will allow the participants to speak for themselves about their experiences as gatekeepers, has been selected as the best way to allow them to tell their story. In depth interviews were analyzed through several types of coding to determine patterns and shared experiences. These shared stories and experiences of gatekeeping by PhD counselor educators will add to the understanding of the gatekeeping process as well as highlight what impacts being a gatekeeper has on PhD counselor educators. It may well also identify areas for change or improvement in gatekeeping policies and procedures, as well as clarifying the need for more departmental and

university support for those who perform this most important function.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS AND INTREPRETATIONS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from this phenomenological study of counselor educator's experiences as gatekeepers. The focus of this study was to explore what it is like to do gatekeeping, to be responsible for the quality of counseling students entering the field, to struggle to support impaired students in the hope that they will become effective counselors, and to ultimately be responsible for terminating impaired students from a counseling program were the focuses of this study. These shared stories and experiences of gatekeeping will hopefully add to the understanding of the gatekeeping process and the impact on counselor educators. Participants' experiences may also highlight areas for change or improvement in gatekeeping policies and procedures, including the need for more departmental and university support for those who perform this most important function.

#### Participant Profiles

Out of 33 potential participants contacted, nine counselor educators were involved in the study. Participant profiles were created based on information obtained in the demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) and information obtained from online resources such as university websites and LinkedIn. To ensure anonymity, participants were given coding numbers, and their work

settings were kept confidential. The participant profiles offer a snapshot of their level of experience with gatekeeping and provide a background to their subjective perspectives.

### *Group Profile*

Each of the nine participants was given a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) including basic sex, age, race/ethnicity, the year their PhD was earned, and what other credentials they hold. In order to understand their activities as gatekeepers, they were also asked how many years they have been counselor educators and how many years they had been counselors and/or supervisors. The specific name and location of their school was not asked due to participants' confidentiality concerns.

The participants included four males and five females. The ages of the participants range from 49 to 73. Two of the participants were African American, one bi-racial, and six Caucasian. All of the participants had earned PhDs, though the time span ranged quite widely, from the oldest PhD being earned in 1980 to the most recent in 2009. The average length of time for holding a PhD in a counseling related field was 18 years, with the longest duration as 33 years, and the shortest duration as 4 years.

Each participant held an additional credential to a PhD. Three were Nationally Certified Counselors (NCC) and four were Licensed Professional

Counselors (LPC). Other credentials included pastoral counselor, psychologist, school counselor, certified substance abuse counselor (CSAC), and Qualified Mental Health Professional (QMHP).

There was also a range in the experience level of the participants. The length of time as a counselor educator ranged from 7 to 33 years, with the average of 17.8 years. The years of experience as a counselor ranged from 30 to 11 years, with the average of 18.1 years. Experience as a supervisor ranged from 20 to 5 years, with an average length of 12.85 years. Table 1 reflects the demographic information obtained from all of the participants.

**Table 1** Participant Profiles

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Ethnicity Gender Age</b>	<b>Degrees and Credentials</b>	<b>Years as Counselor Educator</b>	<b>Years as Counselor</b>	<b>Years as Supervisor</b>
<b>P1</b>	African American Male 63	PhD in 2000 NCC, CCFC, Pastoral Counseling	15	17	14
<b>P2 *</b>	White Female Age unavailable	PhD in 2009	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable
<b>P3 **</b>	White Female Age unavailable	PhD	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable



<b>P4</b>	White Male 62	PhD in 1980 NCC, LPC, licensed psychologist	33	15	20
<b>P5</b>	African American Male 73	PhD in 1985 CSAC, CRP, QMHP	21	21	15
<b>P6</b>	African American Female 49	PhD in 2002 School Counselor Certification	11	11	11
<b>P7</b>	White Female 52	PhD in 1995 LPC	7 full time 7 adjunct	20+	15+
<b>P8</b>	White Male 64	PhD in 1985 LPC	24	13	5
<b>P9</b>	White Female 55-70	PhD in 2006 NCC, LPC	7	30	10

\* Participant 2's email address was no longer valid and could not be contacted for information: information not listed on the university website

\*\* Participant 3 declined to fill out the information; information not on university website

### *Individual participant profiles*

#### *Participant #1: (P1)*

Upon my arrival to interview the first participant, I noted that the office appeared quite disorganized, as if he had just moved into it. The office was

located in the basement of one of his university's older buildings. There were also numerous interruptions by phone and people coming to his office door. In spite of these interruptions, he presented as very engaged and interested in the topic of gatekeeping and his experiences as a gatekeeper.

Participant #1 was a 63 year old Black male. He has 15 years of experience as a counselor educator, 17 years as a counselor, and 15 years as a supervisor. He earned his PhD in 2000 and has the additional credentials of a Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC) and Pastoral Counselor. His position is currently as an Associate Professor and Coordinator of the graduate program in counseling. In describing himself, Participant #1 stated, "... my background may be different than others. I got 29 years in the military as a security policeman, and I deal with a lot of young people... I'm an oxymoron as a counselor."

Only the initial interview was held with this participant. He did not respond to numerous follow-up phone messages or emails to schedule a second interview, so unfortunately he is not represented in the second round. His information was verified by sending him a copy of his interview. He indicated in a return email that it was accurate.

*Participant #2: (P2)*

I interviewed the second participant via Skype, as her husband was deployed out of state. There was an initial problem with establishing a connection but then the interview proceeded uneventfully. The second interview was held by

phone, per her request due to some computer problems she was having. She willingly shared some of her experiences and concerns with gatekeeping. Currently her teaching is only online, and she was able to provide some contrast between gatekeeping on campus in a classroom and with an online class. She stated that not seeing her students can be “disorienting,” since she can “miss cues and body language.” When asked how she viewed herself as a gatekeeper on a range from punitive to supportive, she described herself by saying, “Honestly, I’d probably put myself right smack dab in the middle because I’ll avoid certain situations and have been maybe consulted to not approach certain situations.”

Participant #2 was a White female and is currently an Assistant Professor of Counseling. She received her PhD in 2009. Her main area of focus is in school counseling. As previously stated, she is teaching mainly online classes at this time as she resides out of the state from her current university. She stated, “I am a military spouse and my husband was reassigned here, so I work with the university to do telework until we are able to get back to [the city of her university] which hopefully will be in 2 years.”

She did not return the demographic questionnaire form that was emailed to her, so I was unable to obtain some demographic information such as age, length of time as a counselor educator, counselor or supervisor. From the interview I did determine that she has been with the counseling faculty for two

years and has worked for 1 1/2 years in research with two programs at her university. Several attempts were made using the Internet, Facebook, and LinkedIn to obtain a current address but none was found. I could only obtain what information I could from her profile on her university website and from her interview.

*Participant #3: (P3)*

The third participant was initially interviewed at her university office. The second interview was held over the phone, per her request. She was a White female and presented as very friendly and open. She was very concerned about the responsibility of being a gatekeeper, stating "I am in the position of seeing people come into the program who I do not consider to be qualified and it is a very frustrating thing for me." As a gatekeeper, she described herself by stating, "you know in an ideal world, I am pretty big on gatekeeping, I'm more strongly toward trying to weed out applicants and current students who are not functioning appropriately to become therapists." She even shared research she was using as a source for her own gatekeeping efforts, saying "I passed this along to my dean and said we need to get something like this in place."

She expressed concerns about having her comments be identified by her colleagues or her university in saying, "this is all going to be anonymous, right?" I assured her that any identifiers such as specific program details, students, or departmental positions would be removed from the transcript and not included in

the coding process. Her fear of potential repercussions for talking about concerns, frustrations, or problems with one's workplace, but not with the practice of gatekeeping itself, will be explored further in this chapter

She declined to do the demographic questionnaire or allow any personal information to be used in the dissertation. Her school website only contained name and degree. Because of her concerns with confidentiality, I sent her copies of the original transcripts for her approval. I removed all identifying information that she did not want included. Because of her concerns, I believe that some valuable information was lost and that this participant's story is not as complete as it could be.

*Participant #4: (P4)*

The fourth participant in the study was interviewed in his university office. For the second interview, he requested to speak by phone. He expressed a strong interest in the gatekeeping process and how it could be improved through university policies and procedures. He expressed how the process is an art rather than a science and how he would like to see development of more quantitative means of identifying student issues. He was open to express his opinions and views throughout the interview process.

Participant #4 was a 62 year old White male and has 33 years of experience as a counselor educator, 15 years as a counselor, and 20 years as a supervisor. His PhD was earned in 1980, and his other credentials include

Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC), Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), licensed psychologist, and two expired school counselor credentials. He indicated that his extensive experience has had an impact on his performance as a gatekeeper, "I mean I don't have a problem kicking somebody out if I think it is warranted to do so. But it does become easier once you do it more often." He also jokingly stated that "I don't have a problem with conflicts. I mean, I don't care. I'm a New Yorker!"

*Participant #5: (P5)*

The fifth participant in the study was interviewed in his university office. He did not respond to requests by phone or email for a second interview. This interview was the most challenging one as the participant seemed to wear numerous hats and moved back and forth between his roles of professor, supervisor, and counselor during the interview, as demonstrated in his statement, "...one minute you're their supervisor, next minute you're their mentor." He had stories and experiences to share for each role, often making it unclear to the researcher which role he was in during those experiences. I contacted him two times after the interview to ensure the transcript reflected the accurate role for each experience. When asked how he saw himself as a gatekeeper ranging from punitive to supportive on a 1-10 scale (1 being punitive and 10 being supportive), he stated: "I would put myself [as] an 8."

Participant #5 was a 73 year old Black male, with 21 years of experience

as a counselor educator, 21 years as a counselor, and 15 years as a supervisor. He earned his PhD in 1985 and currently holds the credentials of Certified Substance Abuse Counselor (CSAC) and Certified Rehabilitation Provider (CRP). He spent 31 years in the military (Air Force), saying it was helpful because "I found that [my military service] really laid the groundwork because I did a lot of management instruction and then at the time I was in the service they were really getting into drug training and treatment." He is currently an Assistant Professor and coordinator of a counseling program at his university.

*Participant #6: (P6)*

The sixth participant in the study was referred by Participant #1, who works in the same department. I met her in her office for the first interview, and she asked that the second be conducted over the phone. She seemed very interested in sharing her story. She indicated that gatekeeping is a very important part of how she sees her job as an educator but did acknowledge how difficult it can be, stating, "It's tough being a gatekeeper. I'd just like to be hanging out on the side of the gate sometimes." She was enthusiastic about providing examples from her experiences at her university and elsewhere.

Participant #6 was a 49 year old bi-racial female. She has 11 years of experience as a counselor educator, 11 years as a counselor, and 11 years as a supervisor. She earned her PhD in 2002 and is also has a School Counselor certification. She is currently an Associate Professor and department chair at her

university.

*Participant #7: (P7)*

The seventh participant in the study was interviewed over the phone for both of the interviews; she indicated that her schedule was pretty hectic and that this would be easiest for her. She was very willing to provide information on the topic of gatekeeping but several times expressed concerns that some of the student-specific things she said in her interviews might identify her. She was assured that specific identifiers would be removed from the transcript during the coding process. I asked if she wanted to review the transcript of the interview when it was done, but she said no, asking that I make sure I remove to all the identifiable information.

Participant #7 was a 52 year old White female and has 7 years as a full time counselor educator and 7 years as an adjunct. She has 20+ years as a counselor and 15+ years as a supervisor. She earned her PhD in 1995 and has an additional credential as a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). She is currently a faculty member and clinical coordinator of her university's counseling graduate program, as well as having a private practice. She does acknowledge an issue with her multiple hats, "its really hard for me to separate out being a teacher, instructor, professor with being a clinical coordinator. You know I am not just one, I am both."



*Participant #8: (P8)*

The eighth participant in the study was interviewed in his university office. Both interviews were held face to face. He said he was very glad to discuss the topic of gatekeeping and his experiences, as it is critical to the field. He was able to share numerous very interesting stories, with his focus on supporting students rather than punishing them. "Faculty are asked to be alert to concerns but not to be punitive or arbitrary, so it is required that [any problem with a student] be presented in a careful, kind, and considerate way." When asked to describe how he saw himself as a gatekeeper, he stated, "I feel I give myself a B+ because I think I may be hesitant to act when I should be acting out of fear of being wrong and maybe out of fear of conflict of some kind."

Participant #8 was a 64 year old White male. He has 24 years of experience as a counselor educator, 13 as a counselor, and 5 as a supervisor. He earned his PhD in 1985 and also is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). He is currently a professor and coordinator of doctoral admissions for counseling. He stated that he is "comfortable at this point in my career in a service role."

*Participant #9: (P9)*

The ninth participant in the study was interviewed at home for the first interview, and over the phone for the second interview. She was very engaged in the interview process but similar to other participants, she wanted identifying information about her university removed from the transcript. She was not

concerned about what she said, but instead about the name of the university being identified, saying for example “I don't know how you're going to disguise this, but somehow you're going to have to so that I'm not known and our university is not identified.” She similarly stated, “It's a small community. I know where we are identifiable.” She was assured that all identifiers would be removed from the transcript and not be included in the coding process. She also requested a transcript with the redacted information and was emailed one, which she approved.

Participant #9 was a “55-70 year old” [her words] White female. She has 7 years of experience as a counselor educator, 30 as a counselor, and 10+ years as a supervisor. She obtained her PhD in 2006 and has the additional credentials of Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC) and Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). She is currently an Assistant Professor at her university.

#### Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection consisted of two rounds of interviews. Each participant was given an hour for the initial interview. The follow-up interviews averaged 20-30 minutes. For the second round of interviews a few weeks later, two of the participants did not return numerous calls or emails and one additional participant indicated that he/she did not have anything more to add. Thus, the second round of interviews included only six of the original participants. A third interview was planned but all six of the remaining participants indicated that the findings

represented their viewpoints and the topic had been exhausted.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for analysis purposes. The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist to maintain accuracy and completeness of the participants' voices. Participants were contacted for further clarification to ensure the transcription accurately reflected their viewpoints. On two occasions, minor changes to participants' wording was made, at their request. Once the transcriptions were complete, the peer debriefer and I independently analyzed the data utilizing the *atlas.ti* program. We held several consensus meetings to reach agreement on the primary codes, sub-codes, and operational definitions of each code. The third member of the research team monitored the research process, checking to see if the correct procedures were followed and to answer any methodological questions the other members of the research team might have.

### Results of Initial Interviews

For the initial interview, I met with each of the nine participants for approximately an hour. The information obtained in the first interview related to my overall research question regarding the experience of being a gatekeeper in counseling education programs. Questions to be explored included how the experience of gatekeeping affects them, how they deal with those experiences, and what specific stressors they experience as gatekeepers.

Through the process of open and axial coding two super-ordinate themes were identified, with numerous sub themes. A cross-case display for each theme and sub theme, by participant, was designed and allowed for a visual representation of the data.

## Themes

Two predominant themes emerged from the findings. The first, gatekeeping procedures, involves a variety of sub themes, including how participants defined gatekeeping, the importance of gatekeeping, types of gates and their effectiveness, differences in gatekeepers and the importance of consultation and support. The second main theme, challenges of gatekeeping, included sub themes of definition and identification of impairment issues, types of interventions, developmental process, support/challenge dichotomy, grades versus skills, legal concerns, and individual types of gatekeepers.

### *Theme 1: Gatekeeping Procedures*

In response to my questions, a main theme of gatekeeping procedures emerged. This main theme includes subthemes of ways gatekeeping is defined, the importance of gatekeeping, gates themselves (including formal gates, informal gates, and the effectiveness of gates), and the importance of consultation and support. Figure 1 (p.93) presents the themes and sub themes for the first super-ordinate theme of gatekeeping procedures.

*Definition of gatekeeping.* Each of the nine participants gave definitions of gatekeeping. All of the participants defined the term *gatekeeping* in terms of a formal process of monitoring and evaluating counseling students during their time in a counseling program. For example, Participant 1 called it a "... formal and informal [process] of steering people through and helping if you need to," and Participant 9 called it "...a program oversight so that we can look at it early on if we have a student in question." Participants highlighted the necessity of protecting the field and future clients from counseling students who have entered the field either unprepared or impaired with personal issues. Three of the participants identified gatekeeping as a professional obligation in their work as counselor educators, counselors, or supervisors. Participant 2 stated:

I think we have an obligation to act as good stewards for our clients and ensure that the people who we are endorsing to go out into the field have the skills....I guess I view it as that's just your job, that's what you do, and as a gatekeeper that's what you do.

Similarly, participant 3 stated, "I think that gatekeeping has to do with our professional obligation as educators." Participant 9 framed it in terms of ethics, stating, "I think it is that which we are charged with ethically to, as counselor educators, to counsel students who are not going to be competent counselors to find another profession."

Two of the participants described an informal process that may be difficult

to quantify. Participant 1 indicated, "It's definitely an art." Similarly, Participant 8 stated, "I think it is an inexact science and you wind up with cases missed, more likely than not." Although all of the participants discussed the necessity of being a gatekeeper, none indicated a reluctance in having to take on this role. Interestingly, Participant 4 stated "I wish somebody else would do it but it's part of my role and that basically ends that [choice]." Participant 7 expressed similar concerns by saying "If we don't do it, who is going to do it?"

*Importance of gatekeeping.* The second theme identified was the importance of gatekeeping, as an essential and critical component of their position. I had hypothesized that there might be some evidence of reluctance to gatekeep among the participants, but there was no evidence to support this hypothesis. A few participants did acknowledge that they had colleagues who were somewhat reluctant or did not gatekeep at all. Participant 4 stated, "There have been some people in our department who have been more supportive of gatekeeping processes than others." Similarly, Participant 7 said "There is probably 25% who don't do it or don't do a good job."

Participant 1 indicated "It's very important. The field needs people who are going to say 'You're not going to make it.' " Participant 2 indicated "I guess I view it as that's just your job, that's what you do, and as a gatekeeper that's what you do." Participant 3 looked at gatekeeping as a "professional obligation... [that] needs to be taken very seriously." Participant 6 also felt it was a responsibility to

the profession, stating:

When they graduate and they become counselors, it's sort of like now we are saying, we trust you with individuals, and we trust you with the lives of people. I always feel that it's our responsibility to serve as a gatekeeper.

Participant 7 agreed by stating, "I believe it is critical because not everybody has the capacity to work as a counselor." Participant 8 indicated, "It's a minor part of the job but an important one for the rare occasions." Participant 9 described the importance of gatekeeping by sharing her experiences where gatekeeping had not been done adequately. She stated, "I picked up the carnage of a lot of people who should not be doing what they were doing, and I saw a lot of therapists who had gone to a program that did not train counselors right."

*Gates.* *Gates* are defined as the places in a program where a counseling student's behavior is evaluated. Though the scope of this research does not include an extensive review of types of gates, the participants frequently mentioned locations at which they intervened in a student's progress in their counseling programs. This theme includes three sub themes: formal gates, informal gates, and the effectiveness of gates.

Formal gates are defined as policies and procedures that provide for evaluation, remediation, and/or removal of students from a counseling program.

Each participant indicated that their programs had many such gates but a variation of types of gates exists from program to program. Some participants' programs mostly relied on the admission process (application, essay, interviews), while others utilized more quantitative measures, such as various scales and checklists. Participant 3 stated that an important gate for her program is "the admission process, which is a prime place to gatekeep" and that her program is also "looking for if they've had therapy experience." Participant 6 spoke of their interview process stating, "we have our little registration session we have certain specific questions we ask them, how are you doing, how are you feeling, do you have any issues you need to work on?" Participant 9 stated that in their program, "We take a good look at their references." In contrast, in regards to quantitative measures, Participant 1 stated "You have to be formally admitted into candidacy...they have to take the MMPI and the NEO and the Myers-Briggs." In Participant 2's program "All our students must take the Empathy Checklist or Scale." Participant 3 spoke of the requirement of a "comprehensive examination after the first year." In addition, internships and practicum are also considered formal gates. Participant 9 stated that "Unfortunately often those opportunities [for evaluation] come most dramatically at practicum and internship."

