Mental Well-Being, Academic Experience, and Dropout Intention among Counseling Students Affected by the Shift to Online Instruction during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges for many counseling students due to the threat of COVID-19 and the rapid shift to online learning, possibly resulting in increased mental health problems and dropout rates. This convergent mixed-methods study aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19-related experiences and shift to online learning on (a) counseling students' mental well-being, (b) academic experience, and (c) dropout intentions among a sample of 405 counseling students across 45 states. Path analysis results showed an excellent model fit ($\chi^2 = 5.612$, $p = .47$, CFI = 1.000, SRMR = .025, RMSEA = .000, 90% CI [.000, .063]) and revealed that non-classroom student-faculty interactions positively predicted program commitment ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) and that mental well-being positively predicted program commitment ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$). Program commitment in turn negatively predicted dropout intentions ($\beta = –.22$, $p < .001$). Findings suggest that counselor educators/programs must heed and address students' pressing mental health and learning needs by improving student-faculty communication and developing pedagogies that fit with online/hybrid instruction during this pandemic and beyond.

Aim & Scope: Emerging, Experimental and Current Topics Relevant to Technology in Counselor Education, Supervision and Practice

Keywords: COVID-19, counselor education, counseling students, mental well-being, academic experience and dropout intention

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges for many counseling students and counselor educators, posing a threat to counselor education and student retention. The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2022) stated that "As a counselor educator, you are the linchpin to helping students with the challenges they face each and every day." Namely, counselor educators are responsible for training, supporting, and retaining counseling students. Failure to retain students may cause systemic problems that would profoundly affect the development of the counseling profession and workforce who play an integral role in bridging the mental health gap, particularly in a time of public health crisis–the COVID-19 pandemic (Ewe & Ng, 2022). The pandemic has caused a precipitous reduction in student enrollment (known as enrollment cliff), likely including counseling students (Copley & Douthett, 2020). Some counseling students might experience mental health issues, disappointment at altered learning experiences, or financial hardship (Harrichand et al., 2021). Consequently, these students might be at increased risk of dropping out of counseling programs. Thus, counselor educators have the onus to heed students' concerns and needs in order to support and retain students (Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021). Taken together, the aim of this present study is to examine counseling students' mental well-being and academic experience affected by the pandemic and whether they predict dropout intentions among counseling students.

Counselor Education during the COVID-19 Outbreak

Counselor educators and counselors-in-training are in unprecedented times. Although the necessary focus has been on mental well-being and wellness for clients and

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communities, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted counselor education, calling for intense and prompt attention to counseling students' mental health and academic concerns and needs (Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021). Many people struggle with mental health issues due to the psychological and socioeconomic turmoil created by the pandemic, which worsens mental health disparities and inequalities (Zhai & Du, 2022). Thus, training the next generation of professional counselors has never been more critical to address the public mental health crisis and close the mental health gap. The profound effects of the pandemic might, however, reform how future professional counselors are trained and educated (Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021). With the spike in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations/deaths associated with the more contagious variants, counselor educators and students might have concerns over in-person instruction and the risk for transmission of COVID-19, which could lead to worries and anxiety (Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021).

To address these concerns and reduce the risk for SARS-CoV-2 transmission, counselor education programs had shifted to online instruction in both didactic and experiential courses during the early pandemic (Christian et al., 2021). Counseling practice in practicum and internship was also transitioned to telehealth. Additional institutional COVID-19 safety guidelines and preventative measures (e.g., social distancing, mask-wearing) impacted counseling students' learning experiences, precluding counseling students from gathering in the classroom, forming interdependent social learning groups and connections, and reading facial expressions behind the mask (Christian et al., 2021; Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021). These transitions have increased the use of technology at the expense of interpersonal interactions (Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021). This lack of social connection might have led to isolation and work-life conflict, which could affect counseling students' mental well-being and academic experience (Christian et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020).

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Well-Being

A growing body of literature has documented the multidimensional impact of the pandemic on counseling students' mental well-being (Christian et al., 2021; Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021). Research shows that as adult learners, counseling students often juggle employment and academic/clinical requirements, experiencing unique challenges that can exacerbate poor mental well-being (Prosek et al., 2013). Given the socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic, some counseling students struggled with loss of employment and income, financial, food, and housing insecurity, and limited social connection, which exacerbated challenges that counseling students had confronted even before the pandemic (Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted counseling students' learning environment, wherein programs left students with no choice but to attend online classes at home. Although a recent conceptual article (Ewe & Ng, 2022) has suggested that the altered learning environment (i.e., from in-person to online learning) might affect counseling students' mental well-being, there has been no empirical investigation into the association of counseling students' mental well-being with the altered instruction mode. To investigate this association, our first hypothesis (H1) of this study was that counseling programs' instruction mode would predict mental well-being (i.e., anxiety/depressive symptoms and emotional control) among counseling students who were originally enrolled in residential counseling programs.

Due to the highly infectious nature of COVID-19 and its associated severe morbidity, counseling students might have excessive concerns over their own and loved ones' health and safety amid the pandemic (Zhai & Du, 2020; Ewe & Ng, 2022). Some counseling students might have suffered distress because of specific COVID-19 experiences, such as having confirmed/suspected COVID-19 cases among their families and friends (Zhai & Du, 2020; Ewe & Ng, 2022; Harrichand et al., 2021). Worries and distress associated with COVID-19 experiences could then induce formidable mental health consequences among counseling students. Despite the possible impact of COVID-19-related experiences on mental well-being, no study examined the association of counseling students' mental well-being with their COVID-19-related experiences. Therefore, our second hypothesis (H2) of this study was that counseling students' COVID-19-related experiences would predict their mental well-being.

