# Disrupting the Narrative on Recruiting Graduate Students of Color in Counselor Education

Carlos P. Hipolito-Delgado
*University of Colorado Denver*

Diane Estrada
*University of Colorado Denver*

Marina Garcia
*The Community Lighthouse*

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/tsc

Part of the Counselor Education Commons

## Recommended Citation

# Disrupting the Narrative on Recruiting Graduate Students of Color in Counselor Education

Carlos P. Hipolito-Delgado, Diane Estrada, Marina Garcia

The voices of students of color are largely absent in the literature on graduate student recruitment in counselor education. The existing literature focuses on university personnel and can portray a deficit perspective of students of color. Using grounded theory and a critical race theory framework, we sought to develop a theory that described the motivations of graduate students of color for pursuing counselor education. We interviewed 19 graduate students of color and used a constant comparative method to understand their motivations for and supports utilized in pursuing counselor training. Grounded in our participants' counternarratives, we identified a theory to describe their drive to serve marginalized communities and to attend programs committed to diversity, and the supports they received in applying to graduate school. Based on this theory we provide implications for how counselor education programs can demonstrate a commitment to diversity and support graduate students of color through the application process.

The lack of ethnic diversity in graduate programs is a concern for scholars and practitioners in higher education (Griffin et al., 2012). This is true in counseling programs where ethnic diversity was argued to increase the cultural competence of all students (McDowell et al., 2002). Unfortunately, there is limited research on recruiting graduate students of color in counselor education (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2009) and what does exist lacks the voice and racialized experiences of students of color.

According to Hubain et al. (2016), there is a significant benefit to amplifying the voices of students of color, specifically to counter dominant narratives that perpetuate the racial bias embedded in higher education. Through counternarratives, oppressed communities claim their voice and describe their racialized reality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Using grounded theory and a critical race theory (CRT) framework, we sought to disrupt the dominant narrative on the recruitment of students of color. In its place we offer a theory, that is grounded in the counternarratives of graduate students of

color, on the motivations and supports that propelled students to pursue counselor education. The proposed theory provides implications for recruitment strategies that align with the motivations and supports identified by students of color.

## Increasing Graduate Diversity

The dominant narrative on the recruitment of graduate students of color focuses on universities, graduate programs, and university personnel and what these groups can do to attract students of color (Quarterman, 2008). As such, a trickle-down mentality is created, where the diversification of higher education occurs from the top down. What is more, the dominant narrative also provides a deficit perspective of graduate students of color: as needing to be educated about their field of study, requiring financial assistance, and being intimidated by standardized tests (Griffin et al., 2012; Lider & Winston Simmons, 2015; Proctor & Truscott, 2013).

### The Trickle-Down Approach

One of the two themes present in the dominant narrative on the recruitment of graduate students of

color is that diversification requires a top down approach — where changes in university policy and practices lead to attracting more students of color (Griffin & Muñiz, 2011; Griffin et al., 2012; McDowell et al., 2002). The first element of the trickle-down approach is for senior leadership and faculty to endorse the importance of student diversity (Griffin & Muñiz, 2011; Griffin et al., 2012). The next step is for diversity to be addressed in a program mission (Robinson et al., 2009) and then in the curriculum (Lider & Winston Simmons, 2015). Alas, Lider and Winston Simmons (2015), who conducted a qualitative study of 29 graduate students of color enrolled in student affairs programs, found that students judged a program's commitment to diversity through the ethnic makeup of students and faculty, reputation of program as related to inclusion, and feeling connected during student visits. This provides an indication that changing mission statements and adding diversity courses is likely insufficient to attract graduate students of color.

The final step in the trickle-down approach requires university personnel to make contact with potential applicants of color (Quarterman, 2008; Zhou et al., 2004). These recruitment efforts are most successful when they involve faculty and graduate students and when contact with the applicant continues through the application and admission process (Griffin & Muñiz, 2011; Robinson et al., 2009). As part of these recruitment efforts, faculty and staff were encouraged to reach out to ethnic minority communities through graduate and career fairs (Quarterman, 2008) and by networking with colleagues at minority serving institutions (Posselt et al., 2017). Finally, Griffin and Muñiz (2011) asserted that faculty relationships were essential in attracting students of color to apply to graduate programs. Unfortunately, the literature on faculty recruitment does not address the depth and quality of these outreach relationships.

