"They Stay With You": Counselor Educators' Emotionally Intense Gatekeeping Experiences

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Emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences can require counselor educators to engage in a complicated, time- and energy-consuming, and draining series of events that can last years and involve legal proceedings. Research related to counselor educators' experiences of intense emotions while gatekeeping remains limited. The aim of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate counselor educators' (*N* = 11) emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. Five themes emerged from the data: early warning signs, elevated student misconduct, dismissal, legal interactions, and change from experience. By being transparent about their feelings and challenges regarding emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences, counselor educators may compel other faculty, counselors in the field, and doctoral students to be better prepared for emotional gatekeeping experiences.

Keywords: gatekeeping, counselor educators, transcendental phenomenological, emotionally intense, experiences

Gatekeeping is an important role for counselor educators in order to uphold ethical standards within the counseling profession and to protect clients, students, and faculty (Homrich & Henderson, 2018). Allowing unprepared individuals to become counselors can impede positive client outcomes in therapy and even harm clients (Homrich & Henderson, 2018). The American Counseling Association's *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) defined *gatekeeping* as "the initial and ongoing academic, skill, and dispositional assessment of students' competency for professional practice, including remediation and termination as appropriate" (p. 20). In addition, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2015) standards require counseling program faculty to follow gatekeeping procedures in line with university policy and the profession's ethical codes.

Previous researchers have explored gatekeeping procedures (Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014), gatekeeping policy (Rust et al., 2013), models for evaluating student counselor competence (Lumadue & Duffey, 1999), and problematic student behaviors (Henderson & Dufrene, 2013). Although research has focused on gatekeeping in counselor training, how counselor educators experience emotions tied to gatekeeping practices remains relatively unknown. Faculty who have engaged in some gatekeeping practices (e.g., remediation and dismissal) have reported experiencing strong emotions that may negatively impact the gatekeeping process (Wissel, 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to illuminate counselor educators' emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. We defined *emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences* as multilayered, complex, time-extended events that counselor educators identify as emotionally memorable.

Emotions and Gatekeeping

In more serious cases, gatekeeping can be a multilayered series of interactions with administrators, university appeals boards, and lawyers (Homrich & Henderson, 2018). Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen (2010) framed counselor educators' gatekeeping in terms of *preadmission screening*, *postadmission screening*,

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remediation plan, and *remediation outcome* phases. In many cases, students and educators often proceed through Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen's linear gatekeeping phases, but in other cases, gatekeeping is non-linear. In these non-linear cases, a student may be dismissed from their program, file an appeal, and be granted re-admittance. In these intense gatekeeping scenarios, a considerable amount of attention, time, and energy are often required of counselor educators. Although Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen's phases are aimed to promote more structured gatekeeping practices, little is known about what phases, specific topics, or dimensions of counselor educators' experiences with intense gatekeeping may exist.

A fear of legal consequences as a result of gatekeeping practices can influence counselor educators' decision making (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013). Homrich et al. (2014) found that gatekeepers experience negative emotions, including fear and apprehension, surrounding student dismissals. Recently, Schuermann et al. (2018) utilized consensual qualitative research to reaffirm counselor educators are fearful of some gatekeeping outcomes (e.g., threats of lawsuits or legal consequences). Despite this potential for negative feelings, little is known about how counselor educators' emotions may be tied to gatekeeping-related lawsuits and how these experiences are processed and managed.

