




The Experiences of Counselor Educators Transitioning to Online Teaching

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Abstract

A growing trend in counselor education is to accommodate technological change with more online academic opportunities. Slow to emerge in the counselor education literature is information about how instructors have negotiated the change. This study highlights the experiences of six counselor educators from across the United States who transitioned from teaching counseling courses in the classroom to teaching them online. Four themes of common experience emerged from the data: (a) high expectations and low support from university leaders, (b) limits to transitional enthusiasm among counseling faculty, (c) solutions for transitional success, and (d) support essential for the transition. Results of this study confirm a need for greater attention to the transitional process and increased opportunities for experience and university support.

Keywords: *counselor online education; counselor online teaching; counselor online learning; online education; distance teaching*

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Introduction

Technology has infiltrated many aspects of modern life, including higher education. A growing trend in higher education has been to accommodate technological changes by including more online academic opportunities (Allen et al., 2016; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2018). These opportunities have both intrigued and perplexed many in higher education, including faculty members, who have questioned how they might continue to provide a learning experience for students in online academic settings (Blackmon, 2016; Reamer, 2013). Faculty members often have relatively little experience or training to support their newer online teaching responsibilities and often need assistance to understand how to operate in the online academic environment (Mandernach et al., 2012; Moore, 2014).

Counselor educators are not immune to the influence of technological change, and counselor training programs are continuing to grow an online presence (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision

[ACES], 2016; CACREP, 2018). In common with other scholars in higher education, counselor educators sometimes feel challenged to understand how to use technology to support effective teaching practices and student learning (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). The counseling profession acknowledges the need to stay relevant in an ever-changing society and continues to integrate technological advancements into counselor training strategies (ACES, 2016).

Background

The practice of teaching and learning in higher education is rapidly evolving with the growth of technology. To better understand the development of this evolving academic landscape in the field of counselor education, it might prove helpful to reflect on the foundation of distance education. Also, understanding opportunities and barriers that have evolved with emerging innovative technology might illustrate academic progress as well as provide a roadmap for online counselor education growth.

History

Distance learning began in the early 1800s with correspondence courses delivered by mail (Naidu, 2014). Although innovative for the time and helpful to those who could not physically attend a university, there were limitations to the approach, such as slow mail service and feelings of isolation (Naidu, 2014). Correspondence courses remained an option for many years. During the late 1970s and 1980s, new ideas surrounding distance learning began to emerge with the computer; however, higher education was not significantly influenced by online learning until the expansive development of technology in the 1990s (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). Effective and efficient technological strides increased opportunities for interpersonal engagement in the online academic setting. By the early 2000s, technology offered even more opportunities with the creation of audio and video conferencing and social networking options. Students and teachers were able to engage in a more effective and meaningful way online (Kruger-Gross & Waters, 2013; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Although it is clear the educational landscape is changing due to technological innovations, what remains unclear is how have higher education and, specifically, counselor education programs embraced and effectively uses these evolving online academic practices (ACES, 2016).

By the late 1970s, researchers in counseling were seeking strategies to incorporate emerging technologies into counseling services (ACES, 2016). By 2005, the American Counseling Association (ACA) had added Standard A.12 for distance counseling to its ethical guidelines expanding the use of technology for research, recording keeping, and counseling services (Glosoff & Kocet, 2006). By 2014, the ACA Code of Ethics offered even more guidance in section H surrounding the proper use of technology in the counseling profession, especially when considering professional boundaries, appropriate applications, and limitations (Trepal et al., 2007). Evidence of online academic acceptance in the counseling profession was substantiated when CACREP (2018) required that emerging counselor educators in doctoral programs have the opportunity to develop effective approaches for online teaching. The CACREP board also extended accreditation to several fully online counselor training programs (CACREP, 2018). To stay on the edge of academic development, the counseling profession has demonstrated an openness to technological change.

