Culturally Responsive Distance Counselor Education for International Counseling Students

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Abstract

Counselor education programs have increasingly offered distance education during the last decades. As one of the growing student populations in counselor education programs, international students need to be given more attention pertaining to their cultural and educational experiences as counseling students. Although distance learning in counselor education has gained empirical support for its effectiveness, it may still pose challenges to international counseling students due to their unique characteristics such as language barriers and cultural differences, which may render differing qualities of students' learning experiences. Aiming to enhance our understanding of this student population to provide culturally responsive distance counselor education, the present article introduces international students in the context of distance counselor education and discusses implications for supporting international students in distance counselor education.

According to the U.S. Department of Educations' Office of Postsecondary Education (2012), the distance education program was defined as at least 50% or more of the instruction offered via distance technologies. As the time of this manuscript, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) reported that there are 916 CACREP-accredited master's and doctoral programs, and 115 of them have been identified as programs providing online format (CACREP, 2022), and an increased number of counselor education programs have offered distance education. Accordingly, topics such as the benefits and challenges of distance counselor education, pedagogical strategies for training counselors, and different formats of distance counselor education have been discussed for more than two decades. Although distance learning in counselor education has gained empirical support for its effectiveness (Holmes et al., 2019), there is limited information about international students' experiences and perspectives in distance counselor education (Chen et al., 2020). Given that more than a half of CACREP-accredited programs

had international doctoral students (Ng, 2006), counselor education programs should give more attention to international students regarding their cultural and educational experiences as counselor educators-in-training (Lau & Ng, 2012; Smith & Ng, 2009). Thus, this article is to discuss international students' experiences in distance counselor education and provide suggestions for counselor educators to better support international students in their programs.

International Students in Counselor Education

According to the Institute of International Education (2021), the number of international students in higher education institutions had steadily increased and reached 1,095,299 in 2018 although the number decreased to 914,095 in 2020 after the emergence of the COVID-19. It is known that international students come to the United States to experience new cultures, to enhance their cultural competence, and to achieve future success (Sherry et al., 2010).

In the counselor education field, there has been a considerable increase of international students in

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counseling programs. According to Ng (2006), 41% of the counseling programs surveyed had at least one international student, and nearly half of the counseling programs surveyed had at least one international student in the last three years. While counselor education programs seem to be successful in attracting, enrolling, and retaining international students, they may not have sufficiently addressed the unique experiences, challenges, and training needs of international students in relation to distance education. Researchers have found that international counseling students commonly experience challenges caused by language barriers, cultural differences, lack of social support, financial stress, racial discrimination, and differences in the education system (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Tochkov et al., 2010). Despite the challenges, previous studies have also recognized that international students are the unique contributors to counselor education programs by offering diverse experiences and perspectives beyond the U.S. borders and instilling class discussions regarding multicultural issues (Lau & Ng, 2012; Mittal & Wieling, 2006).

Distance Education in Counselor Education
Distance education provides a greater degree of flexibility, affordability, and accessibility to students and faculty who have previously experienced constraints due to geographic locations, cost, and lifestyle (Sheperis et al., 2020; Snow & Coker 2020; Wasik et al., 2019). Researchers found that students in distance learning often consisted of non-traditional students who identify as full-time workers and are geographically diverse (Barril, 2017) and reported the greater enrollment by students from underrepresented populations (Buzwell et al., 2016). Moreover, counselor education programs offer different types of online training formats, including asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid (Sheperis et al., 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020), and such programs utilize various platforms and technologies to provide an effective learning environment for counseling students.

Despite the benefits of distance education, concerns related to cybersecurity, privacy, and technical difficulties have been addressed in counselor education programs as well (Snow & Coker 2020; Snow et al., 2018). For example, students and faculty heavily rely on web-based platforms in distance counselor education, so the students' learning experiences could be interrupted during class due to technical issues such as internet breakdown, computer malfunction, or inaccurate passwords. Moreover, students often experience a lack of communication and connections to peers and faculty in the online learning community (Lu, 2017); however, the collaboration between students and faculty is crucial to create a positive learning environment regardless of the format of distance counselor education.

International Students in Distance Counselor Education
While international counseling students may experience additional challenges in distance learning because of its unique nature where social contact and communication are limited and students may easily be disengaged, distance counselor education may also pose advantages to international students (Paudel, 2021; Samuel, 2015). Distance counselor education provides access to international students to attend counseling programs in the United States due to its unique characteristics such as having no geographic restrictions or offering asynchronous courses (Kung, 2017). Furthermore, the use of advanced technology may enhance international students' academic efficiency while they are attending the class (e.g., using captions to understand lectures, using translation apps to comprehend in-class readings). International students can participate in class through various ways beyond oral participation by using functions and apps (e.g., writing in chat, voting on Kahoot). These different channels of participation opportunities encourage international students' engagement because some of them may not be familiar or confident with oral participation unlike domestic students.

