Preparing Doctoral Students to Succeed in Counselor Education Programs: An Exploratory Study of New Doctoral Student Orientations

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This article presents the findings from an exploratory study of 12 doctoral students' perceptions of their experiences participating in orientations for students entering CACREP-accredited counselor education programs. Using consensual qualitative research, the following themes emanated: (a) orientation structure, (b) support systems, (c) goals and expectations, and (d) consideration for diversity. Implications for counselor educators are addressed.
Keywords: counselor education, doctoral student orientation

Although many doctoral students in counselor education (CE) programs successfully complete their programs and obtain a doctoral degree, some students drop out for a variety of reasons (Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Given the negative consequences that accompany doctoral student attrition for non-completers and their university (Willis & Carmichael, 2011), scholars have begun to explore students' experiences in CE doctoral programs (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Despite the growing body of literature on students' program experiences in CE doctoral programs, in general, little emphasis has been placed on how programs prepare students for success. In particular, to date, the literature related to how CE-sponsored programming orients students for doctoral training in CE is largely unknown. Such knowledge has the potential to shed light on student attrition and retention and further professional development issues in students. As such, this study aimed to fill this void by exploring aspects of CE doctoral student orientations and students' perceptions of the degree to which these orientations met their needs.

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Doctoral Student Attrition in Counselor Education

Students often make substantial personal sacrifices to enroll in graduate programs, and universities invest a significant amount of time and money in support of graduate student educational programming and services. Therefore, when students do not graduate, the widely held belief is that they are wasting their own time and money, as well as the university's (Wendler et al., 2010). To avoid this unfortunate circumstance, doctoral programs in multiple disciplines go through careful processes to determine the students most likely to perform well academically and graduate. Despite careful graduate admission processes and, quite often, high levels of achievement among those pursuing doctoral degrees, the attrition rate in doctoral programs has, nonetheless, remained in the range of 40 to 60 percent over the past 50 years (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Like other professions, doctoral student attrition rate in CE has been a problem for some time (Golde, 2005; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005).

As concerns about degree non-completion in CE programs have increased (Lovitts, 2001; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Willis & Carmichael, 2011), so has the amount of research on the topic. In a qualitative study involving 33 current and former (i.e., either graduates or those who left programs) students from 17 different CE doctoral programs, for instance, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) discovered that student-program match (i.e., student expectations, student experience, academic match, and social-personal match) was the main factor in students' decisions of whether to remain in or leave their programs. Similarly, in another qualitative study with six individuals who left their CE programs before completion, Willis and Carmichael (2011) found that decisions to leave the program were based on students' assessments that their personal goals were not aligned with the focus of the program. The participants also reported problematic relationships with program faculty as the largest barrier to remaining in their programs. These studies' findings imply that CE doctoral students' overall perceptions of fit between themselves and their program appear to be a key factor in their persistence decisions. Many research studies on doctoral student attrition across various academic disciplines have investigated student-program congruence, as well, and found that personal endeavors (e.g., academic and career goals), departmental culture, mentoring, peer interaction, and other support systems contributed to student persistence and progress (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Lee, 2003).

The Importance of Initial Orientations to Doctoral Students

Beginning doctoral study is a major event that could cause an enormous amount of stress in students' lives (Hughes & Kleist, 2005). In fact, more than one-third of doctoral student attrition has been found to occur during the first year of graduate study (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nerad & Miller, 1996). New doctoral students, it has been found, often feel they are incompetent, constantly

experience feelings of uncertainty, deal with stress-provoking anxiety, and manage overwhelming responsibilities (Dongen, 1988; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Willis & Carmichael, 2011). As such, how program faculty decide to orient students very early in their program of study could play a critical role in determining whether students become involved, remain devoted, and persist (Derby & Watson, 2006; Di Pierro, 2012; Kennedy, 2013).