Gatekeepers can pay an emotional price for gatekeeping students (Gizara & Forrest, 2004). In a collective case study of 12 counseling psychologist site supervisors, participants unanimously expressed that student impairment issues (e.g., when students acted unprofessionally at clinical sites) were the most painful events to confront with supervisees (Gizara & Forrest, 2004). Similarly, participants interviewed in Wissel's (2014) phenomenological study on counselor educators' experiences of terminating students for non-academic reasons (e.g., students causing harm to clients during practicum) reported these experiences were uncomfortable because of role dissonance and responsibility. Kerl and Eichler (2005) claimed counselor educators may experience a "loss of innocence" as a consequence of emotionally taxing, isolating, and professionally challenging gatekeeping experiences (p. 83). Kerl and Eichler also stressed that counselor educators should emotionally explore the meaning of their gatekeeping experiences to uncover how these feelings interact with their gatekeeping practices. Unless emotions surrounding gatekeeping are addressed, counselor educators may "remain stuck in a place that holds on to us with powerful and overwhelming emotions" (Kerl & Eichler, 2005, p. 84).

Because gatekeeping can generate intense emotions, counselor educators' failure to understand and bracket their emotions could result in flawed decision making that serves their needs instead of the ethical codes of the profession (Brear & Dorrian, 2010). Providing specific insights and strategies to help counselor educators become aware of their emotions during intense gatekeeping experiences may help them protect themselves, other faculty, peers, and future clients. Yet, there is currently a lack of depth in our understanding of counselor educators' emotions related to gatekeeping. Therefore, guided by Moustakas' (1994) notion that transcendental phenomenological studies should seek to uncover the essential structure of a particular phenomenon, our study sought to answer two research questions: First, what are the common elements of counselor educators' emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences? Second, what, if any, important insights did counselor educators gain from emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences?

Method

Phenomenological research generates descriptions of experiences that "keep a phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, and retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as possible" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). Therefore, we chose to use a transcendental phenomenological approach for this study to capture and share the

essence of counselor educators' lived experiences with emotionally intense gatekeeping (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Transcendental phenomenology allowed us to (a) explore how emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences affect counselor educators personally and professionally, (b) bracket our own assumptions about emotionally intense gatekeeping, and (c) understand the common elements of participants' gatekeeping experiences.

Participants

Participants qualified for inclusion in this study if they self-reported at least one emotionally intense gatekeeping experience and were currently employed as a counselor educator at a CACREP-accredited institution. Eleven counselor educators participated in this study, representing years of experience between 2 and 37 years (*M* = 19.8, *SD* = 11.58). Table 1 provides a snapshot of participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Race or Ethnicity	Rank	Degree Major	Degree Type	Yrs. Exp. CES
Sue	Female	White	Assistant	CES	PhD	0–5
Rosie	Female	White, Caucasian	Full	CP	PhD	20–25
Rose	Female	White, Caucasian	Associate	CES	PhD	15–20
Mike	Male	Caucasian	Full	CEs	EdD	25–30
Mark	Male	White	Full	CES	PhD	35–40
Maria	Female	White, Caucasian	Associate	CES	PhD	5–10
Lila	Female	Multicultural	Full	CP	PhD	25–30
Frank	Male	Caucasian	Full	CES	EdD	20–25
Rita	Female	Hispanic	Associate	CES	PhD	20–25
Herbie	Female	Asian	Assistant	CES	PhD	5–10
Dan	Male	White	Adjunct	CES	EdD	30–35

Notes. All participant names are pseudonyms. For gender, race, or ethnicity, participants' responses were recorded verbatim. CES = Counselor Education and Supervision. CP = Counseling Psychology. PhD = Doctor of Philosophy. EdD = Doctor of Education. Yrs. Exp. CES = Years Working as a Counselor Educator and Supervisor.

Recruitment Procedures

To seek out counselor educators with emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences (Miller et al., 2018), we recruited participants through three purposeful sampling and screening procedures. First, participants were recruited based on their authorship of at least one gatekeeping article published in a journal or magazine that noted their professional experiences with gatekeeping. Four articles addressing the authors' personal experiences with gatekeeping were identified. Those authors were sent an email inviting them to participate in this study. Second, we used a purposeful sample of accredited counselor education programs listed on CACREP's official website. This search yielded a total of 880 potential counselor training programs. We generated a stratified sample three times that resulted in three separate batches of 23 programs. Program coordinators were sent emails asking them to share the study invitation with their faculty members who may identify as having one or more emotionally intense

gatekeeping experiences. Third, snowball sampling was used by asking all participants to identify other potential participants who fit our criteria for participation. To meet the study's eligibility requirements, participants were required to (a) be employed at a CACREP-accredited counselor training program; (b) be instructors or adjunct, full, associate, or assistant professors (Schuermann et al., 2018); and (c) have been involved in at least one emotionally intense gatekeeping experience as a counselor educator.