**The Deficit Perspective**

The deficit perspective is the second theme in the dominant narrative on the recruitment of graduate students of color. This theme holds that graduate students of color lack knowledge of professions, require financial assistance, and fear standardized tests (Griffin et al., 2012; Lider & Winston Simmons, 2015; Proctor & Truscott, 2013). Therefore,

graduate programs and institutions of higher education must compensate for the shortcomings of graduate students of color.

### Lack of Knowledge

It is assumed that communities of color lack knowledge of professional degrees. Thus, graduate admissions personnel are called to educate applicants about professions (Zhou et al., 2004). For outreach efforts to be most impactful they should begin at a young age, create a desire to diversify a professional field, describe how the profession can uplift the community, and describe how the professionals in a given field can address social problems (Posselt et al., 2017; Tijerina & Deepak, 2014). These suggestions seem troubling as it is implied that it is the responsibility of communities of color to diversify a profession and ameliorate social ills. Contrasting these perspectives, Hipolito-Delgado et al. (2017), in their study of eight master's level students of color enrolled in a counselor education program, found that students did, in fact, have knowledge about the field of counseling, either through related work experiences or participating in counseling; it was these experiences that motivated students to enter the field.

### Financial Need

The notion that graduate students of color require financial assistance is widely echoed in the graduate recruitment literature (Griffin et al, 2012; Tijenrina & Deepak, 2014). In fact, based on their qualitative study of 14 Graduate Diversity Officers, Griffin et al. (2012) asserted that without financial support, students of color would not attend an institution. This notion was supported by Robinson et al. (2009), who in their discussion of a minority recruitment plan for counselor education stated, "without adequate funding, meeting program target enrollment of minority … students is nearly impossible" (p. 186). Beyond the need for financial aid, it is argued that students of color found certain forms of financial aid, such as teaching assistantships, scholarships, grants, and tuition waivers, most desirable (Lider & Winston Simmons, 2015; Proctor & Truscott, 2013; Robinson et al., 2009; Quarterman, 2008; Zhou et al., 2004). However, Proctor and Truscott (2013), in their qualitative study of 30

African American graduate students in School Psychology, found that more than a third of their sample did not consider financial support a deciding factor in the decision to attend a graduate program. Though communities of color are overrepresented in lower SES, the notion that graduate students of color require financial assistance can fuel a deficit perspective that students of color are all poor.

### Fear of Standardized Exams

The use of standardized exams, such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), for graduate admissions is described as a barrier to the recruitment of students of color (Lider & Winston Simmons, 2015; Posselet et al., 2017). Tijenrina and Deepak (2014), in their study of doctoral students in social work, reported that participants felt that standardized tests reinforced low academic self-image. Additionally, Lider and Winston Simmons (2015) found that their participants only applied to graduate programs that did not require standardized exams. As such, it was recommended that graduate programs eliminate standardized tests from admissions criteria (Posselt et al., 2017). Consistent with the deficit perspective, the elimination of entrance exams was not based on racial bias in standardized testing; rather, the narrative that students of color are intimidated by standardized exams is used to drive a deficit perspective of students of color being less academically prepared and more emotionally vulnerable than their White peers.

The dominant narrative on the recruitment of graduate students of color places institutions of higher education in positions of power, being responsible for diversification efforts. Additionally, the themes of the trickle-down approach and the deficit perspective create a savior mentality where White institutions have the ability to provide access to the counseling profession. By employing a grounded theory and a CRT framework, we sought to develop a theory, grounded in students' counter-narratives, on the motivations that propelled students of color to pursue graduate counselor education.

# Method

## Constructivist Ontology

The authors endorse a view that knowledge and meaning cannot be discovered; rather, knowledge is constructed relative to one's personal experience (Creswell, 2013). This belief is most consistent with a constructivist view of reality and explains our implementation of a qualitative research design. We also pursued a qualitative research design to obtain a thick description of the experiences of our participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) in order for their racialized reality to be highlighted. This was especially important to us as the voices of graduate students of color are largely absent in the existing literature.

## Grounded Theory

We implemented grounded theory in order to describe a phenomenon for which limited research exists (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) — in this case, understanding the motivations of graduate students of color for pursuing training in counselor education. In grounded theory, researchers avoid the use of predetermined hypotheses or theory and, instead, utilize an inductive process to derive a theory from their participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This last point was crucial for our decision to implement a grounded theory design as we wanted to amplify the voices of students of color. Although CRT was the theoretical framework for data analysis, the researchers allowed the theory to emerge from the racialized experiences of the participants. Thus, upholding the tenets of grounded theory and accentuating the voices of students of color.

