A Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Online Counselor Training Program Delivery and Instruction

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Computer-enhanced counselor education dates as far back as 1984, and since that time counselor training programs have expanded to include instructional delivery in traditional, hybrid, and fully online programs. While traditional schools still house a majority of accredited programs, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) has accredited almost 40 fully online counselor education programs. The purpose of this article is to outline the similarities and differences between CACREP-accredited online or distance education and traditional program delivery and instruction. Topics include andragogy, engagement, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and gatekeeping.

Keywords: **online, distance education, counselor education, andragogy, CACREP**

Online counselor education training programs have continued to be developed year after year and have grown in both popularity and effectiveness. Recent trends in graduate education reflect online instruction as part of common practice (Kumar et al., 2019). Virtual training opportunities promote access for students who might not otherwise be able to participate in advanced education, and for some students, distance learning can be the ideal method to further their education as they strive to balance enrollment with remote geography, family life, and employment commitments. However, regardless of instructional setting, all counselor training programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) have distinct similarities. For example, CACREP-accredited programs are by nature graduate programs. There are no CACREP-accredited counselor training programs at the bachelor's level or the doctoral level. To clarify, CACREP does offer accreditation for doctoral programs; however, most are focused on counselor education and supervision, and the curriculum is geared toward instructor and supervisor preparation versus counselor training. Thus, in every academic setting, master's-level CACREP-accredited professional counselor training programs are simultaneously an introductory and a terminal degree. Both online and traditional programs must be prepared to design and deliver curriculum to students of various educational backgrounds that will ultimately equip graduates with the skills and dispositions needed for professional practice. As graduate students, enrollment is fully comprised of adult learners and this holds true regardless of instructional setting. Interestingly, most professional counseling literature uses the term *pedagogy* to reference the facilitation of learning within counselor training. For the purposes of this article, we will utilize the term *andragogy*, which is "the art and science of teaching adults" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Counselor Education and Andragogy

Professional counseling literature related to andragogy is scarce and largely contains studies focused on meeting the needs of diverse students and preparing counselors to work with culturally diverse

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clients. Barrio Minton et al. (2014) conducted a 10-year content analysis of studies related to teaching and learning in counselor education, and the large majority of the studies grounded counselor preparation andragogy in counseling literature and theory as opposed to learning theories or research. Efforts to identify research specific to the andragogy of online counselor training produced minimal results, and a clear gap in the literature exists for empirical research when comparing online and traditional learning and instructional delivery. What did emerge from the research was debate regarding whether an online environment is appropriate to teach adult learners curriculum of the interpersonal nature of counseling (Lucas & Murdock, 2014). However, empirical evidence does exist to support the delivery of instruction in online academic environments as effective, although they require different andragogical methods and teaching practices (Cicco, 2013a). Additionally, studies on online education in higher education suggest that differences in student learning outcomes for traditional students and online students are not statistically significant (Buzwell et al., 2016). In fact, some evidence demonstrates superior outcomes in students enrolled in online courses (Allen et al., 2016). However, student perceptions of online learning and learning technologies outweighed pedagogy for impact on the quality of academic achievement (Ellis & Bliuc, 2019). Thus, emerging research on both method and student perceptions supports online counselor education as a viable instructional approach.

Characteristics of Online Learners

Before examining the similarities and differences in instructional practice and curriculum development between online and brick-and-mortar settings, consideration for the composition of the student body is warranted. The student body for both online and traditional programs have a higher enrollment of female versus male students and Caucasian versus other ethnicities across genders (CACREP, 2017). Because online programs are often comprised of non-traditional students who work full-time and are geographically diverse, this invites a student enrollment varied in age, race, ethnicity, physical ability, and educational background (Barril, 2017). Online training programs also demonstrate greater enrollment by learners from underrepresented populations (Buzwell et al., 2016).

