THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE

Teaching and Supervision in Counseling

Volume 4 | Issue 2 Article 3

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Housenecht, Alisa and Swank, Jacqueline () "Motivation, Belonging, and Support: Examining Persistence in Counseling Programs," *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc04g4iv
Available at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/tsc/vol4/iss2/3

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This article is available in Teaching and Supervision in Counseling: https://trace.tennessee.edu/tsc/vol4/iss2/3

TEACHING AND SUPERVISION IN COUNSELING
The official journal of the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision

Motivation, Belonging, and Support: Examining Persistence in Counseling Programs

Alisa Houseknecht, Jacqueline M. Swank https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc04g4iv

The rising racially and ethnically minoritized population in the United States challenges counselor educators to train racially and ethnically diverse counselors; therefore, there is a need to better understand the factors that affect persistence and retention of diverse students in counseling programs. The researchers examined the role of motivation (Academic Motivation Scale), sense of belonging (Campus Connectedness Scale), and social support (Student Academic Support Scale) on the persistence (3-item persistence measure) of 396 master's-level counseling students, including investigating differences between White and minoritized students. Pearson's correlations results revealed intention to persist was positively correlated with motivation ($r(394) = .44$, $p < .01$), belonging ($r(394) = .39$, $p < .01$), and social support ($r(394) = .01$, $p < .05$), and ANOVA results showed no significant differences were found between White and minoritized students. Counselor educators can improve student experiences by implementing strategies to create a diverse and inclusive community.

Keywords: counselor education, motivation, belonging, support

Racially and ethnically minoritized individuals (i.e., Blacks/African Americans, Hispanics/Latinx, Asians, American Indians, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders), referred to as minoritized individuals throughout this article, comprise approximately 25% of the U.S. population and projections indicate that by 2044 more than half of the nation's population is expected to be part of a minoritized race or ethnicity (Colby & Ortman, 2014). Scholars have discussed the need for greater diversity in the counseling profession, with a particular need to recruit and retain minoritized students in counselor preparation programs (Baggerly et al., 2017; Cabral & Smith, 2011; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017). Thus, the rising minoritized population in the United States challenges counselor educators to not only prepare culturally competent practitioners, but to recruit and train racially and ethnically diverse counselors.

Diversity in Counselor Education

Racial and ethnic diversity in counseling programs may generate more effective and culturally competent counselors. A diverse learning environment exposes students to a variety of ideas, experiences, and perspectives that can better prepare them to meet the needs of a multicultural society (Haslerig et al., 2013). Students in programs with a diverse student body reported an increased ability to work with members of other ethnic groups, increased acceptance of individuals from other cultural backgrounds, and increased participation in community-based activities after graduation (Rogers & Molina, 2006). In addition to enhancing the learning environment, minoritized students are needed as researchers and leaders whose perspectives can promote research, policies, and resource allocation that reflect the needs of underserved communities (Phillips & Malone, 2014).

Despite the benefits of having a racially and ethnically diverse student body, the lack of diversity in counselor education remains a challenge (Haizlip, 2012). According to the CACREP 2016 Annual Report, 59.2% of students and 73.6% of full-time faculty in CACREP-accredited programs were White (CACREP, 2017). Additionally, the graduation rate for students enrolled in CACREP

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master's programs was only 30% in 2015 (De Leon-Yznaga, 2017). CACREP does not provide disaggregated graduation rates for students enrolled in CACREP master's programs; therefore, it is difficult to know how many of the students who enroll in a graduate program, but do not graduate, are racial and ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, despite the lack of specific data regarding the graduation rates of minoritized students, there is a clear need to better understand the factors that affect persistence and retention of diverse students.

Minoritized Student Experiences in Higher Education

Although many minoritized students successfully obtain their master's degree in counseling, these students also report significant challenges, which affect persistence and graduation (Henfield et al., 2013; Seward, 2019). Scholars have identified three types of marginality that diverse students navigate during their graduate studies: (a) physical, cultural, and intellectual isolation; (b) tokenism; and (c) lack of support (Gay, 2004; Shavers & Moore, 2019; Woo et al., 2015). Prior research suggests that student engagement and retention depend on (a) feeling a sense of belonging within the academic environment, (b) social support through associations with similar groups of students and faculty, and (c) motivation to succeed based on personal goals and self-efficacy (McClain & Perry, 2017; Oh et al., 2019; Tinto, 2017).