## Critical Race Theory

Through CRT, the experiences of communities of color are highlighted to describe how race and racism impact their lives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). There are five tenets associated with CRT: (1) racism is a pivotal feature of American society; (2) whiteness assures privilege and requires the silencing of communities of color; (3) advances in equity for people of color are pursued when these advancements converge with the interests of Whites; (4) the concepts of colorblindness, meritocracy, and

equality exist to hide racial inequity; and (5) the importance of intersectionality and addressing people's multiple identities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). To achieve these five tenets, researchers rely on counternarratives as a tool to highlight the racialized experiences of communities of color and to document the uneven distribution of power in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In implementing a CRT framework, the researcher sought a liberatory framework that highlighted the voices and racialized experiences of graduate students of color.

## Positionality

In qualitative research, researchers impact every aspect of the research process. Therefore, Jones et al. (2014) asserted that qualitative researchers should address their social identities and biases. The first author is a Chicano, cisgender male counselor educator of upper-middle socioeconomic status (SES). The second author is a Latina, cisgender female counselor educator whose SES has encompassed working poor status to lower-middle class status. The first and second author began this research study to better understand how to diversify counselor education programs. The third author is a Latina, cisgender female counselor of middle SES. Her involvement in the study began as a research assistant; this was followed by an interest in how to diversify the counseling field. Collectively we anticipated, based on our experiences, that graduate students of color would feel tokenized and marginalized during the graduate recruitment experience.

## Data Collection

For this study, 19 participants engaged in individual, face-to-face or video chat, semi-structured interviews. Reliance on interviews is a hallmark of grounded theory research (Birks & Mills, 2011). The third author was responsible for conducting all interviews. The interview protocol consisted of seven questions, including: "Can you recall what first drew your interest in the field of counseling?" and "Why did you decide to study counseling at this particular university?" (see Appendix A for a listing of all interview questions). Initial interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded. Audio recordings were later transcribed for data analysis. In order to clarify lingering questions or

request additional details, a follow-up interview was sought with all participants. Most follow up interviews were conducted face-to-face or by video chat. When the third author was unable to arrange for a meeting with a participant, follow-up questions were emailed to said participant and email responses were treated like the transcribed data. We had a minimum of two contacts with each participant.

Upon concluding data analysis for the 18th participant, saturation was achieved; sufficient data were obtained to fully develop the theory and no new information was obtained (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Consequently, the data from the 19th participant was used for discriminate sampling, in order to assess if the emerging theory was consistent with the 19th participant's motivation to pursue graduate counselor education (Creswell, 2013). This study was approved by the institutional review board of the first and second authors' home institution.

## Participants

Purposeful sampling was employed for this study. Participants were sought who could make rich contributions to the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, participants were recruited from the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) graduate student email listserv and social media accounts. Participants were also recruited through flyers distributed at conferences or were referred by study participants. Participants self-identified as ethnic minorities and had completed at least 1 year of graduate study in counselor education. A total of 19 participants provided informed consent and were interviewed. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant's confidentiality.

Seven participants identified as Latina/o/x, five as Asian American, four as African American, two as Asian, and one as Hispanic. Ten participants attended public universities, three attended private universities, two attended for-profit universities, and four declined to state. Only two participants were enrolled in online counselor education programs, the remaining 17 attended face-to-face programs. Eight participants were master's level stu-

dents and 11 were doctoral level students. To protect the confidentiality of participants we did not collect information about participants' graduate program, age, SES, or specialty track. We sought this degree of confidentiality so that participants would share their experiences without fear of retribution, which was a concern in previous research (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017).

## Data Analysis

The constant comparative method of data analysis, a signature element of grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011), was utilized in this study. The constant comparative method traditionally involves three phases of data analysis (open, axial, and selective), is systematic and structured, and provides a trail of evidence to support conclusions (Charmaz, 2014; Jones et al., 2014). We began data analysis upon completion of the eighth interview; this allowed us to test tentative hypotheses on the remaining participants — a practice known as theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As is consistent with a CRT framework, we focused on issues of race through data analysis.

The first phase of data analysis in the constant comparative method is open coding (Charmaz, 2014). During this phase we conducted independent line-by-line readings of each interview transcript, with the goal of developing a nuanced understanding of the data (Charmaz, 2014). We then met as a group to develop consensus on codes. At the end of open coding, 218 coded segments of data were identified that ranged in length from a couple of lines to a paragraph. To respect participants' voices, we attempted to use their words as names for codes. A total of 57 unique codes were identified during open coding, including advocacy, campus diversity, professional role model, and program flexibility.