Informal gates are identified as actions of faculty and staff aside from formal policies and procedures to evaluate/remove students. Four participants mentioned informal gates, which included personally meeting with the student in an attempt to identify/resolve an issue. Participant 1 stated, "We see, lay eyes on



them. We talk during the semester.” Participant 2 identified it as an “informal consultation” with their clinical person who does the supervision. Participant 4 indicated that “If you think there's a problem with the student you talk to that person directly.” Participant 6 echoed individual meetings in stating, “We meet with our students one-on-one.”

The effectiveness of gates addresses how well participants believe that formal and informal gates work in identifying/remediating impaired students. Three participants mentioned the effectiveness of gates. Participant 1 stated that “Most times it [a gate] works, especially [with] the academic washouts.” Participant 4 indicated that “I think they work somewhat effectively.” Both indicated that effectiveness relies on the proper application of policies and procedures, as well as the willingness to intervene with problematic students. One participant, Participant #9, indicated that a main component of effectiveness rests with counselor educators who must “watch the gate if at all possible.”

*Consultation and Support.* This theme addresses the issue of meeting with others to discuss student issues and the importance of having their departments and colleagues behind them in the gatekeeping process. Every participant mentioned the importance of consulting with others in order to function effectively as a gatekeeper. Participant 1 indicated “It's a combination of seeking others' insight into people too before a decision is made.” This sentiment was echoed by Participant 2, who said:

That's why I consult with my colleagues because they'll sometimes help me understand what really is significant and what is not...that's been probably the most critical piece and how I've been able to gatekeep...consulting is so important and is a classic counseling procedure...consult, consult, consult.

Participant 3 said that in their program “there are mechanisms in place because we meet once a week all together [where] we are able to identify students who are having a rough go of it.” Participant 4 shared that in one meeting “I was impressed that no less than four faculty had spoken to him individually and it might even have been five faculty.” Participant 5 saw it as “your group exercise process with peers, where you share some, because you know, the same people sitting with you every day could have similar situations.” Participant 9 echoed that group experience, stating “We review every one of our students if we have any cause for concern. And so I went to the faculty and we talked about it and decided I'd have a confrontation with this student.”

Not making a gatekeeping decision in isolation was noted by two of the participants. Participant 6 stated:

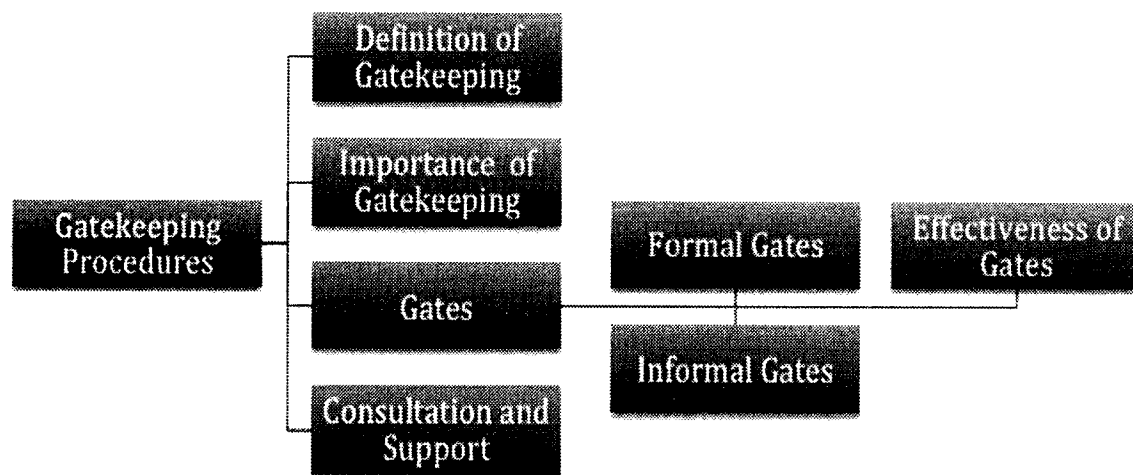
Typically you don't make those decisions in isolation...We come together as a faculty and we present the case. Because we certainly don't want any one individual faculty member to feel that they and they alone were the catalyst behind separating someone

from the school.

Participant 8 agreed saying, "That means that gatekeeping requires more than one person. That power should be distributed and people should consult with each other on concerns."

Most of the participants indicated that they felt generally supported in their gatekeeping duties by colleagues, departments, and universities. Participant 2 stated, "Absolutely I feel supported when there's a concern, we will try to come together and be collegial and act in a consultative role to support one another." Participant 6 echoed this viewpoint, saying, "we try to support the faculty member...once we have everybody on board at the departmental level, pretty much the university will support us." Participant 4 stressed, "I'd be less reluctant to do it if there wasn't that process and everybody wasn't following it, I'd be much less reluctant to do it. There'd be no reason to, really, if I wasn't supported. I can't do it on my own. I'd have to have the faculty support." Participant 8 reiterated, "I think that what you feel as a faculty member is that you have a lot of power not to be misused because you are supported. Your judgment is supported by others." Participant 9 also spoke of how she felt supported, "I felt great about it and I felt very good about the student when I was a doc student because I had the backing of all the faculty."

Figure 1 Theme of Gatekeeping Procedures and Sub Themes



### *Theme II: Challenges of Gatekeeping*

The theme of challenges of gatekeeping includes the types of impairment and how they are identified; interventions which includes the sub themes of informal, formal, and workplace interventions; the developmental process which includes the sub theme of the support/challenge dichotomy; the issue of grades versus skills; legal concerns; and individual types of gatekeepers. Figure 2 (p.108) presents the challenges of gatekeeping and sub themes for this category.

*Impairment issues.* The issue of impairment, not being able to function successfully as either a student or a future counseling professional, is central to the practice of gatekeeping. Participants identified specific student issues which

impacted performance in graduate school or as potential counselors in the field. All participants shared numerous cases of students they have identified over the years as having potential impairment issues that might affect their functioning in the field. These problematic behaviors included lack of skills, personal issues, and behavioral issues.

Participant 1 noted the lack of skills when he said that he discussed a student who “had no interpersonal relationship skills” and identified another student who was “still in Erickson's identity versus Role confusion.” A particularly troubling example was given by Participant 2 who said, “Hearing this student say, ‘Well, I think we should be friends with everybody and then watching how she dealt with some feedback, that really concerned me.” Participant 2 also noted, “The red flag for me was [when the student began] talking about how the program forces you to be something and [the student said she just did not] see the big deal why you have to use all these counseling skills.” Participant 5 spoke with concern about “...a person who is very untimely in submission of reports” and that he was not getting along well with other students in the class. Participant 6 had a student who she said, “I didn't think she would be ethical enough” and worried that it would “impact her decision making skills.” Participant 8 discussed in some detail a student who he had great concern saying, “There was another case when during internship someone avoided seeing clients, obviously afraid of the activity of being a counselor.” These participants were clearly concerned that some of their students might not have the adequate level of skills necessary to

become effective counselors.

Personal issues involve problems that students have in their own lives that may or may not impact their ability to function either as students or future counselors. Participant 3 had a student who he did not know how she got into the program “but it was clear that she was really troubled and mentally ill.” Another student of Participant 4 had an “inability to be empathic. Can't relate, narcissism.” Participant 6 identified one student as “a person who couldn't help or advocate for themselves.” Participant 8 described a student as a “person who is extremely defensive,” and Participant 9 discussed a student whose “life was in total chaos.”

Another category of identified impairment challenges was behaviors that were considered questionable of a potential counselor. Participant 3 stated, “We've seen some crazy students in here. We had one student who had an affair with a client at a party.” Participant 4 related another incident in describing, “It was a male student, and this is very odd, who was a stripper and also a clown at children's parties. That immediately raised flags for me.” Participant 7 had a concern about one of her students, “Her attire was not professional in a school setting, having cleavage showing.” A fairly serious issue was identified by Participant 9 who said that one of her students “...had some problems that some of the students felt were like just subliminal boundary problems.” She described him as “slithery, you just really couldn't put your hands on them, but there was just [something]...He was creepy.”

The identification of impairment issues is essential and involves the process by which the participants identified students with impairment issues or those who could be considered problematic in terms of current or future behaviors. Identification in unquantifiable/non-scientific ways relates to how participants determine if a student is impaired without the use of diagnostic instruments. Participant 1 simply stated "Spider senses go off." Similarly, Participant 2 said, "I can only go by personal experience and that's to say that there is some gut feeling, or some red flag that gets raised for me." Participant 3 was a bit more specific but still non-scientific "We're all mental health professionals. I think it is fairly easy for us to see their patterns of behavior." Participant 4 noted, "I'm not concerned about people who act out, I'm concerned about the people who don't act out." Participant 8 addressed the general inability to quantify some impairment issues by saying "There should be specific behaviors that are named...in the sense that it is operationalizing concerns." He also acknowledged the fact that it may be difficult to identify some impairment because "there is such a variety of human expression and personality that one has to be careful not to just find something wrong because one does not like a particular personality style or attitude."

The general timing of when identification can occur is also important. Participant 3 stated, "I think they sort of make themselves obvious. You know, if they're in class with their head on the table sleeping, I mean, that's high school stuff." Participant 5 related that "I try to make sure that anything I see nonverbally

that might need intervention; I get on before it becomes an issue or problem.”

Sometimes the issues are found during internship and practicum such as in the case of Participant 7, who stated “It is the majority of the time if there is a problem with a student, it tends to show up more when they are in internship or practicum because that is when they have different level of interaction with each other and clients.”

*Interventions.* Interventions can be defined as attempts to alter the course of a student’s progress in a counseling program. Participants discussed three types of interventions---informal, formal, and workplace interventions. Informal interventions involve student meetings to keep/remove problematic students. Most of the participants described being involved in these types of actions, either in order to help keep a student or to separate a student from the program. Participant 1 indicated that his first course of intervention is “to speak to the student and be honest with the student.” Participant 2 sits “face-to-face with that student” and Participant 3 said “we brainstorm strategies to assist these students.” Participant 6 noted that “Generally that student has a relationship with one of the 3 or 4 of us that is closer than and might be willing to talk to that particular faculty member.” Many of them indicated that they rarely have to utilize the formal interventions processes because they work one on one with the problematic student to resolve whatever the issues might be.

Formal interventions are written policies and procedures to intervene



and/or remove problematic students. The majority of the participants indicated that they utilize these formal interventions if informal interventions fail. Formal interventions may allow the student to remain in the program or result in the student being removed from the counseling program. Often the formal intervention involved procedures that permitted the student to remain in the program, especially if they received some kind of remediation or help of some kind. Participant 1 indicated that for one student "I gave him a letter of reprimand, telling him what my concerns were." Participant 2 indicated that she had a student who "asked me for a letter of recommendation and I said no." A range of options was offered by Participant 3, who said: "Go over there for an evaluation; do more visual journaling; here's our therapist list; go see a doctor and get a physical."

Sometimes the formal intervention required that the student be terminated from the program. Participant 6 voiced a belief that many of the participants expressed "We always try to find a resolution of rather than putting them out." Many of the participants stick with the student as long as they can, as evidenced by Participant 8, who said "after three placements were done...then that student wound up being suspended." But if not, Participant 2 stated "the best possible option would be for the student to be counseled out of the program." Participant 6 indicated, "I had one student that I had to separate and it went through the entire university procedures."

Another type of intervention is letting the workplace remove impaired

counselors from the field. All the counselor educators recommend that the graduate school should take care of impaired counselors through the gatekeeping process, although at times, a problematic student enters the workplace with the assumption that the person will be removed from the position eventually. All the participants who mentioned workplace interventions were not in favor of letting the field weed counselors out since much harm can occur to clients who interact with them. Participant 1 stated rather emphatically "I don't want the field to weed them out. I can see how some feel that the field [should] wash them out. I can see it, but I cannot accept it, because that's part of my responsibility [as] the student's advisor and guide through this profession." The role as a gatekeeper in this matter was addressed directly by Participant 7, when she said, "If we don't do it, who is going to do it? If we don't do it at this point, then we are sending students out who employers will have to deal with." Participant 8 agreed by stating "It is really our job primarily to weed out the person because we can't always trust the field supervisor of the future LPC to be doing that." Participant 9 related personal experience to the viewpoint by stating, "Having seen, as a clinician, the clients that I had to pick up, having seen clinicians who were not well trained sitting with me as clients and supervising, there's no way I'd buy to let the field do it." In contrast to these viewpoints, Participant 7 addressed how she and other faculty feel the field can weed problematic counselors out by stating, "We have faculty members who believe that that is ok, and that is ok to some degree...that the workplace will take care

of those folks.”

*Developmental process.* Participants discussed how students mature over time in their program. During the process, they may make mistakes due to lack of experience and immaturity, but in time, they will grow up and mature. Four of the participants acknowledged the reality of this developmental process as students naturally progress as they go through the program. Participant 1 stated: “Who am I to say that you can't change and grow? And sometimes they grow over the 2-3 years they're with us and we can see that growth and change.” Participant 2 commented on the complexity of making this decision: “We also were trying to assess whether the comments were truly reflective of the kinds of practices she was doing or if it was more a situation that she is saying things because of age and immaturity.” Participant 4 indicates that such change does not always happen, stating “Yeah, if you're committed to the person, the change process. It does happen, not with everybody, but it does happen.” Participant 8 also indicated that sticking with a new student is important to him, “I also have a tendency to want to help the student develop... on the other hand, I think I am a pretty good judge of human nature but I am a bit tolerant for variety of human expression. So I get caught between those two tensions.”

Participant 4 stated “Some people believe that this is a developmental process and that you can help a person change... I've seen change enough times that I know that if it happens 1 in 50 times, I'm willing to take the risk.” A

second participant, Participant 8 noted that the discipline aspect can be developmental as well, saying: "I think I have mentioned that the developmental aspect, the sanctioning...they are not incompatible...sanctioning can be developmental; can be asking that person to change some things while being sanctioned from being in the program."

Participants also discussed two potentially conflicting duties of counselor educator gatekeepers in a student's developmental process: (1) providing support for students, as well as (2) challenging students' thoughts and behaviors. Participant 7 stated:

What a challenge it can be to shift gears into a disciplinarian...that's not really the right word but it's as close to it as I can get...into that kind of role with students...that is the major stressor, the conflict of roles and conflict of skills that need to be used...Gatekeeping has an element of disciplinary action to it. And all of us have been trained as counselors and that can be a set up.

Participant 4 noted "When you do meet with students you want to be supportive of them but you also want to challenge them on what they're doing." Participant 8 reflected, "You have to be geared up to do it but it's not that different from being a counselor who has to challenge a client about behavior...it is classic counseling work and we are probably more adapt at it than other fields because we have learned to do the challenging."

Participants noted that being supportive as well as challenging counseling students is basically a part of the job. Participant 2 stated, "We challenge people to go beyond what their typical comfort level is, and we support them in order to get there. I think that's what it means to be a professor and to teach and to supervise." Participant 3 remarked, "as an educator you have both roles," and Participant 5 indicated that it involves "balancing between [supporting and challenging students]." Participant 6 reiterated, "Because [in] counseling we're supposed to help, we are here to help others through life and we're responsible for their mental health in a sense." Participant 1 stated, "It's easy for me, because I'm the bad guy, hard decisions... And I'm not here to be liked, I'm not here to be anybody's friend. I'm here to give you advice and you'll move forward in whatever career you're going into." Participant 2 reiterated "I went in thinking that I was this hard-nosed individual... I'm the type of person if I see something I'm going to push it a little bit, but will support them as they go through it."

*Grades versus Skills.* One particular challenge that participants noted is the ability of some students to have adequate grades in their coursework, but not the skills necessary to become an effective counselor. They stressed the fact that while grades are easily quantified, counseling skills may not be, making some skills difficult if not impossible to measure. In classes as well as field experiences such as practicum and internship, participants expressed concerns regarding grades versus counseling skills. Participant 7 noted, "A lot of students can do

well academically but when it comes to their behaviors at a workplace, that is different.” Participant 6 reiterated, “Some people we know they shouldn't be in the field. But based on the rules or the guidelines that we have established as a university, they're meeting every criteria.” Participant 1 stressed:

Watch out for bad grades...[then] we have a problem that we know we can take on. But the one that has the book knowledge, that can answer all those silly questions and move throughout program so smoothly but we still have concerns about him, those are the ones that are of central importance to us.

Participant 2 added:

...the A/B students who get into practicum and internship and suddenly you're scared to death about them working with students. But in those circumstances I generally do what we were discussing before, try and get them with the grade.

Participant 3 stated, “But it is the other, sort of subtle things, that I think we struggle with... Maybe some people get weeded out. And some people, it's as good as saying this, let's hope [organizations] don't get the one with good grades.” Participant 9 expressed some frustration over graduating students she did not feel had the necessary skills, saying in one case, “He had crossed his I's and dotted his T's. We graduated him. With feelings in our guts of huh! But there

you have it.” She continued, stating, “But [when] we don't really think [the student has] clinical skills, [gatekeeping] gets a little mucky, but we have to deal with it.”

One of the major issues with assessing counseling skills is the difficulty of quantifying effectiveness. Participant 1 asked “How do you quantify a lack of interpersonal relationships? A lack of insight?” Participant 2 seemed to agree, saying “There's not really any way to quantify the stuff that we really need to quantify.” Participant 3 echoes the concerns, stating, “There are nonacademic things that we are not evaluating or assessing and those are typically the things that we worry about, those very abstract...” The issue was summed up well by Participant 8, who stated:

If it is an academic criterion, that is clearly students failing an exam. That is clearly a gatekeeping action in and of itself...but performance criteria and other presences which we consider important in our field...in terms of social skills, are much harder to identify and therefore makes me more reluctant and to want to have very clear markers.

In order to address the academic grades versus lack of skills challenge, participants make efforts to remove students with problematic skill levels through academic means. Participant 1 stated, “Hopefully we can wash them out academically.” Participant 2 concurred, “I generally do what we were discussing

before, try and get them with the grade.” Participant 6 reiterated, “It’s easy if the student is failing. You say, okay, well, you know academically you just don’t have the competencies. So that’s an easy one. Additionally, Participant 4 stressed a best case scenario, when he indicated “It’s interesting that sometimes the person who is really problematic also has a problem with grades.”

*Legal concerns.* Another challenge is the potential legal action or lawsuits from dismissed students. Participant 1 indicated “the biggest concern is the legal aspects of being sued by a student.” Participant 4 stated, “You know, people always worry about lawsuits, some people more than others... It’s just something I don’t worry about. I just figure, if I’m doing everything right, I’m not going to worry about it.” Participant 3 described a particular case in which, “After our experience with that girl with the disability I thought, we’re going to get a huge lawsuit someday, we’re going to be very sorry that we don’t have some way of evaluating the nonacademic performance.” Participant 7 explained “We have faculty who have been sued. So they are not, you know, as willing to step into the role, understandably because if you get burned ...why would you want to set yourself up again.” Participant 8, summarized the challenge by stating, “I think faculty have a lot of power so the only stressor is the interpersonal stressor as well as if you have during law suits and discrimination charges... if your conscious is clear and you are right, then you should feel ok about it.”

*Individual styles.* Most of the participants had experiences with



other gatekeepers and noticed differences in approaches and outlook based on the gatekeeper's personality and length of time in the role. Participant 7 stated, "I understand that it is really hard to step into a gatekeeping role for many people." Participant 6 noted, "A lot of people don't see this part of their job." Similarly, Participant 4 indicated, "There have been some people in our department who have been more supportive of gatekeeping processes than others." Participant 8 stressed, "because you are going to raise challenges, I think some people ...just do not want to work as hard, avoid doing the gatekeeping that is necessary. That could be a possibility." Participant 7 reiterated, "It really varies among my peers as well. There are some people who are willing, very readily willing to step up and manage situations differently...but there are others who avoid it."