Online Education Stakeholders

When we compare traditional programs and their online counterparts, the primary stakeholders for both settings include students and faculty members. In counselor training programs, the clients the graduates will serve also are stakeholders. The processes that occur in both traditional and online classrooms are aligned, with the "foci being teaching, learning, and . . . evaluation" (Cicco, 2013b, p. 1).

In 2018, Snow et al. conducted a study examining the current practices in online counselor education. The results indicated that overall, faculty instructors for online settings indicate a smaller class size with a reported mean enrollment of 15.5 students compared to traditional classroom enrollment of 25 or more. The study showed that both online and traditional programs utilize a variety of strategies for course enrollment, including both student-driven course selection and program-guided course enrollment within the learning community.

Learning Community

As previously mentioned, student perceptions of online learning emerged in the literature as a key for student academic success. However, research suggests that attrition rates for online students are much higher than those in traditional programs (Murdock & Williams, 2011). It has been suggested that elevated attrition rates in online programs could be related to students lacking a sense of connection to peers and program faculty and an insufficient learning community (Lu, 2017). Research reveals that the use of learning communities has proven successful in improving the retention rates (DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Kebble, 2017). The type and frequency of student-to-student and student-to-faculty

interactions in online versus traditional programs are different. In both settings, scholars seek a valuable learning experience (Onodipe et al., 2016). However, while social interaction is a routine part of face-to-face learning, the online environment requires intentional effort to promote interaction between learners and faculty. Research has suggested that online learners need assignments and activities that emphasize the promotion of connection with both the material and peers and faculty (Lu, 2017). At a basic level, affirmation for a job well done on an assignment and prompt and comprehensive feedback are examples of faculty–student engagement that produce student satisfaction regardless of instructional setting (O'Shea et al., 2015). However, we contend these sorts of intentional, personalized instructional interactions are critical for online students who could otherwise feel alienated or isolated in the online learning environment. For online educators, one requirement is to persistently promote engagement for online learners, which can prove to be challenging, and require supplementary or diverse approaches to forging productive student learning communities. Simply transferring material used in traditional classrooms into an online learning management system is not adequate to promote engagement and could instead contribute to both cognitive and emotional detachment.

Instructional Practice and Curriculum Development

There is limited literature comparing the curriculum development and content delivery methods between traditional and distance education specific to counselor education, but there is a body of literature comparing the factors that influence the efficacy of traditional and distance education in general. The gap in the counselor education literature requires a comparative assessment of the deciding factors leading to different curriculum development and delivery methods for counselor education programs.

Delivery Preferences

Taylor and Baltrinic (2018) conducted a study in which they explored counselor educator course preparation and instructional practices. Unfortunately, the researchers did not include the educational delivery setting as a variable in the descriptive demographics, so it was impossible to discern whether the techniques that were identified as preferred methods of instruction were associated with online or traditional classrooms. However, it can be assumed that the preferences that were identified were geared more specifically to an in-class, face-to-face presentation. The five teaching methods that were explored for preferences in teaching content versus clinical courses included lecture, small group discussions, video presentations, case studies, and in-class modeling. Anecdotally, we assert that the reported preferences for instruction delivery would be different for online instructors and would be impacted by content delivery modality and technology. For example, if plans are disrupted in the traditional face-to-face classroom, such as internet disconnection, an instructor has the freedom to shift focus and move to a backup plan. However, an alternate instructional plan is not always available or feasible in an online environment (Marchand & Gutierrez, 2012). Delivery preferences can be influenced by the educational delivery setting in which the program was developed.