Teaching Environments

To better conceptualize the current climate of educational delivery in counselor education, it is essential to understand the various teaching environments used by counselor education programs. Counselor educators deliver content in a face-to-face, hybrid, or online setting (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). They offer face-to-face instruction in a traditional, land-based environment. This approach provides a comfortable and predictable pattern of instruction (Dockter, 2016), but it can lead to more passive forms of student learning (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Kearns, 2016; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Hybrid instruction in counseling courses combines face-

to-face and online academic practices. Moran and Milsom (2015) sought to understand how counseling students experienced a hybrid course and found that students felt more engaged with independent learning but appreciated the reinforcement of the classroom setting. The disadvantages of the hybrid process included slower feedback online and increased preparation time for instructors (Moran & Milsom, 2015). Fully online courses are becoming more common in counselor education, and similar to the other delivery methods present both opportunities and challenges (ACES, 2016). A common benefit of online learning noted in the literature is that it is often more student-centered and requires active student engagement, which is an evidence-based practices in counselor education (Malott et al., 2014). A challenge is that communication seen as more difficult and time consuming (Limperos et al., 2015; Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2013).

Currently, online courses in counselor education programs are delivered through platforms such as Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). Communication in online courses most often occurs using asynchronous, synchronous, or a combination of both methods of instruction, which helps to meet a variety of learning needs (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Tang & Lam, 2012). Asynchronous teaching involves communication that happens at different times; examples include e-mail and discussion boards (ACES Technology Interest Network, 2017). This method allows students time to thoughtfully share information in discussions, which can stimulate critical thinking and scaffold knowledge (Lindsey & Rice, 2015; Trepal et al., 2007). Synchronous teaching involves communication that happens at the same time, such as video conferencing or telephone calls (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). Some benefits of synchronous forms of engagement such as the use of video technology tools include the chance for more immediate responses, social interactions, and nonverbal cues (Trepal et al., 2007). This more direct form of interaction could also reduce the chances of miscommunication, feelings of isolation, and frustration that surround the online educational experience (Bridges & Frazier, 2018).

Best Practices in Online Counselor Education

Although limited literature is available to understand technology in counselor education, ACES Technology Interest Network (2017) provided guidelines specifically related to the developing quality online courses. Among best practices identified in the literature are the need for effective communication, feedback, connection, and ethical practice (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Malott et al., 2014). Communication is a key factor for promoting learning in counselor education courses, especially clarity and the meaningful use of language (Dixon, 2014; Limperos et al., 2015; Malott et al., 2014). According to Trepal et al. (2007), counselors must consider their unique use of language to effectively convey thoughts, feelings, and nonverbal behaviors online. Consistent, timely, and detailed feedback are an effective teaching practice across all academic settings but are especially needed in the online academic environment (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Garratt-Reed et al., 2016; Malott et al., 2014). Connection is another key to an effective experience. Bridges and Frazier (2018) explained that meaningful relational dynamics between instructors and students require positive and consistent interactions through various teaching, mentoring, researching, and supervision interactions. Malott et al. (2014) noted that simple practices, such as connecting with students outside of class, calling students by name, using affirming comments, and inviting responses all encourage relationship.

Using online modalities in counselor education invites unique ethical challenges, and the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics states explicitly that educators are only to use technology if they are competent with it. The ACA Code of Ethics considers the development of technological knowledge and skills to be an ethical obligation for those in the counseling profession. Remaining aware of potential ethical issues when using technology is imperative, and sometimes instructors do not know how to help students understand and access it (Sampson & Makela, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2016; Trepal et al., 2007). The Code of Ethics also considers the potential problems of confidentiality and privacy in the online academic setting. The potential for others to overhear, observe, or even obtain access to online academic work puts a student's sense of privacy and right to confidentiality at risk

(Sampson & Makela, 2014). Instructors must continually seek best measures to ensure the integrity of the online academic setting (Bridges & Frazier, 2018).

Developing quality online courses requires training. The value of guidance in best practices for online teaching highlights the need for educators to understand how to communicate and connect ethically with students online. Training is a critical step in the process of effectively integrating online learning into counselor education programs (ACES, 2016; Blackmon, 2016; Mandernach et al., 2012).

Evolving Perceptions of Students and Faculty

Traditionally, faculty have adhered to developed patterns of land-based instructional practice. But scholars are now challenged to consider expanding their pedagogical styles to include teaching methods that are informed by the ways academic content is delivered online (Hockridge, 2013; Mandernach et al., 2012; Wasik et al., 2019). Defining the online academic experience includes using courses that typically deliver 80% or more of educational content through a technology-based platform (Allen et al., 2016; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Such courses require that educators use a unique pedagogical style that is both synchronous and asynchronous (ACES Technology Interest Network, 2017; Limperos et al., 2015).