Participants noted that sometimes gatekeeping duties are avoided to eliminate or reduce conflict experiences. Participant 2 stated, "Some of us are more passive. I know that I do tend to be a little more passive and avoid conflict." Participant 6 indicated, "I can understand why some faculty members do not want to have that responsibility and some faculty would prefer to move that person along rather than deal with that conflict." Similarly, Participant 8 acknowledged "my tendency is not to confront as much as some others. I am willing to speak and say this is how you are being perceived and this is how it looks and this is not ok. But I do it in a much more socially lubricated way, much more subtle than someone with a lawyerly type style accusation and I do it I think

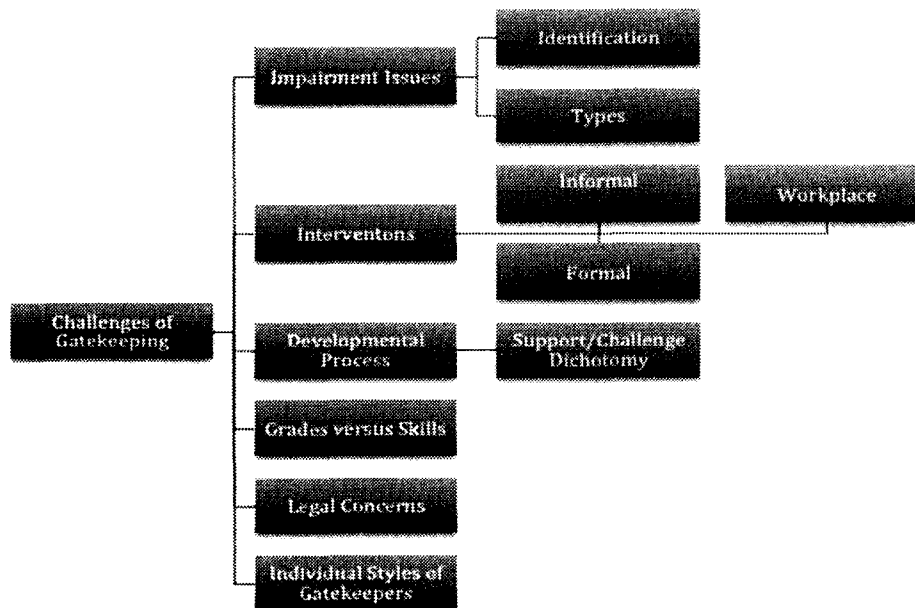
using my counseling skills.”

Participants noted that the personalities of the people who performed gatekeeping duties impacted how they see those duties and how they perform them. For example, Participant 1 stated, “I guess there would be different personalities to go along with different decision-making... especially those who enjoy the power. We've got a few people like that floating around who have that type of authority issues.” Participant 7 noted “It is simply a challenge because some of [gatekeeping] has to do with personality, just like we have some faculty members who aren't willing to or able to see problematic behavior in the masters' students and are willing or able to actually do something about it.” Participant 3 discussed the reality of “people's ambivalence about doing it. Well, I just feel like you have to, I guess...you have kind of to muster up and do it.” Participant 6 stated “I think maybe there are more faculty members who are reluctant and that probably will just get along with students than there are faculty members who will take them to task.” On the other hand, Participant 9 found that “...in the program I am in right now, I can't think of a person who is working on our faculty now who isn't not only willing to gatekeep but who keep their eyes out for it.” Participant 8 noted, “there is probably a continuum...the error is to not gatekeep, to err on the positive side is more likely to be part of human nature.”

Participants also noted that the length of time in the field or length of time involved in gatekeeping duties was important. The consensus appeared to be

that the greater the length of time, the different the gatekeeping experience might be. Participant 1 stated, “You would probably find those who have been academics for longer periods of time are the ones that are more wishy-washy versus those who have the experiences in different fields and working with people.” Participant 2 indicated a similar viewpoint, “I do think it’s an experience thing, and I also think that perhaps people who have been there longer and who have seen so many things become complacent.” Participant 4 had a contrasting viewpoint, “Maybe if you’re new into the field, I wonder about that. I mean I don’t have a problem kicking somebody out if I think it is warranted to do so. But it does become easier once you do it more often... maybe you just get hardened after a while.”

Figure 2 Theme of Gatekeeping Challenges and Sub Themes



### *Summary of Initial Interviews*

All of the participants had a general definition of gatekeeping and expressed clearly how important the process was in ensuring as much as possible that only qualified students enter their programs, graduate from their programs, and enter the field as effective counselors. Participants were knowledgeable about and had experience with the various places in the program, or gates, at which gatekeeping duties were performed. They all acknowledged the importance of consultation with colleagues and support from others in performing those duties. Each participant also shared *horror stories* with students as well as the results of their gatekeeping efforts. Through these perspectives, challenges, frustrations, and stresses of gatekeeping emerged. Challenges involved non-supportive departments, the difficulty of being able to actually quantify impairment issues, having to decide if the student would be able to mature and improve over time in the program, and what to do with students whose grades are good or adequate but whose skill levels are not. These challenges, frustrations, and stressors were greatly mitigated, though, by supportive departments and colleagues. None of the participants indicated a reluctance to perform gatekeeping duties since they saw it as an important part of their jobs, but a few stated they wished that they did not have to be involved. Several did know colleagues who either tried to dodge gatekeeping duties or refused to do them.

This framework represents the responses to my overall research questions. Two main themes emerged from the findings. The first was gatekeeping procedures and involved the sub themes of how participants defined gatekeeping, the importance of gatekeeping, types of gates and their effectiveness, differences in gatekeepers, and the importance of consultation and support. The second main theme that emerged was the challenges of gatekeeping and included sub themes of the definition and identification of impairment issues, types of interventions, the developmental process, support/challenge dichotomy, grades versus skills, legal concerns, and individual types of gatekeepers. These themes were utilized to develop questions for a subsequent interview to expand on already identified themes and to add new emerging themes or sub themes.

### Follow-up Interviews

Follow-up interviews were initiated by email requests. Of the original nine participants, a second interview was conducted with six participants. Participants 1 and 5 did not return several phone messages or respond to email requests to schedule a meeting. A third participant, Participant 9, indicated that she really did not have any new information to add because the first interview had been so extensive. At the beginning of the follow-up interviews, emerging themes from the initial interviews were discussed and the participants were asked if these matched their perceptions. I had previously emailed a copy of the first interview

to each participant so any clarifications could be made.

Analysis of the initial interviews revealed detailed perspectives of the participants' experiences as gatekeepers. Two themes were identified: gatekeeping procedures and challenges of gatekeeping. Each theme had numerous sub themes. Gatekeeping procedures include the definition of gatekeeping, the importance of gatekeeping, gates themselves (formal, informal, and effectiveness of gates), and consultation and support. The challenges of gatekeeping involve identification and types of impairment found in counseling students; informal, formal, and workplace interventions; the developmental process; the issue of grades versus skills; legal concerns; and individual differences. To elaborate on these initial themes, participants were asked the following questions:

1. Can you tell me about any pressures from your department to gatekeep?
2. Do you have any concerns about what might be called "rocking the boat", i.e., getting any negative reactions from performance of your duties?
3. Can you tell me about any concerns you might have about your department or university finding out some of the things you shared in the interview?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add that would better help in the understanding of what it is like to be a gatekeeper?

#### Results of Follow-up Interviews

The information gathered from the follow-up interviews was organized into the existing framework that pertained to gatekeeping procedures and challenges of gatekeeping. Coding procedures were utilized to expand upon the initial themes, elaborate on perspectives, and establish additional subthemes for the two broad categories. One new sub theme emerged under the first main theme of gatekeeping procedures; this concerned the topic of future improvements which could be made. Under the second main theme of gatekeeping challenges one new sub theme emerged, perceptions from the institution. This involved pressures to gatekeep, "rocking the boat," conflicts experienced, and concerns with confidentiality and being identified as participants in the study.

#### *Theme 1: Gatekeeping Procedures*

The theme of gatekeeping procedures was developed from the initial interviews. Analysis of the follow-up interviews resulted in the addition of one more sub theme, future improvements in the practice of gatekeeping. Figure 3 (p.113) represents the combined codes for gatekeeping procedures for both interviews.

*Future Improvements.* Participants discussed efforts that they knew which were directed at improving gatekeeping policies, efforts, and procedures on their campuses. Participant 3 described how her graduate school is "continuing to refine our professional performance evaluation form...the more consistent our

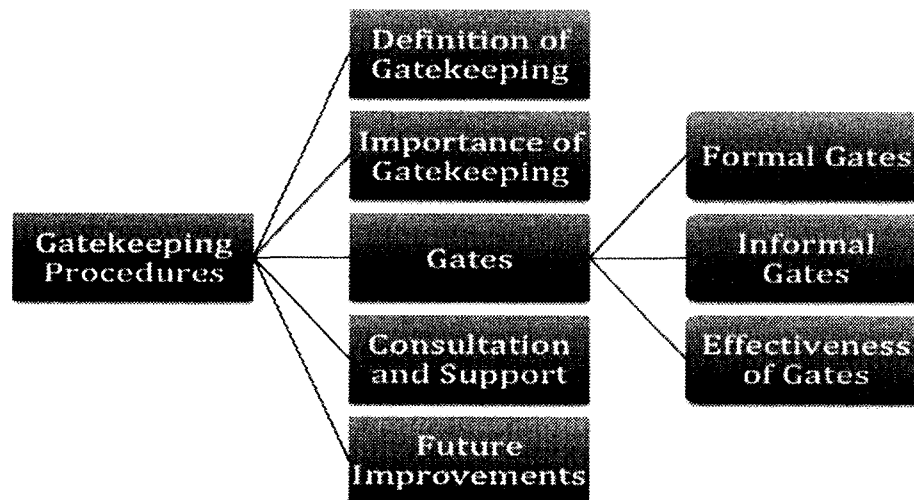
policies are with each other, the better chance we have to gatekeep effectively.” But she also had a concern about her specific program, saying “We already have some systems in place but we find that some of our policies are not being followed.” The experience of Participant 7 seemed to echo this viewpoint, as she stated “things work fairly well if all of the procedures are followed.”

Participant 8 further discussed some recent changes in their program:

The gatekeeping process has changed in the last year where one graduate program director thought just basically fail the student and that's enough gatekeeping as it is. Give him a bad grade, give him an F or a C, and then [he's] done, and that should be enough of a criteria. But when that person stepped down “we got back to discussing a case...and that process allowed people to provide input who also had had experience with the student, and making the decision as a group as far as what to do. It has been kind of a better process lately. Nowhere in our process does an individual just raise a question, go to the graduate director, and have the student suspended.”

Figure 3 Combined Codes for Two Interviews for the First Theme of Gatekeeping Procedures.





### *Theme II: Challenges of Gatekeeping*

The theme of the challenges of gatekeeping included impairment issues, interventions, the developmental process, grades versus skills, legal concerns, and individual styles of gatekeepers. The theme was expanded in the follow-up interviews to include a major theme of perceptions from the institution, with sub themes of pressures to gatekeep; “rocking the boat;” conflicts experienced by participants including power issues and discomfort; and concerns for confidentiality as a participant. Figure 4 (p.119) represents the combined codes for the challenges of gatekeeping for both interviews.

*Perceptions from the Institution.* This theme involves experiences participants had in specific facets of their work at their particular universities. These included discovering if any of the participants had experienced any pressure to perform gatekeeping duties, if they felt they were “rocking the boat” due to their duties, what conflicts such as power struggles and discomfort they

experienced, and if they had concerns about their confidentiality as participants in the study.

*Pressures to Do Gatekeeping.* Participants discussed how gatekeeping is perceived within their departments. Participant 3 stated, “No, actually we don't experience [pressure], we experience the opposite...Just about the lack of... serious interest in our program to the extent that there isn't much understanding of the type of student we are looking for...very little help ... from the dean, regarding how important it is to have particular qualities in an applicant wanting to become a therapist.” Participant 4 stated, “I feel very little external pressure. However, I feel a moral and ethical obligation to be a gatekeeper and feel like it's my responsibility to make sure students are appropriately addressed if need be.” Participant 8, reiterated, “There's no fear of gatekeeping as far as I can see, there's no reluctance to gatekeep. There's sometimes concern that you are the only person who is seeing something and concern that you are not seeing it correctly until you take a bold action.” He also noted “...so that reluctance does happen when there is disagreement among the faculty among whether there is a problem with the student.”

*Rocking the Boat.* In this final round of interviews, participants discussed “rocking the boat,” as doing something to cause trouble where none is wanted or to disturb a situation that others feel is satisfactory. Participant 4 stated “I'm not concerned about rocking the boat. I'm concerned about a student rocking the

boat if we don't address an issue." Participant 8 reiterated, "I am so surprised that a department wouldn't support [gatekeeping]. It's no skin off their back; they're punishing themselves." On the other hand, Participant 2 indicated that there could be "...a feeling like they might have a shadow cast on them if they do raise issues." But Participant 3 shared:

I think people are told to stop doing that and that the dean wants things the way they are. Except that, under these circumstances, when they are ongoing, it is very wearing on people, and it's a real formula for burnout. I think as long as things kind of go smoothly and he does not hear discontent from anybody, not just us, but other programs here, then that makes his life very happy and he can do what he wants to do. He gets angry and upset when people complain, instead of addressing a problem in the appropriate way.

Participant 7 indicated "it has happened at least once where I have seen a problem and it hasn't been validated from other faculty members and therefore it's not really seen as a problem."

*Conflicts experienced.* Participants further expanded on the struggles, conflict, or disagreements within the department over gatekeeping issues. Participant 2 discussed it as an organizational issue, stating "I wouldn't want to put words in anyone's mouth, but I think like any organization you've got some undertones of personalities and undertones of different kind of power

differentials.” Participant 7 related the conflict to the chain of command, stating:

I get that our program coordinator or department chair has to make some decisions about what is going to be handled and what's not and what looks like a potential lawsuit and what doesn't. And in that situation I was angry that the dean's office stepped in to handle the situation instead of referring it back to me. You know, at one point I was asked to provide all the information but I was not kept in the loop.

Participant 8 expanded on the difference in opinions stating “I have seen both cases and we are caught in a dilemma because one colleague would say isn't it our job to help people develop? And another colleague would say they need to be suspended and they need to be suspended now.”

Participant 2 referenced her own discomfort when she stated:

Well, we're in the helping profession and generally we do everything in our power to help people succeed, so it can be very uncomfortable. I hate personally to have that conversation, to get that realization where this person is not meant to be in this field. Having to have that real conflict conversation is definitely an uncomfortable conversation to bring issues to the forefront and

recognize that this is not an appropriate place for [the student]. I think it goes against many of our personalities.

*Concerns with Being Identified.* Interestingly, an additional concern related to the perception from the institution was how participants could potentially be identified by their institution or colleagues as being a part of this study.

Participant 9 stressed:

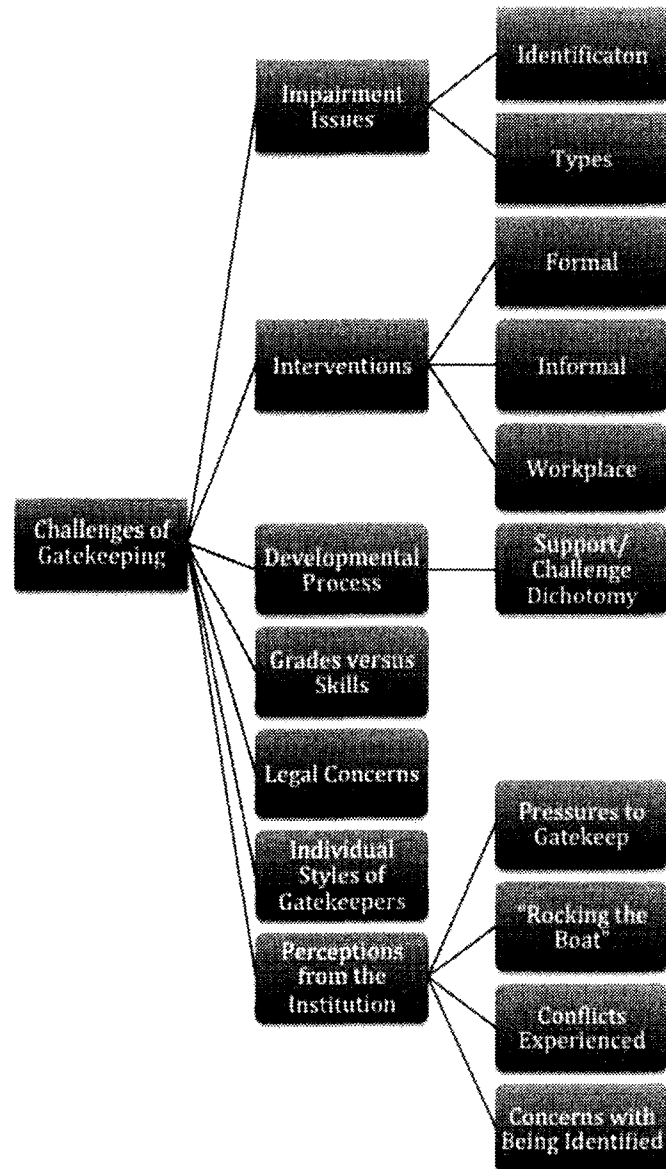
I don't know how you're going to disguise this, but somehow you're going to have to so that I'm not known and our university is not identified. There are things I'm telling you ...concerns about what I'm telling you is because it's a small community. I know where we are identifiable.

Participant 6 explained her concerns about being identified in stating:

Being identified is frightening for many reasons. The University community is very small in the area and we usually know our counterparts at the other universities. If you espouse, or what is perceived as negative comments about your university, or department, the fear is that you will not be able to apply for positions at other universities. In essence, your reputation will arrive before your application. It is a real fear. To avoid conflicts most people decline to be interviewed. Those that choose to be

interviewed are fearful but are also cautious with their responses.

Figure 4 Combined Codes for Two Interviews for the Second Theme of Gatekeeping Challenges



### *Summary of Follow-up Interviews*

During the follow-up interviews, the participants confirmed emergent themes and patterns gathered from the initial interviews. An additional sub theme of efforts to improve gatekeeping was identified under the major theme of gatekeeping procedures. Under the second major theme, challenges of gatekeeping, an additional sub theme of perceptions from the institution was identified. This included sub themes of pressures to gatekeep, “rocking the boat”, conflicts experienced, and concerns with being identified as a study participant. This framework demonstrates the procedures of gatekeeping as well as the challenges experienced by those who are a gatekeeper.

### Summary of Findings

The focus of this study was to explore the perceptions of counselor educators as they perform gatekeeping tasks including being responsible for the quality of counseling students entering the field, supporting impaired students in the hope that they will become effective counselors, and possibly being responsible for terminating impaired students from a counseling program. A phenomenological approach was utilized that allowed participants to share their experiences as gatekeepers.

Two main themes emerged from an analysis of the initial and follow-up interviews. The first main theme of gatekeeping procedures included participants'

definitions of gatekeeping, what they said about the importance of gatekeeping, gates themselves (formal, informal, and effectiveness of gates), the importance of consultation and support, and suggestions for future improvements in gatekeeping.

Seven of the participants defined term gatekeeping in terms of a formal process of monitoring and evaluating counseling students during their time in a counseling program as well as an informal process, an art rather than a science. All participants agreed that gatekeeping was important, essential, and critical. A few participants did acknowledge that they had colleagues who were somewhat reluctant or did not gatekeep at all.

The participants frequently mentioned locations at which they intervened in a student's progress in their counseling programs. Formal gates are defined as policies and procedures that provide for evaluation, remediation and/or removal of students from a counseling program. Each participant indicated that their programs had many such "gates" but there was quite a variation of types from program to program. Informal gates are identified as actions of faculty and staff aside from formal policies and procedures to evaluate/remove students. Informal gates included personally meeting with the student in an attempt to identify/resolve an issue. The effectiveness of such gates was mentioned as a concern by two of the participants, who noted that neither formal or informal gates are totally effective in identifying or removing problematic counseling



students.

Every participant mentioned the importance of consulting with others in order to function effectively as a gatekeeper and not make decisions in isolation.. All participants indicated that their programs had mechanisms in place to facilitate consultation, such as staff meeting or periodic reviews of student progress. The importance of support from others emerged as an important element in the effective gatekeeping process. Most of the participants indicated that they felt generally supported in their gatekeeping duties by colleagues, departments, and universities.