Sense of Belonging

Master's students in counseling programs report experiencing physical isolation due to the lack of representation of peers or faculty from their own cultural or ethnic background and questioning their sense of belonging in the academic environment (Baker et al., 2015; Haskins et al., 2013; Yuan, 2017). In addition, minoritized students experience cultural isolation when they feel immersed in an environment that does not resemble their culture. The learning environment may include curriculum that is not culturally relevant, pedagogy that is insensitive to their cultural backgrounds and assumptions, or faculty and peer attitudes that reflect harmful stereotypes (Haskins et al., 2013; Henfield et al., 2013; Yuan, 2017). Lastly, these students experience intellectual isolation within the dynamics of the classroom when they perceive their courses are geared toward dominant cultures and position them as members of groups to be studied, rather than as learners (Steward, 2014). This can lead to microaggressions where they confront inequity, bias, or ignorance. Scholars have found that microaggressions are related to lower perceptions of belonging, and that the more students encounter negative race-related experiences, the less likely they are to perceive social support in their academic environment (Clark et al., 2012; O'Hara & Cook, 2018).

Social Support

Minoritized students may also experience problematic popularity or tokenism, which occurs when students are the only representative of a specific race or ethnicity. Students experiencing tokenism report being asked to represent perspectives of diversity in the classroom and may be singled out to become the designated representative for an entire racial or ethnic group (Baker et al., 2015; Shavers & Moore, 2019). Minoritized students may also experience benign neglect, which occurs when faculty do not provide the necessary instruction or feedback, such as probing or clarifying their ideas due to a lack of knowledge about or experiences with ethnic and cultural diversity (Gay, 2004). Scholars have found that counseling students experience benign neglect when they report discrepancies in the level of support received by faculty or peers compared to their White peers, including lack of access to opportunities such as mentoring or research, and unclear and ambiguous standards for performance evaluation (Baker et al., 2015; Haskins et al., 2013). Poor support combined with feelings of isolation that arise when a student does not feel a sense of belonging in their program significantly affect academic persistence, especially for Black students (Shavers & Moore, 2019).

Motivation

Minoritized students may also differ in their motivation for pursuing a counseling degree. A few scholars have examined the reasons why minoritized students pursue counseling degrees,

which illuminates potential intrinsic (e.g., learning, affiliation, autonomy) and extrinsic (e.g., income, occupation) motives that may be associated with degree persistence and completion. Olive (2014) explored first-generation Hispanic students' desire to enroll in a counselor preparation program and identified several themes: (a) resilience, persistence, and self-efficacy; (b) altruistic motivation to professionally help others; and (c) a view of commitment to a counseling degree as a nonlinear but preferred process. Hipolito-Delgado et al. (2017) found similar themes in exploring factors that encouraged and discouraged eight students of color from pursuing careers in counseling. Participants reported pursuing a counseling degree based on their belief that there is a need to diversify the counseling profession and they expressed a desire for a diverse curriculum, faculty, and learning environment (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017).

The limited literature regarding minoritized students' experiences and perceptions of sense of belonging, social support, and motivation in counseling preparation programs is conceptual and qualitative in nature (Baker et al., 2015; Gay, 2004; Haskins et al., 2013; Henfield et al., 2013). A review of the current literature suggests that there is a need for additional research that quantitatively examines the role of these factors on minoritized student persistence using a representative sample of counselor education students across institutions (Haskins et al., 2013; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017). Thus, the aim of this study was to examine how motivation, social support, and sense of belonging affect persistence as defined by intention to persist. Additionally, the relationships and differences among the factors were examined by comparing White and minoritized students. The following research questions guided this investigation: (a) What is the relationship between master's-level counseling students' perceptions of their social support, sense of belonging, and academic motivation and intention to persist? and (b) What are the differences between White and minoritized master's-level counseling students' perceptions of their social support, sense of belonging, and motivation?