The second phase of coding, axial coding, took place once all participant interviews were completed and open coding had concluded. During this phase, codes were first compared within each participant and then across all participants. The goal was to consolidate similar codes and eliminate codes that did not relate to the phenomenon under investigation. At the end of this process 14 codes remained, including: admissions process; diversity;

role models and mentors; and work, school, life balance.

During selective coding, the final phase of data analysis, the goal was to develop a theory that described the motivation of students of color for pursuing counselor education. Similar codes were again consolidated and others were organized thematically into factors. Upon completion of this process, three factors were identified that described the motivation and support that inspired graduate students of color to pursue counselor education. Data were then disaggregated to examine if differences existed between graduate students of color based on their level of study (master's or doctoral), program type, ethnicity, or gender. No differences were found, leading the researchers to believe that the emerging theory captured the motivations of all participants in this study. We argue that these three factors provide a liberatory perspective on the motivations of graduate students of color to enter counselor education, as it is grounded in the racialized experiences of and accentuates the voices of students of color.

## Trustworthiness

According to Creswell (2013), *trustworthiness* describes the accuracy and consistency of interpretations in qualitative research. In this study, discriminate sampling, memoing, and an external auditor were used to establish trustworthiness. Through discriminate sampling, the authors' sought to assess the degree to which the emerging theory was dependable in describing the experience of new participants (Creswell, 2013). Since saturation was reached with the 18th participant, the data from the 19th participant (Isabel) were used for discriminate sampling. Isabel's drive and supports were consistent with the emerging theory — her experiences were represented in each of the three factors of the emerging theory. Therefore, the researchers felt that the motivation of Isabel was consistent with the emerging theory; supporting our argument for the dependability of the emerging theory.

Memoing was also used to assess trustworthiness, particularly credibility and transparency. We used memoing to document our assumptions before

and during data analysis, to record follow-up questions for participants, to note trends in the data, and to document important decisions made during data analysis. The goal of memoing was to limit bias from entering the study, to ensure the credibility of emerging theory by grounding results in our participants' experience, and to provide transparency in our research procedures. Additionally, an external auditor, who is knowledgeable in qualitative methods, assessed the data and conclusions derived from this study in order to establish confirmability and credibility. The external auditor felt that the emerging theory was tenable as it was grounded in the experience of participants.

We would like to note that member checking with all participants was attempted. Alas, we were only able to complete member checks with three participants. The three participants that we did speak to generally felt that the emerging theory was consistent with their motivations to pursue counselor education. Finally, we detailed our ontology, theoretical framework, interview protocol, sampling strategy, and data analysis procedure to provide transparency.

## Findings

Based on the counternarratives of our participants we offer the theory that a desire to serve marginalized communities and authentic relationships drove students of color to pursue graduate counselor education. To achieve their goals, students sought graduate programs committed to diversity. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the theory where graduate students of color are centered, the desire to serve marginalized communities and authentic relationships propel students toward counselor education, and students reach out to graduate programs committed to diversity. As was noted in the data analysis section, all participants were represented in the following themes, regardless of level of graduate study (master's or doctoral), program type, ethnicity, or gender. The following sections explore the theory in more depth.

### Desire to Serve Marginalized Communities

Participants described their desire to serve marginalized communities, including the drive to be an advocate, as motivation for pursuing counselor education. A common theme for participants was the scarcity of quality mental health services in marginalized communities. Leigh spoke to her desire to fill that gap:

> I was looking for counselors of color, queer counselors, and those people like weren't available. So, I felt like I wanted that to be different … like my friends and social network wanted to work with and they weren't finding those people either so I just felt like it was a need and something I felt like I could do.