Some of the participants discussed efforts their departments are making which are directed at improving gatekeeping policies, efforts, and procedures. These include refining a professional evaluation form in an effort to better quantify the characteristics they felt counseling students should have. Two of the participants, though, admitted the policies and procedures would be more effective if they were followed as they should be and would like to see that change in the future.

The second main theme involves challenges of gatekeeping. This theme includes the sub themes of impairment issues (including type and identification), interventions (informal, formal, and workplace), the developmental process which includes the support/challenge dichotomy, the issue of grades versus skills, legal concerns, individual styles of gatekeepers, and perceptions from the institution

which includes pressures to gatekeep, “rocking the boat”, conflicts in gatekeeping (power issues and discomfort), and confidentiality concerns of being a study participant.

The issue of impairment, of not being able to function successfully as either a counseling student or a future counseling professional, is central to the practice of gatekeeping. All the participants identified specific student issues which impacted performance in school or as potential counselors in the field. They all shared numerous cases of students they have identified over the years as having potential impairment issues that might affect their functioning in the field. These problematic behaviors included lack of skills, personal issues, and behavioral issues. Four participants, in particular, identified students who had problems with interpersonal skills, boundary issues, ethical problems, and attempts at avoiding clients. Three participants discussed students who had significant enough problems in their personal lives that it impacted their functioning as students and potentially as future counselors.

The identification of impairment issues involved the process by which the participants considered problematic current or future behaviors. Four participants discussed the unquantifiable/non-scientific ways they identify impairment in their students, including “spider senses” and “red flags”. Most of the participants, at one time or another during the interviews; spoke of the inability to quantify impairment issues in order to better identify them. One of the participants noted

that sometimes an identified impairment issue might be a developmental issue or an issue of different human expression and personality and that gatekeepers need to keep that in mind.

Interventions can be defined as attempts to alter the course of a student's progress in a counseling program. Informal, formal, and workplace interventions were discussed. Informal interventions involve student meetings to help keep a student or to separate a student from the program. Many of them indicated that they rarely have to utilize the formal interventions processes because they work one on one with the problematic student to resolve whatever the issues might be. Formal interventions are written policies and procedures to intervene and/or remove problematic students. The majority of the participants indicated that they and their programs utilize these formal interventions if informal interventions fail. Another type of intervention that emerged is letting the workplace remove impaired counselors from the field. All the counselor educators recommend that the school should take care of impaired counselors through the gatekeeping process, although at times, a problematic student enters the workplace with the assumption that the person will be removed from the position eventually. All the participants who mentioned workplace interventions were not in favor of letting the field weed counselors out since much harm can occur to clients who interact with impaired professionals.

Four of the participants acknowledged the reality of the developmental

process as students naturally mature as they go through the program. During the process, they may make mistakes due to lack of experience and immaturity, but in time, they will grow up and mature. Participants noted that it is important to stick with students during this process, providing guidance and support. Sticking with the student involves two potentially conflicting duties of counselor educator gatekeepers: (1) providing support for students as well as (2) challenging their thoughts and behaviors. Participants noted that being supportive as well as challenging counseling students is basically part of the job, but several acknowledged difficulty since the counseling profession is more about support and encouragement and often times their training as counselor educators does not involve the disciplinary aspect of their work as gatekeepers.

Another challenge that participants noted is the ability of some students to have adequate grades in their coursework, but not the skills necessary to become an effective counselor. Participants stressed the fact that while grades are easily quantified, counseling skills may not be, making some skills difficult if not impossible to measure. Three participants told stories of students who did well academically but whose skills were lacking; they also expressed frustration at not being able to have a way to quantify those skills in order to remove those students from the program. There seems to be a general consensus that this is a significant concern because students could graduate from the program and enter the workplace with less than adequate or effective skills.

Participants were also concerned with the potential legal action or lawsuits from dismissed students. Two of the five participants stated that they were not really concerned about legal challenges as long as they did what they felt was right. On the other hand, three participants shared stories of colleagues who had been sued and how that affected their gatekeeping performances in the future.

Most of the participants had experiences with other gatekeepers and noticed differences in approaches and outlook based on the gatekeeper's personality and length of time in the role. Two participants said they knew colleagues who did not see gatekeeping as part of their role as counselor educators and rarely involved themselves in gatekeeping duties in order to avoid conflict situations. Three participants knew of colleagues who seemed to be too punitive in their decisions and attributed that to their colleagues' personalities. One participant said that he saw some correlation between personality type and type of decision making. Three participants also noted that the length of time in the field or length of time involved in gatekeeping duties was important. The consensus appeared to be that the greater the length of time in the role, the easier the gatekeeping became as time went on.

Participants discussed how gatekeeping is perceived within their departments. Perceptions from the institution includes pressures to gatekeep, "rocking the boat", conflicts in gatekeeping (power issues and discomfort), and

confidentiality concerns of being a study participant. None of the participants indicated that their departments apply any pressure to perform their gatekeeping functions. Actually the opposite was seen, with all the participants indicating that they simply say gatekeeping as part of their jobs, that is was necessary though a few said they would like to avoid it if they could. Two of the participants admitted that they knew colleagues who at times tried to avoid gatekeeping duties.

“Rocking the boat” is a theme noted among several participants which includes doing something to cause trouble where none is wanted or to disturb a situation which others feel is satisfactory. Participants expressed varying experiences with this phenomenon. Three participants were very clear that they do not have any concerns about this at their universities and one even expressed surprise that it should be an issue at all. On the other hand, three participants recounted experiences that resulted in negative reactions when an issue they felt was important was brought up.

Participants further expanded on the struggles, conflict, or disagreements within the department over gatekeeping issues. Two participants explained these in terms of organizational issues, personality differences, or power differentials. One spoke of the cause being a disagreement over where there is the developmental aspect to students’ problematic behaviors. Another participant discussed at some length her experiences with discomfort and conflict as a gatekeeper, due to perceived lack of support from her department.

An additional challenge that participants expressed was being identified either by their institution or colleagues as being a part of this study. One participant had such serious concerns that she asked to closely examine the transcript before allowing her statements to be included. Another participant shed some light on why there is a concern among some people to be identified with a study of this nature, saying that university communities are generally fairly small and that making negative comments might impact current or future employment.

### Verification Procedures

A sample of nine PhD counselor educators was obtained from a population of 33 who were contacted at five graduate counseling programs in the eastern United States. The sample was a criterion sample, as it was felt that PhD counselor educators would have the most experience with gatekeeping in their departments. The sample was also a convenience sample, with no attempt at representativeness.

Data collection consisted of two rounds of interviews. Each participant was given an hour for the initial interview. The follow-up interviews averaged 20-30 minutes. For the second round of interviews a few weeks later, two of the participants did not return numerous calls or emails and one additional participant indicated that he/she did not have anything more to add. Thus, the second round of interviews included six of the original participants. A third interview was planned but all six of the remaining participants indicated that the findings

represented their viewpoints and the topic had been exhausted.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for analysis purposes. The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist to maintain accuracy and completeness of the voices of the participants. On two occasions, participants were contacted for further clarification to ensure the transcription accurately reflected their viewpoints. Once the transcriptions were complete, the peer debriefer and I both independently analyzed the data utilizing the *atlas.ti* program. We held several consensus meetings to reach agreement on the primary codes, sub-codes, and operational definitions of each code. The third member of the research team monitored the research process. Through the process of open and axial coding two super-ordinate themes were identified, with numerous sub themes. A final codebook was developed. Within case displays were developed for each participant and a cross-case display for each theme and sub theme, by participant, was designed and allows for a visual representation of the data.

Because this is a qualitative study of gatekeeping, there is always the issue of confidence in the results. Credibility of findings are enhanced, though, by making sure interview questions were clearly stated and that the researcher and peer debriefers bracketed their biases. It is recognized that the results will not be highly generalizable, due to small sample size, the use of only PhD level counselor educations, and the use of CACREP-only accredited schools, as well



as the qualitative nature of the methodology. The utilization of the same interview guide for each participant is intended to increase the dependability of the results. But it is possible that both the researcher and the participants may misunderstand questions or forget facts or details. By utilizing a round of three separate interviews, it was hoped that some of these weaknesses would be reduced. An effort to increase confirmability was the use of only CACREP-accredited schools. It was decided, for the sake of this study, to limit the participants to schools that are CACREP accredited because of the standardization of policies and procedures.

### Rival Explanations

I searched for rival explanations by reviewing the extensive literature on gatekeeping in the counseling, social work, and psychology fields. For the most part, the findings of this study were confirmed in the literature. There is agreement between the research and my findings concerning how gatekeeping is defined and its degree of importance. The issue of impairment, how to identify it and the difficulty in quantifying specific problematic behaviors is seen in the literature and is clear from the struggles my participants discussed in their stories. Gatekeeping policies and procedures, as discussed in the literature, mirror the types discussed by my participants; there is also general agreement that there is a problem if these are not applied effectively. There was also agreement on the concerns about legal issues, the fear of students suing if they

are terminated or remediated. On the issue of students having adequate grades but not the necessary clinical skills, I also found agreement and the same level of concern about not being having an instrument that can effectively measure those skills.

One issue that was not noted with my participants was a reluctance to perform gatekeeping duties, either due to fear of retribution, negative reactions from peers, or legal concerns. There is quite a bit of research surrounding this topic, and I had anticipated finding this in my sample, even though it was very small.

#### Member checks

Member checks were accomplished at several levels. The first occurred when participants received a copy of their transcript and were questioned as to whether the rendition accurately reflected their responses. In two cases, one or two statements had to be clarified and were done so over the phone. In one case, more parts of the interview had to be redacted because the member felt they might prove identifying. At the beginning of the second interview, I spoke to the participants about the themes that were emerging in the data and if those matched their perceptions of their comments. The third time occurred when participants received a copy of their second interview and were asked if it was accurate; no changes were requested at that level. I feel that the use of a professional transcriptionist greatly enhanced the accuracy of the transcription.

## Summary

It is evident from the stories of the participants that gatekeeping is a challenging responsibility, something none of them took lightly. The experiences they shared highlighted many the struggles they faced when determining if a counseling student should continue in a program, the difficulties in identifying such students, and how they dealt with the pressures and stressors. In spite of this, the overwhelming consensus was that gatekeeping was an important and worthwhile part of their role as PhD counselor educators. None of the nine participants in the study expressed any reluctance to perform these duties.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The practice of gatekeeping is critical for the training of competent professionals in many disciplines, including counseling, social work, and psychology. Gatekeeping generally involves some type of initial screening and continues until graduation. This study attempted to discover, through a phenomenological approach, how counselor educators view gatekeeping in the discipline. This chapter includes a brief overview of the purpose of the study and a summary of the methodology and results. Next is a summary of the findings and their connection with the literature. It is followed by a discussion of the study's limitations related to (a) data collection, (b) researcher's bias, (c) researcher's lack of experience, (d) counselor educator backgrounds, and (e) delimitations. Implications for counselor education, supervisors, counselors, and professional organizations are presented, followed by suggestions for future research and my concluding remarks.

#### Purpose of the Study

Even though there is acknowledgement of the importance of gatekeeping in the counseling profession, there is a noticeable lack of qualitative research, especially on the experiences of being a gatekeeper. The majority of studies are quantitative and are unable to richly portray three important phenomena: what it

is like to be a gatekeeper, how the experiences and stresses involved impact the gatekeepers, and how gatekeepers process these experiences. The purpose of this study was to discover the explore counselor educators' perceptions of the gatekeeping experience. To fulfill this purpose, nine participants were asked about the following questions:

1. What is it like to be a gatekeeper?
2. How does the experience of gatekeeping impact counselor educators?
3. How do gatekeepers process the experiences?
4. What particular stressors are experienced as a gatekeeper, if any?

These broad research questions were explored utilizing an interview guide format (Appendix C). The guide is the foundation of the interviews, and all other information provided by the participants was included in the data analysis.

### Methodology

Qualitative methodology was selected for this study as a means of examining the experiences of gatekeeping from PhD counselor educators. The specific qualitative methodology selected for this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to discover the very nature of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). A central tenet of the phenomenological approach is the assumption that people share common experiences, thus core meanings are mutually understood. The main technique utilized in phenomenology involves in depth interviews with individuals who experience a certain phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). The research questions were structured to elicit personal experiences and their impact. These broad research questions were explored

utilizing an interview guide format (Appendix C).

Names of potential participants for the study were obtained from the websites of several large universities in the eastern United States. Criterion sampling was employed as it was important that all the participants are PhD counselor educators who are actively involved in gatekeeping duties at their universities. Based on this criteria, 33 individuals were selected and sent an email request for participation. Convenience sampling was also utilized, so it is understood that the sampling is non-random. This form of sampling was used because it is convenient and cost effective. In the end, only nine participants were involved in the first round of interviews and of those, six in the second round of interviews. The original research design had included a third interview, but each of those who participated in the second interview indicated that they had nothing else to add to the information they had already given. This was interpreted to mean that the subject had been fully explained and exhausted (Patton, 2002).

Both rounds of interviews were recorded and digital recordings were then burned to a disk and sent to a professional transcriptionist. The transcriptionist emailed the completed documents to me. The *atlas.ti* computer program ([atlas.ti.com](http://atlas.ti.com)) was utilized to assist in the analysis of interviews by facilitating the extraction, categorization, and linkage of segments of information in order to discover patterns in the data. Each pattern or set of data was given a code or name. The research team consisted of a peer debriefer, a monitor, and me. The peer debriefer replicated the analysis and coding process with the *atlas.ti*

program to increase the degree of inter-rater reliability. The team monitor reviewed the process at several points and made some recommendations.

Case displays were developed as a way to graphically displaying the data derived from the individual interviews (Hays & Singh, 2012). Initial within-case displays were developed for each participant's first and second interviews. Cross-case displays were then constructed from all the individual case displays. This allowed for common patterns as well as discrepancies in comments to be easily visible. Emergent themes were reviewed, and the counselor educators agreed that the findings were indicative of their experiences.

### Summary of Findings

The literature states that being a gatekeeper presents numerous challenges to those who perform those important duties. This study examined some of the experiences of a small group of PhD counselor educators, utilizing a phenomenological approach. The findings are presented as they relate to two broad categories, gatekeeping procedures and the challenges of gatekeeping.

#### *Gatekeeping Procedures*

Participants explored gatekeeping procedures including how they defined gatekeeping, the importance of gatekeeping, informal and formal gates, differences in gatekeepers and the importance of consultation and support. The section that follows provides descriptions of each of these concepts.

*Definition of Gatekeeping.* Each participant defined gatekeeping in terms of a formal process of monitoring and evaluating counseling students during students' time in a counseling program. For example, Participant 1 called it a "... formal and informal [process] of steering people through and helping if you need to." Several participants identified gatekeeping as an obligation of their work as counselor educators, counselors, or supervisors. Participant 3 stated, "I think that gatekeeping has to do with our professional obligation as educators." Two of the participants discussed the necessity of being a gatekeeper but also voiced their desire to not have to participate in gatekeeping. Participant 4 stated, "I wish somebody else would do it but it's part of my role and that basically ends that [choice]." Participant 7 expressed similar concerns by saying, "If we don't do it, who is going to do it?" Participants stressed the necessity of protecting the field and future clients from counseling students who have entered the field either unprepared or impaired with personal issues of some kind. Participant 9 framed it in terms of ethics, stating, "I think it is that which we are charged ethically, as counselor educators, to counsel students who are not going to be competent counselors to find another profession."

In general, participants' definitions of the gatekeeping process are supported in the literature. According to Moore (1991), gatekeeping involves a process that begins at admission into a program and concludes with an evaluation of suitability at the end of a program. Koerin and Miller (1995) saw gatekeeping as the effort to prevent the graduation of students who are not equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and values needed for



professional practice.

*Importance of Gatekeeping.* All participants agreed that gatekeeping was important, essential, and critical. Participant 1 indicated, "It's very important. The field needs people who are going to say 'You're not going to make it.'" Participant 3 looked at gatekeeping as a "professional obligation" that "needs to be taken very seriously." Participant 9 described the importance of gatekeeping by sharing her experiences where gatekeeping had not been done adequately. She stated, "I picked up the carnage of a lot of people who should not be doing what they were doing, and I saw a lot of therapists who had gone to a program that did not train counselors right."

It had been hypothesized that there might be some evidence of reluctance to gatekeep among the participants, but participants reiterated that gatekeeping is essential as a counselor educator. Two participants did acknowledge that they had colleagues who were somewhat reluctant or did not gatekeep at all. Participant 4 stated, "There have been some people in our department who have been more supportive of gatekeeping processes than others." Similarly, Participant 7 said "There is probably 25% who don't do it or don't do a good job."

The literature supports the importance of gatekeeping in the counseling profession. Findings from many studies indicate that faculty members have frequent dealings with students whose professional performance fails to meet defined standards (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Keri et al., 2002). The ultimate concern of the profession is to prevent what is termed "gateslipping" (Gaubatz & Vera,

2002), which occurs when students who are not suitable for a profession are “inappropriately permitted to complete graduate programs or are supported for licensure by supervisors of clinical experience.”

The importance of gatekeeping continues to be seen, for example in the mandates in the ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2005). Although gatekeeping is an ethical obligation of counselor educators, Tam and Kwok (2007) pointed out several ethical controversies related to gatekeeping. Some people believe gatekeeping promotes elitism by maintaining a monopoly on who can and cannot enter the field. Additionally, gatekeeping may deprive some people of a college education if they do not meet the standards set up by the university for admission into a counseling program. A third controversy lies in the argument that it can be contrary to the helping profession's belief in self-determination and respect for individual rights. Others may add that performance at the university level does not predict competence in the workplace. Another criticism is that universities already have policies in place that address student misbehavior and that additional ones are not needed. Finally, it is said that gatekeeping also may make students uncomfortable and inhibit learning. Although participants in this study did not include any of these controversies in their experiences as gatekeepers, more targeted questions might have broadened the discussion to support or negate these criticisms.

*Gates.* Gates are defined as locations in a program where gatekeeping can occur. Formal gates are identified as codified policies and procedures that

provide for evaluation, remediation and/or removal of students from a counseling program. All participants indicated that their programs had formal gates, but there was quite a variation of types from program to program. In Participant 2's program, "All our students must take the Empathy Checklist or Scale." Participant 3 stated that an important gate for her program is "the admission process, which is a prime place to gatekeep." Participant 9 stated that in their program, "We take a good look at their references." The literature provides numerous examples of formal gates, though there is a wide variety of policies and procedures. There are the seven gates described by Campbell (2010), for example. These gates are admissions, skills, classroom behavior, relationship, internship, national examination, and ethics. The usage of formal gates are also discussed by Gaubatz and Vera (2002) who found that formalized gatekeeping procedures, along with program-wide training standards, resulted in more efficient screening of deficient trainees.

Informal gates are identified as actions of faculty and staff aside from formal policies and procedures to evaluate/remove students. Not all the participants mentioned informal gates, but four participants stated that informal gates relate to meeting personally with the student in an attempt to identify/resolve an issue. Participant 1 stated, "We see, lay eyes on them. We talk during the semester." Participant 2 identified it as an "informal consultation" with their "clinical person" who does the supervision. Participant 4 indicated that "if you think there's a problem with the student you talk to that person directly." Participant 6 echoed the use of individual meetings in stating, "We meet with our

students one-on-one.” Though the term “informal gates” was not specifically identified in the literature, a review of several case studies indicates that counselor educators frequently meet with questionable students in an effort to resolve issues before formal measures must be taken. For example, Grady (2009) presented, in ethnographic format, stories of a social work faculty member and a student who failed his/her class. Interviews with both participants captured the concerns, fears, and uncertainties of the interactions between faculty member and student during the gatekeeping process. The stresses involved were similar to the examples given by some of the participants of this study.

Participants also addressed how effective they believe gates are in identifying/removing impaired students. Participant 1 stated, “Most times it [a gate] works, especially [with] the academic washouts.” Participant 4 indicated that “I think they work somewhat effectively.” Both indicated that effectiveness relies on the proper application of policies and procedures, as well as the willingness to intervene with problematic students. One participant, Participant 9, indicated that a main component of effectiveness rests with counselor educators who must “watch the gate if at all possible.” Overall, participants believed that neither formal or informal gates are totally effective in identifying or removing problematic counseling students.