As university administrators and doctoral program faculty realize the need to help students persist in their chosen programs, they have begun to pay closer attention to incoming student orientations as meaningful opportunities to anticipate students' needs and address them in the early stages of the adjustment process (Derby & Watson, 2006; Poock, 2004). In a qualitative study of 20 doctoral students, Taub and Komives (1998) discovered that a first-semester student orientation was effective in accomplishing numerous goals: The orientation (a) provided prospective as well as incoming students with chances to evaluate their chosen profession and the program for fit; (b) offered timely, necessary information (e.g., assistantships); and (c) built a sense of community and connection between current students and program faculty. Some scholars noted that particular orientation components, such as social gatherings with classmates, arranging meetings with students and faculty advisors, introducing faculty to new students, and supplying information about support systems, could be extremely important for certain student populations (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Kennedy, 2013). For instance, ethnic minority students have been found to experience tremendous difficulties in predominantly White contexts (which characterizes most doctoral programs' student demographics) and may have a particularly strong need for supportive networks and communities in such environments (Gonzales, Hill-Traynham, & Jacobs, 2000); orientation programs that build social interactions and communities among participants can be of benefit to those students. In CE, Protivnak and Foss (2009) surveyed 141 CE doctoral students from the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited programs, ranging in age from 24 to 67, and reported that students were positively impacted by orientation activities.

CE program meetings have also been cited as opportunities to help develop incoming students' professional identities. These meetings are used as a learning environment to teach students about the mission of the CE program and profession, who counselor educators are, and how CE programs are different from other doctoral-level mental health programs. This notion is reflected by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards (2009) that require an orientation into the CE program and profession as one of the core knowledge areas in the graduate curriculum. The American Counseling Association's (ACA) *Code of Ethics* (2014) also explicitly states that CE programs must provide an orientation to matriculated, as well as prospective, students that should include specific information.

Purpose of the Study

A student's initial entry into a college program is widely understood to be a stage filled with potential barriers to success that could lead to attrition. As such, CE has embraced the importance of orienting students very early on in students' programs of study, as a means to prevent issues common amongst newly enrolled students. CE research literature, however, has not consistently investigated the content and quality of program orientations in relation to their alignment with and ability to meet students' needs. Although the topic of program orientations for doctoral students has been researched within other professions (e.g., Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006; Miller, et al., 2001), currently, there is no published study of doctoral student orientations in CE programs.

Despite the challenges and difficulties new doctoral students in CE programs encounter in the early stages of transition to doctoral education and the profession (Hughes & Kleist, 2005), understanding of student orientations and students' perceptions of them is largely absent in the counseling profession. Given the positives associated with orientations amongst students in other fields, it makes sense to explore CE doctoral students' orientations for similar results. That said, the present study's overarching research question was as follows: How do doctoral students perceive their orientation experiences in CE programs? One of the major goals of this question was to identify aspects of orientations CE doctoral students found to be most and least helpful in terms of supporting a successful transition to doctoral study. Developing an in-depth, baseline understanding of students' orientation perceptions has the potential to aid CE programs committed to enhancing newly admitted students' transition to and experiences in their respective programs and, subsequently, positively impact retention rates and academic success.

Methods

Participants

Twelve full-time equivalent doctoral students (7 female, 5 male) enrolled in CACREP-accredited CE programs participated in this study. Specifically, participants were from 10 different programs located in diverse regions of the US: three in the North Central Region, five in the Southern Region, one in the Rocky Mountain Region, and one in the Western Region. Nine of the programs were at public universities, and one was at a private university. Participants' mean age was 32 years, with a range of 27 to 52 years. Ethnicities represented were African American (n = 2), Asian (n = 1), Asian American (n = 1), Caucasian (n = 7), and Mexican American (n = 1). Participants' educational status varied from first-year student to Ph.D. candidate, with a median status of third-year student.