Method

Participants

The targeted population was counseling students currently enrolled in master's-level CACREP-accredited counseling program. The researchers aimed to recruit participants from two groups: racially and ethnically minoritized students and White students. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 65 years, with a mean age of 30.05 years (SD = 8.77). Regarding sex, 84.8% (*n* = 335) of the participants identified as female, 14.2% (*n* = 56) as male, 1% (*n* = 4) as other, and one person did not respond. Racial/ethnic composition of the sample was 70.7% (*n* = 280) White, 16.2% (*n* = 64) Hispanic, 11.4% (*n* = 45) Black or African American/Non-Hispanic, 5.3% (*n* = 21) Mixed Racial, 3.8% (*n* = 15) Asian, 1.3% (*n* = 5) American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.3% (*n* = 1) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 1.8% (*n* = 7) other. Forty-two (10.6%) participants selected more than one race/ethnicity. Thirty-one percent (*n* = 121) of the sample identified as a racially/ethnically minoritized, 39.6% (*n* = 157) indicated they were a first-generation college student, and 2% (*n* = 8) reported they were an international student.

Regarding the location of their institution, 42.5% (*n* = 168) of the sample indicated that their program was in the Southern region, 35.7% (*n* = 141) in the North Central region, 9.9% (*n* = 39) in the Western region, 7.1% (*n* = 28) in the Rocky Mountain region, and 4.8% (*n* = 19) in the North Atlantic region. Fifty-seven percent (*n* = 223) of the sample reported that their program is face-to-face, 40.4% (*n* = 160) indicated a hybrid or blended format, and 3% (*n* = 12) reported a fully online program. The majority of the sample (75.5%; *n* = 299) reported attending a 60-credit hour program. Twenty-eight percent (*n* = 112) of the sample indicated that they had completed 9 or less credit hours, suggesting they were in their first semester. Additionally, 35.4% (*n* =140) reported they attended their current institution for their undergraduate degree.

The majority of the sample (78.5%; *n* = 311) indicated that their grade point average ranged between 3.7 to 4.0 on a 4.0 scale. Regarding intention to continue in their program, 84.8% (*n* =

336) reported they planned to attend their program next semester and 86.4% (*n* = 342) reported they intended to register for classes for the next semester. Additionally, 10% (*n* = 40) of the sample reported they were graduating at the end of the current semester.

Procedure

The researchers used a multistage cluster sampling method to select programs from different regions of the United States to ensure the inclusion of geographically diverse programs. Following approval from the institutional review board, the first author developed a list of master's-level CACREP-accredited counseling programs (*N* = 397) listed on the CACREP website. Then, she selected 20% of programs from each of the five regions of the United States as defined by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES): North Atlantic (*n* = 15), North Central (*n* = 20), Rocky Mountain (*n* = 5), Southern (*n* = 32), and Western (*n* = 7). Next, this researcher emailed and invited faculty (*N* = 625) at each of these programs, listed on program websites, to distribute study information to students in their programs. The recruitment email included a link to the Qualtrics survey. The researchers offered $25 Amazon gift cards to every 20th participant that completed the survey. The authors obtained contact information separately from survey responses to ensure confidentiality, and gift card recipients were notified at the end of data collection. A total of 502 participants attempted the survey, and 409 participants completed the full survey (81.5% completion rate). Participants that did not meet the study criteria, such as not attending a CACREP-accredited program (*n* = 13) were excluded from analysis; therefore, data collection yielded 396 useable surveys.

Instrumentation

AMS. The Academic Motivation Scale (AMS; Vallerand et al., 1992) is a 28-item instrument designed to assess college students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The instrument has seven subscales: (a) three subscales of intrinsic motivation (to know, toward accomplishment, and to experience stimulation); (b) three subscales of extrinsic motivation (identified, introjected, and external regulation); and (c) one subscale of amotivation (lack of motivation). The item stem for all questions is "Why do you go to college?" Individuals respond using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 7 (*corresponds exactly*) to 1 (*does not correspond at all*). A self-determination index ranging from –18 (*very little self-determination*) to +18 (*extreme self-determination*) is calculated from an individual's total score by finding the mean response for each of the subscales and then inserting these means into the self-determination index formula (Vallerand et al., 1992). The AMS was normed using a sample of 745 undergraduate college students and the Cronbach's alpha for each scale varied from .83 to .86, indicating strong internal consistency. Additionally, the researchers found strong concurrent and construct validity for the instrument among a sample of 217 undergraduate students (Vallerand et al., 1993). For this study, the researchers changed the wording on several items of the AMS to more appropriately assess graduate students' perceptions. Although researchers have not validated the AMS for use with graduate students or counseling students in particular, the Cronbach's alpha for the AMS in the current study was .90.