Impact of the Pandemic on Academic Experience

Academic experience involves interactions between students and the education environment, such as instruction mode (e.g., in-person, online) and interactions with faculty and peers in-classroom or non-classroom settings (Kent et al., 2011). In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, universities shifted their instruction mode from in-person to online. Residential counselor education programs rapidly implemented technological solutions to transition their training to online format (Christian et al., 2021; Ewe & Ng, 2022). In spite of the administrative efforts to prevent a disruption of students' educational and clinical experiences, many counseling students enrolled in residential programs scrambled for adjustment and adaptation during this abrupt transition, confronting emerging challenges in their academic experience affected by the pandemic (Christian et al., 2021; Ewe & Ng, 2022). Student-faculty interactions play an important role in counseling students' learning outcomes and clinical performance, given counselor training that entails intensive professional encounters, such as course/advising meetings and supervision (Ewe & Ng, 2022). These non-classroom interactions (i.e., advising meetings, supervision) with faculty provide counseling students with more opportunities for professional growth in parallel process, which has been essential to counselor education (Ewe & Ng, 2022).

Students who are originally enrolled in online programs have had certain expectations and preparations for online learning. Counseling students whose learning experience involuntarily shifted from in-person to online, however, experienced reduced non-classroom interactions and might have lower levels of commitment to their program (Ewe & Ng, 2022). While counseling students could still have non-classroom interactions via videoconferencing software, non-academic settings (e.g., home, vehicle/car) comprised many distractions that might have impaired student-faculty interactions (Christian et al., 2021; Ewe & Ng, 2022). Counseling students who lacked access to reliable, fast internet could also experience difficulties meeting remotely, which restricted students' ability to interact with their faculty (Ewe & Ng, 2022). The discrepancies between students' expectations toward residential counselor education and their actual academic experience in the online educational environment only belied the academic experience advertised by residential counseling programs, which might cause poor students' confidence in and commitment to their programs and lead to increased dropout intentions (Tinto, 1994, 2017). To date, no single study has assessed the impact of the altered instruction mode and non-classroom student-faculty interactions on counseling students' commitment to their programs. Hence, our third hypothesis (H3) of this study was that programs' instruction mode would contribute to commitment to programs among counseling students (originally enrolled in residential programs) directly and indirectly through their non-classroom interactions with faculty.

Program Commitment and Dropout Intention

Counseling students' mental well-being and their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and altered academic environment might have affected their program commitment and dropout intentions. Research on student retention often adopted Tinto's (1994, 2017) theory to depict the relationships between individual/environmental characteristics and student retention/commitment to school (Beatson et al., 2021; Dwyer, 2017). According to Tinto's student departure theory (Tinto, 1994, 2017), students' individual characteristics (e.g., mental well-being), environmental factors (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), and academic experience have a consequential influence on students' confidence in attending schools/programs and their dropout intentions. Counseling students with a strong commitment to their programs are confident that they have made the right decision in attending this school/program. However, the convergence of the effects of the pandemic on counseling students' mental well-being and academic experience had created discrepancies between their expected and actual experience in counselor education, posing a threat to their confidence in continuously attending the program, namely their program commitment (Tinto, 1994, 2017; Samuel & Burger, 2020). Given the association between students' program commitment and dropout intention (Tinto, 1994, 2017; Samuel & Burger, 2020), counseling students with lower levels of program commitment might be prone to dropping out of their programs before completion. To assess the influence of counseling students' individual characteristics, environmental factors, and academic experience on their program commitment and dropout intention, we based the hypothesized path model on Tinto's theory to

test the following hypotheses: (H4) counseling students' COVID-19 experiences would contribute to their program commitment directly and indirectly through mental well-being, and (H5) counseling students' program commitment would predict their dropout intentions.

Current Study

Although issues around counseling students' mental well-being and academic experiences affected by the pandemic have received growing attention, there remains a paucity of empirical evidence on these issues. To fill the research gap, we conducted this convergent mixed-methods study (i.e., quantitative and qualitative data collected and analyzed spontaneously) because we could compare results from quantitative and qualitative analysis to confirm findings from each other and explain contrast experiences if any, across participants (Nowell et al., 2017; Proudfoot, 2022). Integrated findings from our path analysis and thematic analysis aimed to provide counselor educators with an in-depth, comprehensive understanding of counseling students' experiences and practical implications for counselor educators. Path analysis was guided by the aforementioned five quantitative hypotheses, and thematic analysis was guided by one qualitative research question as follows: how do counseling students experience barriers, hardship, and opportunities in their counseling program due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Of note, thematic analysis is one of the widely utilized qualitative research methods for qualitative data analysis. Although thematic analysis has been deemed a foundational qualitative method, it has been rarely recognized in the same way as other qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and case study (Nowell et al., 2017). Before and during the pandemic, numerous researchers conducted thematic analysis studies to provide a rich and detailed account of data that were collected from specific open-ended questions (e.g., Limberg, et al. [2022]; Kuş & Aydin [2022]). One way to collect qualitative data for thematic analysis is to include one or more open-ended questions in the survey (Nowell et al., 2017; Proudfoot, 2022). Considering the multifaceted experiences of counseling students amid the pandemic, we included an open-ended question in our survey to discover various perspectives of counseling students, capturing similarities and differences and soliciting unanticipated insights (Nowell et al., 2017; Proudfoot, 2022). For the detailed description of thematic analysis, we refer the reader to popular and readily available published journal articles (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Proudfoot, 2022).