Support for including online learning in higher education is growing. More than 33% of all university students are now taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Blackmon, 2016; Mandernach et al., 2012). In an age where higher education is becoming expected for career advancement, online learning benefits nontraditional students as well as underserved populations. Academic options online provide opportunities for individuals who might otherwise be unable to participate in higher education due to family, work, or geographic constraints (Smith et al., 2015; Snow et al., 2018). Along with greater student support, many university administrators also see value in online learning opportunities. They acknowledge that online courses provide avenues for broader geographic reach, increased enrollment, and greater economic gain (Baack et al., 2016).

Although research suggests that support for online academic practices is growing in higher education, some stakeholders have been hesitant to fully embrace the value of online academic methods and often question the rigor and integrity of the approach (Baack et al., 2016; Karl & Peluchette, 2013; Reamer, 2013; Snow et al., 2018). Blackmon (2016) wrote that, in 2012, over half of the faculty members in higher education nationwide felt uncomfortable with the idea of online teaching and considered the practice a radical transformation of the academic experience. Allen et al. (2016) found that only 29.1% of university leaders nationwide believed their faculty members accepted the legitimacy of online academic practices. Research is just beginning to emerge that acknowledges the rigor and integrity of the online approach. Holmes and Reid (2017) conducted a pretest/posttest study on both the classroom and online versions of a research methods course taught in a counselor education program. They found no significant difference in learning outcomes between the classroom and online teaching modalities (Holmes & Reid, 2017). While this study highlights the efficacy of online academic practices, more research is needed to fully understand how the learning experiences compare.

The resistance to online teaching among faculty members in higher education is based on comfort with traditional academic practices, the acceptance of broad assumptions about their inferiority of online teaching methods (Blackmon, 2016; Karl & Peluchette, 2013; Reamer, 2013; Urofsky, 2013), and, among faculty members who lacked training in online academic practices, a fear of the unknown (Blackmon, 2016; Smith et al., 2015). Without proper training, faculty members have limited understanding of how to develop and deliver content in online modalities. Sword (2012) supported this finding in a study with nursing faculty members. Nursing faculty reported that they were often asked to transition from land-based to online courses with no previous experience or training in online instructional methods, leaving them lacking confidence in

their online teaching approach (Sword, 2012). This lack of confidence is a problem, as many land-based university programs, including counselor education, are now incorporating online courses at an increasing rate (Allen & Seaman, 2016; CACREP, 2018). When considering the transition from land-based to online teaching, researchers across various disciplines in higher education have suggested that faculty members need training, experience, and institutional support to help rethink pedagogy and make a successful transition (Blackmon, 2016; Mandernach et al., 2012; Moore, 2014; Wasik et al., 2019).

To continue to understand how counselor educators might accommodate technology while providing a rigorous and meaningful learning experience for counseling students, it is helpful to explore the experiences of counselor educators who have already transitioned from classroom to online teaching. Research on the experiences of counselor educators who have made the transition could support faculty members who want to include online teaching skills in their academic practice. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of faculty members who had transitioned from teaching land-based counselor education courses to online courses.

Method

We used a transcendental phenomenological approach to guide this exploration into the transitional experience of counselor educators who had moved from land-based to online academic settings. Husserl (1931) described this philosophical perspective as knowledge coming from the meaning of human experience. Using this approach, we bracketed any prejudgments or personal perceptions to ensure the collection of uncontaminated information (Husserl, 1931). We focused on participants' experiences of transitioning to online instruction. From their structural and textual descriptions, patterns emerged and offered themes of common perceptions that culminated in the essence of the transitional process (see Husserl, 1931).