There is a significant discussion of the need for effective gates in the literature. Though many acknowledge that gatekeeping is an essential element of the helping professions, Gaubatz and Vera (2002) found that existing policies

and procedures are not always effective in keeping impaired students from completing their programs. Counselor educators may experience pressures to ignore potentially impaired students, fear being sued, or worry about receiving negative teaching evaluations. In spite of this finding, Gaubatz and Vera (2002) concluded that effective gatekeeping policies and procedures, when they occur, do improve the quality of counseling program graduates.

*Consultation and Support.* Consultation includes meeting with others to discuss student issues. Participants agreed that consultation is important to be able to function effectively as a gatekeeper. Participant 1 indicated "It's a combination of seeking others' insight into people too before a decision is made." This sentiment was echoed by Participant 2, who said:

That's why I consult with my colleagues because they'll sometimes help me understand what really is significant and what is not...that's been probably the most critical piece and how I've been able to gatekeep...consulting is so important and is a classic counseling procedure...consult, consult, consult.

Not making a gatekeeping decision in isolation was noted by Participant 6, who stated:

Typically you don't make those decisions in isolation...We come together as a faculty and we present the case. Because we certainly don't want any one individual faculty member to feel that

they and they alone.

There is evidence in the literature of the process of making gatekeeping decisions by involving others. Some consults with others can be positive and productive, but some may be controversial and awkward, difficult to do (Gizara & Forrest, 2004; Younes, 1998). Some educators may try to avoid gatekeeping situations in order to not involve their colleagues (Bemak et al., 1999). These experiences, though, were not reflected in the stories of any of my participants.

Most of the participants indicated that they felt generally supported in their gatekeeping duties by colleagues, departments, and universities. Participant 2 stated, "Absolutely I feel supported when there's a concern, we will try to come together and be collegial and act in a consultative role to support one another." Participant 6 echoed this viewpoint, saying, "we try to support the faculty member...once we have everybody on board at the departmental level, pretty much the university will support us." Participant 4 stressed, "I'd be less reluctant to do it if there wasn't that process and everybody wasn't following it, I'd be much less reluctant to do it. There'd be no reason to, really, if I wasn't supported. I can't do it on my own. I'd have to have the faculty support."

The literature includes many studies of the importance of support by colleagues. Barlow and Coleman (2003) found that colleagues who were supported by their peers and department in believing that a student's strengths will emerge in time with adequate support and resources were less likely to screen out problematic students. Other studies by Bradey and Post (1991),

Gizara (1997), and Vacha-Haase (1995) found that disagreement (which can be perceived as non-support) among faculty and/or supervisors about what constituted inadequacy or impairment was a major barrier in addressing impaired trainees.

*Future Improvements.* Several of the participants spoke about efforts they knew which were directed at improving gatekeeping policies, efforts, procedures. These include participants who spoke about attempts to refine student performance instruments and attempts to make sure policies and procedures are followed correctly. Participant 3 described how her school is “continuing to refine our professional performance evaluation form...the more consistent our policies are with each other, the better chance we have to gatekeep effectively.” But she also had a concern about her specific program, saying “We already have some systems in place but we find that some of our policies are not being followed.” Participant 4 seemed to feel that a change of personnel would improve the gatekeeping process, saying “I would like a different program director...and would like for the dean to be interested enough in our program to sit down and try to understand with us.” Participant 8 stated that their program is working to make the process of gatekeeping more of a group effort, stating “...when that person stepped down as GPD, we got back to discussing a case as a group and found it more effective.” The literature suggests that there are several areas of gatekeeping where there are ongoing efforts to make improvements. One of these is in the identification of impairment and includes efforts to quantify important skills so that a measure of some kind could determine effectiveness.

Litchenberg and Portnoy (2007) acknowledge that there is some difficulty in defining competencies in precise and measurable terms, as well as establishing tools for their assessment. This inability to quantify skills was mentioned by several participants, who expressed frustration that they were unable to measure skills in a valid way.

A second area for improvement is in the area of policies and procedures. Tam and Kwok (2007), in their study of gatekeeping in the field of social work, identified arguments in favor of having gatekeeping policies. Gaubatz and Vera (2002) found that formalized gatekeeping procedures, along with program-wide training standards, resulted in more efficient screening of deficient trainees. But not all programs have policies or procedures which function as part of the gatekeeping process. For example, Barlow and Coleman (2003) identified the lack of policies and guidelines for managing failing and problematic trainees in practicum as well as in classroom settings in social work programs in Canada.

### *Challenges of Gatekeeping*

In addition to gatekeeping procedures, participants also shared many of the challenges of being a gatekeeper in the profession. Participants expressed how gatekeeping is difficult and hard, sometimes frustrating, but how it seems to get easier with experience. They also shared their perceptions on how it feels to let an impaired student through the process and how important it is to gatekeep despite the challenges. They explored these challenges, specifically including types impairment issues and their identification, three different types of



interventions they have utilized, the developmental process of students which includes the support/challenge dichotomy, the issue of grades versus skills, legal concerns, the individual styles of gatekeepers and the perceptions of the institution.

Although qualitative studies on the experiences of gatekeepers is limited, Grady (2009) utilized an ethnographic format and presented the story of one social work faculty member and one student which provided a glimpse into the issues and stresses involved in gatekeeping process from both sides. Keri and Eichler (2005) identified factors that inhibit gatekeeping such as fear of retribution, loss, or damage to reputation. Participants in their study voiced feelings of denial, lower feelings of entitlement, self-blame, and reduced feelings of control. A qualitative study on the effects of the termination process on supervisors and students found that students and supervisors alike experienced trauma because of the termination process and were equally in need of institutional support during and after this process (Samec, 1995). Though none of my participants indicated this level of challenge in their gatekeeping experiences, it is likely that more in depth interviewing might have uncovered deeper reactions to some of the challenges they discussed.

*Impairment Issues.* The identification of impairment issues involves the process by which the participants identified students with impairment issues or those who could be considered problematic in terms of current or future behaviors. Participants shared examples of potential impairment issues such as

lack of skills, personal issues, and behavioral issues that might affect the student functioning in the field including the timing of such identification. When it comes to the issue of lack of skills, Participant 1 said that he had a student who “had no interpersonal relationship skills” and identified another student who was “still in Erickson's identity versus Role confusion.” A particularly troubling example was given by Participant 2 who said, “Hearing this student say, ‘Well, I think we should be friends with everybody’ and then watching how she dealt with some feedback really concerned me.”

Personal issues is another area of impairment identified by some participants and involves problems that students have in their own lives which may or may not impact their ability to function either as students or future counselors. Participant 3 had a student who he did not know how she got into the program “but it was clear that she was really troubled and mentally ill.” Another student of Participant 4 had an “inability to be empathic. Can't relate, narcissism.” Participant 6 identified one student as “a person who couldn't help or advocate for themselves.” Participant 8 described a student as a “person who is extremely defensive,” and Participant 9 discussed a student whose “life was in total chaos.”

Another category of identified impairment challenges was behaviors that were considered questionable of a potential counselor. Participant 3 stated, “We've seen some crazy students in here. We had one student who had an affair with a client at a party.” Participant 4 related another incident in describing, “It was a male student, and this is very odd, who was a stripper and also a clown at

children's parties. That immediately raised flags for me.”

Participants indicated what a struggle it can be to identify impairment issues. The identification of impairment issues is essential and involves the process by which the participants identified students with impairment issues or those who could be considered problematic in terms of current or future behaviors. Identification can be done in unquantifiable/non-scientific ways and relates to how participants determine if a student is impaired without the use of diagnostic instruments. Participant 1 simply stated “Spider senses go off.” Similarly, Participant 2 said, “I can only go by personal experience and that's to say that there is some gut feeling, or some red flag that gets raised for me.”

A second way of identifying impairment issues is through the use of some kind of standardized instrument. Several participants stated that they wished that there were some kind of test or evaluation available to determine and quantify “impairment.” Participant 8 addressed the general inability to quantify some impairment issues by saying “There should be specific behaviors that are named...in the sense that it is operationalizing concerns.” He also acknowledged the fact that it may be difficult to identify some impairment because “there is such a variety of human expression and personality that one has to be careful not to just find something wrong because one does not like a particular personality style or attitude.”

The general timing of when identification can occur is also important. Participant 3 stated, “I think they sort of make themselves obvious. You know, if

they're in class with their head on the table sleeping, I mean, that's high school stuff." Participant 5 related that "I try to make sure that anything I see nonverbally that might need intervention; I get on before it becomes an issue or problem."

Sometimes the issues are found during internship and practicum such as Participant 7 who stated, "It is the majority of the time if there is a problem with a student, it tends to show up more when they are in internship or practicum because that is when they have different level of interaction with each other and clients."

There is general agreement in the research concerning the need to identify areas of impairment (Sheffield, 1998; Emerson, 1996; Halinski, 2009), but counselor educators have not yet identified an adequate means of predicting which applicants will or will not be successful in counseling programs or become effective professionals (Sheffield, 1998). This research highlights the critical nature of gatekeeping as a mechanism for identification of those persons in the field, or preparing for the field, who are not suitable to enter practice.

The literature is replete with examples of impairments in potential counseling students (Elman & Forest, 2007; Emerson, 1996; Sussman, 1992; Halinski, 2009) but more important, it seems, is that there is some disagreement concerning what the term "impairment" means. This disagreement has an obvious impact on the ability to identify "impaired" behavior of counseling students. The ACA Task Force on Counselor Wellness and Impairment (2004) noted that impairment involves a negative impact on counselor functioning that

impacts client care; identified impairments include substance abuse or chemical dependence, mental illness, personal crisis (traumatic events or vicarious trauma, burnout, life crisis, physical illness or debilitation). But Emerson (1996), acknowledged that we think we know incompetence when we see it but also that severe cases are relatively rare, so the field needs to be attuned to those less obvious ones. Sussman (1992) identified such problems as interpersonal insensitivity, personality disorders, beliefs of being a savior or rescuer, or having control issues. In this study,, participants share some of these experiences including the wish for improvements in the area of identifying and quantifying impairments of some counseling students.

*Interventions.* In order to address the potential impairment issues, participants discussed informal, formal, and workplace interventions. Informal interventions involve faculty to student meeting to address individual actions to keep/remove problematic students. Most of the participants utilized informal interventions to help keep a student or to separate a student from the program. Participant 1 indicated that his first course of intervention is “to speak to the student and be honest with the student.” Participant 2 sits “face-to-face with that student” and Participant 3 stated, “ we brainstorm strategies to assist these students.” Participant 6 noted, “Generally that student has a relationship with one of the 3 or 4 of us that is closer than and might be willing to talk to that particular faculty member.” Many of the participants indicated that they rarely have to utilize the formal interventions processes because they work one on one with the problematic student to resolve whatever the issues might be.

Though not directly seen in the literature, examples given by several researchers indicate that there are generally concerted efforts to work individually with students at some point in the gatekeeping process (Gizare & Forrest, 2004, Keri & Eichler, 2005). But these researchers also note that supervisors may not be prepared to identify and intervene with impaired trainees, sometimes due to the emotional difficulty. Gizare and Forrest (2004) concluded that it was important to discover how skilled supervisors deal with serious impairment and competence problems among internship students. Those supervisors can illustrate how best to perform gatekeeping functions.

Formal interventions are codified policies and procedures to intervene and/or remove problematic students. The majority of the participants indicated that they and their programs have and utilize formal interventions, especially if informal interventions fail. Formal interventions may allow the student to remain in the program or result in the student being removed from the counseling program. Often the formal intervention involved procedures that permitted the student to remain in the program, especially if they received some kind of remediation or help of some kind. Participant 1 indicated that for one student, "I gave him a letter of reprimand, telling him what my concerns were." Participant 2 indicated that she had a student who "asked me for a letter of recommendation and I said no." A range of options was offered by Participant 3, who said, "Go over there for an evaluation; do more visual journaling; here's our therapist list; go see a doctor and get a physical."

The literature discusses the use of formal interventions to keep students in the program and improve their functioning, or if need be, remove them from a program. Gaubatz and Vera (2002) studied various formal interventions and found that formalized gatekeeping procedures, along with program-wide training standards, resulted in more efficient screening of deficient trainees. Though many acknowledge that gatekeeping is an essential element of the helping professions, Gaubatz and Vera (2002) found that existing formal policies and procedures are not always effective in keeping impaired students from completing their programs. Currier and Atherton (2008) concluded that it is sometimes necessary but nonetheless, difficult to dismiss a student. Bradley (1991) found that even though counselor educators have developed and used initial screening procedures, they are less certain about implementing them and dismissing impaired students once they are in the program. Participant perspectives reflect these challenges.

Workplace interventions focus on the workplace removing impaired counselors from the field. All of the counselor educator participants recommend that the school should take care of it through the gatekeeping process before they enter the workplace. Participant 1 stated rather emphatically, "I don't want the field to weed them out. I can see how some feel that the field [should] wash them out. I can see it, but I cannot accept it, because that's part of my responsibility [as] the student's advisor and guide through this profession." The role as a gatekeeper in this matter was addressed directly by Participant 7, when she said, "If we don't do it, who is going to do it? If we don't do it at this point,

then we are sending students out who employers will have to deal with.”

Participant 8 agreed by stating “It is really our job primarily to weed out the person because we can't always trust the field supervisor of the future LPC to be doing that.” One participant did indicate that she knew of some counselor educators who would allow the problematic student to enter the workplace and let things work out as they will, assuming the person will be removed from the position eventually by stating, “We have faculty members who believe that that is ok, that the workplace will take care of those folks.”

The issue of allowing the field itself to “weed out” impaired students or counselors is discussed in the literature. In Barlow's 2003 study of social work programs in Canada, he found that four of the schools that did not have any policies indicated that the best way to weed students out of the field was through their performance in practicum. Lamb (1987) acknowledged that there has been little done regarding how to deal with impairment early in the professional career and that a pre-doctoral internship is a critical stage in which to assess and deal with impairment. A study by Shepard, Britton, and Kress (2008) found that university supervisors were more likely to report fitness deficiencies than were site supervisors, who appeared more likely to allow a problematic student to remain at their sites; the authors were not able to determine the exact reasons for the discrepancies but felt it may be related to better training of university supervisors.

*Developmental Process.* Participants discussed the concept of the



developmental process in which students mature over their time in the program, making mistakes due to lack of experience and immaturity, but in time, will grow up and mature. Four of the participants acknowledged the reality of this developmental process as students naturally progress as they go through the program. Participant 1 stated: "Who am I to say that you can't change and grow? And sometimes they grow over the 2-3 years they're with us and we can see that growth and change." Participant 2 commented on the complexity of making this decision: "We also were trying to assess whether the comments were truly reflective of the kinds of practices she was doing or if it was more a situation that she is saying things because of age and immaturity." Participant 4 indicates that such change does not always happen in stating, "Yeah, if you're committed to the person, the change process. It does happen, not with everybody, but it does happen." Participant 8 also indicated that sticking with a new student is important to him, "I also have a tendency to want to help the student develop... on the other hand, I think I am a pretty good judge of human nature but I am a bit tolerant for variety of human expression. So I get caught between those two tensions."

There are some indications in the literature concerning the reality of a developmental process with some counseling students. Moore and Urwin (1990) noted that one of the most identifiable student problems is lack of maturity. Leech (1998) indicated that it is important to understand that an important skill, empathy, has a developmental aspect, that is a degree of it needs to be present initially in the individual, and then it can then be enhanced through education and

training. It is not simply a skill that can be learned. Bowles (2009) noted that counselor impairment occurs during the training stage and that there is a need to educate counseling students about impairment issues and wellness strategies so they can deal better with those issues as they progress through their program and mature more fully. He further indicated that strengthening or restructuring while supporting the efforts and growth of their students is essential (Bowles, 2009). Some other issues may be related to the developmental process as well. Skovholt (2001) identified what he calls "high touch" hazards, including the fact that some client problems are unsolvable, our inability to say no, the stress of one way caring, and maintaining a state of constant empathy. How these realities of helping professions are handled by students can be related directly to their level of maturity.

Related to the developmental aspect of gatekeeping is the support/challenge dichotomy. This dichotomy revolves around the two conflicting duties of counselor educator gatekeepers, that of providing support for students as well as challenging their thoughts and behaviors. All of the participants agreed that, though sometimes difficult, both aspects of the job are essential: encouraging as well as providing essential feedback, even if it is corrective. Participants did discuss the two potentially conflicting duties of counselor educator gatekeepers in a student's developmental process: (1) providing support for students as well as (2) challenging student's thoughts and behaviors. Participant 7 stated:

What a challenge it can be to shift gears into a disciplinarian...that's

not really the right word but its as close to it as I can get...into that kind of role with students...that is the major stressor, the conflict of roles and conflict of skills that need to be used...Gatekeeping has an element of disciplinary action to it. And all of us have been trained as counselors and that can be a set up.

Participant 4 noted "When you do meet with a student you want to be supportive of them but you also want to challenge them on what they're doing." Participant 8 reflected, "You have to be geared up to do it but it's not that different from being a counselor who has to challenge a client about behavior...it is classic counseling work and we are probably more adapt at it than other fields. Because we have learned to do the challenging."

Participants noted that being supportive as well as challenging counseling students is basically a part of the job. Participant 2 stated, "We challenge people to go beyond what their typical comfort level is, and we support them in order to get there. I think that's what it means to be a professor and to teach and to supervise." Participant 3 remarked, "as an educator you have both roles."

Zoimek-Daigle (2005) addressed the belief that support and encouragement are important elements of the counselor educator-student relationship, whereas challenge and criticism may be more difficult to do. Barlow and Coleman (2003) found that colleagues who were supported by their peers and department in believing that a student's strengths will emerge in time with adequate support and resources were less likely to screen out problematic

students. Needless to say, not all counselor educators ascribe to the belief that there is a developmental aspect and that the support/challenge dichotomy are important, though that was not seen with these participants.

*Grades versus Skills.* Participants pointed out another challenge with students who have adequate grades in school work but not the skills necessary to become an effective counselor. They stressed the fact that while grades are easily quantified, counseling skills may not be, making some skills difficult if not impossible to measure. In classes as well as field experiences such as practicum and internship, participants expressed concerns regarding grades versus counseling skills. Participant 7 noted, "A lot of students can do well academically but when it comes to their behaviors at a workplace, that is different." Participant 6 reiterated, "Some people we know they shouldn't be in the field. But based on the rules or the guidelines that we have established as a university, they're meeting every criteria. " Participant 1 stressed:

Watch out for bad grades...[then] we have a problem that we know we can take on. But the one that has the book knowledge, that can answer all those silly questions and move throughout program so smoothly but we still have concerns about him, those are the ones that are of central importance to us.

Participant 2 added:

...the A/B students who get into practicum and internship and

suddenly you're scared to death about them working with students. But in those circumstances I generally do what we were discussing before, try and get them with the grade.

Participant 3 stated, "But it is the other, sort of subtle things, that I think we struggle with... Maybe some people get weeded out. And some people, it's as good as saying this, let's hope [organizations] don't get the one with good grades." Participant 9 expressed some frustration over graduating students she did not feel had the necessary skills, saying in one case,

He had crossed his I's and dotted his T's. We graduated him. With feelings in our guts of huh! But there you have it. But [when] we don't really think [the student has] clinical skills, [gatekeeping] gets a little mucky, but we have to deal with it."

Part of the problem is the fact that while grades are easily quantified, counseling skills may not be, making some skills difficult if not impossible to measure, for example. One of the major issues with assessing counseling skills is the difficulty of quantifying effectiveness. Participant 1 asked "How do you quantify a lack of interpersonal relationships? A lack of insight?" Participant 2 seemed to agree, saying "There's not really any way to quantify the stuff that we really need to quantify." Participant 3 echoes the concerns, stating, "There are nonacademic things that we are not evaluating or assessing and those are typically the things that we worry about, those very abstract." The issue was summed up well by Participant 8, who stated:

If it is an academic criteria, that is clearly students failing an exam. That is clearly a gatekeeping action in and of itself...but performance criteria and other presences which we consider important in our field...in terms of social skills, are much harder to identify and therefore makes me more reluctant and to want to have very clear markers.