Educational Delivery Settings

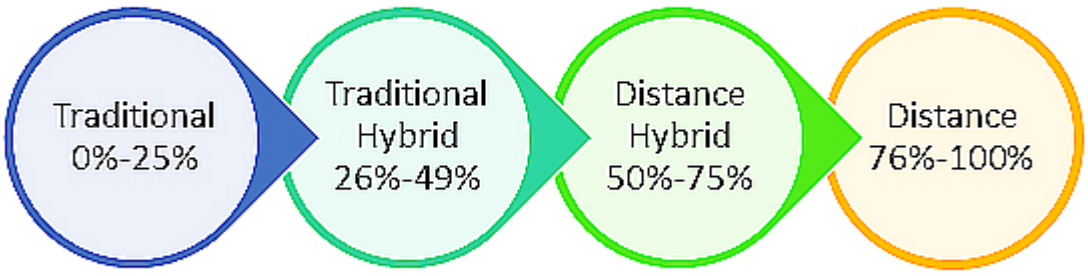
Content delivery modalities determine whether a program is defined as traditional or distance (telecommunications or correspondence) in accordance with the Office of Postsecondary Education Accreditation Division of the U.S. Department of Education (2012). If a program offers 49% or less of their instruction via distance learning technologies, with the remaining 51% via in-person synchronous classroom, the Department of Education categorizes that program as *traditional education*. The Department of Education defines *distance education* as instructional delivery using technology to support "regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor,

either synchronously or asynchronously" in courses in which the students are physically separated from their instructor (Office of Postsecondary Education Accreditation Division, 2012, p. 5). The Department of Education further clarifies that a distance education program offers at least 50% or more of their instruction via distance learning technologies that include telecommunications (Office of Postsecondary Education Accreditation Division, 2012). The Office of Federal Student Aid of the U.S. Department of Education separates distance programs between *telecommunications courses* and *correspondence courses*. A *telecommunication course* uses "television, audio, or computer (including the Internet)" to deliver the educational materials (Office of Federal Student Aid, 2017, p. 299). A *correspondence course* includes home study materials without a course or regular interactions with an instructor (Office of Federal Student Aid, 2017). Although discussing correspondence education is outside the scope of this article, including it as context for educational delivery settings is valuable to have a full view of content delivery options as defined by the Department of Education.

Through informal observations of counselor education programs, the hybrid or blended program seems to be neglected in the current educational delivery setting definitions provided by the Department of Education. Although there are variations in the definition of a hybrid or blended program, the Department of Education does not use hybrid or blended education as a category. Because most, if not all, programs integrate some level of telecommunications technology as defined above, we recommend using the word *hybrid* as a qualifier to the categories of educational delivery settings to more accurately categorize the unique complexity and needs of every counselor education program. We recommend defining the qualifier of *hybrid* as a program that offers at least 25% and no more than 75% of their instruction via a combination of distance learning telecommunication technologies and a traditional classroom. This qualifier would be added to the Department of Education's primary definition of a traditional or distance program based on the percentage of telecommunications technologies used for content delivery. By adding this qualifier, a program may be categorized as traditional, traditional hybrid, distance hybrid, or distance education. The traditional setting uses telecommunications technologies for up to 25% of their content delivery, traditional hybrid is 26%–49%, distance hybrid is 50%–75%, and distance education has 76%–100% of their content delivered using telecommunications technologies. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of the Educational Delivery Settings Continuum.

Figure 1

Educational Content Delivery Continuum.



Note. This figure demonstrates the percentages of content delivered using telecommunications technologies for each setting.

When we adopt the continuum above it becomes clear that counselor education content delivery cannot be reduced to a dichotomy. Viewing counselor education program content delivery through the lens of a continuum results in valuing the unique needs, complexities, and strengths of all counselor education programs with varying degrees of technology sophistication. Further, using this continuum can more accurately highlight the similarities across counselor educator programs instead of the differences. By definition, if any program relies on email and a website to communicate information about the content of the program (e.g., submitting assignments), that program is using telecommunication technologies to some degree. The above continuum is an important context for reviewing the current state of counselor education program content delivery and curriculum development. Because the traditional educational delivery setting was the starting point for formal education, a program will inevitably have a reason, purpose, or motive for integrating technology into a traditional model.