SASS. The Student Academic Support Scale (SASS; Thompson & Mazer, 2009) is a 15-item multidimensional instrument assessing informational, esteem, motivational, and venting support. Individuals use the instrument to assess two major categories of student academic support: (a) action-facilitating academic support (student support that directly assists another student with an academic problem), and (b) nurturant academic support (student support that offers comfort to cope with stress related to an academic problem; Thompson & Mazer, 2009). Respondents indicate how often each type of support has been offered by a friend in a specific class over the last month. The SASS includes a 5-point Likert-type scale (*not at all, once or twice, about once a week, several times a week, about every day*). Thompson and Mazer (2009) found strong internal consistency for all four factors of the SASS (informational support, α = .91; esteem support, α = .83; motivational support, α =

.85; and venting support, α = .82) with a sample of 148 undergraduate students. Additionally, the scale has shown strong validity, including: convergent validity with other social support scales (e.g., Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors); construct validity to other theoretically similar constructs (e.g., relational closeness, student motivation, engagement); and discriminant validity evidence suggesting that the SASS is distinct from measures of traditional social support (e.g., Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support; Mazer & Thompson, 2011a, 2011b). Although researchers have not validated the SASS for use with graduate students or counseling students in particular, the Cronbach's alpha for the SASS in this study was .94.

CCS. The Campus Connectedness Scale (CCS; Lee & Davis, 2000) is a 14-item instrument designed to measure a student's psychological sense of belonging on campus. Individuals respond to each item by indicating the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement using a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 6 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Lee and Davis (2000) found strong internal consistency (α = .92) for the CCS among 104 undergraduate students. Additionally, the CCS has strong construct validity for college students and is positively correlated with psychological sense of community and self-esteem, and negatively correlated with psychological stress (Lee & Davis, 2000). For this study, the researchers changed the wording on several items of the CCS to more appropriately assess students' perceptions of their program, rather than college or the campus in general. Although researchers have not validated the SASS for use with graduate students or counseling students in particular, the Cronbach's alpha for the CCS in this study was .95.

Demographic questionnaire. The researchers developed a questionnaire to assess both personal (i.e., race/ethnicity, sex, GPA, age, number of credit hours completed) and programmatic characteristics (i.e., location, accreditation, class format, number of credit hours required) that can affect a student's perceptions and experience. The researchers also measured intention to persist using 3 items developed by Hardre and Reeve (2003): (a) I sometimes consider dropping out of school (program), (b) I intend to drop out of school (program), and (c) I sometimes feel unsure about continuing my studies year after year. Individuals respond to each of the 3 items using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 7 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Vallerand et al. (1997) found that the first 2 items strongly predicted student retention 1 year later in a sample of 4,537 high school students. Hardre and Reeve (2003) added the third item in order to increase the scope and reliability of the measure and found that students' scores on the original 2-item measure correlated highly with students' scores on the 3-item measure ($r = .97$, $p < .01$). Additionally, they reported acceptable internal consistency (α = .79) for the 3-item measure among a sample of 483 high school students (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). The Cronbach's alpha for the 3-item measure in this study was .74.

Results

The researchers chose a cross-sectional, correlational design to examine the relationships and differences between the variables. An a priori power analysis using G* Power (Version 3.1; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that 102 participants was the minimum sample size needed to detect a medium effect size ($r = 0.5$; Power = .80; Cohen, 1992) using the traditional .05 alpha level criterion for statistical significance (Balkin & Sheperis, 2011). Data was transferred from the Qualtrics survey platform and analyzed using SPSS (Version 24).