Suggestions for Counselor Educators
Step-by-Step Instructions
It is important that counselor educators understand the different needs of international students so that they can better support students in their learning process. Because barriers to international counseling students' learning are diverse (e.g., language difficulty, cultural difference), counselor educators should take efforts to understand students' own challenges and needs and assess their learning process in distance education. For example, when international counseling students are new to an online learning platform and all the terms are not familiar to them, it is recommended that counselor educators provide step-by-step instructions or demonstrations on navigating the course platform in the first class and then follow up with the students to make sure that they have become familiar with the system. In addition, international students come from over 200 countries, so they have been in different educational systems with diverse individual preferences on learning modules. Thus, counselor educators should be aware of diverse preferences and needs and reflect them in their teaching.

Relationship Building
In distance counselor education, international students

may not have opportunities to interact or meet with their peers, thus having limited peer support. International counseling students often have difficulties in mingling with domestic students due to language barriers and cultural differences (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Sherry et al., 2010), and this particular student population is known to experience high levels of isolation in distance learning (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). Therefore, it is critical for international counseling students to have opportunities to build a bond in their distance learning process. In order to help international counseling students to build relationships with domestic students, group work should be promoted. However, international students are often left out from a large group because of many barriers such as language difficulties and lack of common interests; thus, discussions and activities as a small group may benefit international counseling students as they may have more one-on-one interactions with their classmates. Holding online gatherings can create a supportive space for international students in distance counselor education. Thus, it is suggested that counselor educators facilitate a regular or frequent online gathering for students such as Zoom Cafe.

Diversified Communication Methods

Counselor educators' additional efforts to diversify communication methods can be impactful especially for international counseling students whose unique challenges usually address language barriers. For example, explicitly utilizing chat functions and closed captions in video conferencing programs (e.g., Zoom, WebEx) would benefit international counseling students as they tend to find written communication easier than verbal communication (Sherry et al., 2010). Also, counselor educators' dissemination of important information such as instructions or deadlines can be diversified. In addition to their verbal announcements, the inclusion of the information in presentation slides would be helpful. Moreover, as distance learning may make verbal participation more limited and complicated in general (Jung, 2021), diversifying evaluation methods for student participation may render more accurate and fairer ways to capture students' performance than only considering verbal interactions as student participation.

Ongoing Communication

Counselor educators are required to support, facilitate, and ensure the quality education for all students through regular and substantive interactions with students. To foster community building and quality student engagement, counselor educators should actively reach out to international students and discuss their experiences in distance education pertaining to the overall online learning environment, course materials, and course assignments (Wasik et al., 2019). Instructor-initiated communication with international students may lead to effective and collaborative learning experiences for the students.

Additionally, counselor educators can create a supportive online learning environment for international students through timely and relevant communications. Sheperis and colleagues (2020) found that students emphasized the importance of having email, phone, and video chat communication with faculty to acknowledge their self-worth and eventually showed more satisfaction with distance education. To reduce the burden of asking and/or writing a request for individual meetings, counselor educators may benefit international counseling students by utilizing online meeting scheduling tools (e.g., Doodle, Acuityscheduling).

Conclusion

As more international students join distance counselor education programs, it is important for counselor educators to understand each student's needs and difficulties so that the educators take more advantage of distance education when educating international counseling students by providing a culturally responsive environment. In this article, different strategies were discussed for counselor educators to create a culturally responsive and supportive learning environment and to meet diverse needs of international students in distance counselor education. First, counselor educators need to provide step-by-step instructions while monitoring each international student's learning process. Second, counselor educators are encouraged to support international students to build relationships with domestic students by providing small group activities in class and facilitating events such as Zoom Cafe for social gathering outside of class. Third, counselor educators should open diverse channels to communicate with international students such as chat functions, closed captions, and written announcements in presentation slides. Lastly, ongoing communication through regular and substantive interactions should be promoted by counselor educators in order to increase international counseling students' engagement. By creating a culturally responsive environment in distance counselor education through the aforementioned suggestions, counselor educators can better deliver information and knowledge, support international students, and encourage the students' engagement, which in turn lead to quality education and effective learning for international counseling students.

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