Method

Procedure

The current study was approved by [omitted for review]. Using non-probability sampling methods (i.e., snowball sampling, convenience sampling, purposive sampling), we recruited participants from CACREP-accredited counseling programs listed on the CACREP website. Participants were recruited via an in-class presentation in two online counseling courses at a northeast public university and via listservs (e.g., CESNET). We contacted counselor educators in CACREP-accredited counseling programs, asking for their help in distributing the recruitment email to their students. To increase the diversity of participants, we also recruited participants via social media student groups (e.g., Facebook, Instagram). Participants completed an anonymous online survey through Qualtrics after providing informed consent, and they were asked about their willingness to enter into a raffle for a chance to win one of five $10 Amazon gift cards. The inclusion of criteria for this study stipulated that this current study excluded participants who were younger than 18 years of age or not enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The survey included questions concerning demographic information, instruction mode, COVID-19-related experience, mental well-being status, protective behaviors, program commitment, and intent to persist.

Participants

The sample included 405 students in CACREP-accredited counseling programs across 45 states. Participants predominantly self-identified as White (71.4%, *n* = 289), female (84.9%, *n* = 344), and heterosexual (74.6%, *n* = 302). The rest participants identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (0.5%, *n* = 2), Asian (6.4%, *n* = 26), Black/African American (6.4 %, *n* = 26), Latinx (7.9%, *n* = 32), Multiracial (5.4%, *n* = 22), and the rest specified as other (2.0%, *n* = 8). Given that we aimed to test quantitative hypotheses among counseling students who were originally enrolled in residential counseling programs, three participants who indicated their enrollment in online counseling programs were excluded from quantitative analysis but included in qualitative analysis.

analysis. Table 1 presents all participants' demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Characteristics	*N*	%
Race/ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0.5
Asian	26	6.4
Black or African American	26	6.4
Hispanic or Latino	32	7.9
White	289	71.4
Multi-racial	22	5.4
Additional race/ethnicity	8	2.0
Gender		
Male	47	11.6
Female	344	84.9
Transgender	8	2.0
Additional Gender	6	1.5
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	302	74.6
Lesbian/Gay	17	4.2
Bisexual	48	11.9
Queer	17	4.2
Additional Sexual Orientation	16	4.0
Prefer not to say	4	1.0
International Student (hold an F-1 or J-1 visa)		
Yes	24	5.9
No	378	93.3
First-Generation College Student		
Yes	137	33.8
No	264	65.2
Not sure	3	0.7
Having a documented and diagnosed disability		
Yes	68	16.8
No	335	82.7
Current Instruction Mode[a]		
in-person instruction	114	
remote synchronous instruction (i.e., interact in "real time" via videoconference)	365	
remote asynchronous instruction (i.e., no scheduled meeting time)	195	
Other	25	

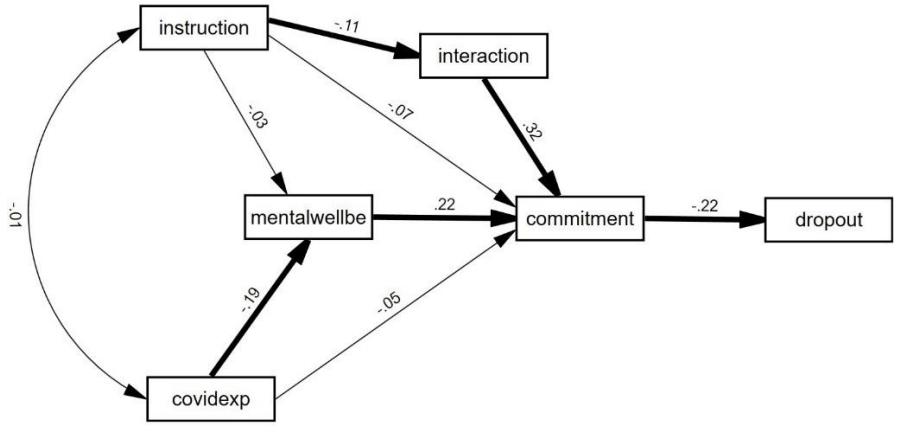
Note. $N = 405$. The total number of answers for each characteristic may be less than the resulting sample size due to participants' nonresponse.
[a] Given that participants were asked to check all that apply for current instruction mode experience, the percentages for this variable were not provided.

Research Design

The current study used a convergent mixed methods analysis as this approach can enrich our understanding of counseling students' experiences (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). Specifically, we performed path analysis (see Figure) and thematic analysis of an open-ended question by connecting, building, merging, and embedding qualitative data with quantitative results (Nowell et al., 2017). We examined the relationships between the study variables in a hypothesized model guided by Tinto's theory via path analysis. In parallel, we performed thematic analysis to better understand participants' experiences and add richness to the data of the study (Nowell et al., 2017). We used an inductive approach that allowed qualitative data to determine the themes emerging during thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Proudfoot (2022) argues that inductive thematic analysis has become a common approach within mixed methods research designs, wherein data can be collected through open-ended survey questions or interviews.