Sampling Strategy

To ensure rich descriptions of meaningful experiences, we used purposive sampling to recruit well-qualified, homogenous interviewees (Cleary et al., 2014). Selected participants had direct experience with the phenomenon to ensure relevant and rich information (Giorgi, 2009). Criteria for participation included only faculty members who (a) were currently teaching at least one online counselor education course, (b) had prior experience teaching land-based counselor education courses, and (c) represented a college or university with less than 2,500 online students. This study focused on smaller universities because individuals at these universities were found the most resistant to online academic practices (Allen et al., 2016). Narrowing the sample to this population was meaningful, as faculty members meeting these criteria provided the most relevant information to address the research question. We recruited six participants from five different counselor education programs across the United States. Recruitment for this study concluded when saturation was reached, and no new themes emerged from the data.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study came from semistructured, face-to-face individual interviews with faculty members who were currently teaching online in counseling programs but had also taught in a land-based classroom setting. Interviews were primarily held in person or via Skype video conference. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a systematic procedure of conducting, recording, saving, and transcribing the interview, and then member checking the data to ensure its accuracy (Giorgi, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The information collected in this qualitative research was fluid, making it difficult to ensure the validity and reliability of the results. To mitigate this difficulty, we employed various strategies to establish

trustworthiness, including triangulation, informed consent, and carefully outlined processes for data collection and analysis (see Shelton & Bridges, 2019).

For analysis, we used Giorgi's (2012) systematic process of data reduction and began with a careful review of the transcript language to get a sense of the whole interview experience. Next, we returned to the beginning of the data to reread the descriptions of experience at a more methodical pace. During this stage, we established units of meaning by marking every shift in meaning found in the data (see Giorgi, 2012). In this third step, we returned to the beginning of the data and considered each of these meaning units through a more psychological lens (Giorgi, 2009). This step required a psychological attitude and more time for dwelling on the data beyond the surface of the information to draw out the deeper meaning (Finlay, 2014; Giorgi, 2009). Husserl's (1931) process of free imaginative variation helped during this transformation stage as we framed the wording of each unit in a manner that aligned with the purest psychological sense of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). We repeated this data analysis process until all meaning units were discovered and transformed in a manner that highlighted the collective faculty member experience (Giorgi, 2009).

Results

Four themes emerged from this study: (a) high expectations and low support from university leaders, (b) limits to enthusiasm during the transition among counseling faculty, (c) solutions for transitional success, and (d) support for the counselor educator's transition. Counselor educators said that they felt high expectations but often low levels of support when trying to move from land-based to online teaching. These conditions often led to a lack of enthusiasm among those faculty members who found themselves presented with challenges when trying to teach counselors online. With time and experience, counselor educators gained some clarity and developed innovative solutions to enhance their teaching and connecting with students online. However, even with more understanding of online methods, there was a common desire to continue learning about becoming an effective online counselor educator (Hale, 2018). Overall, participants felt that support during the entire transitional process was essential.

Theme 1: High Expectations and Low Support From University Leaders

When reflecting on the transition from land-based to online teaching, most of the respondents described high, mostly uninformed expectations from institutional leaders coupled with low support to help navigate their transitional process. For example, two of the participants explained that their university leaders wanted to move from no online courses to a fully online program by the end of the year. However, beyond this more extreme example, all six participants in this study echoed these high expectations to quickly accommodate technological change and offer courses online. Many of the participants felt that institutional leaders perceived the transition to online teaching as easy and without extensive modifications to accommodate the new academic setting.

Lack of experience and support

Along with the pressure to quickly accommodate online teaching, five of the six instructors expressed a lack of experience and support to help with their transition. Participant 2 explained, "We do what a lot of schools do, we put the plane in the air, and then we finish building." Participant 1 noted, "Few of them [instructors] had ever even done online at all; had never touched it; didn't have a framework for it and were having to just adapt their own ideas to online." All six participants in various ways described their start to online teaching as being "thrown in" to the process with a "trial and error" type of strategy to figure out how to best connect with students and teach online. When reflecting on their experiences with online education over time, four of the six participants felt that support for online teaching was getting better at their institutions. Participant 3 explained,

They've actually had to take a step back and say "Okay, we're going to do this a little more slowly than we first told you all." They realized that this is a whole different ball game for people who aren't comfortable with technology. This is going to be a lot different in how you teach and how you grade. There's going to be a lot more reading. There's going to be a lot more feedback needed and that kind of thing.

All six participants acknowledged that online education was still a new phenomenon and that the development of quality online programs was a continual learning process for all involved.