Motivation to Integrate Learning Technologies

When we examine the history of curriculum development and delivery methods, we can use traditional education as our starting point, dating back to the Socratic method (Snow & Coker, 2020). As Snow and Coker (2020) have shared, there are two primary motivators to developing or integrating technology into content delivery—increasing access and increasing revenues. These program development motivators can be valuable when initiating curricula, as long as programs consider how technological tools will be used to promote the "regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor" (Office of Postsecondary Education Accreditation Division, 2012, p. 5). This requires initial planning to integrate technological tools that can both deliver content and promote a learning community. Technology in any amount is a tool requiring skillful application in order to promote an effective technologically supported learning experience (Hedén & Ahlstrom, 2016; Koehler et al., 2004). Although some might choose to debate the differences in benefit between increasing access and revenues, a more equitable comparison for motivations requires the context of the faculty's ability to skillfully deliver course content using technology. The faculty's instructional practices impact the application of the program development motivators.

Instructional Practice

As we consider the continuum of technology integration for counselor education programs in different settings, we must consider the level of synchronicity for content delivery. Historically, the nature of professional counseling work has been synchronous, in-person interactions. The synchronous nature of the counseling profession is often used to argue that traditional programs are more effective than distance programs. Looking at a historical read/write approach (i.e., read materials and rely on written assignments to evaluate learning) to distance education, there can be some validity to the perceived challenges for a distance counselor education program that delivered its content in a read/write format only. Often, distance counselor education programs have overcome this perceived challenge by integrating traditional components into their curriculum.

Technology advancements provide new mediums for both synchronous and asynchronous learning to prepare a counselor-in-training. Counselors' and counselor educators' duties require some amount of synchronous activities (i.e., in-person interactions between two or more individuals occurring at the same time). As we view the counseling profession through the lens of telecommunications, the paradigm is expanding to include asynchronous counseling activities (i.e., interactions between two or more individuals occurring at various time intervals, such as text messaging).

Because the counseling profession requires human interactions, it seems fair that synchronous components, whether in person or technologically assisted, are necessary to prepare counselors-

in-training. The synchronous component of every counselor education program is that of the practicum and internship experiences. The didactic curriculum in a counselor education program can vary between synchronous and asynchronous. But when a counselor-in-training meets the practicum and internship benchmarks, synchronicity is required by virtue of program accreditation standards and professional regulations. Although there can be an expansion into the asynchronous approach to counseling field experience in the distant future, it may not be realistic to imagine a fully asynchronous field experience. Consideration of the modalities used to deliver supervision and direct counseling services as part of the practicum and internship provides great opportunity to align these experiences with the overall curriculum delivery methods of the counselor education program and promote future skills for professional counselors.

Curriculum Development Models

The curriculum development model used for the counselor education program also can impact the program's level of synchronicity. Although there are multiple designs that can guide curriculum development, there are two models often used in counselor education—teacher-centered and subject-centered. Programs used the teacher-centered approach when the curriculum was designed with the teacher as the subject matter expert and the content was designed to guide the learner through the content by way of the guidance of the teacher (Dole et al., 2016; Pinnegar & Erickson, 2010). Programs used the subject-centered approach when the subject matter guided the organization of the content and how the learning was assessed to support consistency across instructors (Burton, 2010; Dole et al., 2016). It would be inaccurate to assign either one of the approaches to a specific setting category as each approach can be plotted along the above continuum.

Teacher-Centered Approach

The teacher-centered approach allows the teacher to own their curriculum, and the specifics of the content within the same subject can vary across teachers. The teacher-centered approach occurs when assigned faculty members develop a course from scratch. They can use information from similar courses; however, there is a great amount of flexibility and freedom to develop the course content and delivery modalities. This approach may or may not integrate curriculum across multiple sections of the course taught by different instructors. The teacher-centered approach also can have varying degrees of course curriculum connections across different courses within the program. The instructor of the course in the teacher-centered approach typically develops the course and teaches the course, so they are intimately aware of the intention and nuances behind each element of the course curriculum.