In order to address the academic grades versus lack of skills challenge, participants make efforts to remove students with problematic skill levels through academic means. Participant 1 stated, "Hopefully we can wash them out academically." Participant 2 concurred, "I generally do what we were discussing before, try and get them with the grade." Participant 6 reiterated, "It's easy if the student is failing. You say, okay, well, you know academically you just don't have the competencies. So that's an easy one. Additionally, Participant 4 stressed a best case scenario, when he indicated "It's interesting that sometimes the person who is really problematic also has a problem with grades."

There is dialogue in the literature about the issue of grades versus skills. Moore and Urwin (1990) acknowledged that students who are either strong or weak in both academic and non-academic criteria present few challenges to the gatekeeping function. However, academically borderline students who have strong practice abilities and professional values, or academically outstanding students with unsatisfactory field performance, present a "gatekeeping dilemma" (p.123). In practice, academic success such as GPA or performance on standard

achievement tests usually suffice for entrance into a counseling program (Leech, 1998). If these criteria are the main ones used by counselor education programs, it is conceivable that numbers of impaired students could easily enter the field.

Often, skill levels cannot be quantified in the same ways that grades can. There is some difficulty in defining competencies in precise and measurable terms, as well as establishing tools for their assessment (Litchenberg & Portnoy, 2007). Trainee impairment among graduate students is an interference in professional functioning that is reflected in one or more of the following ways: (a) an inability and/or unwillingness to acquire and integrate professional standards into one's repertoire of professional behavior, (b) an inability to acquire professional skills to reach an acceptable level of competency, and (c) an inability to control personal stress, psychological dysfunction and/or excessive emotional reactions that interfere with professional functioning (Lamb et, 1987). These issues may not be reflected in academic abilities, thus emphasizing the importance of utilizing other criteria in the gatekeeping process.

Counselor educators may be hesitant to screen students for non-academic reasons. Bradley (1991) found that it can be more difficult to identify students with mental health problems than those with academic problems. This decision may be subjective rather than objective. In addition, one faculty member's perception may be different from another's. Students may learn to mask their problems by limiting self-disclosure in class or interactions with particular faculty members. This can create uncertainty about nature and degree

of the problem. Bradley stated that this reluctance may be due to fear of legal action, lack of definitive evidence, and lack of support by administrative elements in the department.

*Legal Concerns.* Participants also addressed a significant legal component to gatekeeping, which can be lawsuits and legal actions brought by dismissed students. Participant 1 indicated, "The biggest concern is the legal aspects of being sued by a student." Participant 3 described a particular case: "After our experience with that girl with the disability I thought, we're going to get a huge lawsuit someday, we're going to be very sorry that we don't have some way of evaluating the nonacademic performance." Participant 7 explained, "We have faculty who have been sued. So they are not, you know, as willing to step into the role, understandably because if you get burned ... why would you want to set yourself up again." Participant 8, summarized the challenge by stating, "I think faculty have a lot of power so the only stressor is the interpersonal stressor as well as if you have during law suits and discrimination charges... if your conscious is clear and you are right, then you should feel ok about it." In contrast, Participant 4 stated, "You know, people always worry about lawsuits, some people more than others... It's just something I don't worry about. I just figure, if I'm doing everything right, I'm not going to worry about it."

Cole (1991) acknowledged the importance of program staff being well versed in the legal aspects of gatekeeping. Proper gatekeeping relies on elements which should already be in the admission process including equal



protection for all applicants, no arbitrary decisions, established standards that will be followed, and no discrimination based on race, sex, handicapped. Cole indicated that following established policies should reduce the risk of legal problems for programs and staff but also that the most effective means of reducing the risk of liability is maintaining harmonious faculty-student relationships. Cole and Lewis (1993) discussed the legal implications of the gatekeeping process by examining court cases and their legal and ethical ramifications for social work students' academic and disciplinary dismissals. They found that termination guidelines were not consistent and that this has resulted in legal action in some cases. In particular, behavioral and ethical criteria for making termination decisions are not always clear or consistent. They recommended that termination guidelines be developed and applied consistently, which may reduce legal exposure. From the participant's points of view, it appears that they are cognizant of the possible legal ramifications of their gatekeeping duties but that this has not deterred them from performing them.

*Individual Styles.* Most of the participants had experiences with other gatekeepers to notice differences in particular styles of addressing student concerns. Participant 7 stated, "I understand that it is really hard to step into a gatekeeping role for many people." Participant 6 noted, "a lot of people don't see this part of their job." Similarly, Participant 4 indicated, "There have been some people in our department who have been more supportive of gatekeeping processes than others." Participant 8 stressed, "...because you are going to raise challenges, I think some people ...just do not want to work as hard, avoid doing

the gatekeeping that is necessary. That could be a possibility.” Participant 7 reiterated, “It really varies among my peers as well. There are some people who are willing, very readily willing to step up and manage situations differently...but there are others who avoid it.”

Participants noted that sometimes gatekeeping duties are avoided to eliminate or reduce conflict experiences. Participant 2 stated, “Some of us are more passive. I know that I do tend to be a little more passive and avoid conflict.” Participant 6 indicated, “I can understand why some faculty members do not want to have that responsibility and some faculty would prefer to move that person along rather than deal with that conflict.” Similarly, Participant 8 acknowledged, “my tendency is not to confront as much as some others. I am willing to speak and say this is how you are being perceived and this is how it looks and this is not ok. But I do it in a much more socially lubricated way, much more subtle than someone with a lawyerly type style accusation and I do it I think using my counseling skills.”

Participants noted that the personalities of the people who performed gatekeeping duties impacted how they see those duties and how they perform them. For example, Participant 1 stated, “I guess there would be different personalities to go along with different decision-making.... especially those who enjoy the power. We've got a few people like that floating around who have that type of authority issues.” Participant 7 noted, “It is simply a challenge because some of [gatekeeping] has to do with personality, just like we have some faculty

members who aren't willing to or able to see problematic behavior in the masters' students and are willing or able to actually do something about it."

Participant 3 discussed the reality of "people's ambivalence about doing it. Well, I just feel like you have to, I guess...you have kind of to muster up and do it." Participant 6 stated, "I think maybe there are more faculty members who are reluctant and that probably will just get along with students than there are faculty members who will take them to task." On the other hand, Participant 9 found, "...in the program I am in right now, I can't think of a person who is working on our faculty now who isn't not only willing to gatekeep but who keep their eyes out for it." Participant 8 noted, "There is probably a continuum...the error is to not gatekeep, to err on the positive side is more likely to be part of human nature."

Participants also noted that the length of time in the field or length of time involved in gatekeeping duties was important. The consensus appeared to be that the greater the length of time, the different the gatekeeping experience might be. Participant 1 stated, "You would probably find those who have been academics for longer periods of time are the ones that are more wishy-washy versus those who have the experiences in different fields and working with people." Participant 2 indicated a similar viewpoint, "I do think it's an experience thing, and I also think that perhaps people who have been there longer and who have seen so many things become complacent." Participant 4 had a contrasting viewpoint, "Maybe if you're new into the field, I wonder about that. I mean I don't have a problem kicking somebody out if I think it is warranted to do so. But it

does become easier once you do it more often... maybe you just get hardened after a while.”

The literature indicates that there are indeed different styles of gatekeeping. Campbell (2010) examined the attitudes and beliefs of counselor educators toward gatekeeping and at which gates which type of staff (i.e., full-time faculty, field supervisors, etc) was strictest. Full time faculty with many prior years of experience as counselor educators made less stringent gatekeeping decisions. Currier and Atherton (2008) identified characteristics that seem to be significant for gatekeepers to possess which include honesty, the importance of judgment, emphasis on self awareness, and the importance of trying to keep personal responses and empathy out of judgment. Tam (2005) found that gatekeeping in the field of social work is controversial and that some field instructors are reluctant to fail an inadequate student. She found that some groups of field instructors have higher professional suitability to be gatekeepers than others which would indicate the need for more education and training for those in this role.

*Perceptions of the Institution.* This theme involves experiences participants had in specific facets of their work at their particular universities. These included if any of the participants had experienced any pressure to perform gatekeeping duties, if they felt they were “rocking the boat” due to their duties, if they experienced discomfort or power struggles, and if they had concerns about their confidentiality as participants in this study.

Participants were asked about potential external pressure to engage in gatekeeping within their departments. All but one indicated that they have not felt any pressure from their departments, but they admit to internal personal pressure to gatekeep as part of their professional functions. Participant 4 stated, "I feel very little external pressure. However, I feel a moral and ethical obligation to be a gatekeeper and feel like it's my responsibility to make sure students are appropriately addressed if need be." Participant 8, reiterated, "There's no fear of gatekeeping as far as I can see, there's no reluctance to gatekeep. There's sometimes concern that you are the only person who is seeing something and concern that you are not seeing it correctly until you take a bold action." He also noted, "so that reluctance does happen when there is disagreement among the faculty among whether there is a problem with the student."

Participant 3 indicated that the opposite was true in her case:

No, actually we don't experience [pressure], we experience the opposite...Just about the lack of... serious interest in our program to the extent that there isn't much understanding of the type of student we are looking for...very little help ... from the dean, regarding how important it is to have particular qualities in an applicant wanting to become a therapist.

There was no direct evidence in the literature that there is sometimes pressure exerted on counselor gatekeepers to perform these duties, though gatekeeping itself was often acknowledged as part of the job (Koerin &

Miller, 1995; Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 2008; Moore, 1991). Tam and Kwok (2007) discussed that there is some controversy surrounding the practice of gatekeeping, including that it promotes elitism by maintaining a monopoly on who can and cannot enter the field. Supervisors may not be prepared to identify and intervene with impaired trainees (Gizare & Forrest, 2004). They found that some supervisors identified issues that impacted their ability to intervene appropriately with impaired trainees; these included their lack of training for the evaluative component of supervision. In addition, Gizare and Forrest also found that the degree of agency and collegial support for supervisors in their programs affected their effectiveness. Finally, supervisors were hesitant to intervene due to the emotional difficulty of intervening. A study by Elman and Forrest (2008) discussed the issue of allowing problem students to graduate from a program. They found reluctance to apply rules that might result in dismissal unless the offense is very serious. There is also the fear of legal repercussions (Cole & Lewis, 1993). This can result in a reluctance and/or refusal to function as a gatekeeper.

Another aspect of individual styles involves what is called "rocking the boat", doing something to cause trouble where none is wanted or to disturb a situation which others feel is satisfactory. Participant 4 stated "I'm not concerned about rocking the boat. I'm concerned about a student rocking the boat if we don't address an issue." Participant 8 reiterated, "I am so surprised that a department wouldn't support [gatekeeping]. It's no skin off their back; they're punishing themselves." On the other hand, Participant 2 indicated that there

could be "...a feeling like they might have a shadow cast on them if they do raise issues." But Participant 3 shared:

I think people are told to stop doing that and that the dean wants things the way they are. Except that, under these circumstances, when they are ongoing, it is very wearing on people, and it's a real formula for burnout. I think as long as things kind of go smoothly and he does not hear discontent from anybody, not just us, but other programs here, then that makes his life very happy and he can do what he wants to do. He gets angry and upset when people complain, instead of addressing a problem in the appropriate way.

Participant 7 indicated "it has happened at least once where I have seen a problem and it hasn't been validated from other faculty members and therefore it's not really seen as a problem."

The literature does address reactions from others as being one of the consequences experienced by gatekeepers. Legal issues, already addressed, can be framed as reactions from others, either the student involved or the university. Currier and Atherton (2008) examined the termination policies of several universities in England and Australia and concluded that terminating training for some students is necessary but often difficult. Bradley (1991) stated that a reluctance to gatekeep may be due to fear of legal action, lack of definitive evidence, and lack of support by administrative elements in the department. This lack of support can be an important element in a counselor educator's decision to

follow through on gatekeeping policies or not. Tam (2005) found that gatekeeping in the field of social work is controversial and that some field instructors are reluctant to fail an inadequate student, as other research has confirmed. This reluctance, she feels, can be in part due to either the reality that their department do not support gatekeeping efforts, or the perception that they will not support such efforts.

Related to the theme of rocking the boat is the issue of what has been termed the “nice counselor syndrome” or NCS. First advanced by Chung and Bemak (2008), NCS has been identified in various school systems that have attempted to implement culturally responsive social justice advocacy policies. In many cases resistance to such implementation takes the form of refusing to follow new policies and procedures because of fear of the reactions of others to their efforts. This is evident in the responses of two of the participants. Participant 3 was especially concerned about the reaction of her Dean, “He gets angry and upset when people complain [about issues], instead of addressing a problem in the appropriate way.” She indicated that she feels restricted from performing gatekeeping functions in the way she feels she should because of his reactions to her efforts. Participant 7 indicated that at times she has “taken the steps that I deemed necessary” because she felt that asking for permission from her supervisor would result in a “No!” and cause conflict.

The second sub theme identified involves conflicts in gatekeeping, including power struggles within the department over gatekeeping issues and the



discomfort felt during the process of gatekeeping. Participant 2 acknowledged that in her department “like any organization you've got some undertones, of personalities, and undertones of different kind of power differentials.” Participant 7 stated that at times she “was not kept in the loop” by her dean and felt that the dean had over stepped his bounds.

Related to power struggles, Koerin and Miller (1995) and Tam and Kwok (2007) provided examples of professionals who support the practice, as well as those who have criticisms. Differences of opinion often lead to conflict, and researchers have shown that counselor educators have not yet identified an adequate means of predicting which applicants will or will not be successful in counseling programs or become effective professionals (Sheffield, 1998). Studies by Bradey and Post (1991), Gizara (1997), and Vacha-Haase (1995) found that disagreement among faculty and/or supervisors about what constituted inadequacy or impairment was a major barrier in addressing impaired trainees as well as creating arguments within the departments.

The issue of discomfort was mentioned by two participants, who indicated that although they know it is important to help people succeed, having to intervene in their educational process has a marked level of discomfort or stress connected with it. Participant 2 states, “Well, we're in the helping profession and generally we do everything in our power to help people succeed, so it can be very uncomfortable [to terminate the student].” Participant 4 discusses having what he identifies as “real conflict conversations” with problematic students.

Even while acknowledging the importance of gatekeeping, many faculty members struggle with the process. (Grady, 2009). The concept of “the loss of innocence” addresses the emotional cost to gatekeepers in the counseling profession. Keri and Eichler (2005) discovered feelings of denial, lower feelings of entitlement, self-blame, and reduced feelings of control in a group of supervisors. Capps (2005) concluded that being a gatekeeping agent can cause some distress to faculty but that it is important to do it in order to protect both the field and potential clients.

The third sub theme identified involves confidentiality as a gatekeeper. Two participants in particular expressed concern of being identified by their institution or colleagues for their comments. One participant in the first round of interviews indicated her concern by saying “There are things I'm telling you about that because it's a small community, I know where we are identifiable.” Her concern was so great that extraordinary efforts had to be made to remove all identifiers from her interview and a copy was sent for her approval before the coding began. During the process of the follow-up interview, a second participant expressed concerns that some of her students and supervisees might be able to identify her from her comments, saying, “I am concerned that they will be able to identify me and the examples of students' behaviors.” She was given the same assurances that all possible identifier would be removed. Nothing directly related to this concern was identified in the literature, but it is often a concern of study participants in general. It also may be tied into concerns with rocking the boat. Due to these confidentiality concerns, some demographic information from these

participants was restricted.

### Limitations

There are several notable limitations to this study. This section will focus on these limitations and methods to address these concerns. Limitations included issues related to (a) data collection, (b) researcher's bias, (c) researcher's lack of experience, (d) counselor educator backgrounds, and (e) delimitations.

#### *Data Collection*

One significant limitation was the low response rate for the sample size. Of the 33 PhD counselor educators contacted, only nine followed through with the first interview. Several potential participants were never able to set a time for the interview, so were eventually dropped. There were also some scheduling challenges for the interviews, with some having to be rescheduled a few times. Of the nine original participants in the first round of interviews, only six participated in the second round. In addition, three rounds of interviews had been planned, but only two were actually held, as all six in the second round indicated that they did not have any more information to add.

A second limitation was the inability to use most of the demographic information that could be obtained about the participants. Several of the participants were extremely concerned about identifying information regarding their university or their departments appearing in the study. Participants were assured that all information would be removed and transcripts were made available so that any concerns were addressed.

Data collection was done through a series of two interviews. Because this was a phenomenological study, an interview guide rather than a questionnaire with specific questions was utilized. As a new researcher, I often had the tendency to ask specific questions or to ask for clarification, rather than simply allow the participants to tell their story. The result was actually a combination of information given by the participants along with answers to some specific questions for clarification or expansion, but all efforts were made to keep those intrusions to a minimum.

### *Researcher's Biases*

As important as objectivity is in this research, it is clearly understood that due to personal experiences with the topic, I have more than a personal interest in the topic of gatekeeping in the counseling profession. A neutral stance was taken in regards to the topic and the data collected, though this does not mandate total detachment from the subject matter (Patton, 2002).

During the course the interviews, I was able to relate closely to the examples and experiences discussed by the participants. I did feel, in some cases, too close of a connection to the participant as well as to what was being said. I balanced my biases by stating my assumptions and biases before beginning this research and sharing my thoughts with my peer debriefer to ensure the findings were indicative of participants' perspectives and not my own. I also utilized member checks to ensure the transcripts and findings accurately reflected participant's perspectives.

### *Researcher's Lack of Experience*

Though I have completed several quantitative studies over the years, this was my first attempt at a qualitative study. Initially, I spent a great deal of time reading and consulting before the start of the project to ensure I fully understood how to proceed. I utilized a specialized analysis program (*atlas.ti*) to assist in the coding process. Additionally, the use of a research team also proved most helpful, as both of the peer debriefers had some experience with qualitative research. I also consulted with my dissertation advisor and methodologist to assist in formulating my questions and refine categories of findings. I believe my lack of experience affected the project in several ways. One was the inability to obtain the sample size I wanted. I also believe that with additional practice I could have improved the interviewing process and thus obtained more open ended responses of participant's experiences.

### *Counselor Educators' Backgrounds*

An unanticipated limitation was the extreme reaction by several of the participants of being identified in any way as part of the study, even in general comments. The original plan was to obtain as much information about the participants as possible, so that they could be fully described and understood. Extreme editing was done on several of the transcripts to assure that all identifying information was removed. I had hoped some connections could have been drawn between participants' backgrounds and their experiences with

gatekeeping to enhance the participants' stories and add to the understanding of what it is like to be a gatekeeper in the counseling profession. Unfortunately, with this sample of participants I needed to standardize the analysis by not including data other than what could be obtained from their university websites in order to accommodate several participants' concerns.

### Delimitations

This study was delimited to PhD counselor educators at major universities in the eastern United States who had at least 10 years experience as counselor educators, supervisors, and counselors. All other counselor educators who did not meet those qualifications were excluded. It is acknowledged that gatekeeping functions are also performed by a variety of other staff and personnel at many other types of work places, but the decision was made to focus on PhD level personnel. It was decided to select a geographic area that would be easily accessible so that face to face interviews could be held.

### Implications

The reality of what it is like to do gatekeeping, to be responsible for the quality of counseling students entering the field, to struggle to support impaired students in the hope that they will become effective counselors, and to ultimately be responsible for terminating impaired students from a counseling program was the focus of this research. Implications for counselor educators, counselors, supervisors, and professional organizations will be presented.

### *Counselor educators*

The shared stories and experiences of gatekeeping by PhD counselor educators may add to the understanding of the gatekeeping process as well as highlight what impacts being a gatekeeper has on PhD counselor educators. This study may identify areas for change or improvement in gatekeeping policies and procedures, as well as clarifying the need for more departmental and university support for those who perform this most important function.

Similar to previous research, participant stories highlighted the importance of good policies and procedures as part of an effective gatekeeping process. Different departments can have widely varying policies and procedures, but it is important that these policies and procedures are determined to be effective. It is clear that having bad grades will easily eliminate a student from a program, but there is still a lack of instrumentation to measure counseling skills, even though there are various, instruments used by different schools. A cohesive, research-based instrument that will measure counseling skills could be developed.