Theme 2: Limits to Transitional Enthusiasm Among Counseling Faculty

All six participants suggested barriers that impeded their transitional enthusiasm. In other words, the participants reported that, due to barriers, they were not fully invested in the process of moving to online instruction. Barriers identified by the participants included feeling a lack of authenticity in the online format, a lack of student connection, and cumbersome teaching practices.

A lack of authenticity online

When considering what counselor educators lost in the online setting, most identified authentic communication was often missing from their online course. Participant 4 explained, "Our field values transparency, values disclosure, realness. And online, you never know if you're getting that." Professors were concerned that students might not present themselves authentically online. Participants also described themselves as lacking authenticity in the online format. Participant 4 explained,

I have had students tell me that I'm a little harsher, a bit more difficult online. I guess, in a way, I'm more disciplined online, whereas in class, I can probably be more myself. I don't have to hide behind a kind of professional facade in class, whereas I think online that kind of comes with it. For example, I don't use a lot of humor online because it could be misinterpreted. When people read stuff, they can interpret things in different ways. In a classroom, when I use humor or sarcasm to make a point, students know that I am kidding, whereas, if I try to use sarcasm in a forum, it might get me into a lot of trouble.

This quote aptly describes how one professor found a way in the online format to structure presence to the students. However, all the participants expressed a feeling of inauthenticity when teaching online.

Problems connecting with students online

Establishing an interpersonal connection was a considerable challenge noted by all six participants. Participant two suggested, "We have exchanged access for intimacy. I have people all over the world in all these different countries, but the intimacy is just not there." When trying to engage students in learning online, professors were many times dissatisfied. Participant 3 explained:

They [students] were all working professionals with busy lives. They didn't have a lot of extra time, so sometimes they would see things as extra when I feel like they're an important part of counselor training. You're not just learning facts in counselor education; you're learning how to be with people. They just weren't going to post any more than they had to.

Participants perceived a less than enthusiastic engagement among online students. They all expressed a genuine desire to draw students into the learning process and were frustrated when their natural engaging styles seemed limited through online connection.

Teaching practices that were cumbersome online

All six participants reported that it was difficult to know if they were adequately teaching the course content online and expressed concern over the fit of online counseling courses, especially when it came to assessing character and teaching counseling skills. Participant 2 explained,

One of the hardest things it seems about not interacting online in an intimate fashion is it becomes much more difficult to develop character and skills. We've got to learn how to do this. Otherwise, we will pretty soon give up lots and lots of techniques and knowledge.

Participant 4 agreed with this line of thinking:

On-ground they have exposure to us, to the counseling center, and the therapeutic community. You don't get that [modeling] as much online, which makes them greener. Students don't get the interpersonal, the intangible aspects of counseling, and that's kind of hard to teach online.

Participant 5 summed it up with a question, "How do I meet the needs of my students online?" Most participants echoed this concern, perceiving that their freedom to develop and deliver content online in a meaningful way was limited.

Theme 3: Solutions for Transitional Success for Counseling Faculty

All six participants tried to understand how to make their online courses rich and meaningful. All reported that helpful online teaching strategies were emerging. Participants spoke to strategies that fell under into two primary and interrelated categories: improvement in their ability to establish online student engagement and connection and ways to enhance student learning.

Intentional engagement and connection

The word "intentional" seemed to resonate with most participants when discussing online connection. All six participants explained that instructors must think about how to build a relationship with their students online, and that connection was an essential part of the counselor education process. When discussing this online student–instructor connection, Participant 1 explained,

I have students say all the time: "I feel so much more connected to my faculty in my online master's program than I did in my bachelor's program on-ground ever." It's just intentionality. It's incorporating more ways to connect, to see each other, to hear each other.

Several participants explained that just as instructors must reach out and connect with students in the classroom, they must take on the responsibility of connecting with their students online. They discussed how they make this connection happen in the online format with strategies like (a) engaging students in discussions, (b) communicating openness, (c) creating a personal connection, and (d) showing more humanity. Participants noticed that the more they intentionally engaged with students the more students seemed to engage with them and the online experience. Participants reported working to initiate connection through discussion boards, e-mail, phone calls, or video chats, and inviting students to reciprocate. Participants also described the importance of creating an online environment where students felt that communication was not a bother but a welcomed endeavor to forward learning.