The first author screened the data for accuracy and missing values, and conducted preliminary analyses. Additionally, the researchers calculated descriptive statistics for the demographic questions and conducted reliability analyses for the instruments. The data for three of the four variables (social support, belonging, persistence) violated the assumption of normality. In order to adjust for outliers and normalize the distributions for the outcome variables, the researchers used 5% trimmed means based on the variable with the most significant violation of normality (belonging; $N = 356$; Yuen, 1974). Cases with missing data were excluded analysis by analysis. The first author conducted parametric analyses (Pearson's

correlations and an ANOVA) to analyze the data. The use of an ANOVA when data is not normally distributed in large samples ($n > 30$) is supported by the central limit theorem (Chang et al., 2006; Feller, 1945), especially in the social sciences (Micceri, 1989). The data violated the assumptions of more sophisticated analyses such as multiple regression and structural equation modeling. Transformations of the variables were also unsuccessful. Therefore, the authors were unable to examine differences across groups for each of the three variables.

The first author calculated the means, standard deviations, and coefficient alphas for the four variables under investigation (i.e., motivation, social support, belonging, and persistence). The results of these calculations, as well as Pearson's correlations between the variables, are presented in Table 1. The researchers examined the first research question (i.e., What is the relationship between motivation, social support, belonging, and participants' intention to persist in their program?) through Pearson's correlations. They found a statistically significant, positive correlation between social support and belonging, motivation and social support, and motivation and belonging. Regarding persistence, they also found a statistically significant, positive correlation between intention to persist and all three predictor variables.

The researchers performed an ANOVA to examine research question two (i.e., What are the differences between White and minoritized students' perceptions of their social support, belonging, and academic motivation?). The results revealed no statistically significant differences between White and minoritized students and their motivation, F (1, 350) = .061, p = .806; sense of belonging, F (1, 350) = 1.900, p = .169; perceptions of social support, F (1, 349) = .059, p = .808; and intention to persist, F (1, 348) = 1.765, p = .185.

Discussion

The results suggest that having higher self-determination (i.e., being more intrinsically motivated), strong social support, and greater sense of belonging are all positively correlated with a counseling student's intention to persist in their program. These findings are consistent with Tinto's (2017) assertion that a student's social integration into the academic environment, including relationships with peer groups and a perceived sense of belonging, contributes to persistence and retention. Additionally, the current findings support previous research that showed positive relationships between sense of belonging and motivation, academic and long-term success, and persistence and retention (Strayhorn, 2008; Tovar et al., 2009).

Interestingly, the researchers found no significant differences in motivation, social support, sense of belonging, and intention to persist between White and minoritized students. These results are contrary to qualitative findings examining the experiences of minoritized students in graduate education (Gay, 2004; Yuan, 2017), and specifically in counselor

Table 1

Pearson's Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Alphas

	Motivation	Social Support	Sense of Belonging	Persistence
Motivation	–			
Social Support	.12*	–		
Sense of Belonging	.29**	.37**	–	
Persistence	.44**	.01*	.39**	–
Means	8.01	8.75	73.34	6.31
SD	2.95	3.36	11.65	1.03
Alpha	.90	.94	.95	.74

Note. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed; * $p < .05$, two-tailed

preparation programs (Baker et al., 2015; Haskins et al., 2013; Henfield et al., 2013; Seward, 2019; Shavers & Moore, 2019).

It is difficult to know why the results from this study are different from previous qualitative studies. There are many interconnected factors that affect student experiences in their programs including cognitive, social, and institutional (Hamshire et al., 2013; Swail, 2004). Cognitive factors relate to academic abilities, such as knowledge and skills that the student brings to the college environment. Social factors include a student's maturity, communication skills, family and peer influence, and financial issues. Institutional factors (i.e., practices, strategies, culture of the university) are associated with an institution's ability to provide the necessary academic and social support for students to succeed (Swail, 2004).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are limitations to consider in this study. The participant recruiting procedure was dependent on the assistance of faculty at randomly selected programs. The number of students who received the invitation to participate is unknown, and therefore, it is not possible to report an accurate response rate. The majority of our sample was White (70.7%) and female (84.8%), with a mean age of 30.05 years. The limited number of men and nontraditionally aged students in our study may suggest that our findings are not representative of their perceptions and experiences. Additionally, the correlational study design allowed the researchers to only assess relationships between the variables and not causation. Finally, although the instruments were reviewed by counselor educators for their appropriateness in the use of this study, researchers have not validated the AMS, SASS, and CCS for use with graduate students, minoritized students, or counseling students in particular. The wording on several items of the AMS and CCS was changed to more appropriately assess students' perceptions of their program, rather than college or the campus in general. This may have affected the validity of the AMS, SASS, and CCS in this study.