Another issue for the field of counselor education is how to define and measure "impairment." Even the term meets with disagreements among professionals, let alone how best to measure it. Along with this is the belief among some counselor educators that counseling students are a "work in progress," programs and gatekeepers should always consider this developmental process to help students grow and develop.

It is also very important for universities and counseling departments to support counselor educators in their gatekeeping efforts. This is not always the

case, as seen in the stories of some participants as well as in the literature. In addition to effective policies and procedures, assistance with stress that can arise while performing gatekeeping functions is warranted. Often it appears that “Counselor heal thyself” is the policy, but that is often not easy. Comments from participants make it very clear that there are personal struggles and stresses involved in being a gatekeeper. Programs for self-care could be expanded to include specific concerns related to gatekeeping duties.

### *Supervisors*

As noted in the literature, as well as in the stories the participants, specific training or education on how to perform gatekeeping duties does not often exist. Supervisors have the important task of monitoring prospective counseling students, assessing their skill levels, and providing support and further training and practice when needed. Some supervisors evidently do not see this as part of their duties, as reported by a couple of the participants. Others see this as a very important part of what they do. Somehow it must be made clear by all counseling programs or departments that gatekeeping is an essential and required part of supervision duties. Everyone must play a part if the field is to be protected from problematic students who become problematic counselors in the real world. Many programs do offer a class in supervision, so including a discussion on gatekeeping duties and how to handle difficult situations would be warranted. Supervision of supervisors is essential to fill in that gap but there could also be something additional added to the supervision course.



### *Counselors*

Implications for counselors involve the realization that gatekeeping duties can be very demanding and stressful. As counseling students, they may not have any direct experience with remediation, either formal or informal but they may have been given extra support or encouragement from a supervisor or professor that can be perceived as gatekeeping efforts.

Since it may not have been identified as gatekeeping, counselors may have never heard the work “gatekeeping” or know anything about it when they enter the field. I myself knew the process but not the term, and I have been in the field over 25 years, both in teaching and counseling. This lack of awareness can result in is lack of efforts to practice gatekeeping in the field; maybe they even believe that it is not their job but that of their employers.

There is an abundance of research on impairment in the field and what effects it has on clients and the effective performance of counseling duties. Several participants shared examples of people in the field who are doing harm, even though they somehow successfully graduated through their program. It would be valuable, and maybe essential, for counselors to learn more about the process of gatekeeping and how to best perform those duties in the field. Counselors fairly quickly learn to recognize impairment in clients, but could also possibly need some assistance in gatekeeping with other professionals.

### *Professional Associations*

One of a professional association’s most essential functions is

safeguarding clients by ensuring each person has been educated, trained, supervised and has practice in the counseling field before being granted a professional status. Professional associations can be involved in educating their members about not only the importance of gatekeeping and how to gatekeep, as well as supporting professionals in their gatekeeping efforts. This can include training and development of best practice policies and procedures. Professional organizations can also provide education on how to handle stress reactions to the gatekeeping role, as well as other resources such as counseling and support groups.

#### Future Research

The stories of the participants in this study provide color and pattern to the quantitative picture of gatekeeping that has been prevalent in the research. Larger samples and participants from around the country would expand the picture of what it is like to be a PhD counselor educator. It would also be interesting to examine why there are differences between gatekeepers, whether there is a connection between things like personality type or length of time in the field and gatekeeping practices.

Additionally, previous research has focused on the position of the gatekeeper, so examining the process from the student point of view could be helpful. This additional facet could allow for improvements in the process or application of the process, as the final goal is to make sure students leaving counseling programs are effective and competent.

Finally, additional research and development on instruments to measure the effectiveness of counseling skills is warranted. Previous research as well as my study found a level of frustration and concern at not being able to quantify effectiveness. The lack of scientifically developed criteria is acknowledged to cause stress when having to remove problematic students from a program.

### Concluding Remarks

The end result of this research process has been to better see and understand the experiences of a small sampling of PhD counseling gatekeepers. Surprisingly, there were really no surprises. As an instructor for over 20 years, I have been both the subject of gatekeeping efforts as well as the gatekeeper. I selected this topic because in my work as a therapist, I have seen and had to deal with several other co-workers who presented as “impaired,” as having personal issues or even their own substance abuse problems. My question was always “How did they ever get into the field?” Some of them I would work with individually, on my own time, to try to help. Others, I either just left alone or in one case, reported to my supervisor.

Early on, I hypothesized that it was partly the result of people at their schools who were reluctant to gatekeep, who did not want to do what needed to be done to either help these problematic students improve or put them out of the program so they did not enter the counseling field. This started as a quantitative project with a questionnaire to quantify this “reluctance.” After several efforts with the Likert Scale, I gave up and decided to examine the experiences of being a

gatekeeper rather than the process itself. I was still sure I would discover this "reluctance."

So months later and dozens of transcripts later, it became clear that none of my participants were in any way reluctant to perform gatekeeping duties. They did know of others who they thought were reluctant but did not really want to say much about them. The thought crossed my mind to ask to interview them, but I decided to stick with the participants I have since I believed that those who were not doing what they were supposed to do might not disclose that information. I do not doubt that the reluctance factor is still out there, it was just not reflected in my sample.

One very disappointing factor was the fear a few of my participants had about being identified by their school or department for sharing their experiences in the interviews. Confidentiality aside, I feel this rests in the culture of their workplace and those above them in power who might not support their gatekeeping efforts. None of the participants were reluctant to discuss this with me, they just wanted to make sure it was not included in the report. To me, the fact that I could not include it in the report tells me more about gatekeeping than anything else I discovered either in the research or in the interviews with my participants. They felt hampered and not supported in their gatekeeping efforts but continued to do them the best they could, under the circumstances, with the hope that support would change in the future. So it is clear that for gatekeeping efforts to be successful, it involves not only the PhD counselor educators and effective policies and procedures, but also departmental and university support

for gatekeeping efforts.

I leave this endeavor now with a much better understanding not only of the mechanics of the gatekeeping process but also of the impact being a gatekeeper has on the people who perform those essential duties. There were sad stories and uplifting stories, concerns but also laughter. I believe there is no one simple reason why those impaired people in my past got into the field or no one remedy to address the concerns. I guess I did not really get an answer to my original question, but I do more fully understand how difficult being a gatekeeper is and how stressful it can be on people who really are there to encourage and support. And most importantly, it is everyone's task to gatekeep so that future clients and agencies can be protected from harm.

### Summary

This chapter included a brief overview of the purpose of the study and a discussion of the methodology and results, as well as the findings and their connection with the literature. The study's limitations and delimitations were identified. Implications for counselor education, supervisors, counselors, and professional organizations were discussed, as well as suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER SIX

### MANUSCRIPT

The manuscript in this chapter was prepared to be submitted to the journal *Counselor Education and Supervision*.

A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of  
Gatekeeping Among PhD Counselor Educators

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the gatekeeping experiences of a group of PhD counselor educators, utilizing a phenomenological approach. The stories of the participants in this study provided some important details and “color” about what it is like to be a PhD counselor educator, to be ultimately responsible for ensuring that only qualified, effective counseling students leave their program and enter the counseling field. The challenges, rewards, and ultimately the satisfaction of playing a role in the development of future counselors were clearly seen.

## Introduction

The practice of gatekeeping is critical for the training of competent professionals in many disciplines, including counseling, social work, and psychology. This is due to the fact that much harm can be done to clients if a student enters the field either unprepared or ill-suited for the work. According to Koerin and Miller (1995), gatekeeping is the effort to prevent “the graduation of students who were not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice (p.247).”

There is a lack of qualitative research being done on the issue of gatekeeping. The majority of the studies done were quantitative, and were not able to portray richly three important phenomena: what it is like to be a gatekeeper, how the experiences and stresses involved affect the gatekeepers, and how they process these experiences. It is most likely that the gatekeeping experiences, both positive and negative, impact each individual PhD counselor educator somewhat differently. This study attempted to discover, through a phenomenological approach, what those impacts were. This knowledge can then be shared with other counselor educators, in hopes of helping them process their own experiences and improve their gatekeeping efforts.

## Method

Qualitative methodology was selected for this study as a means of examining the experiences of PhD counselor educators. The specific qualitative



methodology selected for this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to discover the very nature of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The main technique utilized in phenomenology involves in depth interviews with individuals who experience a certain phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). The research questions were structured to elicit personal experiences and their impact. These broad research questions were explored utilizing an interview guide format. The study was approved by the Old Dominion University IRB board.

### *Participants*

Participants (N=9) in this study were full time PhD counseling faculty members. All departments were CACREP accredited. The names and email addresses of a pool of 33 eligible participants were obtained from the counseling program websites of five large universities on the east coast. An initial email detailing the specifics of the proposed study was sent to all of them, along with a request for their participation. A total of eleven PhD counselor educators agreed to participate in the study. In the end, only nine actually did follow through with their participation. Only seven of the nine participants responded to attempts to schedule the follow-up interview; two of the participants did not return several calls or emails. So they were not represented in the second round of interviews.

The participants included four males and five females. The ages of the participants ranged from 73 as the oldest to 49 as the youngest; the average age is 60.5. Two of the participants were African American, one bi-racial and six Caucasian. There was no effort made to obtain a balance of demographic

characteristics. All of the participants have earned PhDs, though the time span ranges quite widely, from oldest in 1980 to the most recent in 2009. The average length of time for holding a PhD was almost 18 years (17.75), with the longest time being 33 years and the shortest, 4 years. The type of PhD was not collected due to concerns of some about being identified as participants, but most of them were in counseling related fields.

Various certifications or licenses were held by the participants. Three of them were Nationally Certified Counselors (NCC) and four were Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC). Other credentials include pastoral counseling, licensed psychologist, school counselor certification, certified substance abuse counselor (CSAC), and Qualified Mental Health Professional (QMHP). Each of the nine participants hold some additional credential in addition to their PhD.

There is also a range in the experience level of the seven participants who provided that information. The average length of time as a counselor educator was 17.8 years, with the longest 33 years and the shortest, seven years. Experience as a counselor was the longest, with the average being 18.1 years, but again there was quite a range—from 30 years to 11 years. The final type of experience was as a supervisor; this reflected the lowest level of experience. The average length of time was 12.85 years, with 20 years being the longest and five being the shortest length of time.

*Overview of methodology*

Qualitative interviewing was selected for this the project, as it would enable the researcher and reader to enter into another person's perspective (Patton, 2002). A series of two interviews were held. A general interview guide approach was utilized as it provided a list of concepts intended to help explore the participant's experiences as gatekeepers in a graduate counseling program. Each participant was interviewed loosely following the guide but they were encouraged to add other information they felt was important. This interviewer asked new questions that arose in the course of the interview, to help clarify or elaborate on what was said.

Criterion sampling was employed as it was essential that the subjects be PhD counselor educators who have been actively involved in the gatekeeping process. They were also all selected from CACREP-accredited schools, in order to provided standardization of qualifications. Convenience sampling was also utilized. Requests for interviews were emailed to the potential pool of thirty-three subjects, and the hope was that ten to twelve would respond with agreements to participate. Those who did agree to participate comprised the sample. In the end, only eleven responded and of those, nine followed through with interviews.

Information from the subjects was obtained utilizing an in depth interview process. Each subject was interviewed twice, the interviews recorded and then transcribed. The second round of interviews was used to clarify patterns that emerged in the first interview. A peer debriefer and a monitor were used in the analysis process in order to increase inter-rater reliability and to supervise the

data analysis process. Several consensus meetings to reach agreement on the primary codes, sub-codes, and operational definitions of each code.

Through the process of open and axial coding two main themes were identified, with numerous sub themes. A final codebook was developed and a cross-case display for each theme, by participant, was designed and allowed for a visual representation of the data. Two main themes emerged. The first theme, gatekeeping procedures, involved a variety of sub themes, including how participants defined gatekeeping, the importance of gatekeeping, types of gates and their effectiveness, differences in gatekeepers, the importance of consultation and support, and future improvements in gatekeeping. The second theme involved the challenges of gatekeeping and included sub themes of impairment, which included the of types of impairment and how they were identified, interventions which included informal, formal, and workplace interventions, the developmental process which included the support/challenge dichotomy, the issue of grades versus skills, legal concerns, individual types of gatekeepers, perceptions from the institution which included pressures to gatekeep, "rocking the boat", conflicts experienced, and concerns about being identified in the study.

### Summary of Findings

The focus of this study was to explore the perceptions of counselor educators as they perform gatekeeping tasks, including being responsible for the quality of counseling students entering the field, supporting impaired students in

the hope that they will become effective counselors, and possibly being responsible for terminating impaired students from a counseling program. A phenomenological approach was utilized that allowed participants to share their experiences as gatekeepers

Two main themes emerged from an analysis of the initial and follow-up interviews. The first theme was that of gatekeeping procedures and included sub themes of participants' definitions of gatekeeping, what they said about the importance of gatekeeping, gates themselves (formal, informal, and effectiveness of gates), the importance of consultation and support, and suggestions for future improvements in gatekeeping.

Seven of the participants defined term gatekeeping in terms of a formal process of monitoring and evaluating counseling students during their time in a counseling program as well as an informal process, an art rather than a science. In general, the study participants' definitions of the gatekeeping process were supported in the literature. Definitions varied but all included an element of evaluating suitability for practice. According to Moore (1991), gatekeeping involves a process which begins at admission into a program and concludes with an evaluation of suitability at the end of a program. Koerin and Miller (1995) see gatekeeping as the effort to prevent the graduation of students who are not equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and values needed for professional practice.

All participants agreed that gatekeeping was important, essential, and

critical. A few participants did acknowledge that they had colleagues who were somewhat reluctant or did not gatekeep at all. The literature for the most part supports the importance of gatekeeping in the counseling profession. Findings from many studies indicate that faculty members have frequent dealings with students whose professional performance fails to meet defined standards (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Keri et al., 2005). The importance of gatekeeping continues to be seen, for example in the mandates in the ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2005).

The participants frequently mentioned locations (gates) at which they intervened in a student's progress in their counseling programs. Formal gates were defined as policies and procedures that provide for evaluation, remediation and/or removal of students from a counseling program. Each participant indicated that their programs had many such "gates" but there was quite a variation of types from program to program. The literature provides numerous examples of formal gates, though there is a wide variety of policies and procedures. There were the seven gates described by Campbell (2010), for example. This usage of formal gates was also discussed by Gaubatz and Vera (2002) who found that formalized gatekeeping procedures, along with program-wide training standards, resulted in more efficient screening of deficient trainees. Informal gates were identified as actions of faculty and staff aside from formal policies and procedures to evaluate/remove students. Informal gates included personally meeting with the student in an attempt to identify/resolve an issue. Though the term "informal gates" was not specifically identified in the literature, a

review of several case studies indicates that counselor educators frequently meet with questionable students in an effort to resolve issues before formal measures must be taken. For example, Grady (2009) presented, in ethnographic format, stories of a social work faculty member and a student who failed his/her class.

The effectiveness of such gates was mentioned as a concern by two of the participants, who noted that neither formal or informal gates were totally effective in identifying or removing problematic counseling students. There is a significant discussion of the need for effective gates in the literature. Though many acknowledge that gatekeeping is an essential element of the helping professions, Gaubatz and Vera (2002) found that existing policies and procedures were not always effective in keeping impaired students from completing their programs. In spite of this finding, Gaubatz and Vera concluded that effective gatekeeping policies and procedures, when they occur, do improve the quality of counseling program graduates.

Every participant mentioned the importance of consulting with others in order to function effectively as a gatekeeper and not make decisions in isolation. All participants indicated that their programs had mechanisms in place to facilitate consultation, such as staff meeting or periodic reviews of student progress. The importance of support from others through the consultation process emerged as an important element in the effective gatekeeping process. Most of the participants indicated that they felt generally supported in their gatekeeping duties by colleagues, departments, and universities. There is

evidence in the literature of the process of making gatekeeping decisions by involving others, by consulting. Some consults can be positive and productive, but some may be controversial and awkward (Gizara & Forrest, 2004; Younes, 1998). Some educators may try to avoid gatekeeping situations in order to not involve their colleagues (Bernak et al., 1999). These experiences, though, were not reflected in the stories of any of my participants.

Some of the participants discussed efforts their departments are making which are directed at improving gatekeeping policies, efforts, and procedures. These include refining a professional evaluation form in an effort to better quantify the characteristics they felt counseling students should have. Two of the participants, though, admitted the policies and procedures would be more effective if they were followed as they should be and would like to see that change in the future. The literature suggests that there are several areas of gatekeeping where there are ongoing efforts to make improvements. One of these is in the identification of impairment and includes efforts to quantify important skills so that a measure of some kind could determine effectiveness. Litchenberg and Portnoy (2007) acknowledge that there is some difficulty in defining competencies in precise and measurable terms, as well as establishing tools for their assessment. This inability to quantify skills was mentioned by several participants, who expressed frustration that they were unable to measure skills in a valid way.

A second area for improvement is in the area of policies and procedures.



The literature is filled with studies detailing the kinds of policies and procedures which exist in various counseling departments as well as how effective these are. Tam and Kwok (2007), in their study of gatekeeping in the field of social work, identified arguments that support gatekeeping policies. Gaubatz and Vera (2002) found that formalized gatekeeping procedures, along with program-wide training standards, resulted in more efficient screening of deficient trainees. But not all programs have policies or procedures which function as part of the gatekeeping process. Barlow and Coleman (2003) identified the lack of policies and guidelines for managing failing and problematic trainees in practicum as well as in classroom settings in social work programs in Canada.

The second theme involved challenges of gatekeeping. This theme included the sub themes of impairment issues (including type and identification), interventions (informal, formal, and workplace), the developmental process which includes the support/challenge dichotomy, the issue of grades versus skills, legal concerns, individual styles of gatekeepers, and perceptions from the institution which includes pressures to gatekeep, “rocking the boat”, conflicts in gatekeeping (power issues and discomfort), and confidentiality concerns of being a study participant.

Much of the literature does show that there were indeed challenges to being a gatekeeper. Although qualitative studies on the experiences of gatekeepers is limited, Grady (2009) utilized an ethnographic format and presented the story of one social work faculty member and one student which

provided a glimpse into the issues and stresses involved in gatekeeping process from both sides. Keri and Eichler (2005) identified factors that inhibit gatekeeping such as fear of retribution, loss, or damage to reputation. Participants in their study voiced feelings of denial, lower feelings of entitlement, self-blame, and reduced feelings of control. A qualitative study on the effects of the termination process on supervisors and students found that students and supervisors alike experienced trauma because of the termination process and were equally in need of institutional support during and after this process (Smaby, 2005). Though none of my participants indicated this level of challenge in their gatekeeping experiences, it is likely that more in-depth interviewing might have uncovered deeper reactions to some of the challenges they discussed.

The issue of impairment, of not being able to function successfully as either a counseling student or a future counseling professional, is central to the practice of gatekeeping. All the participants identified specific student issues that impacted counseling students' performance in school or potential counselors in the field. They all shared numerous cases of students they have identified over the years as having potential impairment issues that might affect their functioning in the field. These problematic behaviors included lack of skills, personal issues, and behavioral issues. Four participants, in particular, identified students who had problems with interpersonal skills, boundary issues, ethical problems, and attempts at avoiding clients. Three participants discussed students who had significant enough problems in their personal lives that it impacted their functioning as students and potentially as future counselors.

The identification of impairment issues involved the process by which the participants considered problematic current or future behaviors. Four participants discussed the unquantifiable/non-scientific ways they identify impairment in their students, including “spider senses” and “red flags”. Most of the participants, at one time or another during the interviews, spoke of the inability to quantify impairment issues in order to better identify them. One of the participants noted that sometimes an identified impairment issue might be a developmental issue or an issue of different human expression and personality and that gatekeepers need to keep that in mind. There is general agreement in the research concerning the need to identify areas of impairment (Sheffield, 1998; Emerson, 1996; Halinski, 2009), but counselor educators have not yet identified an adequate means of predicting which applicants will or will not be successful in counseling programs or become effective professionals (Sheffield, 1998). This highlights the critical nature of gatekeeping as a mechanism for identification of those persons in the field, or preparing for the field, who are not suitable to enter practice.