Subject-Centered Approach

The subject-centered approach often relies on a team approach and can support consistency across sections of the same course. The subject-centered approach can assign responsibilities for the development to different team members (e.g., subject matter expert, curriculum design expert, learning resource expert). Team members work collaboratively to develop curriculum that targets critical elements of knowledge, skills, or dispositions directed by the subject matter. There can be a scaffolding approach to the overarching program curriculum when using a subject-centered approach. The subjects can be linked across courses to support collective success across the program's curriculum. Although the instructor of the subject-centered curriculum did not typically take part in the development, they are tasked with bringing the course content to life by adding additional resources, examples, and professional experiences to the course curriculum. Now that we have discussed the various educational delivery settings, the motivation for integrating technologies, impact of instructional practices, and curriculum development models, we can consider the application of learning telecommunication technologies.

Learning Telecommunication Technologies

As telecommunication technologies have advanced, the integration of asynchronous counseling and telehealth is changing the landscape of the profession. Although there are state-specific definitions of the term, in sum *telehealth* refers to providing technology-assisted health care from a distance (Lerman et al., 2017). These changes in the counseling profession force us to consider the needs and the impact of the level of formal integration of technology skills training or practice in a counselor education program. This alone may begin to separate counselor education programs along the educational delivery settings continuum.

Using the traditional education category as our foundational approach for counselor education, we can see the parallels between the in-person synchronous experiences in the classroom and in counseling sessions. Professional counselors of the 21st century now need to be equipped with skills using and maneuvering technologies for communicating, documenting, and billing. Technology skills have received limited attention in the current CACREP standards as only five core standards and seven specialty standards mention technology. Technology is not mentioned in the specialty standards for Addiction Counseling; Clinical Mental Health Counseling; College Counseling and Student Affairs; Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling; or School Counseling. There is one mention of technology for the doctoral program specialty standards (CACREP, 2015). Conversely, all 50 states in the United States have laws related to practicing telehealth (Lerman et al., 2017). The limited number of program accreditation standards that include technology neglects the current and future needs of professional counselors. Professional counselors are taxed with learning the required technological skills on the job instead of while enrolled as a student in their counselor education programs.

Student Considerations

A key factor in content delivery decisions is considering the type of learner the program will serve. The motivation, synchronicity level, and design approach all guide how successful a student will be. Not all students can be successful in every type of educational delivery setting. When considering synchronicity, the teacher-centered approach often is dependent on a greater percentage of synchronicity, while the subject-centered approach has flexibility in the percentage of synchronicity needed to effectively deliver the content. The choice in curriculum design approach also relates to the type of learner that the program attempts to serve. Yukselturk and Bulut's (2007) description of the self-regulated learner summarizes the qualities of a learner that can be more successful with a greater percentage of asynchronous work. We also need to consider the comparative processes in a counselor-in-training's development through a program of study.

Student Development in Online Education

Assessment of Skills and Dispositions

Assessment of skills and dispositions is a critical element of any counselor training program. The assessment process ensures that students have received the necessary training to demonstrate the skills and dispositions required to work with the public. The sections below will highlight a few of the ways student assessment is currently addressed within programs with online components.

Skills

Regardless of format, the key to effectively developing clinical skills in counselor trainees begins with intention. There are many shared approaches to teaching skills and techniques to counselor trainees in both online and traditional university settings. The nuances of online skills evaluation often begin with student access. Whereas traditional training programs have direct access to students

in class and often do things like role-plays, practice sessions, and mock session evaluation in person, online programs do these in differing ways. There is a heavier reliance on technology to help facilitate exposure, practice, and assessment at a distance. This is demonstrated with greater use of podcasts, video clips, and video interfaces (Cicco, 2011). Additionally, there is a stronger need for well-developed relationships between students, faculty, and supervisors (Cicco, 2012). This strengthens the communication process and allows for more familiarity between the student and evaluators. It also allows for increased positive feedback, which can help reduce student anxiety and increase skill competency among counselor trainees in an online setting (Aladağ et al., 2014).