Research Team

The research team consisted of two researchers. At the time of study, the first author was a Korean female doctoral candidate in a CACREP-accredited counselor education program. She has engaged in qualitative research studies on multiple topics and has used consensual qualitative research (CQR) in her research. The second author was a Black male associate professor in the same counselor education program. He embraces counseling students' professional identity issues in the areas of his professional activities, including teaching, research, and service. Based on the literature review and personal experiences, the team presumed that unique issues and experiences of newly admitted doctoral students in CE orientation programs have not received the proper attention from counselor educators and were even overlooked in the counselor education field. Throughout this study, the team members communicated at least once a week through face-to-face meetings and emails and had discussions about potential biases to ensure that they did not unduly influence data analysis and interpretation.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to participant recruitment, approval from the Institutional Review Board was obtained. Participation was solicited via e-mail invitations sent out to two professional counseling listservs: Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET) and Counseling Graduate Students (COUNSGRAD). The following inclusion criteria were described for participation: (a) be a current and full-time equivalent doctoral student in a CACREP-accredited CE program, (b) have completed at least one semester of coursework, and (c) have participated in a student orientation for new doctoral students. Those who were interested in participating in the study were sent an email with a link to demographic and interview questions the authors created based on an extensive literature review. The authors elected to use an electronic approach to qualitative data collection for a variety of reasons: It (a) increased the likelihood of participant anonymity, (b) was time and cost effective (Jowett & Peel, 2009), and (c) was the platform through which the researchers gained access to individuals who shared specific interests, beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding the issue (Wright, 2005).

The demographic questions were related to participants' gender, ethnicity, age, educational status, program and university characteristics, and e-mail address for member checking. The interview questions asked participants to reflect on their doctoral student orientations, with questions associated with the following areas: (a) orientation form and structure, (b) orientation agenda items, (c) personal perceptions of the orientation, and (d) suggestions for specific information and activities for incoming students. Initially, 25 individuals participated; however, 13 participants' data were removed before data analysis because they either did not complete the questionnaire or did not participate in the member checking process.

The remaining 12 participants satisfied the sample size requirements needed to conduct consensual qualitative research (CQR) analysis (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997, 2005, 2012).

Data Analysis Procedures

The research team used CQR (Hill, et al., 1997, 2005, 2012) for data analysis. This method was selected because it has a number of unique characteristics designed to increase the likelihood of methodological triangulation, such as emphasizing the consensus process among researchers, obtaining perspectives from auditors, and examining the representativeness of results across cases (Hill et al., 1997, 2005, 2012). In the first step, each member of the research team independently examined the data to construct domains in order to group the data under similar topics. Each researcher divided responses into domains for each individual case. Then, as a group, they discussed the domains until they reached consensual agreement. After some discussion, they agreed on four domains. Once the domains were created, each member independently generated core ideas, brief summaries of each domain (Hill et al., 1997, 2005, 2012). Similar to the aforementioned consensus-building process, the research team met to discuss core ideas and reached consensus. The domains and core ideas created by the research team were sent to two external auditors who were experienced qualitative researchers and knowledgeable of the CQR approach. The auditors cross-examined the raw data, domains, and core ideas. The research team accepted suggestions from the auditors and finalized the domains and core ideas. For instance, the auditors suggested revisions such as changing the domain of "positive aspects of orientation," initially developed by the research team, to the domain of "support systems" and changing the domains of "negative aspects of orientation" and "suggestions for future orientations" into other domains (i.e., "goals and expectations" and "consideration of diversity"). Next, each researcher individually constructed categories across all cases. Categories illustrate similarities and consistencies in the core ideas across all the individual cases (Hill et al., 1997, 2005, 2012). Then, the researchers discussed their ideas together until consensus about the categories was reached. Once again, the categories created by the research team were given to the auditors for their judgment and feedback. A number of categories for each domain were finalized (Table 1).