Data Collection Procedures
Semi-Structured Interviews

After the lead researcher obtained IRB approval, we collected interview data through telephone and Skype interviews. We contacted potential participants with a description of the study, including our definition of emotionally intense gatekeeping, and a copy of the informed consent form. Interested participants responded to our requests via email and the lead researcher scheduled a time to interview them. Semi-structured interview questions were designed from a review of the relevant literature on gatekeeping and our own professional experiences with gatekeeping as counselor educators to gather rich and thick descriptions of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview questions, including "What do you remember most vividly about your emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences?", were emailed to all participants prior to their interviews. Before audio recording began, all participants created a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded using Garageband. Interviews were between 24 and 45 minutes and were transcribed by Rev.com. Once interviews were transcribed, audio files were deleted.

Letter-Writing Activity

Once interviews were completed, participants also were invited to complete a letter-writing activity based on their emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. Letter writing can provide a concrete and lasting record of one's experiences as opposed to spoken words, which usually disappear after they are spoken (Goldberg, 2000). We used this letter-writing activity to help triangulate the data. The letter-writing instructions asked participants to revisit their emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences, if other prior life events may have influenced their perceptions of gatekeeping, and what, if anything, they learned from these experiences. We received three letters, ranging from 94 to 2,027 words (M = 786).

Data Analysis

We used Moustakas' (1994) five-step transcendental phenomenological process to analyze the data. First, prior to reading the transcribed interviews and letters, the research team (composed of all three authors of this article) met and existentially bracketed (Gearing, 2004) their experiences with emotionally intense gatekeeping, identifying biases or presuppositions. Next, we read the transcripts and letters twice independently and began familiarizing ourselves with participants' experiences. We reconvened to discuss our initial impressions of the data and engaged in *horizontalization* (Moustakas, 1994), or highlighting and clustering significant statements into groups with similar meaning. Forty-six initial codes were created and grouped into clusters to generate textural descriptions of the phenomena. We met three more times to discuss our emerging themes, reconcile any discrepancies in our analysis, and reach consensus on the findings. In between each meeting, team members independently reflected on the codes and emerging phenomena. We reconvened a fifth time and developed nine larger themes that were organized as textural and structural clusters, or *meaning units* (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Through this process of *phenomenological reduction* (Moustakas, 1994), we refined our themes and identified the crucial elements of participants' experiences. At this point, two themes were discarded because of inconsistent support and a lack of consensus among the research team. Next, an external auditor, who was a counselor educator with qualitative research experience and numerous publications in counseling journals, reviewed the initial coding and theme construction and provided feedback to

the research team. The auditor suggested the removal of one theme and the consolidation of two others. The research team discussed the external auditor's feedback and incorporated their theme reduction suggestions to help clarify the meaning and representation of the data. Finally, we met one more time to discuss our final five themes and confirmed that our findings accurately represented the essence of participants' experiences of emotionally intense gatekeeping.

Trustworthiness

In this study, we used several measures to achieve congruent trustworthiness within the phenomenological research tradition (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). First, in order to uncover the essence of our experience without completely detaching from the world, we bracketed our prior theories, interpretations, and assumptions of the phenomena through multiple team discussions (Gearing, 2004). To track our discussions during the data collection and analysis phases, the lead author kept a reflexive journal to help us account for our presuppositions and interpret the data accurately. Second, we offered participants a member check of their interview transcripts. Each participant was asked to review their transcript for accuracy and was provided an opportunity to elaborate further on their initial statements. Five participants elaborated on their thoughts to clarify meaning. Third, the lead author kept an audit trail detailing the times and dates of participant interviews, sampling procedures, and member checks, and a summary of the discussions between the researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Fourth, the letter-writing activity yielded another data source to triangulate our findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, the auditor in this study challenged the research team to revisit our prior assumptions of emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences to ensure monitoring of potential bias.