Fully online programs and some hybrid models often include synchronous activities, such as weekly course practice sessions, whereby students will meet via video technology and practice in front of the class or through a recorded session that can be viewed by the instructor at a later date. Feedback is an important part of this process and often includes both peer feedback, in the form of observation notes or class discussion, as well as notes or scaled assessments or rubrics provided to the student by the instructor (Cicco, 2011). This type of feedback is generally formative, which allows counselor trainees the opportunity to practice skills that are required by the program with a high level of frequency and relatively low stakes. Final course or summative evaluations often reflect a student's combined skills practice demonstration and growth across the term.

Another frequently utilized form of skills assessment in online education is a residency model. In this training format, students gather in person with program faculty for a designated time (often 5–7 days) to complete specific skills-related training. Here, students may receive a combination of skills-based practice, faculty demonstrations, and skills- and content-based lectures. Within this format, skill development is specifically highlighted and opportunities to practice and receive real-time formative feedback are included. These in-person experiences are often evaluated in a summative manner at the conclusion of the experience with some form of established skills evaluation form. Determinations for additional skills training or remediation are often made at this point as well.

Dispositions

Much like skills assessment, dispositional assessment is a key function of counselor training programs and a requirement in the 2016 CACREP standards (CACREP, 2015). However, while skills are more behavior-based and observable, dispositional assessment often requires faculty and administrators to make judgments on student characteristics that are more abstract and difficult to define (Eells & Rockland-Miller, 2010; Homrich, 2009). Coupled with this is the fact that within the counseling profession, there are currently no specifically designed dispositional competencies (Homrich et al., 2014; Rapp et al., 2018). The result is that residence-based programs, as well as those online, are faced with the challenge of generating and operationalizing key dispositional characteristics within their counseling programs and in determining solid methods for assessment.

While challenging to establish, there have been programs that have made their disposition development process available to the broader counseling profession (Spurgeon et al., 2012). Additionally, Homrich et al. (2014) conducted a study with 82 counselor educators and supervisors from CACREP-accredited programs to better determine what dispositional characteristics are most valued in the counseling profession. Their results indicated three primary clusters of behavior specific to counselor disposition: (a) professional behaviors, (b) interpersonal behaviors, and (c) intrapersonal behaviors, with an emphasis on things like maintaining confidentiality, respecting the values of others, demonstrating cultural competence, and having an awareness of how personal beliefs impact performance. Similarly, Brown (2013) proposed the domains of (a) professional responsibility, (b) professional competence,

(c) professional maturity, and (d) professional integrity, with associated behaviors within each domain. Many of these behaviors are indicated in the Counseling Competencies Scale, which has a specific section on counselor disposition (Swank et al., 2012). Having this psychometrically tested and sound assessment certainly aids in the process of assessing dispositions, whether online or in a traditional university setting.

Despite having some degree of guidance on dispositions and how to assess them, the unique elements of online education similarly reflect what was noted in the skills section—a lack of direct access to students, which alters the ability to assess formally and informally on already abstract concepts. While obvious or visibly present in a traditional classroom, interaction can be hidden behind a computer screen in the online setting. As a result, online-based programs often get around this limitation by creating opportunities to challenge students' thinking and belief systems as well as enhancing awareness of key triggers and blind spots. Within the classroom, specific efforts can be made to create assignments in which students will face dilemmas and varied cultural experiences. Similarly, students can be asked to role-play certain characters or serve as the counselor to clients who may be perceived as controversial. These types of activities allow online counselor educators to first evaluate the responses students have, as well as to gauge openness to feedback if concerns arise in the initial response. Residency or other synchronous experiences, like video-based synchronous classrooms, afford faculty the chance to see and work with students on an interpersonal level. They also allow students to interact with one another and in some cases receive feedback from one another. Much like in the classroom, faculty members are then able to assess students on the interactions as well as on how students respond to specific feedback.