In addition to the lack of available counselors of color, other participants spoke of negative experiences with counselors who were not culturally competent and how this served as motivation to enter the profession. Still other counternarratives addressed how social services and counseling marginalized communities of color. Such was the case with Phillip:

> I actually worked in foster care in the Bronx …. I was working with so many Latino families and so many African American families … and I noticed that there were a lot of times that so many of these families were misunderstood. It was such a traumatic experience for children and adolescents …. I

Figure 1

*Motivations for Graduate Students of Color to Pursue Counselor Education*
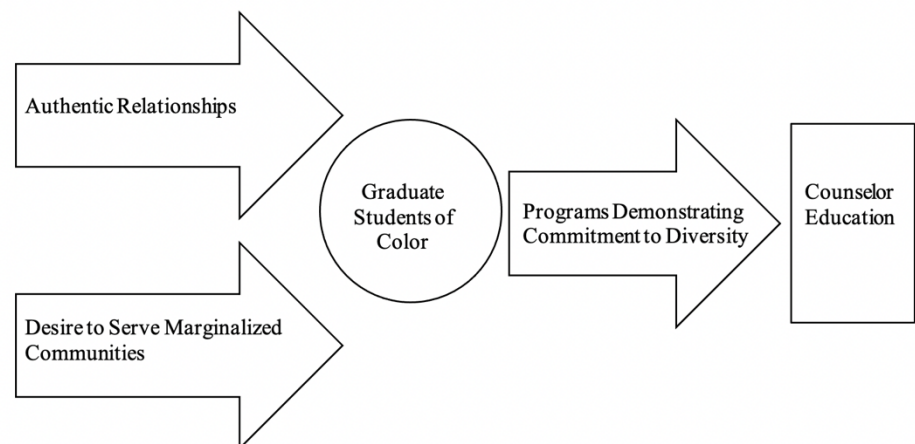
just saw like how are we actually tailoring ourselves to actually think about culture in the work …. [As a result] I actually applied to programs in clinical mental health counseling.

This desire to provide more culturally responsive services was a driving force for a number of participants. For master's level students, this desire manifested through becoming a counselor, and for doctoral students, it was often about training culturally competent counselors or providing services directly. Interestingly, negative experience with the profession, either through their work or as clients, did not dissuade participants; instead, they were driven to enter the field so others in the community would have access to quality counseling services.

For Ginger, the desire to pursue counseling went beyond providing culturally responsive services; she wanted to foster resilience:

I was, started off wanting to um, specifically to work with um, people who have disabilities …. But then I started to see that there was overlap in terms of resilience among people of color. My identity as a person of color and a person who has an obvious disability, I use a wheelchair, and so I think that wanting to contribute and help to develop resiliency and the communities I represent is kind of what sparked the interest …. I just feel like there seems to be … a lot of focus on pathology in communities that are historically underrepresented … but I think that there's also a need to contribute to the resiliency of those groups and so that's what I would like to do ultimately.

Through their counternarratives, participants described a desire to deconstruct stereotypes, amplify strengths, recognize intersectional identities, and provide support. It was their desire to advocate, represent, and support the strengths and complexities of marginalized communities that drove them to seek graduate counselor education.

**Authentic Relationships**

In the counternarratives of participants authentic relationships with colleagues, friends, and uni-

versity representatives were key in encouraging students of color to pursue counselor education. These relationships were crucial as they aided participants in seeing their potential and overcoming their self-doubts. In many instances, colleagues were instrumental in presenting graduate school as an option even when it was not being considered by the participant. Rena spoke of how the dean of her university inspired her to apply to graduate school:

I was already teaching at a university …. I already owned a business, a private practice and consulting business …. I had already bought property, like my lifestyle was comfortable … so I hadn't planned to go back, but I went back because my dean at the university [where] I was teaching was really pushing me to go back … so it was encouraging, an encouraging push.

Troy also described the positive impact of being encouraged to pursue graduate training. However, in his case, encouragement came from a friend. Troy stated:

A friend of mine contacted me one day and said, "Hey you should look at this school."…. He was just really encouraging me to get a PhD. So I looked into the school and I was just like no way there's too much stuff to do to get into this doctoral program, but I did it anyway and got accepted …. I know a lot of times I think about peer pressure or peer influence in a negative context but this was actually a more positive one.

For participants, like Rena and Troy, it was empowering to realize that colleagues and friends saw potential within them.

Aside from friends and colleagues, authentic relationships with university representatives aided participants in pursuing graduate education. Some participants described how student support personnel answered questions or assuaged concerns about entrance requirements. Jon described having self-doubts, but how an academic advisor helped him to realize his potential:

But after speaking with admissions like the academic advisors … first thought was there's an … African American woman,

okay so that's comfort feeling in some ways. And her presence and her questions about inquiring why I wanted to seek, uh become a counselor, why I should choose this program really had me sold …. And it made me kind of not feel like oh yeah I don't meet all the [requirements] but she did make me feel like the faculty will look at pretty much a bigger picture than just my GPA and my GRE scores and all that. So she made me feel that comfortable to apply so I applied.