To establish trustworthiness of the findings, first, the member-checking process was conducted by sending initial response to participants to ensure that what they intended to articulate was accurately represented and to clarify participants' statements. Second, the research team employed investigator triangulation by analyzing the data independently and then together (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2003). Third, the external auditors provided insights into the findings. Next, throughout the data analysis process, the research team revisited participant responses and took reflective notes of their emerging thoughts to stay aware of potential researcher biases (Charmaz, 2002). Finally, to accurately deliver

participants' meaning attached to their experiences, the research team used rich direct quotations from participant responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Four domains emanated from the data, with multiple categories under each domain. The final domains are as follows: (a) orientation structure, (b) support systems, (c) goals and expectations, and (d) consideration for diversity (Table 1). To ensure participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout the results.

TABLE 1

Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Student Orientations in Counselor Education Programs

Domains & Categories	General	Typical	Variant
Structure of orientation(s)			
One-time orientation/seminar		X	
In the beginning of a semester		X	
Faculty-led	X		
Using a student handbook as a major material		X	
Presentation & discussions		X	
Social gathering			X
Support systems			
Social & emotional support		X	
Information & resources		X	
Goals & expectations			
Articulation of orientation goals		X	
Consideration for diversity			
Consideration for diverse students' needs		X	
Follow-up orientations/seminars		X	

Note: "General" applies to all of the cases, "Typical" applies to half or more of the cases, and "Variant" applies to one or two cases.

Orientation Structure

Concerning communicating with incoming doctoral students, according to participants, most CE programs told students about orientation several weeks prior

to the beginning of classes. This information was communicated, primarily, by a program coordinator/director via email. As illustrated in Table 1, many programs provided one-time (without follow-ups) orientations for new doctoral students in the first few weeks of their first semester. One student reported taking a one-credit doctoral orientation class in the first semester. In terms of person(s) who led the orientation, all participants reported that one of the faculty members delivered orientation information. Regarding orientation material, 12 participants reported that they were provided with a doctoral student handbook and several other reference materials, such as resource sheets, including information about class schedules and financial support. Writing assistance opportunities were also provided in a few orientation programs. One participant reported that one week prior to the start of class, she was invited to "a kind of ice-cream social" as an informal doctoral orientation in which no materials were provided. The orientation format was typically a combination of faculty presentations and discussions with all orientation participants.

Support Systems

Two categories emerged for this domain: social and emotional support and information about the program and other resources. Nine participants described feeling a sense of community and belonging during orientation. The most common denominators among responses were participants' reports of receiving emotional support and social integration by having opportunities to connect with cohort members, senior students, and faculty members. Mary described meeting the professors and having time to spend with her new peers: "I quickly realized they are my family." Similarly, Sarah, an incoming African American student, mentioned,

I experienced social isolation and often felt [like] social misfits in many contexts prior to enrolling in the doctoral program…The orientation atmosphere encouraged establishing networks with other minority students which included open discussions about various "isms" [e.g., racism, sexism, classism, etc.] and different backgrounds. This openness alleviated my concerns about being isolated and further motivated me to pursue my academic endeavor.

Likewise, Patrick reported,

Orientation provided me with human resource[s] to approach with questions. The professor worked hard to promote a fun, warm, and welcoming environment. Senior colleagues' experiences and personal stories also relieved my anxiety [associated with] beginning a new career and made me feel connected in my program.

However, eight participants also expressed a desire for more support from faculty and senior student mentorship during orientations. Katherine, for example, seemed to want to build rapport with faculty prior to being paired with a faculty advisor:

I would recommend providing opportunities for one-on-one conversation and a meet-and-greet with all faculty. Establishing a good relationship or understanding with each of the faculty members in an effort to find the "right" person who you believe will be an advocate and mentor for you to succeed in the program is really needed in the orientation. I recognized that this was often hard and challenging to accomplish within the first semester.

Sally, on the other hand, did not seem to have an issue with selecting an advisor, but did articulate a desire to have her advisor present during the orientation process:

I had little knowledge of who does what within the department and often had to go to leaps and bound[s] to get ahold of the right person…[In the orientation], I was basically rushed out the door with no room for questions or concerns once student handbook and my class plan were checked over… It would have been comforting and helpful to have had my advisor welcoming me in the orientation process."