One area that is unique to online education and dispositional assessment is that of *cyber incivility*. De Gagne et al. (2016) defined *cyber incivility* as "a direct and indirect interpersonal violation involving disrespectful, insensitive, or disruptive behavior of an individual in an electronic environment that interferes with another person's personal, professional, or social well-being, as well as student learning" (p. 240). Because online education programs rely so heavily on written electronic communication, both in the classroom and through email, there is a growing need for evaluation of interpersonal interactions in written online formats. Students who would otherwise never come into their faculty member's office and disparage them face-to-face, or speak offensively to another student in a traditional classroom, might not struggle to do so when online. As a result, online education programs need to fine-tune the way they operationalize certain dispositional characteristics and otherwise make more formal evaluations of things like tone and messaging in written communication and interpersonal interactions. Recommendations to best address this include heightening students' awareness of cyber incivility in both the curriculum and programmatic policies and communication (De Gagne et al., 2016), and assessing for cyber incivility as part of a dispositional evaluation. These types of assessment practices ultimately help online programs in the broader area of professional gatekeeping.

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping is a fundamental part of the counselor training process and is mandated by section F.6.b. of the American Counseling Association's *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014). As defined by the *ACA Code of Ethics*, *gatekeeping* is "the initial and ongoing academic, skill, and dispositional assessment of students' competency for professional practice, including remediation and termination as appropriate" (2014, p. 20). It therefore includes both the assessment and evaluation process of each counselor trainee, but also the need for appropriate remediation, support, and dismissal by the programs that support them. In addition to the ethical mandate for gatekeeping, significant litigation in counseling programs (Hutchens et al., 2013) and a greater emphasis on assessment and gatekeeping in the CACREP 2016 standards (CACREP, 2015) have fostered a real need for programs of all types to firm up the gatekeeping process.

Gatekeeping is well addressed in the counseling literature, including the need for programs to create transparent performance assessment policies and practices that are explicitly communicated to students and to which students can respond (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016; Foster & McAdams, 2009; Rapp et al., 2018). Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen (2010) proposed that there are four phases to the gatekeeping process: (a) preadmission screening, in which potential students are evaluated on key metrics prior to admission; (b) postadmission screening, in which actively enrolled students are evaluated and monitored on academic aptitude as well as interpersonal reactions; (c) remediation plan, in which students requiring remediation are provided intensified supervision and personal development; and (d) remediation outcome, in which students are evaluated on their remediation efforts and determined to be successful or not. The value of these proposed frameworks and theories is that they can be adapted and used to support the gatekeeping process of all counseling programs, regardless of the format. This is particularly valuable when as many as 10% of students in counseling programs may be deficient in skills, abilities, or dispositions and ill-suited for the profession (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016).

In online education, the process of gatekeeping can look very similar to traditional programs, but it often requires a specific or altered set of practices to support its students. First, though not always the case, many online programs have an open- or broad-access admissions policy. This means that while certain minimal requirements have to be met (e.g., GPA, letters of recommendation, goal statement) at the preadmissions phase, other more traditional prescreening steps, such as student interviews (Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010), may not be included. The byproduct of this may mean that there is a heightened level of gatekeeping required at the other phases: postadmission screening, remediation plan, and remediation outcome (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). This often results in the need for more faculty support related to the remediation process itself, as well as the need for very clear policies and practices related to remediation and dismissal that are consistently applied across a larger group of students.