Figure

Hypothesized Path Model with Standardized Regression Coefficients



Note. Statistically significant effects are shown as thicker paths. instruction = current instruction mode; covidexp = COVID-19-related experience; interaction = non-classroom student-faculty interaction; mentalwellbe = mental well-being; commitment = program commitment; dropout = dropout intention.

Quantitative Method

Measures

We used the Mental Health Inventory-5 (MHI-5; Berwick et al., 1991) to measure counseling students' mental well-being. It is a 5-item scale that assesses mental well-being/distress, such as anxiety, depression, and emotional control in participants, using a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *all of the time*, to 6 = *none of the time*). The Cronbach's α for the MHI-5 in this study was .88.

The survey also included a 3-item scale (Oh et al., 2020) to assess students' experiences related to COVID-19 (a. "whether there had been confirmed COVID-19 cases in families or friends?" [Yes/No]; b. "whether there had been suspected COVID-19 cases in families or friends?" [Yes/No]; and c. "number of hours spent thinking about the COVID-19 information every day" [0/1/2/3+ hours].). The Cronbach's α for this scale in this study was .41, which could be considered acceptable (Taber, 2018) when a scale was designed to measure distinct facets of participants' attributes/experiences (in our case, COVID-19-related experiences).

Further, three questions were adopted from the Student Integration Model Measurement (Cabrera & Castaneda, 1992), which is a reliable, strong measurement using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, to 5 = *strongly agree*) to assess: a. students' perceived effect of non-classroom student-faculty interactions on student growth (i.e., "My non-classroom interactions with faculty have had a positive

influence on my personal growth, values, and attitudes"); b. program commitment ("I am confident I made the right decision in choosing to attend this school"); and c. dropout intention ("It is likely I will re-enroll at this university next semester"). Of note, non-classroom student-faculty interactions, program commitment, and dropout intention were three different variables in the path model; therefore, the internal consistency test was not warranted. Lastly, programs' current instruction mode was measured by one multiple-choice question (i.e., in-person instruction, remote synchronous instruction, remote asynchronous instruction, mixed-mode [hybrid] instruction), which was coded as a binary variable with in-person instruction as the reference (vs. online/hybrid instruction).

Table 2
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
instruction	0.28	0.45	1					
covidexp	3.73	1.37	–.01	1				
interaction	0.84	0.37	–.12*	–.04	1			
mentalwellbe	53.23	19.92	–.03	–.19**	.07	1		
commitment	4.26	1.03	–.11*	–.11*	.35**	.25**	1	
dropout	1.30	0.84	.04	.00	–.01	–.00	–.22**	1

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Data Analysis

We analyzed quantitative data via SPSS and SPSS-Amos version 26. We first computed the correlation coefficient between mental well-being, student-faculty interaction, instruction mode, program commitment, COVID-19-related experience, and dropout intention to examine relationships between these variables (Table 2). Second, we performed path analysis to assess the model fit of our hypothesized model guided by the theoretical framework. Several goodness-of-fit indices were used to assess how well the model described the input data set: (a) the χ^2 test; (b) a comparative fit index (CFI; values of .90 or above suggest a good fit; [Bentler, 1990]); (c) a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; values of .08 or less suggest a reasonable fit; [Steiger, 1990]); and (d) the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; values of .80 or less suggest a good fit; [Martens, 2005]). Given that missing data were missing completely at random, we adopted Expectation-Maximization (EM) algorithm that handled missing data to obtain unbiased estimates of parameters of interest.

Qualitative Method

Data Collection

Our mixed-methods data collection approach followed a convergent approach (Castro et al., 2010) in which both survey and open-ended question responses were collected at the same time. Castro et al. (2010) argue that such an approach can provide confirmatory results to support quantitative results. Singer and Couper (2017) stress the fact that "The addition of open-ended questions … and analysis of respondents' verbatim responses to other types of questions may yield important insights" (p.115). We adopted this approach by using student narratives to support the survey results and enrich findings (Proudfoot, 2022; Singer & Couper, 2017).

In line with a convergent mixed methods approach, we developed an open-ended survey question (Singer & Couper, 2017). At the end of the survey, we asked participants the following question: "If you wish to make any other comments with respect to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on your mental health and academic experience, please do so." A total of 120 counseling students provided detailed narratives about the impact of COVID-19 on their mental well-being and academic experiences. Responses were transferred to a secure, shared file to which all team members had access. Responses were listed based on their appearance across the survey.

Data Analysis

We applied the recommended approach for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Proudfoot, 2022) to analyze the responses to the open-ended question. In the first stage, we collected all responses in a secure file as they appeared in the survey. The second and third authors then open-coded all responses while staying open to data coding by apprehending results of path analysis. After several meetings, 12 themes emerged, four of which had some similarities. Of the 12 themes, eight distinct themes were yielded in the last stage. The team members also consistently met the first author to discuss preliminary findings and compare them with quantitative findings. This strategy allowed the research team to approach the

narratives with an open mind to minimize any influence from quantitative data.