Aside from noting the encouragement to apply, Jon described how this advisor helped him navigate the application process. This is the type of support that comes from authentic relationships, where university professionals are committed to student success.

Others, like Milly, described forming relationships with current graduate students and how these relationships encouraged her to apply:

The students that I was asking questions, they were very friendly and open people. Although it wasn't specific recruitment through you know the department, it was the students who were helping recruit me just by being themselves … you know it's people that you find out about. They talk to you and they are willing to share those experiences.

A crucial point in Milly's statement is that the students she spoke to were genuine in answering her questions and encouraging her to apply. In both cases, university representatives showed an interest in supporting students through the application process.

## Programs Demonstrating Commitment to Diversity

Participants in this study sought graduate programs with a demonstrated commitment to serving diverse communities. Numerous participants described the multicultural research being done by faculty as what attracted them to a specific counseling program. This was the case for Ana: "The multicultural aspect of [their research] really spoke to me …. I paid more attention to the research interests of the faculty as opposed to the diversity of the faculty itself." Ana clarified that it was not the ethnic make-up of faculty nor the number of faculty of color that

drew her to a program, but the commitment of faculty to research on communities of color.

Zoraida reinforced the importance of a program's commitment to diversity as her deciding factor in which university to attend. To this end, she asked program representatives to demonstrate how diversity was enacted:

What really drew me [to my program] was the multicultural emphasis. I made an appointment to come and talk to [a representative] about the program and what it looked like, what the faculty was like …. I was really encouraged after talking to her about the fact that this program really is multiculturally-oriented and looked at socio-political factors.

Though not all participants were as thorough as Zoraida, most described searching for indicators that their graduate program was truly committed to diversity and social justice.

Participants in the study also shared their disappointment with programs that did not live up to social justice and diversity ideals. Nikki addressed how she often felt like a token when being recruited by counselor education programs: "I feel like, and in all honesty, I felt like [other university] was really trying to recruit me because I was an African American female in the field. And it's like oh we need more minority students." Nikki, like other participants, was turned off by being seen as a token minority. Similarly, Phillip described being turned off by graduate counseling programs that did not seem to enact a commitment to diversity:

Particularly with introducing culture within the program, I think it was briefly discussed by the faculty when I interviewed [at various universities], but it wasn't necessarily this firm idea that okay yeah … we're championing it in every possible way, that we are outspoken about multiculturalism …. There was virtually none of those conversations.

For participants, an authentic commitment to multicultural issues was demonstrated through faculty research, how multiculturalism was infused throughout a program, and explicit discussion of diversity issues during interviews. What is more, a lack of

consideration of diversity by a program was a turnoff for participants.

## Discussion

Contrary to the dominant narrative in higher education literature that emphasizes the role of universities in attracting graduate students of color, the emerging theory, grounded in the counternarratives of participants, describes graduate students' desire to serve marginalized communities, authentic relationships, and the importance of a program's commitment to diversity. The findings of this study advance the counseling literature as they are centered on the racialized experience of graduate students of color and provide a more authentic understanding of why graduate students of color pursue a career in counseling. Furthermore, the theory challenges elements of the existing literature on recruitment of graduate students of color.

A unique contribution to the literature emanating from this theory is that graduate students of color were driven by a desire to serve marginalized communities. This desire often began with a perceived void of counseling professionals serving marginalized communities or through experiences with counselors who lacked cultural competence. Whereas the existing literature does not consider the motivations of graduate students of color (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017), the participants in this study described how they were motivated to increase representation of diverse communities in counseling and sought to increase the availability of culturally relevant services to marginalized communities.

Participants also spoke of the empowering nature of authentic relationships, as words of encouragement from colleagues and peers led the participants to realize their potential. The role of authentic relationships as a factor in seeking higher education also disrupts the trickle-down nature of the dominant narrative where recruitment efforts by university personnel are strictly focused upon (Quarterman, 2008). Instead, participants, like Troy, described how friends encouraged them to pursue counselor education and aided them through the application process. By emphasizing the role of authentic relationships, the theory described in this study provides a more liberatory perspective of

graduate students of color, where the support of the community facilitates the educational pursuits of its members.