In terms of mentoring relationships with more advanced students, participants suggested an unofficial orientation with them to discuss faculty dynamics, tips to survive challenging courses, and strategies for managing policies. John suggested,

Having students in the cohorts ahead of me to discuss their personal experiences and having discussions with them while faculty is out of the orientation room would be helpful. The frankness of what is happening and how to prepare for the realities would be very helpful. At the doctoral level, I think many of the students in my program had gone through the politics of graduate school and felt they did not need things sugar coated but rather wanted to have the truth about what to expect.

Participants perceived linking incoming students with more experienced students to follow up with support as helpful.

Eleven participants described obtaining or wanting important information about how to be successful in their program. They seemed to appreciate receiving an introduction to doctoral study via a doctoral handbook, manual, and other written resources during student orientation. Most commonly addressed topics in written materials were suggested course schedules, program timelines, academic expectations, and general doctoral student duties and requirements. As Margret stated,

[Orientation] provided an overview of requirements and the expectations of me and the faculty within the program…Some useful information was also given about doctoral research, teaching opportunities, and what jobs to start looking at…As paying students, many of us carry a student debt load that will probably take some years to pay off. The debt we have incurred has been for the purpose of attaining a strong foundation in our field of endeavor so that, upon graduation, we become a strong candidate in our respective field. It was clear that the educational experiences at [university name] would help us be prepared as future counselor educators.

In addition to written materials, participants also frequently reported that senior colleagues led group discussions in which they disclosed a lot of valuable

information. They recalled a positive experience of meeting with current students who shared their personal experiences, information, and resources. Mary stated,

My difficulties stem from transitioning back into a productive academic routine, which has proved difficult for me personally. I heard from current students to provide helpful tips to survive, such as childcare, educational opportunities for family members, and social gatherings…. It would have been terribly difficult to stay [in the program] without this help.

However, eight participants also mentioned the necessity of well-prepared materials with enough information. Anna stated,

Having more complete information about the orientation and preparing questions and topics to discuss would be very helpful. I would have prepared a list of things that need to be accomplished and times when they need accomplished. A few weeks later, a professor said, "Oh, did you do this?" I just found out one week later that there were three different manuals for three different things. This did not allow for me to plan ahead. Letting us know up front all the requirements and time periods in a concrete [manner] and have all the forms would be important for us to be prepared.

Specific information participants stated they needed and expected in the orientations was identified as follows: researching tools, technological support, requirements for preliminary exams, dissertation expectations, how to use coursework toward dissertation, explanations about professional organizations, presentations in professional conferences, doctoral student work spaces, library resources, and a pamphlet on navigating everyday practicalities in the university and the city.

Goals and Expectations

Nine participants described struggles associated with not having goals and expectations presented during their respective orientations. As Anna recalled,

[Orientation] left me confused. I didn't know the purpose or goal of the session, so I do not know if I can really speak about this aspect. I felt kind of abandoned. It didn't seem very supportive, nor did what they were saying have any impact on what I ultimately experienced in the program. I felt as if the orientation was only being done because of CACREP, not out of concern for what I should expect from the program and what I would need to prepare and plan for later in my study.

Likewise, Katie stated that "Orientation did not allow for me to plan ahead. I didn't know what the goal of the orientation was exactly…Unfortunately, the person who led the orientation tended to get off track and told lots of interesting stories that were relevant, but only marginally so."

John also mentioned that:

The orientation seminar was very redundant if one had taken the time to review the doctoral handbook ahead of time. As for the research and academic review, it was obvious to me that doctoral-level studies would warrant such

high expectations, so being told so was nothing new or eye opening to me. Further explanations and detailed information about expectations of new doctoral students in the areas of research, teaching, and service should've been given.