Trustworthiness

We made collective efforts to establish and ensure trustworthiness of thematic analysis: credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and audit trail (Nowell et al. 2017). We achieved *credibility* through researcher and methods (qualitative vs. quantitative) triangulation, and consistent peer debriefing through the process of coding (Nowell et al. 2017). We strove for *dependability* through expert member checks during a professional conference wherein the audience from counselor education confirmed our findings. In an effort to ensure *transferability*, we collected responses from participants who were enrolled in various counselor education programs nationwide and provided in-depth, detailed descriptions of their experiences. To establish *confirmability*, we (i.e., all three authors) met regularly to examine the codes and themes that emerged from participants' narrative responses and discuss how such findings aligned or did not align with quantitative findings.

We also coded the responses once data was collected to ensure that qualitative data interpretations were not affected by trends seen in quantitative data. We documented the *audit trail* by writing how codes changed throughout the process. The audit trail helped us revisit data and codes to ensure data landed in the correct theme. As part of reflexivity efforts, we carefully discussed our own biases towards the data as counselor educators and as former students who studied in counselor education programs during the pandemic. Those discussions were crucial in helping us stay in check and minimize interference of prior experiences with data interpretations.

Results

Quantitative Findings

The overall model was evaluated with hypothesized pathways between variables to examine the model fit informed by the goodness-of-fit indices. This hypothesized model overall showed an excellent fit: $\chi^2 = 5.612$, $p = .47$, CFI = 1.000, SRMR = .025, and RMSEA = .000, 90% CI [.000, .063]. When compared with two alternative models, the hypothesized model was superior, as shown by better goodness-of-fit indices. In the first alternative model, there was no direct path from COVID-19 experience or instruction mode to program commitment. In the second alternative model, there was a direct path from COVID-19 experience to program commitment compared with the first alternative model. Results confirmed that the hypothesized model was the best fitting.

As shown in Figure, no significant association was found between COVID-19 experience and current instruction mode. The direct effect of COVID-19 experiences on mental well-being ($\beta = –.19$, $p < .001$) was statistically significant, but that on program commitment ($\beta = –.05$, $p = .27$) was not statistically significant. The direct effect of current instruction mode on non-classroom student-faculty interactions ($\beta = –.11$, $p = .011$) was statistically significant, but that on mental well-being ($\beta = –.03$, $p = .54$) and program commitment ($\beta = –.07$, $p = .07$) were not statistically significant. Non-classroom student-faculty interactions positively predicted program commitment ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$). Mental well-being positively predicted program commitment ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$). Program commitment negatively predicted dropout intent ($\beta = –.22$, $p < .001$).

Table 3

Standardized Direct and Indirect Effects of the Model

Path			Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
interaction	<-----	instruction	–.11*		–.11
mentalwellbe	<-----	instruction	–.03		–.03
commitment	<-----	instruction	–.07	–.04*	–.11
dropout	<-----	instruction		.02**	.02
mentalwellbe	<-----	covidexp	–.19***		–.19
commitment	<-----	covidexp	–.05	–.04***	–.10
dropout	<-----	covidexp		.02*	.02
commitment	<-----	interaction	.32***		.32
dropout	<-----	interaction		–.07***	–.07
commitment	<-----	mentalwellbe	.22***		.22
dropout	<-----	mentalwellbe		–.05***	–.05
dropout	<-----	commitment	–.22***		–.22

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

We conducted bias-corrected bootstrapping to analyze the significance of mediation effects. In SPSS Amos, 5000 bootstrap data samples were generated by randomly sampling with replacement from the data set to compute standardized parameter estimates of both the direct and indirect effects in the hypothesized model (Table 3). The 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) indicated several indirect effects were statistically significant. The indirect effect of COVID-19 experience on program commitment was significant through mental well-being, suggesting full mediation. The indirect effect of current instruction mode on program commitment was significant through non-classroom student-faculty interactions but not mental well-being, suggesting full mediation.

Qualitative Findings

Our qualitative findings overall corroborate the quantitative findings in this study. Thematic analysis revealed eight different challenges (i.e., themes) to the mental well-being of counseling students during the COVID-19 pandemic: lack of institutional support/guidelines, unrealistic expectations from programs, conflicting experiences about remote learning, poor mental well-being, life-work conflict, lack of social connections, increased financial burdens, and systemic injustice experienced by minority students. Findings indicated that counseling students faced significant challenges to their mental well-being, academic experience, and program commitment.

Lack of Institutional Support/Guidelines

Because of lacking institutional support for the transition to online learning mode amid the pandemic, eight respondents explained that they were not getting quality learning experience as programs promised. One participant stated:

> "My graduate program was marketed as a collaborative experience with lots of cohort interaction and great community. I feel as if I do not have any of that and live most of my life stuck in my room. I cannot focus well, I am fatigued, and have had great difficulty starting assignments. I do not think my academic experience matches what I was marketed going in and I feel extreme pressure to push through, learn, and finish school."

This student and others reported they began counseling programs right at the beginning of the pandemic. Many counseling students reported that they were ill-equipped to handle drastic alterations in teaching and training modalities, thus making virtual learning less effective. "It feels like my educational experience was 'stolen' by COVID, because the program wasn't designed to be online (though I am glad we are safe)," one student further explained. Most CACREP-accredited counseling programs were designed for in-person training. Students explained that the COVID-19 pandemic had highlighted that counseling programs and counselor educators were not fully prepared for the transition to online learning.