Another significant finding associated with this study was how participants sought counseling programs that demonstrated an authentic commitment to diversity. Whereas the literature emphasizes executive leadership and mission statements (Robinson et al., 2009), participants in this study sought more concrete examples such as faculty research, integration of multiculturalism throughout a program, and explicit discussions of diversity. Participants also noted being turned off when a program was not committed to diversity, with participants like Nikki feeling that programs only wanted her because she identifies as a Black female or Phillip noticing a lack of explicit discussion of diversity during interviews.

The dominant narrative on graduate recruitment described students of color needing to be educated about professional careers (Zhou et al., 2004). However, participants in this study described their professional experiences in counseling and related fields. For some, such as Phillip and Ginger, noting the limitations of their current position or the desire to foster resilience in communities of color led them to seek further graduate training. As such, the participants in this study provided a counternarrative, where they did not need to be educated about counseling by university personnel.

Though a few participants did mention having doubts about their academic abilities or being intimidated by standardized testing or program entrance requirements, these were not significant barriers for our participants. Additionally, participants, like Jon, described how authentic relationships aided in overcoming self-doubts. Similarly, the availability of financial aid was not a significant concern for participants. It seems that students were able to make finances work when they found a program they wished to attend. These points are crucial in challenging the deficit perspective that graduate students of color are intimidated by entrance exams (Tijenrina & Deepak, 2014) or require financial aid (Griffin et al., 2012).

## Implications

In order to respect the interests and needs of students of color, graduate counseling programs might give attention to when and where they are practicing their commitment to diversity. Realizing that participants in this study were driven by a desire to serve marginalized communities and sought programs with commitments to diversity, we argue that counseling programs might focus on their active embodiment of social justice. This might be accomplished through highlighting the work of existing faculty or hiring new faculty who are conducting research with marginalized communities, ensuring that issues of diversity and social justice are ingrained in all aspects of the program including the interview process, and admitting students who are committed to diversity. Another suggestion would be to provide internship and fieldwork opportunities where students might have the opportunity to work with marginalized communities. Such an opportunity would directly speak to students' desire to serve marginalized communities. By taking these steps, a counseling program can demonstrate their commitment to diversity and social justice.

Honoring the voices and racialized experiences of students of color in counselor education programs might require recruitment efforts focused on relationship building. As was described by participants in this study, mentors, colleagues, and friends were meaningful in encouraging them to apply to graduate school. As such, those involved with conducting outreach to communities of color might seek to develop authentic relationships with individuals and communities of color. Collaborations built on mutual trust can aid in the identification of candidates who demonstrate promise or are in need of encouragement. It is possible that relationship building will encourage more students of color to pursue counselor education.

Although the availability of financial support is described as being essential for the recruitment of graduate students of color (Griffin et al., 2012), we argue that using financial aid as a primary recruitment tool can be problematic. The availability of financial aid was not a significant theme in this study. Instead, participants described being motivated by a desire to serve marginalized communities and being interested in programs that display a commitment to diversity. When financial assistance is used as the primary recruitment strategy for graduate students of color, it implies that diversity can be bought.

Finally, we argue for the potential of CRT in engaging in liberatory research with communities of color. CRT provides a theoretical framework that accentuates the voices of marginalized communities and places them as experts of their lived reality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Thus, communities of color claim authorship over the knowledge that describes them. CRT can also be a liberatory theoretical framework as it challenges Western assumptions that often marginalize communities of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through CRT, communities of color describe their racialized reality and provide a more accurate understanding of the community. Thus, we argue for the usage of a CRT theoretical framework when researching with communities of color.

## Limitations and Future Research

A limitation to this study was the lack of Native American or Pacific Islander student participants. Despite our efforts to recruit a diverse participant pool, we were unable to recruit participants who self-identified as Native American or Pacific Islander. Therefore, the findings of this study might not be representative of the experiences of graduate students of Native American and Pacific Islander heritage. Future research on the recruitment of graduate students of color should include Native American and Pacific Islander participants. Selection bias might also be a limitation associated with this study; some participants reported that they were motivated to participate in the study to support the research of the first and second author.

Despite our attempts to engage in member checking with all participants, we only received responses from three participants. This limited response rate might be attributed to member checking occurring once data analysis was completed, approximately 18 months after the start of interviews. It is possible that during that time some students graduated, lost access to university emails accounts, or were not able to participate further. Regardless, the small number of member checks represents a limitation to this study.

Further, research is needed to examine how intersectionality impacts the desire to pursue graduate

counselor education. Though various participants noted how ability status, gender, and sexual orientation intersected with ethnicity to influence their desire to pursue a career in counseling, the focus of this study on race/ethnicity likely limited the degree to which participants discussed their intersectionality. A more concerted focus on intersectionality would likely expand understanding on how to diversify the counseling profession.