Participants voiced that they had to spend a significant amount of time figuring out specific information regarding the "how to's" not the "why to's." According to David,

What was missing as I came in was some sort of guidance or structure around how to maximize my time being involved in research…Now I hear about the importance of doing research and making presentations, but reasons to do those things and resources such as technology programs were not explained in the orientation session. With the profession increasingly productive in research, there will be more research-oriented students entering the program in following years…If I had been able to access or know certain information earlier in the orientation, I would have been less stressed doing those activities and done more professionally.

To this end, seven participants suggested a need for clear goals and expectations during orientation. They recommended that programs have an agenda with clear goals and meet the goals in the orientation. For example, Katherine stated that

We sometimes learn by burn, and this sometimes makes us less effective in our work and life. If the orientation had clear objectives and had been designed as more learner-centered, reflecting requirements and students' needs, I could have saved my time and efforts to search for help and resources available for me. Setting clear goals and having directions should always come first.

Another participant, Katie, voiced that "I tried to do too much when I first began the doctoral program because I was oriented to do so…I don't know what the goal of the orientation session was. The orientation should've included emphasizing self-care and setting time boundaries in work and personal life as an important component."

Consideration of Diversity

Consideration for diverse students' needs and follow-up orientations and seminars were found to be two categories in this domain. Eight students reported their program's lack of respect for diverse students and their needs as a common experience. As Sally noted,

I was interested in the fact that the program's website indicated their drive for diversity. I got here and I realized the lack of minority students and the fact I was the only person of color in my cohort. This was very intimidating… The person who managed the orientation was not culturally sensitive. The orientation session was dominated by several Caucasian students and didn't seem to be carefully designed to meet needs of students from different educational and cultural backgrounds.

Similarly, David noted that

> The person who led the orientation didn't facilitate the environment where opinions and words from the student participants are welcome and respected, simply taking a top-down approach…At the graduate level, it should be assumed that students are mature enough to define their goals, and the program should be able to accommodate these differing needs and interests. It would be a mistake to provide "student orientations" to students without having sought the opinions and ideas from the students…I felt diverse students' opinions and needs starting their rigorous doctoral study were unheard.

The second category addressed among six participants was no follow-up orientation sessions. According to Margret,

> I think to have a follow-up orientation toward the end of the first semester would be good. We will have experienced the school culture by that time and may have questions or suggestions about what to tell the next group coming in. I guess it is more of a follow-up feedback session to the faculty about their initial orientation. This would also give an opportunity for faculty to adjust and understand how the orientation impacted our success in the first year of the program and adjust accordingly.

Likewise, Sally advocated for ongoing orientations, "such as meetings with people in leadership, opportunities to ask questions, social activities, and team builder[s] such as dinner together as follow-ups" to help new students stay supported within their networks.

Discussion and Implications

The data presented here have provided a glimpse into numerous concerns counselor educators may want to consider when developing a new student orientation. Orientations are crucial components for assisting in the reduction of retention barriers in any academic program (Derby & Watson, 2006). Clearly, the significance of student orientations cannot be overlooked when determining factors that contribute to successful degree completion. Research in scholarly CE journals, however, has been scant in relation to doctoral-level orientations and students' perspectives of them. Thus, this study sought to explore CE students' perceptions of doctoral-level orientations.

The findings highlight the need for CE programs to organize purposeful student orientations that take students' perspectives into consideration. It also revealed how the absence of goals and expectations very early in students' courses of study can lead to confusion and even feelings of abandonment. Student orientations with deliberate planning, it appears, have the potential to be quite significant to new students' academic success. This finding is similar to Hughes and Kleist (2005) who reported that doctoral students may experience feelings of self-doubt, increased anxiety regarding professional development, and low self-efficacy at the beginning stages of their respective programs. As such, student orientations,

we contend, ought to be intentional, that is, organized with well-defined goals, planned activities, and goals aligned with students' presumed and articulated needs.