The results from this quantitative study provide a better understanding of the perceptions of both White and minoritized students in counselor preparation programs and could help inform culturally inclusive practices. Future research may include a sample of students at various stages of the program (i.e., practicum, internship), specific populations (i.e., age, race/ethnicity), and students in different semesters of the program to provide further insight into the factors that may affect persistence. Scholars may further examine whether various factors (i.e., faculty mentoring, cultural climate, microaggressions) affect student perceptions and experiences. Finally, longitudinal or qualitative studies examining factors that influence students' decisions to leave or drop out of counseling programs may be beneficial given the paucity of research in this area.

Implications

The results of this study suggest a need for counselor preparation programs to conduct self-assessments to determine the climate of the academic environment for all students. Faculty and administrators should examine university and program-level practices and policies to determine the extent to which they may perpetuate the marginalization of any student. This could include an assessment of (a) the structure, pedagogy, and mission of the institution and program, (b) compositional diversity (numerical representation of various social identity groups in the student body and faculty), (c) reported instances of race-related discrimination or harassment, (d) availability of campus or program diversity activities, and (e) the development of multicultural and social justice competencies (Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013). It is imperative that programs take a proactive approach to developing an inclusive environment that is culturally responsive to all students upon admission and as they progress throughout the program.

Counselor educators may also examine the challenges and supports that exist within their programs for students. This requires understanding what motivates students to become counselors, as well as their needs for belonging and diverse peer

and faculty support. In this study, the researchers found that motivation, social support, and belonging positively correlated with a student's intention to persist in their program. Students who are motivated to pursue a counseling degree, with the goal of diversifying the profession, expressed a desire for a diverse curriculum, faculty, and learning environment (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017; Seward, 2019). Researchers found that participating in diversity-related activities, such as racial/ethnic organizations or taking courses that focus on diversity issues, positively influenced multiple learning outcomes, including cultivating supportive relationships and developing multicultural competencies (Hurtado et al., 2012). Faculty need to ensure that they foster an inclusive climate by promoting diverse perspectives in the classroom, acknowledging and refraining from using students as token representatives in class discussions, and providing culturally relevant learning experiences for all students. This requires that faculty are comfortable and skilled in managing challenging experiences, such as discussions around diversity, equity, and inclusion, as they integrate multicultural perspectives into their teaching and supervision practices. Scholars have found that professional development opportunities can be beneficial for developing faculty skills and ensuring that they are prepared to manage the unique classroom dynamics around diversity issues and foster an inclusive environment (Rogers & Molina, 2006).

Programs can support students by creating opportunities for informal interactions with faculty and peers in various settings. Organizing program meetings to discuss programmatic challenges, critical incidents, or student accomplishments can create an inclusive community that values student perceptions and experiences. Program orientations and panel discussions with diverse students in various stages of the program can also provide students with opportunities to develop supportive relationships with peers outside of the classroom. Additionally, using virtual communication such as listservs or social media sites to post announcements, such as available resources, can create a sense of inclusion and ensure that opportunities are accessible to all students. Disseminating information, including mentoring or research opportunities, so that all students receive the information, can help students feel equally valued (Baker et al., 2015; Haskins et al., 2013). Thus, counselor educators can improve the persistence and retention of both White and minoritized students by creating a diverse and inclusive community.

Conclusion

Although many minoritized students successfully obtain their master's degree in counseling, these students also report social and academic challenges throughout their graduate studies. In this study, intention to persist was positively correlated with motivation, belonging, and social support and no significant differences were found between White and minoritized students. Counselor educators can improve student experiences by examining the challenges and supports that exist within their programs and implementing strategies to ensure a diverse and inclusive community.

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