While there is a call for all programs to make explicit policies and practices related to the gatekeeping process (Hutchens et al., 2013), online education programs have a heightened responsibility to overly communicate these practices. Students in online programs often are required to do much of their coursework on their own as well as attend and complete orientations and information sessions via electronic formats. The lack of direct contact with students means that online programs need to be more overt with policy messaging and provide repeated exposure to gatekeeping practices so that students stay informed. Often this is done via classroom announcements, email messaging, and course- or program-based requirements in which they must sign statements or acknowledgement forms indicating they have read and understand specific policies.

As remediation needs develop through the gatekeeping process, one of the fundamental needs of distance-based programs is strong collaboration and consultation among faculty and administration. Faculty with student concerns need the outlet and opportunity to connect with their colleagues to address potential issues and determine if issues are isolated. This is not unlike what occurs in traditional programs; however, the mechanisms for communication can differ, requiring more phone calls, tracking of email communication, and increased documentation in shared electronic records platforms. Problematic behaviors can be hard to parse out (Brown, 2013; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016) regardless of setting, but can be increasingly challenging to identify online. Having these types of opportunities to connect with colleagues and track student issues is imperative to good remediation in an online setting.

Similarly, there is often the need for remediation committees in online programs. These committees generally include faculty and leadership within the program that work specifically to address the remediation needs of identified students. They can be content-specific—focusing solely on skills remediation or dispositional remediation—or they can serve both functions. While some traditional counseling programs have remediation committees (Brown, 2013), online programs often serve a significant number of students, which can translate to a higher number of students requiring remediation and support. Having a formalized process in place that is guided by a remediation or student support committee can be invaluable to this type of load.

Conclusion

When comparing program delivery and instructional variance between CACREP-accredited online and traditional counselor training programs, it is clear there are distinct similarities and differences. While the literature included debate regarding the appropriateness of an online environment for training counselors, research supports online counselor education training as effective for skill and professional identity development, despite requiring different instructional practices than traditional classrooms. Similarities between both settings also include a student body made up of adults, with a higher enrollment of Caucasian female students. However, online programs show greater diversity within their student body with higher numbers of non-traditional and underserved populations. One significant difference in online and traditional settings was attrition rates, which were higher for online programs, and research suggests that the social interaction that is a routine part of traditional training could hold a key to successful program completion for online learners. Future implications for counselor education are the expansion of empirically based curriculum development approaches that not only engage students but promote increased connection with the material, faculty, and peer learning communities. Another critical future direction of the counseling profession that has implications for both educational environments is the formal integration of technology skills training into the curriculum. While the academic core content areas are aligned for both settings, telehealth is rapidly changing the required skill sets for counselors to include communicating, documenting, and billing clients through electronic means.

Online counseling programs are growing in number and type, with many traditional programs now offering courses or full-program offerings at a distance. The increasing demand for this delivery model ultimately means more students will be trained at a distance, with an ever-increasing need to ensure appropriate assessment and gatekeeping practices. Faculty and administrators must be mindful of developing strong processes around admissions, student developmental assessment, remediation, and, where necessary, dismissal. Visual technology and simulation experiences are already being used by many online programs and will continue to grow and diversify as students seek new ways and opportunities to train at a distance. As more programs adopt online courses or curriculum, it is important that those programs, and the larger university systems that support them, are equipped to provide necessary training in the most effective and meaningful ways, while ensuring appropriate assessment and gatekeeping.

Finally, while conducting the review of literature for the analysis of similarities and differences between online and traditional programs, we revealed some gaps in existing research. Suggestions for future research include an investigation of instructional practices within online settings inclusive of delivery methods specific to asynchronous learning. Research indicates that attrition rates are higher for online programs, but it would be useful for researchers to investigate variables that contribute to

attrition in online counseling students. Similarly, a meta-analysis of remediation practices as well as a qualitative inquiry of successful remediation efforts from both the faculty and student perspective may provide useful information in closing the gap for degree completion between online and traditional students. Finally, with the growing demand for technology literacy, the development of technology competencies for professional counselors could prove very useful for both curriculum development and counselor supervisors in facilitating success in developing professionals.

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