Indeed, the findings suggest that information and resources presented during orientation be relevant to students' professional and personal needs (e.g., writing and assistantship opportunities, social activities, and childcare). Specifically, a need to feel welcomed and offered opportunities to establish supportive connections with faculty and other students cannot be understated as this has also been found in other research literature (see Brown, 2008). According to multiple scholars (e.g., Miller, et al., 2001; Motteram & Forrester, 2005; O'Gara, et al., 2009), a successful orientation contributes to a student's academic success and their social transition to doctoral studies, which both have been found to play a pivotal role in student retention. However, as some of the participants noted, if unsuccessful, an orientation may meet their social needs or academic needs, but not both. According to the findings, this was mainly due to a lack of preparedness for the orientation as many of the participants felt they were not aware of the goals of the orientation and were not sure of what types of questions they should prepare. Counselor educators are in a unique position to provide an orientation designed to provide crucial information, facilitate the development of positive relationships, and ease student anxiety. In doing this thoughtfully, the likelihood of positive results may increase. For example, some of the ethnic minority participants mentioned that they felt more at ease when other students of color were present at the orientation as it allowed them to form relationships with individuals that look like them. Obviously, this highlights the expressed need for increased recruitment of students of color—a topic quite common in higher education; however, for those programs with small numbers, it may be useful to have orientations that allow new students to see the other students of color in one place at one time.

To facilitate these developments, counselor educators can do several things to prepare for students for orientation. In addition to suggestions provided by the participants, counselor educators may ask incoming doctoral students to complete a survey prior to orientation that will allow them to supply questions they may ask about aspects of the process they are unsure of at the time. This would allow faculty to speak directly to students' needs and, as added value, allow incoming students to provide a list of informational items that would make their transition easier. Surveys could be completed by each cohort entering the program as specific needs and concerns probably vary each year. Further, by asking students about their individual needs as opposed to assuming, faculty could then make certain the interests of ethnic minority students are addressed. By using this approach, program faculty would then be in a position to address the survey responses during orientation, so the students know from the onset that their concerns are valued and that a supportive environment is in place to address their unique needs.

Additionally, program faculty may want to think about providing an orientation agenda to students in advance of the orientation so they can be prepared for the topics to be addressed. As students new to doctoral education, they may not know what to ask and, as result, will rely on faculty to anticipate

their needs, at least initially. Given the potential fear of the unknown, it is not out of the realm of possibility that some students may not ask questions during the initial orientation. As such, reaching out to students later on in their first semester could allow new students who might have been quiet to voice their concerns and feel supported as they navigate their environments. This could come in the form of another formal orientation, or the onus could be on each student's advisor to make arrangements to check in and report back to the program.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the potentially useful data gathered from this study, several limitations exist. First, the participants' responses were based on self-reporting of answers which, as stated previously, is time and cost effective, but solely relied on the participant's written responses. To that end, the researchers may have missed some elaboration that would add to the richness of the qualitative data through verbal and face-to-face communications. Second, to ensure methodological triangulation, it would have been helpful to use other types of data collection methods, such as interviews and focus groups, or a combination of both. Finally, much of the data seemed to be somewhat brief due to the inability to ask respondents detailed follow-up questions (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005). To minimize this limitation, it was explained that the questionnaire included open-ended questions that enabled participants to type as much as they wanted (no-limit text response boxes were provided) and that participants would be expected to provide their email address for further clarification of their responses as a form of member checking.

Future research investigations on graduate student orientation activities are needed as there is much to be learned. Possible research could explore the effectiveness of different delivery methods, such as online versus onsite orientation or a combination. In some cases, students move to attend graduate school so an online orientation informing them of basic things they should know and do could be helpful. In addition, future research is needed to explore the unique needs of students of color and international students as they transition into graduate study. These populations experience college and university life differently from ethnic majority students, so a greater understanding of their needs may help retain students and increase their success. Finally, newly admitted students receive invitations to many types of orientation-like events prior to the semester beginning. Future research to explore how institutions integrate these activities and how counselor educators support or advertise these events to help students make informed decisions about which would be most beneficial.

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