Reflexivity Statement

The research team included two counselor educators employed as full-time faculty at two different midsized universities in the Midwest United States, and one graduate student with knowledge of gatekeeping and research experience at the first author's university. The first author identifies as a White, able-bodied, middle-aged male and pre-tenured counselor educator. The second author identifies as a White, able-bodied, middle-aged male and pre-tenured counselor educator, and the third author identifies as a White, able-bodied, young adult female counseling graduate student. Our main assumptions before starting this study were that (a) emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences elicit only negative emotions from faculty; and (b) discussion of emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences is considered taboo for fear of litigation or unwanted attention. These assumptions stemmed largely from our own experiences as students in counselor training programs. Each of us experienced times when we knew faculty were engaged in gatekeeping. These experiences modeled gatekeeping for us and demonstrated how faculty balance protecting students from peers who may be engaged in problematic behaviors.

Results

We identified five themes from counselor educators' emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences: (a) early warning signs, (b) elevated student misconduct, (c) student dismissal, (d) legal interactions, and (e) change from experience.

Early Warning Signs

Most participants (*n* = 10) discussed behavioral and academic issues with students that, at first, appeared to be fixable through remediation and interventions. During these experiences, participants reported feeling shock, frustration, irritation, and sadness. For example, Rose shared how faculty noticed that a student was making poor choices and how they tried to intervene quickly:

> She really had tried to push herself too far, farther than she was ready to go. . . . I just
> knew the person, in spite of the faculty repeatedly saying don't push yourself too
> hard to where you're not even able to show up at your practicum internship site on a
> regular basis. They ignored our advice. And when somebody is simply not showing
> up on a regular basis, that's behavior that can't go on.

In other examples, participants shared stories of students exercising poor boundaries. In these experiences, students displayed behaviors that were symptomatic of larger issues that would reveal themselves later. Dan shared:

> This student was chronically late, and when the student arrived, instead of just
> sliding in quietly, the student would make an entrance. . . . After this became a
> chronic problem, there seemed to be resistance. The next semester was similar, except
> by now, I could see that the student was being avoided by many of his classmates.

Like Dan, participants discussed a variety of outcomes after their early interventions with students regarding their problematic academic and professional behavior(s). Often counselor educators' interventions helped students remediate and correct their behaviors. In other cases, students continued to act inappropriately or committed more serious infractions.

Elevated Student Misconduct

All 11 participants described a more serious student violation after initial warning signs. These violations required a higher level of faculty intervention. In these interactions, participants felt anger, betrayal, and confusion. Sue discussed her emotions and process surrounding discovering her students had cheated:

> I had one earlier this year that was very emotionally intense, that affected me personally
> and professionally, that was around academic honesty and integrity. During one of my
> classes, I discovered that a group of students cheated on an examination—a group of
> five out of a classroom of 12, so a very significant percentage. It was really shocking at
> first. I really did go through the stages of grief now looking back.

For several other participants, more serious violations occurred during students' practicum or internship courses. Mike described hearing about one student's ethical violation from their practicum site supervisor: "She has taken it upon herself to recruit individual clients from her group to see on her own, at home!" These events brought out anxiety, despair, and anger in faculty members and required more direct interventions, including direct meetings with students, discussions of students during faculty meetings, or removal of students from a class or courses.