Additional research is also needed to examine the theory proposed in this article. Researchers might consider using the described constructs as a framework for a qualitative study or to develop a quantitative instrument. Future research would be useful to assess the validity of this theory with a larger sample of graduate students of color.

## Conclusions

Disrupting the dominant narrative of graduate student recruitment, the emerging theory, grounded in the counternarratives of participants, described the motivations for graduate students of color in pursuing counselor education. This theory holds that a desire to serve marginalized communities, authentic relationships, and wanting to attend a counseling program with a commitment to diversity motivated students to pursue counselor education. Additionally, the participants in this study provided a counternarrative that is liberatory, as it accentuates their voice and speaks to their reality. By recognizing the voice and heeding the advice provided by participants in this study, counselors and counselor educators might help promote diversity in the counseling field.

## References

Birks, M., & Mills, J. (2011). *Grounded theory: A practical guide.* SAGE.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis* (2nd ed.)*.* SAGE.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. SAGE.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.

Griffin, K. A., & Muñiz, M. M. (2011). The strategies and struggles of graduate diversity officers in the recruitment of doctoral students of color. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 44*(1), 57–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2011.540961

Griffin, K. A., Muñiz, M. M., & Espinosa, L. (2012). The influence of campus racial climate on diversity in graduate education. *The Review of Higher Education, 35*(4), 535–566. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0031

Hipolito-Delgado, C. P., Estrada, D., & Garcia, M. (2017). Counselor education in technicolor: Recruiting graduate students of color. *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, *51*(1), 73–85. https://journal.sipsych.org/index.php/IJP/article/view/293/pdf

Hubain, B. S., Allen, E. L, Harris, J. C., & Linder, C. (2016) Counter-stories as representations of the racialized experiences of students of color in higher education and student affairs graduate preparation programs. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 29*(7), 946–963. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1174894

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues* (2nd ed.)*.* Routledge.

Lider, C., & Winston Simmons, C. (2015). Career and program choice of students of color in student affairs programs. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 52*(4), 414–426. https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2015.1081601

McDowell, T., Fang, S., Brownlee, K., Gomez Young, C., & Khanna, A. (2002). Transforming an MFT program: A model for enhancing diversity. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 28*, 179–191. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2002.tb00355.x

Posselt, J., Reyes, K. A., Slay, K. E., Kamimura, A., & Porter, K. B. (2017). Equity efforts as boundary work: How symbolic and social boundaries shape access and inclusion in graduate education. *Teachers College Record, 119*(10), 1–38.

Proctor, S. L., & Truscott, S. D. (2013). Missing voices: African American School Psychologists perspectives on increasing professional diversity. *Urban Review, 45*(3), 355–375. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-012-0232-3

Quarterman, J. (2008). An assessment of barriers and strategies for recruitment and retention of a diverse graduate student population. *College Student Journal, 42*(4), 947–967.

Robinson, M. C., Lewis, D., Henderson, D., & Flowers, C. R. (2009). Increasing minority student enrollment in counselor education. *Rehabilitation Education, 23*(2), 183–192.

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytic framework for educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*, 23–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103

Tijerina, M., & Deepak, A. C. (2014). Mexican American social workers' perceptions of doctoral education and academia. *Journal of Social Work Education, 50*(4), 365–378. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2014.885277

Zhou, Z., Bray, M. A., Kehle, T. J., Theodore, L. A., Clark, E., & Jenson, W. R. (2004). Achieving ethnic minority parity in school psychology. *Psychology in Schools, 41*(4), 442–450. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.10187

Appendix A
*Interview Protocol*

1.  Can you recall what first drew your interest in the field of counseling?
    a.  Why did you ultimately decide to pursue a career in counseling?
    b.  Were there any specific factors (e.g., family, mentor, personal experience, academic experience) that led you to pursue a career in counseling?
2.  Why did you decide to study counseling at your current university?
    a.  Were there any specific factors that drew you to this program (e.g., community clinic, multicultural emphasis, faculty diversity, student diversity, CACREP accreditation, recruitment, etc.)?
    b.  Were there any specific factors that made you hesitant about enrolling at your current university (e.g., student diversity, program expectations, balancing work and school, etc.)?
3.  What suggestions do you have on how to make Counselor Education more responsive to the needs of students of color?