Several of the professors also discussed their process of establishing a more authentic connection with students online. Participant 5 spoke to forming a human connection in the online environment:

One of the things that I would do was schedule video conferences periodically throughout the semester, like office hours, if I was at a land-based program. They can come and kind of ask questions.

Then every week, I would always do a really brief minute and a half maybe even two-minute video introduction to the course just because for me, as a student, I liked that face-to-face connection. So from the educator's standpoint, I thought, let me try to develop that personal connection the best way that I could, and I think it really does help in the online environment.

When considering authenticity in the online setting, Participant 5 also mentioned that counselor educators must not be afraid to "let their personality shine" in the online environment and said,

I think when you get people laughing together, it reduces their defense mechanism, and it normalizes the environment. It's so much easier to include humor in a classroom, but I can't lose who I am in an online world. So, I think I include more humor in my video introductions every week.

Precise strategies included holding virtual office hours, starting each week of the course with a short video about the week's content, and incorporating humor into the course on a regular basis. With these strategies, participants experienced an increase in student connection that led to more meaningful learning.

Helping students learn online

Four participants also offered strategies for helping students learn online, including (a) fostering critical thinking through questioning, (b) planning and clarity, (c) maintaining consistency, and (d) modeling. When considering how to inspire critical thinking, Participant 2 explained,

It's just like counseling. It's all about the question you ask. In my mind, counseling is not great answers or great thoughts; it's asking an appropriate question at an appropriate time. I think I taught my third or fourth online course before I really got that.

Clarity was also an important strategy in the online setting. Several professors explained that they used video conferencing to enhance clarity of concepts. To further enhance clarity of expectations, participants also referred to maintaining consistency by repeating important information in several ways, such as communicating in the syllabus, announcements, and course descriptions.

A final strategy was finding ways to creatively model counseling behaviors for online students. These professors believed that modeling happened through the language used online and the intentional connection process. For example, Participant 5 suggested, "Periodically, I will say, 'Okay, this week I took some time for my own self-care, and I want you to take five minutes to do something for yourself over this next week.'" All six participants acknowledged that connecting with students and fostering learning were more challenging and time-consuming in the online setting, and they all acknowledged still being in the process of growing in their understanding of effective online teaching.

Theme 4: Support Essential for the Counselor Educator's Transition

Participants agreed on the need for greater support of counselor educators in navigating the transition. Support was conceptualized as external, from profession and institution, and internal, from a personal place.

Support at the personal level

Several participants explained that if intrinsic motivation and internal support for online education were missing for the counselor educator, the instructor could struggle. Participant one referred to online teaching as a "challenge" and stated, "That doesn't mean it's impossible, but you have to be flexible enough to change the way you do things and to rethink and be open." Participant 1 suggested,

If you just take ownership of it and realize that it matters, it creates more confident faculty. Faculty who are engaging with their students from the knowledge and heart of it being done well and with good quality are more confident. It takes a belief that it can be done that way.

In other words, a core source of support which was required to make a successful transition, according to participants was the personal motivation to reconceptualize what it means to teach and what a classroom is.

Support at the professional level

Most of the participants believed that more support for online counselor education was needed at the professional level. Participant 1 said,

I think that there is still a lot of disparity in people saying online programs are not good enough, and as a whole, we need to hold our own field accountable to support the decisions that our field has made to include online learning.

Participant 4 said, “It’s like okay, this is what we’ve decided to have, so how are we going to do it well so that we can help our students?” When considering what counselor educators might need from their profession to support effective online teaching, three of the six participants said it would be helpful to pay more attention to standards and models for best online teaching practices in counselor education. Some professors suggested refining CACREP standards for online programs. For example, Participant 4 said,

A problem is that there’s [online] programs that don’t have any residential requirements, and students just flock to those. We never know how those students are going to do in the field. I think that CACREP should probably step up and say, “Hey, if you’re totally online, fine, but you need to have some residential requirements.” What will those be?

When thinking of gatekeeping, three of the six participants supported the need to consider a hybrid experience as standard for online counselor education. For example, Participant 4 said,

You can do a lot of damage in this field and really hurt people emotionally and psychologically. So, it’s a hazardous profession both for us and for the client. I think it takes us, as gatekeepers, as best....we can, to be responsible and make sure these students are interpersonally, emotionally, and psychologically ready, or as ready as they can be for this field.