Student Dismissal

Participants ($n = 9$) reported feeling many intense emotions in their experiences when dismissing students. Most expressed extreme sadness and frustration with students. Students were usually dismissed after failing to comply with remediation plans (e.g., retaking an ethics course, attending personal counseling) within the time frame allotted. Some remediated students chose to leave the program on their own account. Some participants questioned if they were acting in the best interests of the profession, program, and university. For example, Rose reflected on her personal feelings and professional responsibilities with emotionally intense gatekeeping:

I would say that [gatekeeping experiences] took a lot out of me, emotionally. It was exhausting. Even today, I don't feel the intensity that I felt at the time. But there's still emotion. There's still kind of a sadness and disappointment that we had to have conversations. And certainly, I'm very hopeful that . . . the people who were removed from the program have found something else to do where they can be successful.

Participants' decisions to dismiss students also impacted them unexpectedly. Lila explained:

Once in a while it's also very sad because you see people with a lot of potential, good people, that because of what's happening in their lives might make poor choices. And the sad part is to see somebody with so much potential getting themselves into trouble because of personal issues. And then the investment they have made in their education and all this money they have put into it, it comes to an end because they made poor choices. It's very sad to see something like this. It stays with you. Those are the things that sometimes will wake me up at three, four in the morning and think, "Ah, I wish things were different."

Legal Interactions

Among the most disruptive and emotionally intense phase of many participants' (*n* = 7) gatekeeping experiences were legal proceedings. These moments were often physically and emotionally taxing, confusing, and disruptive on personal and professional levels. Participants frequently second-guessed their thoughts and behaviors. Usually this phase started with notification of a lawsuit that was filed on behalf of the student against the faculty, program, or university. Mark shared his feelings after discovering he was one of the primary people named in a lawsuit:

I was the department chair, and I had to deliver the news. I was named in the lawsuit along with the dean, and the Board of Trustees, and one other faculty member. . . . I questioned whether I had done things properly. I felt vulnerable. I felt like that my reputation might be compromised.

Legal proceedings involving participants (*n* = 6) were jury and judge trials in either civil or criminal court and sometimes generated publicity outside of their institutions. Several participants shared that legal proceedings came with an emotional cost to them and their respective programs. For example, Dan felt emotionally exhausted with his lengthy involvement with the legal system:

Along the way, there was tremendous amounts of angst, and time, and energy, and aggravation spent on this student, and on the trouble that he generated, and the accusations that he was making . . . 12 or 18 months later, we were notified that he had hired an attorney, and that he was going to sue the college. Depositions followed, hours of depositions. Because I was the faculty member that had the most time with him, I was deposed for about a day and a half, where his attorney asked me every imaginable question six different ways from Sunday. It was not a pleasant experience. Anyway, there would be many, many months that would go by without hearing anything, and then we'd be told that, "Okay, we've been scheduled for a trial." Then we get up to the trial and there'd be some continuance, and the can would get kicked down the road again. From the time the student was expelled from the program to deposition, it was four years. From the time of the actual jury trial, it was 10 years.

Most participants were surprised and saddened by students' efforts to win legal proceedings. Participants were aware of the importance of their legal encounters, yet also unsure how to balance them with multiple professional responsibilities. Lila expressed:

> This was a student that was terminated and the student sued, started a lawsuit. . . . The student re-mortgaged their home so they could hire that attorney and take the university to court, take us to court. It was disruptive to our teaching because . . . the trial was happening about an hour and a half away. So we would have to find somebody to cover our class. We would get there, there would be delays, so we would be asked to go again the next day. . . . And we won the case because we had followed the policy and the student had refused to remediate . . . so the student lost their home. I mean it was a really sad situation.

Change From Experience

All participants in this study shared what they learned from their emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. In this theme, participants offered advice and wisdom for other counselor educators.

All participants shared that their emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences reinforced their commitment to ethics, program standards, transparency, and fairness. Despite their feelings of guilt and humility resulting from their experiences, participants wanted to be more proactive and clear with their gatekeeping processes. Dan shared:

> It was a learning, not just for me, but for our entire faculty that we need to be really clear every step of the way, about who we are as a program, what do we stand for, what expectations do we have? And that when those expectations are in some way violated or are bent, we need to be very clear with the student about what's going on. And when or if we ever arrive at a place where we see a student who is having this kind of a problem, we need to take action sooner.