Unrealistic Expectations from Programs

Ten participants explained unrealistic program expectations. "I'm also not getting the best education I wished for through online learning. It feels like I need 48 hours a day to be able to be done with all of the academic stuff, take care of myself and maintain my social life," one participant explained. Several reported that they struggled to understand the level of academic expectations given the change of circumstances. As one student stated:

> "I find it difficult to take professors seriously when they talk about social justice issues during a pandemic while I am working outside the home and barely making enough money to support myself ..and refuse to modify their course expectations to account for unforeseen circumstances."

Conflicting Experiences about Remote Learning

Thirty-three participants reported conflicting experiences about their learning during the pandemic, such as the inability to access private space to study or provide telehealth counseling. "Some don't have a quiet space, and it becomes stressful. It is not a fair educational experience," one student explained. Given that roommates, partners, and children might have also studied/worked from home, counseling students reported that they struggled to find privacy and space. As one participant explained:

> "I am taking graduate classes online (was supposed to be online). However, I had not planned on my children and husband also being home and online when I registered for class. It has been challenging for me to find uninterrupted time to do my coursework."

Other counseling students protested that their learning had suffered due to increased screen time. "COVID-19 has changed the way we learn, and I

certainly feel that I am unprepared for this sudden change. It has made me feel not wanting to take classes because I cannot pay full attention to the content and comfortably interact with faculty and my cohorts through the screen." Students explained that they had struggled with the online learning environment because of the distraction and discomfort associated with technological solutions (i.e., videoconferencing via computers).

In contrast, a few counseling students shared that they preferred the virtual mode of learning because it gave them room for other activities and saved their time. The following statement shows how these students found more time when attending online classes. One counseling student narrated:

> "I would rather be in my own apartment doing my studies and being able to turn in homework on time and have plenty of time to study for homework but instead there are a million other factors like curfews, limited supplies at grocery stores and max capacity at stores that take up too much time to do simple things."

A few students, however, reported that they preferred virtual education because it was time-saving and flexible, especially those who signed up for online counseling programs. "I am currently in an online program, so the transition that many experienced during COVID-19 was not an issue for me personally" one student shared.

Poor Mental Well-Being

Poor mental well-being was the most cited impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on counseling students in CACREP-accredited programs. Thirty-eight participants believed that their overall wellness and mental health declined. As one student shared:

> "As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, my world has collapsed to the space inside my house. It has abruptly and dramatically altered my usual life routines, such as working outside my home, having even a modicum of time alone, and physical differentiation of space that aided in smooth mental differentiation between work, home, and self."

Counseling students reported negative feelings, such as anger, sadness, isolation, and depression. "The impact these thoughts have had on mental health have been a roller coaster between anger, sadness, hopelessness, frustration, restlessness, etc." one student shared. Some students even went as far as attributing physical health symptoms to their altered lifestyle.

> "The isolation is slowly draining the life out of me. I am experiencing touch deprivation and am seriously worried about how this will change our culture and society in the long-term. Sitting in front of other students' faces on screen staring at me down for hours on end each week aggravates serious anxiety and gives me physical stomach aches."

Life-Work Conflict

Life-work conflict was one important challenge for counseling students. Twenty-two students explained that they struggled with life-work conflict due to competing demands. As one student explained, "Although I like being home more to be here for my daughter and family as head of household, it is difficult to stay focused while in synchronous instruction as there are many distractions and other responsibilities competing for my attention." Students shared that it was challenging to accommodate childcare needs while attending classes or working on assignments. **"**Trying to keep up with my studies as well as my children's needs has been the most difficult since my parents feel they can no longer help at all due to feeling at risk from covid," another student shared.

Lack of Social Connections

Social isolation was another key finding in our study. Sixteen students identified decreases in their social connectivity during the onset of the pandemic. "The isolation is slowly draining the life out of me," one student wrote. While another added, "The isolation of going to classes from home gets to me. I have had to be extra careful in making sure my self-care stays on track and keeps my stress levels down." Given the influence of social integration and mental health on students' perspectives on their programs/schools (Tinto, 1994, 2017), decreased social connections and associated mental health problems could impair students' commitment to their programs. One participant reported, "I often find myself being down here and there. I miss playing sports and being active now. I can't as often and that truly impacts my health and overall mental health." The manifestation of social

isolation and mental burden underscores counseling students' struggles in the context of online counselor training.

Increased Financial Burdens

Six students reported financial insecurity due to loss of employment or increased financial pressure. The following quote describes the financial burden felt by several counseling students:

> "Working full time and going to graduate school full time is extremely stressful, but due to COVID and the uncertainty of finances I feel that I can't reduce to a part time job for my mental health, even though I am very burnt out."

Students who were employed reported a variety of hardships, including layoffs, cuts in pay, and decreased hours, all contributing to the overall financial burden. "This pandemic has forced me to lose my job and have to stay home with my family; [causing] a financial hardship," one student shared. Some other financial burdens were reported, including high tuition. "The tuition, for the most part, is still ridiculously high under the current condition," a student explained.