Interventions can be defined as attempts to alter the course of a student's progress in a counseling program. Informal, formal, and workplace interventions were discussed. Informal interventions involve student meetings to help keep a student or to separate a student from the program. Many of them indicated that they rarely have to utilize the formal interventions processes because they work one on one with the problematic student to resolve whatever the issues might be. Though not directly seen in the literature, examples given by numerous authors

indicate that there are generally concerted efforts to work individually with students at some point in the gatekeeping process (Gizare & Forrest, 2004; Keri & Eichler, 2005).

Formal interventions are written policies and procedures to intervene and/or remove problematic students. The majority of the participants indicated that they and their programs utilize these formal interventions if informal interventions fail. The literature discusses the use of formal interventions to keep students in the program and improve their functioning, or if need be, remove them from a program. Gaubatz and Vera (2002) studied various formal interventions and found that formalized gatekeeping procedures, along with program-wide training standards, resulted in more efficient screening of deficient trainees.

Another type of intervention that emerged is letting the workplace remove impaired counselors from the field. All the counselor educators recommend that the school should take care of impaired counselors through the gatekeeping process, although at times, a problematic student enters the workplace with the assumption that the person will be removed from the position eventually. All the participants who mentioned workplace interventions were not in favor of letting the field weed counselors out since much harm can occur to clients who interact with impaired professionals. The issue of allowing the field itself to “weed out” impaired students or counselors is discussed in the literature. In Barlow’s 2003 study of social work programs in Canada, he found that four of the schools that

did not have any policies indicated that the best way to weed students out of the field was through their performance in practicum. Lamb (1987) acknowledged that there has been little done regarding how to deal with impairment early in the professional career and that a pre-doctoral internship is a critical stage in which to assess and deal with impairment.

Four of the participants acknowledged the reality of the developmental process as students naturally mature as they go through the program. During the process, they may make mistakes due to lack of experience and immaturity, but in time, they will grow up and mature. There were some indications in the literature concerning the reality of a developmental process with some counseling students. Moore and Urwin (1990) noted that one of the most identifiable student problems is lack of maturity. Bowles (2009) noted that counselor impairment occurs during the training stage and that there is a need to educate counseling students about impairment issues and wellness strategies so they can deal better with those issues as they progress through their program and mature more fully. He further indicated that strengthening or restructuring while supporting the efforts and growth of their students is essential (Bowles, 2009).

Participants noted that it is important to stick with students during this process, providing guidance and support. Sticking with the student involves two potentially conflicting duties of counselor educator gatekeepers: (1) providing support for students as well as (2) challenging their thoughts and behaviors.

Participants noted that being supportive as well as challenging counseling students is basically part of the job, but several acknowledged difficulty since the counseling profession is more about support and encouragement and often times their training as counselor educators does not involve the disciplinary aspect of their work as gatekeepers. Zoimek-Daigle (2005) addressed the belief that support and encouragement are important elements of the counselor educator-student relationship, whereas challenge and criticism may be more difficult to do.

Another challenge that participants noted is the ability of some students to have adequate grades in their coursework, but not the skills necessary to become an effective counselor. Participants stressed the fact that while grades are easily quantified, counseling skills may not be, making some skills difficult if not impossible to measure. Three participants told stories of students who did well academically but whose skills were lacking; they also expressed frustration at not being able to have a way to quantify those skills in order to remove those students from the program. There seems to be a general consensus that this is a significant concern because students could graduate from the program and enter the workplace with less than adequate or effective skills. There is quite a dialogue in the literature about the issue of grades versus skills. Moore and Urwin (1990) acknowledged that students who are either strong or weak in both academic and non-academic criteria present few challenges to the gatekeeping function. However, academically borderline students who have strong practice abilities and professional values, or academically outstanding students with unsatisfactory field performance, present a "gatekeeping dilemma" (p.123).

Often, skill levels cannot be quantified in the same ways that grades can. There is some difficulty in defining competencies in precise and measurable terms, as well as establishing tools for their assessment (Litchenberg & Portnoy, 2007).

Participants were also concerned with the potential legal action or lawsuits from dismissed students. Two of the five participants stated that they were not really concerned about legal challenges as long as they did what they felt was right. On the other hand, three participants shared stories of colleagues who had been sued and how that affected their gatekeeping performances in the future. Cole (1991) acknowledged the importance of program staff being well versed in the legal aspects of gatekeeping and indicated that following established policies should reduce the risk of legal problems for programs and staff but also that the most effective means of reducing the risk of liability is maintaining harmonious faculty-student relationships.

Most of the participants had experiences with other gatekeepers and noticed differences in approaches and outlook based on the gatekeeper's personality and length of time in the role. Two participants said they knew colleagues who did not see gatekeeping as part of their role as counselor educators and rarely involved themselves in gatekeeping duties in order to avoid conflict situations. Three participants knew of colleagues who seemed to be too punitive in their decisions and attributed that to their colleagues' personalities. One participant said that he saw some correlation between personality type and type of decision making. Three participants also noted that the length of time in

the field or length of time involved in gatekeeping duties was important. The consensus appeared to be that the greater the length of time in the role, the easier the gatekeeping became as time went on. The literature indicates that there are indeed different styles of gatekeeping, based on a variety of reasons and possibly a combination of reasons. Campbell (2010) examined the attitudes and beliefs of counselor educators toward gatekeeping and at which gates which type of staff (i.e., full-time faculty and field supervisors) was strictest. She found that full time faculty with many prior years of experience as counselor educators made less stringent gatekeeping decisions.

Participants discussed how gatekeeping is perceived within their departments. Perceptions from the institution includes pressures to gatekeep, "rocking the boat," conflicts in gatekeeping (power issues and discomfort), and confidentiality concerns of being a study participant. None of the participants indicated that their departments apply any pressure to perform their gatekeeping functions. Actually the opposite was seen, with all the participants indicating that they simply saw gatekeeping as part of their jobs, that is was necessary though a few said they would like to avoid it if they could. Two of the participants admitted that they knew colleagues who at times tried to avoid gatekeeping duties. There was no direct evidence in the literature that there is sometimes pressure exerted on counselor gatekeepers to perform these duties, though gatekeeping itself was often acknowledged as part of the job (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 2008; Moore, 1991). But there was evidence that some people in the gatekeeping position either do not support the practice or do not always



participate in the practice. Tam and Kwok (2007) discussed that there is some controversy surrounding the practice of gatekeeping, including that it promotes elitism by maintaining a monopoly on who can and cannot enter the field.

“Rocking the boat” is a theme noted among several participants. I define this as faculty doing something to cause trouble where none is wanted or to disturbing a situation that others feel is satisfactory. Participants expressed varying experiences with this phenomenon. Three participants were very clear that they do not have any concerns about this at their universities and one even expressed surprise that it should be an issue at all. On the other hand, three participants recounted experiences that resulted in negative reactions when an issue they felt was important was brought up. The literature does address reactions from others as being one of the consequences experienced by gatekeepers. Legal issues, already addressed, can be framed as reactions from others, either the student involved or the university. Tam (2005) found that gatekeeping in the field of social work is controversial and that some field instructors are reluctant to fail an inadequate student, as other research has confirmed. This reluctance, she feels, can be in part due to either the reality that their department do not support gatekeeping efforts, or the perception that they will not support such efforts.

Participants further expanded on the struggles, conflict, or disagreements within the department over gatekeeping issues. Two participants explained these in terms of organizational issues, personality differences, or power differentials.

One spoke of the cause being a disagreement over where there is a developmental aspect to students' problematic behaviors. Another participant discussed at some length her experiences with discomfort and conflict as a gatekeeper, due to perceived lack of support from her department. The literature did not directly address the issue of power struggles in the gatekeeping process, but the root causes of it might be found in some important issues that were found in the research. First, agreement or lack thereof, on the importance of gatekeeping; in spite of its long history and critical importance in the helping professions, the literature provides examples of professionals who support the practice, as well as those who have criticisms (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam & Kwok, 2007). Another issue may be the difficulty in defining "impairment" and in quantifying it. Differences of opinion often lead to conflict. And researchers have shown that counselor educators have not yet identified an adequate means of predicting which applicants will or will not be successful in counseling programs or become effective professionals (Sheffield, 1998). Studies by Bradey and Post (1991), Gizara (1997) and Vacha-Haase (1995) all found that disagreement among faculty and/or supervisors about what constituted inadequacy or impairment was a major barrier in addressing impaired trainees.

An additional challenge that participants expressed was being identified either by their institution or colleagues as being a part of this study. One participant had such serious concerns that she asked to closely examine the transcript before allowing her statements to be included. Another participant shed some light on why there is a concern among some people to be identified with a

study of this nature, saying that university communities were generally fairly small and that making negative comments might impact current or future employment. Nothing directly related to this concern was identified in the literature, but it is often a concern of study participants in general. It also may be tied into concerns with rocking the boat, which was discussed earlier. This researcher felt, though, that it was important enough to include this issue in the study in order to examine it more closely. The loss of some demographic information from the participants did limit the description of them, resulting in not as full a picture as was hoped for.

### Limitations

There were several notable limitations to this study. First is the small sample size ( $n=9$ ), though there were numerous efforts to increase the sample size. Of the 33 PhD counselor educators contacted, only nine followed through with the first interview; a sample of 10-12 had been hoped for. Another limitation is the fact that of the nine original participants in the first round of interviews, only six participated in the second round. In addition, three rounds of interviews had been planned, but only two were actually held, as all six in the second round indicated that they did not have any more information to add. So in the end, the hoped for sample size and number of interviews limited the amount of information obtained.

A second limitation was the inability to use most of the demographic information that could be obtained about the participants. Several of the

participants were extremely concerned about any identifiers about them, their university or their departments appearing in the study. This was due, it is assumed, to some negative comments made about their experiences as gatekeepers in their specific departments. They were assured that all information would be removed and a copy of the transcript (edited) was emailed to one of the most concerned participants. This researcher does understand the situation, having worked in several places where saying anything negative could result in either pressure or sanctions. But for this research project, it was a disappointment because it was felt that being able to more fully describe the participants would have resulted in a fuller picture of who said what, and maybe why. There would not doubt have been some interesting correlations. But the decision was made to use few identifiers, out of respect for the participants. But it is acknowledged that there was no doubt a loss of valuable information.

### Implications for Future Research

There are several suggestions for future research. The main one would be that more qualitative work be done on the topic of gatekeeping. The stories of the participants in this study provide color and texture to the quantitative picture, flesh to the bones so to speak. Larger samples and participants from around the country would expand the picture of what it is like to be a PhD counselor educator.

It would also be interesting to examine why there were differences between gatekeepers, whether there is a connection between things like

personality type or length of time in the field and gatekeeping practices. The literature and this research show that there are significant differences and understanding the reasons for them could help improve the effectiveness of their efforts.

Though this research and all the literature focuses on the position of the gatekeeper him/herself, it would be interesting to examine the process from the student point of view, what their experiences are of being involved in the gatekeeping process. What happened? What was it like? Was it useful or harmful? This additional facet could well allow for improvements in the process or application of the process, as the final goal is to make sure students leaving counseling programs are effective and competent.

There also needs to be more research and development on instruments that would measure the effectiveness of counseling skills. My participants and well as the literature indicate that there is a level of frustration and concern at not being able to quantify effectiveness. There is acknowledged stress at having to remove problematic students from a program based on less than scientifically developed criteria.

### Summary

The focus of this study was what it is like to do gatekeeping, to be responsible for the quality of counseling students entering the field, to struggle to support impaired students in the hope that they will become effective counselors,

and to ultimately be responsible for terminating impaired students from a counseling program. These shared stories and experiences of gatekeeping by PhD counselor educators will hopefully add to the understanding of the gatekeeping process as well as highlight the impacts on PhD counselor educators. It may also identify areas for change or improvement in gatekeeping policies and procedures, as well as potentially clarifying the need for more departmental and university support for those who perform this most important function.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A  
Old Dominion University IRB Approval



DARDEN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF THE DEAN  
Norfolk, Virginia 23529-0196  
Phone: (757) 683-3938  
Fax: (757) 683-5001

May 13, 2011

Proposal Number 201002084

**Professor McAuliffe:**

Your proposal submission titled, "A Qualitative Study of the Experience of Gatekeeping among PhD Counselor Educators" has been deemed EXEMPT from IRB review by the Human Subjects Review Committee of the Darden College of Education. If any changes occur, especially methodological, notify the Chair of the DCOE HSRC, and supply any required addenda requested of you by the Chair. You may begin your research.

We have approved your request to pursue this proposal indefinitely, provided no modifications occur. Also note that if you are funded externally for this project in the future, you will likely have to submit to the University IRB for their approval as well.

If you have not done so, PRIOR TO THE START OF YOUR STUDY, you must send a signed and dated hardcopy of your exemption application submission to the address below. Thank you.

Edwin Gómez, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Human Subjects Review Committee, DCOE  
Human Movement Studies Department  
Old Dominion University  
2021 Student Recreation Center  
Norfolk, VA 23529-0196  
757-683-6309 (ph)  
757-683-4270 (fx)

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

#### OLD DOMINION UNIVERISTY

**PROJECT TITLE:** A Qualitative Study of the Experience of Gatekeepers Among PhD Counselor Educators

### INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this form are to give you information that may affect your decision whether to say YES or NO to participation in this research, and to record the consent of those who say YES. Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose and benefits of the study and how it will be conducted. This is a study of your experiences as gatekeepers at your university; the interviews will be conducted at a place of your choice, either your office or wherever else you choose.

**RESEARCHER:** Carol Erbes, a graduate student in the Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Va. Department of Counseling and Higher Education.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH STUDY:

The primary purpose and focus of this study will be to describe the experience of gatekeeping impaired counseling students, as seen through the experiences of those who are tasked with this critical job. This will be an in depth study of the gatekeeping practices, experiences and beliefs of ten PhD level counseling education professors at two large universities in the southeastern United States. The goal will be to record and examine the experiences, beliefs, and feelings that surround the performance of gatekeeping functions, paying special attention to how the participants remember it, feel about it and speak about it with colleagues.

If you decide to participate, that participation will last for a period of two weeks during which time three interviews will be conducted. The interviews will be conducted at a place of your own choosing. Approximately nine other PhD counselor educators will be participating in this study.

You have received a brief questionnaire asking you about your experiences as PhD level gatekeepers in your department. This was emailed to you through your school email.

The design protocol calls for a series of three interviews. I will be contacting you personally to arrange a time for the first interview. The questions you have received will be the basis for that interview, but more information will also be welcomed.

The first round of interviews will consist of broad and general questions designed to elicit overall comments on the participants' experiences with and perceptions of gatekeeping. These questions are the ones you have already received and are based on a review of the literature pertaining to gatekeeping. The initial responses will be analyzed and themes determined.

You will then be contacted at a later date and the second round of interviews will be held to help clarify and elaborate on the themes identified from the first round of interviews. It is hoped that new themes may emerge as well and will then be integrated into the study.

Finally, you will be contacted to arrange a third and final interview to obtain your reactions to the themes that have been identified and to solicit any further comments.

### **EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA**

You should have completed the preliminary questionnaire emailed to you. To the best of your knowledge, you should not have anything that would keep you from participating in this study.

### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

**RISKS:** If you decide to participate in this study, you will face no foreseeable risks.

**BENEFITS:** This study is not expected to be of any immediate benefit to you. However, counselor educators and others who perform gatekeeping duties could potentially benefit from this research if it yields results that help them understand better the gatekeeping process and the impact, if any, it has on them as gatekeepers

### **COSTS AND PAYMENTS**

The researchers want your decision about participating in this study to be absolutely voluntary. There will be no compensation for your participation.

### **NEW INFORMATION**

If the researchers find new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will give it to you.



## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The researcher will take every effort to keep private information, such as name and position at the University, confidential. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications; but the researcher will not identify you. Of course, your records may be subpoenaed by court order or inspected by government bodies with oversight authority.

## **WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE**

It is OK for you to say NO. Even if you say YES now, you are free to say NO later, and walk away or withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with Old Dominion University, or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled.

## **COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY**

If you say YES, then your consent in this document does not waive any of your legal rights. However, in the event of harm or injury arising from this study, neither Old Dominion University nor the researchers are able to give you any money, insurance coverage, free medical care, or any other compensation for such injury. In the event that you suffer injury as a result of participation in any research project, you may contact Carol Erbes at 588-4718 or Dr. George Maihafer the current IRB chair at 757-683 4520 at Old Dominion University, who will be glad to review the matter with you.

## **VOLUNTARY CONSENT**

By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, then the researchers should be able to answer them: Carol Erbes at 588-4718 the faculty advisor, Dr. Garrett McAuliffe, Department of Counseling and Higher Education, at telephone number (757) 683-5075.

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should call Dr. George Maihafer, the current IRB chair, at 757 683 4520, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research, at 757 683 3460

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study. The researcher should give you a copy of this form for your records.

Please return the signed Informed Consent Form to Carol Erbes, 6043 BAL (fax 683-5634) by

<b>Subject's Printed Name &amp; Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Witness' Printed Name &amp; Signature (if Applicable)</b>	<b>Date</b>

### **INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT**

I certify that I have explained to this subject the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and any experimental procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws, and promise compliance. I have answered the subject's questions and have encouraged him/her to ask additional questions at any time during the course of this study. I have witnessed the above signature(s) on this consent form.

<b>Investigator's Printed Name &amp; Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
--	-------------

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Guide for the Initial Interview

1. Define gatekeeping for participants
2. Please tell me about your experiences as a gatekeeper.
  1. How you feel about doing it
  2. Some of the cases you recall as being significant
  3. How it has impacted you either positively or negatively
  4. Its importance to them as counselor educators
  5. Challenges
3. Tell me about your understanding of your department's and university's gatekeeping policies and procedures.
  1. Looking for specific policies
  2. If they agree or not with them or some of them
  3. Support from the department/university when implementing them
  4. Any concern for legal repercussions such as lawsuits
4. Challenge/support dichotomy
  1. Feelings about this dual role
  2. Examples of cases
  3. Comfort level in this role
  4. Stressors involved and how they handle them
5. How they identify potentially impaired students
  1. Specific cases and the elements of them
  2. Level of support from department/university in identification process
  3. How they feel about needing to identify impairment issues
  4. How accurate they feel their identification process is
  5. Where are they on a range of gatekeeping (very punitive to not doing it at all)

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Guide for the Follow up Interview

1. I am interested in getting more information on some of the topics you discussed in the first interview we had. Are there any more details you would like to add at this time? Anything that you would like to correct?
2. I would like you to speak about any pressures to gatekeep that you have felt or experienced.
3. Please tell me more about support or lack of support you have felt in your department.
4. Tell me about any experiences you have with what I call "rocking the boat".
5. Is there anything else you can tell me that would help me understand your experiences as gatekeepers?

**APPENDIX E**

## Participant Demographic Questionnaire

In order to better understand you, please indicate the following:

1. Numbers of years as a counselor educator \_\_\_\_\_
2. Number of years as a counselor \_\_\_\_\_
3. Number of years as a supervisor \_\_\_\_\_
4. Your sex \_\_\_\_\_
5. Your age \_\_\_\_\_
6. Your race/ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_
7. Year earned PhD \_\_\_\_\_
8. Credentials other than PhD \_\_\_\_\_

## VITA

Carol Erbes holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology from Kent State University, Master of Arts degrees in sociology and anthropology from Kent State University, and a Master's degree in social work from Norfolk State University. She is also a certified substance abuse counselor (CSAC) and a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW). She has 25+ years of experience in the fields of substance abuse, criminology, and social work. She has taught since 1991 at various universities in the Hampton Roads area, including Old Dominion University, Strayer University, Commonwealth University, Thomas Nelson Community College and St. Leo's University at Langley AFB. She is currently employed as an adjunct instructor at TNCC and St. Leo's, teaching sociology, research, and various other social science courses.