Every participant expressed a commitment to engage in future gatekeeping practices more effectively. Several expressed feeling unsure about gatekeeping initially but eventually replaced vacillating feelings with more confidence and greater self-efficacy. Herbie noted:

> I think initially there was much more apprehension and dread. Just a lot of uncertainty and a lot of ambiguity about like, okay, how is it going to go? What do I need to say? How can I be clear? How am I wrapping up this conversation and their understanding of the message I'm trying to communicate? Well, at the same time as, you know, like being a counselor, like how can I be like positive and supportive at the same time, which is a hard place to be in when you're also being the disciplinarian. And I think now because I've had many more experiences with gatekeeping, and having those tough conversations, it's much clearer to me. I go in and I have in my mind a plan that I need to follow.

Nine participants shared how bracketing their personal beliefs, emotions, and opinions of students helped them become more effective and ethical gatekeepers. Frank commented:

> I was less aware of my emotional triggers years ago. And realizing that there are lots of different values, beliefs, knowledge, and skills that I bring in that I use to judge

a situation. And in doing so I have to remember to bring it into the present. That I have to be able to separate what my values and beliefs, skills, and competencies are and what is expected of the profession, especially as delineated in the code of ethics.

Most participants also discussed how their programs and departments changed as a result of their intense gatekeeping experiences. Changes often occurred at multiple levels. For example, Sue shared, "I tightened my syllabi. I went back through the code. I actually advocated and we re-wrote all of the syllabi for my entire university in grad counseling."

All but one participant (*n* = 10) offered current and future counselor educators advice on emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. Eight participants specifically mentioned that counselor educators should rely on trusted and supportive colleagues to help navigate emotionally intense gatekeeping. Dan said:

I want to say how critically important it is to make sure that you build a team of faculty, not just for the day when you're going to have to engage in a gatekeeping process, but for all kinds of reasons. Building a team where there's real trust, where there's emotional vulnerability, and where differences about ideas . . . can be addressed is so very important.

In other examples, participants shared how each faculty member in their program developed a role. These roles helped faculty share responsibility with gatekeeping duties while also promoting due process and professionalism. Rosie commented:

We look at [gatekeeping] in a behavioral way, but certainly with a respect for the student's interpersonal processes and personality style. . . . We're always good at keeping each other (faculty) accountable. . . . We balance each other out. Then, when we do meet with the student as a faculty, if on one of those occasions we think that is necessary, we take different roles. We decide who's going to be what person in that process.

Several participants offered tips for working with administrators (e.g., deans, human resource representatives, university lawyers, provosts, presidents), including how faculty may need to explain ethical codes, program policy, and gatekeeping philosophies to them. Lila shared, "Be prepared outside of the department, there are appeals committees. They may see it differently than you and your faculty see it." Maria offered more proactive advice:

At the beginning of a semester, reach out to deans or upper administration, that, "we are looking to tweak or update our gatekeeping policy; we'd like to run it by you and get your feedback, and we'd also like to run it by legal counsel through university." And that helps everybody be informed up front, and things tend to go much better when everybody knows what to expect and what our obligations are as gatekeepers.

Finally, all participants talked about ways in which counselor educators and counselor programs can better prepare doctoral students and support early career faculty for emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. Herbie offered:

[The] messages I received and modeling that I saw were really helpful in me understanding the need for gatekeeping. Because the parameters that were set forth in both my master's and my doctoral program, were just really clear on what's okay and what's not okay. And then having a cohort family . . . and having that support network and being able to talk about experiences that I was observing . . . within a safe container was really helpful.