Systemic Injustice Experienced by Minority Students

Systemic injustice is characterized by several factors, particularly access to resources and reliable internet connections. Several students struggled to find proper space to attend classes and to study, finding reliable internet connections, and accessing reliable computers, which increased disparities between marginalized students and privileged students. As one student shared:

> "The virtual academic experience is disproportionate. Not everyone has the same equipment or internet speed at home…Some are using their phones to attend class. It is not a fair educational experience."

Another student shared the following: "my institution does not have covid-19 support for Black students." A marginalized international student reported that she suffered social isolation and felt helpless. "As a 1st year international student, it was extremely tough with very limited help due to the pandemic," she shared.

Discussion

This is the first national study to examine counseling students' wellness and experience during the COVID-19 pandemic through quantitative and qualitative approaches. Results from quantitative data analysis revealed that counseling programs' instruction mode did not predict mental well-being (i.e., anxiety/depressive symptoms and emotional control) among counseling students originally enrolled in residential counseling programs (the hypothesis [H1] was not supported). Although the impact of programs' instruction mode on mental well-being did not emerge in the quantitative data, several students' statements indicated increased emotional distress and decreased mental well-being resulting from virtual instruction. This contradiction between quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that quantitative findings may not capture the full scope of the issue, especially with a large number of participants. Not only does Zoom/online learning fatigue impact counseling students' learning experience and outcomes (Wiederhold, 2020), but it also seems to exacerbate mental well-being among some counseling students because they were not prepared for the disruptive shift of their learning environment while juggling school, life, and work responsibilities (Ewe & Ng, 2022).

Findings from quantitative analysis showed that counseling students who underwent negative COVID-19-related experiences were more likely to suffer from poor mental well-being (the hypothesis [H2] was supported), which corroborates anecdotal reports for the first time suggesting adverse psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on counseling students (Ewe & Ng, 2022). In our path model guided by Tinto's student departure theory (Tinto, 1994, 2017), we found that counseling students' COVID-19-related experiences did not directly predict their program commitment but did contribute to their program commitment indirectly through lower levels of mental well-being (H4). It is possible that individual characteristics, such as mental health status, affected by the COVID-19 pandemic play a central role in counseling students' program commitment because their mental well-being may determine their ability to adapt to an altered learning/academic environment, which in turn affects their perspectives and commitment to programs. Our qualitative findings lend support to this finding as students disclosed their emotional and somatic struggles in adapting to the

online instruction mode. Given the strongly predictive effect of students' mental well-being on their program commitment, counselor educators should heed mental health needs among counseling students in order to support and retain them (Harrichand et al., 2021; Ewe & Ng, 2022).

Results from quantitative analysis showed that programs' instruction mode did not directly predict students' program commitment but did contribute to their program commitment indirectly through their perceived satisfaction with non-classroom interactions with counselor educators (H3), suggesting that non-classroom student-faculty interactions play a crucial role in students' program commitment despite the shift of programs' instruction mode. This full mediation indicates that having the online/hybrid instruction shifted from in-person instruction might have only affected students' program commitment when students had poor non-classroom interactions with faculty (Ewe & Ng, 2022; Tinto, 1994, 2017). Coupled with our qualitative findings wherein students stressed their needs for counselor educators' support and compassion, the findings provide empirical evidence that non-classroom student-faculty interactions (e.g., supervision, advising meeting) might have provided counseling students with support to navigate uncertainty and challenges that emerged during the pandemic (Ewe & Ng, 2022). With an increased sense of security due to counselor educators' support, counseling students might feel more confident in their decision to receive counseling training by attending their programs (Tinto, 1994, 2017). Thus, we conclude that non-classroom student-faculty interactions may enhance counseling students' sense of security and self-efficacy to complete their program, which helps to improve program commitment (Tinto, 1994, 2017). As our results from quantitative analysis indicated that counseling students' program commitment strongly predicted their dropout intentions (H5), it is imperative for counselor educators to enhance students' program commitment in order to protect students from dropping out.

Additionally, results from qualitative analysis revealed that counseling students' quality of life suffered due to conflicting demands of school, life, and work. Students' mental and physical health, social well-being, learning experience, and career wellness were negatively impacted by the pandemic, substantiating our quantitative finding on the effects of COVID-19 experience on mental well-being in our hypothesized model. In parallel, the qualitative findings on poor life-work balance and financial strain among counseling students suggest that counselor educators and universities should consider developing contingency plans to relieve counseling students' emotional and financial stress in order to retain these students.

Our qualitative data also show that counseling students have had concerns over the online instruction mode and reduced interactions with peers and faculty, suggesting that students' needs for social connections with peers and counselor educators remain important for their well-being and commitment to programs (Ewe & Ng, 2021). Last, amid nationwide conversations surrounding racial and systemic injustice, the qualitative findings also suggest that some universities have failed to provide marginalized students (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, international students, individuals with low socioeconomic status) with timely and adequate support and a safe learning environment (Zhai & Du, 2020).