Thus, counselor educators continue to seek support at the professional level to more productively align counselor education standards with professional practice in the field.

Support at the institutional level

All six participants felt that support for the transition to online teaching was critical at the institutional level. Support for online teaching produced ideas such as (a) experiencing online courses, (b) mentorship, and (c) creating common platforms for sharing information.

Four of the six participants had taken an online course at some point in their undergraduate or graduate training. All six participants endorsed being an online student as helpful in understanding how to be a good online instructor. Participant one suggested that the profession might benefit from making online teaching and learning a graduate coursework requirement: “I think that teaching online should be completely integrated into counselor education classes as a standard, knowing that this is the trend and something we’re all going to have to be competent in.”

The most prevailing idea that resonated with all six participants was the need for mentorship. Every participant described a type of passive mentoring experience in their transition and expressed a deep desire for a more interactive and intentional mentoring. A good mentor was described by Participant 4:

A professor who has taught a lot of online classes and can kind of guide a person who is just getting into it. “Let me help you. What kind of questions do you have? Let me come to your office and actually watch you do this. Let me tell you what I do for that kind of thing.”

Participant 2 suggested a common platform for counselor educators to share information:

Most of us are operating off a blank slate or a residential slate. We need to create a place where counseling professionals can share what they’ve been doing, best practice, or even the syllabus. We can’t compete with each other. We can learn to teach each other and grow together when you say, “That’s a great idea, never thought about that before,” or “That’s a really bad idea. I need to make sure I don’t do that.” We need to see something modeled.

Just as participants identified modeling clinical standards to students to enhance student learning, participants showed that they were learning as they transitioned to online instruction and stated that the institution should formally mentor and prepare faculty to teach online.

Discussion

Participants in counselor education recognized that online learning is a process that seems here to stay. They acknowledged that online courses are attractive to universities because such courses widen the geographic reach and increase enrollment (Baack et al., 2016). In concordance with Allen and Seaman (2014), participants also noted that institutions choosing not to include online options may struggle in the future because students may gravitate toward schools with more convenient online opportunities.

Participants in this study all found the transition to online teaching a challenge. Many perceived that their institutions had high hopes for a quick transition to online academics. But instructors were slower to understand the transition because they still wondered how to teach a traditional course in a format that felt foreign to their traditional understanding of the academic process. Navigating the transition was difficult with little guidance or support.

An affinity for land-based teaching and a lack of skills and experience with online academic processes made counselor educators in this study less enthusiastic about transitioning from land-based to online teaching. Participants noted problems with online engagement, such as communicating their authenticity and creating a genuine connection with students. Counselor educators also expressed concerns over an inability to teach and model effective interpersonal characteristics and skills online.

Along with frustrations in rethinking teaching and engagement strategies, participants developed solutions through their online teaching experience. They found themselves thinking creatively about how to form connections, model skills, and teach in the online environment. To improve engagement, they suggested video segments, online office hours, and making face-to-face experiences a requirement in online courses.

The most important theme, which resonated with all participants, was the need for greater support in the transitional experience. They explained that support began within the counselor educator, as resistance to online teaching could limit personal growth in the changing academic landscape. Participants desired greater support on the professional level to align counselor education standards with professional practice in the field. They also wanted greater institutional support. They needed (a) a safe place to gain online experience, (b) a

platform to share online teaching strategies and resources, and (b) qualified mentors who had time to provide intentional and engaging supportive services throughout the transition.

Implications for Practice and Training

Technology has provided innovation and led to benefits and conveniences that many in society find hard to ignore. Stakeholders in higher education, who have valued traditional academic practices, are beginning to accommodate these technological advancements leading to online courses but also feel challenged (Bilbeisi & Minsky, 2014; Snow et al., 2018). The counseling profession is no exception, as its leaders have developed professional standards to guide the use of technology in both counseling practice and training (ACA, 2014; ACES Technology Interest Network, 2017). The counseling profession has also accredited both land-based and fully online counselor training programs, making online counselor education an accepted aspect of the counselor development experience (CACREP, 2018). Universities with online counselor education programs have opened opportunities for many aspiring counselors. Students who were previously unable to join the profession, due to family, work, financial, or geographic constraints, now have new possibilities to forward their personal and professional goals (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Smith et al., 2015; Snow et al., 2018).