Discussion

To ensure the counseling profession is composed of qualified, competent, and ethical counselors, counselor educators must gatekeep even if they may experience intense emotions. The emotions stemming from participants' intense gatekeeping experiences included dissonance, discomfort, guilt, anger, and role confusion, as well as empathy, compassion, and sensitivity for students. These emotions were similar to those reported by participants in other studies (Gizara & Forrest, 2004; Wissel, 2014). Regardless of the type (i.e., professional or academic) and the level of severity of gatekeeping counselor educators experienced, participants' experiences were persistent and draining. Counselor educators engaged in intense gatekeeping should prepare for exhausting, emotionally layered events that will impact them professionally and personally. In addition, the time-intensive nature of emotionally intense gatekeeping is noteworthy. Several counselor educators reported that numerous years (the longest being 10) were needed for due process (i.e., academic appeals and legal proceedings).

The findings from this study also extend the concept of gatekeeping beyond the boundaries of what happens within a counseling student's program and institution. Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen (2010) noted that unsuccessful remediation efforts may yield either students leaving their program voluntarily or being dismissed. This study highlights that when students challenge dismissal decisions, the dismissal process can involve legal proceedings that can last for numerous years. Over half of the participants in this study discussed legal encounters of some kind related to intense gatekeeping, and this may indicate that legal encounters related to gatekeeping may be occurring more frequently among counselor educators (Homrich et al., 2014; Schuermann et al., 2018).

Most participants expressed that their gatekeeping experiences fostered their professional growth, but also came with personal emotional costs. Many participants said that their intense gatekeeping experiences unexpectedly affected them personally. Some participants indicated they felt trapped because they could not share details of their emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences with partners, family, or others outside their department because of student confidentiality constraints. This finding aligns with Kerl and Eichler's (2005) assertion that unless faculty actively take steps to process emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences, the experiences themselves may hold power over faculty until they are properly addressed.

Finally, as a result of their intense gatekeeping experiences, many participants took more preventative and systematic approaches to protect the counseling profession, students, and future clients by preparing for future intense gatekeeping encounters. Participants reported processing their feelings about gatekeeping as well as reassessing individual responsibilities plus program and university polices to better align with the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014). Homrich (2009) suggested that faculty, including adjunct instructors and clinical supervisors, should plan for challenges that may arise when gatekeeping students. Multiple faculty stressed that their admissions decision making and criteria for new students were improved as a result of their emotionally intense gatekeeping. For instance, faculty

reported recognizing rigid beliefs and concerning behaviors more quickly during admissions interviews and when students were starting their graduate training (Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014.) Participants also reported how changes in gatekeeping practices at the individual (e.g., confronting problematic behaviors quicker), institutional (e.g., discussions with provosts and deans about professional ethics and gatekeeping practices), and professional (e.g., publishing articles) levels often took time and focused effort to change perceptions among stakeholders and others connected to their programs.

Implications for Counselor Educators and Counselors

Based on our findings, we noted several implications for counselors and counselor educators. First, counselor educators should consider how doctoral training programs can facilitate learning related to emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences that include discussion of students' potential emotional reactions to gatekeeping. Doctoral students may benefit from more transparency among current counselor educators in discussing their emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. Discussions may help normalize how maintaining professional relationships with students and navigating intense emotions can be useful learning experiences during their doctoral training. Doctoral student gatekeeping training may inadvertently create dual relationship conflicts between master's students and doctoral students if there are pre-existing relationships. Although a faculty mentor's sharing of a student's gatekeeping context may help doctoral students learn, faculty should balance this with the need to maintain the student's confidentiality (Rapp et al., 2018).

Furthermore, more mentorship for future and beginning counselor educators regarding emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences may help alleviate adverse feelings. Departmental discussions of gatekeeping policies, a culture of openness, and mentorship from senior faculty (Homrich, 2009) can help reduce feelings of isolation, anger, sadness, betrayal, and other negative emotions for future and inexperienced faculty. Over half of participants mentioned mentorship from experienced faculty as support that helped them manage feelings of stress, anxiety, and fatigue during emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. In addition, several participants in this study, regardless of prior experience with emotionally intense gatekeeping, sought consultation and comfort from other faculty within their departments. Counselor education programs should have a designated mentor for faculty who may feel overwhelmed with an emotionally intense gatekeeping experience and keep open lines of communication for all faculty (Homrich & Henderson, 2018). Of note, two participants expressed that they were aware of colleagues at other institutions who were unable to find encouragement and mentorship while imbued in intense gatekeeping, and those faculty either found other jobs or left the profession entirely.

Third, participants in this study experienced challenging and intense emotions surrounding legal proceedings. Counselor educators and clinicians should consider that lawsuits related to gatekeeping, impairment, and professional competence are on the rise (Schuermann et al., 2018). Counselor educators and counselors in the field should be better prepared for lawsuits and retain legal counsel, consult with colleagues, utilize personal counseling, and take other protective and therapeutic measures (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). In addition, counselor educators and counselors may want to utilize self-care strategies to help bracket and monitor their emotions to allow for clear thinking and more ethical and intentional decision making if confronted with a lawsuit (Dugger & Francis, 2014).

Limitations

This study has three limitations. First, only three participants had less than 10 years of experience. Because perspectives, practices, and philosophies on gatekeeping can differ with experience (Schuermann et al., 2018), early counselor educators may have different experiences of emotionally

intense gatekeeping. Second, only one participant in this study identified as an adjunct instructor. As institutions of higher education increase the number of their courses taught by non–tenure-track faculty, perspectives from adjuncts, lecturers, instructors, and other non–tenure-track training professionals, who are held to the same ethical standards and gatekeeping expectations, may be warranted. Likewise, site supervisors can play a vital role in the gatekeeping process and their perspectives on gatekeeping are important as well. Finally, given the complex and ongoing nature of emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences reported by participants, another data source (e.g., follow-up interviews) and more letters from participants might have provided a more thorough understanding of emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences.

Implications for Future Research

This study was a first step in describing counselor educators' emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences. Researchers of future studies might explore faculty groups' collective emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences through focus groups. More understanding of how counselor education programs collect and document student information, make gatekeeping decisions, develop gatekeeping policies and procedures, and rely on gatekeeping-related ethical codes and standards are needed. Additionally, insights from adjunct instructors and clinical site supervisors who have experienced emotionally intense gatekeeping or students who have successfully completed remedial plans may provide unique perspectives on gatekeeping. Understanding how students navigate remediation plans and their emotional reactions to them may inform counselor educators and the profession as to what matters most to students and how to better reach them (Foster et al., 2014). Similarly, site supervisors often have more knowledge of students' work with clients than counselor educators and may be an underutilized resource in gatekeeping practices. Finally, more research on counselor educators' experiences with legal proceedings are warranted. Although several legal cases have generated considerable attention (see *Plaintiff v. Rector and Board of Visitors of the College of William and Mary*, 2005; *Ward v. Wilbanks*, 2009), this study seems to be the first that qualitatively explored counselor education faculty members' experiences specifically with legal encounters. How counselor educators balance lawsuits and professional responsibilities, the prevalence of lawsuits against counselor education faculty for gatekeeping practices, and counselor educators' levels of legal preparedness are rich topics for future study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, findings of this transcendental phenomenological study reveal the intense emotions counselor educators may experience when gatekeeping. In support of others' research (Kerl & Eichler, 2005; Wissel, 2014), participants felt intense emotions such as anger, sadness, frustration, and vulnerability, as well as empathy for the affected students. Emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences seem time-consuming, usually involving multiple faculty members and administrators, as well as sometimes requiring legal counsel. The findings reveal how faculty should moderate their emotions and uphold ethical standards while engaging in emotionally intense gatekeeping. Finally, emotionally intense gatekeeping experiences can inspire counselor educators to revise their program policies, syllabi, and approaches to gatekeeping practices.

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