With online academic opportunities in counselor education, there is a continuum of beliefs among educators about the usefulness of online courses and the effectiveness of training students online for a relational field (Baack et al., 2016; Hale, 2018; Reamer, 2013; Wasik et al., 2019). In this study, counselor educators who were comfortable with online teaching, as well as those who struggled to understand the method, were both in agreement that more support is needed to help counselor educators grow in their understanding of online teaching and learning practices (Blackmon, 2016; Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Hale, 2018; Mandernach et al., 2012). All participants in this study acknowledged that they were continuing to learn best practices for online teaching and engagement. As online counseling programs continue to develop, it remains essential to explore the needs of counselor educators and support their work to produce qualified professionals for the field.

Technology has changed how we interact and communicate on a worldwide scale and understanding how to support the development of counselor educators is an ongoing process. One recommended strategy to bridge the divide between land-based and online teaching was to open communication and collaboration among diverse scholars in counselor education. To promote best practices, a common platform that allows for the sharing of ideas and resources might help. Counselor educators working together could produce valuable results, suggested one faculty member. Integrating the knowledge of counselor educators experience could result in a process of including technology that addresses educational changes. Counselor educators who have more years in education can bring to the discussion wisdom from their vast experience. Younger educators, although lacking in educational experience, may excel in technological understanding. Bringing these diverse perspectives together might encourage open communication, relationship building, and trust (Hale, 2018). Finding ways for counselor educators to support one another to unify the academic experience will encourage best practices and promote a common professional counseling identity.

It is significant to explore assumptions among faculty members in counselor education surrounding online learning because it illuminates important issues in the transitional process from land-based to online settings. This research gave voice to counseling faculty on the leading edge of educational change and allowed them to share their transition experiences. Collecting real experiences offered insight that might help educate the counseling community about what is needed to promote an effective transitional experience. This insight could provide meaningful information for training strategies that might prepare counselor educators effectively for work in educational systems that are more technology inclusive.

Limitations

This research was subject to two limitations: researcher bias and recruiting an adequate sample. As researchers, it was important to consider positionality. At the time of the research, the primary investigator was a full-time doctoral candidate in a fully online fully online, CACREP-accredited, counselor education and supervision program. The secondary researcher was a core faculty member of a fully online, CACREP-accredited counselor education and supervision doctoral program. Our views on online counselor education could sway the interpretation of the findings and put this study at risk. To address this issue, we used a transcendental phenomenological approach to gather the data and to analyze data, focusing on participants' language. This phenomenological design requires researchers to bracket their presuppositions (Giorgi, 2012; Shelton & Bridges, 2019). The primary investigator took notes and reflected throughout the interview and data analysis process and remained aware of personal thoughts and perspectives to limit their influence on the experience. However, due to the subjective nature of qualitative work, researcher bias can still limit the study (Husserl, 1931).

Another possible limitation of this research was an adequate sample: This study would have benefited from greater diversity. While participants represented universities across the United States and offered rich, thick descriptions that yielded saturation, there was little variation in race: One participant was Black and the rest were White.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are many opportunities for further research when it comes to online counselor education. The counseling profession is just beginning to consider best online academic practices and would benefit from research to empirically support strategies to teach and connect with counseling students online (ACES, 2016; Bridges & Frazier, 2018). Being a relational field, many counselor educators are concerned that online counseling students may lack preparation for work in the field because educators often feel limited in their ability to model counseling skills and characteristics online. Research on best practices to teach skills and assess character online might provide information to support the development of more effective online academic practices. Hybrid opportunities in counselor education as a professional standard might also be important to explore. More research is also needed to address best gatekeeping practices in online programs to ensure that counseling students are emotionally and mentally prepared for their professional work. Finally, research opportunities exist to address supportive services for counselor educators at the institutional level. This research study identified mentoring as an important strategy for helping counseling educators make the transition to online teaching, but effective and realistic mentoring practices could be further explored. The growth of online teaching and learning in counselor education make this a rich area of continued exploration.

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