Practical Implications

Counselor Educators

Educators play an essential role in student retention by contributing to students' wellness and academic experience (Tinto, 1994, 2017). To this end, counselor educators should stay attentive to students' needs and concerns (Ewe & Ng, 2022), checking in with advisees and supervisees more often than in the pre-pandemic period. With increased knowledge of students' unique experiences, counselor educators can tailor pedagogies to meet both learning and mental health needs (Ewe & Ng, 2022). For example, the course assignment could use more creative approaches, such as reflecting/discussing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on clients' and counselors' mental well-being and access to resources (Harrichand et al., 2021). An accommodating and creative approach will allow students to discuss topics from their daily life, which can be an avenue for emotional relief and peer support (Harrichand et al., 2021). Further, counselor educators may benefit from creating an online academic community that provides students and faculty with opportunities for non-classroom encounters, such as

learning, supervision/consultation, and emotional support. Counselor educators can take the initiative by adopting convenient platforms (e.g., virtual office hours via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Canvas) that ensure ongoing academic/social interaction at a distance.

Online classes require an intense cognitive load (Wiederhold, 2020), and students and instructors can get overwhelmed easily. To combat Zoom fatigue, instructors should offer multiple short breaks. Instructors can also help students stay focused by offering students options to turn off or leave cameras on during online classes because recent studies (Bailenson, 2021; Wiederhold, 2020) suggest that some students may experience less cognitive load when their cameras are off during classes, which may increase comprehension and minimize distraction.

Outside the classroom, counselor educators should be more transparent about ground rules or boundaries for communication. Given that non-classroom communication is as valuable as in-classroom communication (Tinto, 1994, 2017), counseling students in this present study reiterated the need for non-classroom communication because it creates a sense of community. Students may feel that faculty members are disengaged or disinterested in their needs due to the faculty's delayed response, which can undermine students' passion and interest in counselor education. Consequently, counseling students can feel less committed to their programs due to difficulties connecting outside the classroom, which leads to dropout behaviors (Tinto, 1994, 2017). Thus, faculty should inform students about the expectations of communication timelines and be more transparent about communication difficulties or delays that students might experience to help them feel informed and connected in order to retain students.

Counseling Students

Counseling students' individual characteristics (e.g., mental health) can contribute to student retention (Tinto, 1994, 2017). Our findings suggest that counselor educators should encourage students to practice self-care to mitigate pandemic-related stress (Harrichand et al., 2021). Self-care can come in various shapes, from basic daily needs such as healthy dietary choice and sleep hygiene, to practicing activities such as mindfulness and exercise. Moses et al. (2016) found that certain self-care habits predicted well-being among college students, namely mindful acceptance, social support, and healthy sleep and eating habits. Self-care is effective in addressing most participants' concerns over mental health, education, social interactions, and financial struggles (Harrichand et al., 2021).

Counseling students are encouraged to practice self-compassion. Narratives of this study have shown a great deal of psychological burnout among counseling students. To counteract such feelings, utilizing self-compassion can not only help reduce feelings of guilt and increase hope but also enable students to develop greater levels of acceptance to cope with stress and increase their quality of life (Hall et al., 2013; Harrichand et al., 2021). Further, counseling students should familiarize themselves with virtual/in-person on-campus resources, such as services provided by academic departments and student affairs, to address issues related to technology, wellness, and funding sources.

Counselor Education and Supervision Programs

Our qualitative findings show that students became more disengaged with their counselor education programs when they switched to remote learning. Disengagement was related to program communication. When programs stayed well connected with their students after switching to remote instruction, it is likely that students remained more engaged and committed to their course of study. For many students, poor program communication resulted in unclear program expectations, students feeling that they were not important to their program, and students feeling that their needs were not valued or addressed by their programs. Some said they wanted to discontinue their programs or were paying for something other than what they had signed up for. For both the success of the program and students, programs need to stay in good contact with their students regardless of instruction type and keep the communication lines open with clear and realistic expectations about learning outcomes.

Students' feedback suggested caution around using online instruction if a choice between in-person and virtual courses is available for programs. Many students reported their preference for in-person classes. Students said they were more engaged with instructors, course materials, and classmates in person. Whenever in-person classes are suspended due to natural disasters

(e.g., infectious disease outbreaks), counseling programs must find a balance between in-person and virtual learning experiences because such a balance could help reduce in-person contact but still allow students to obtain social-learning experiences in person/virtually. For instance, individual supervision of counseling students may be hybrid (i.e., in-person or virtual at selected times).

Although the findings suggest that student learning was severely impacted due to over-reliance on virtual learning experiences, virtual supervision appears to demonstrate equal efficacy when compared with in-person supervision (Tarlow et al., 2020). Scharff et al. (2020) surveyed counseling students during the pandemic and found that "Counselors…who received hybrid training were more satisfied with supervision than their in-person counterparts and evidenced more positive attitudes toward the use of technology in their later practice" (p.680). Henceforth, we argue that hybrid supervision is an effective option, given the fluctuation of the pandemic.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations. First, cross-sectional data does not permit us to examine causality via the path model. The qualitative findings, however, provided preliminary support for the directional relationships between study variables in our path model via the convergent mixed methods design. Nonetheless, future longitudinal studies are still needed to help to assess the directional relationships of study variables. Second, the results may not be generalized to other student bodies. Participants in this study could not represent the entire U.S. counseling student body because of non-probability sampling strategies. Although participants' characteristics were close to students' demographics in the 2019 CACREP report, future studies should recruit more diverse participants to increase representativeness. Third, survey questions were self-administered, and the open-ended question might not be able to capture nuances in responses compared with semi-structured follow-up interviews. Fourth, due to the response anonymity, we were unable to conduct a follow-up interview that might provide additional insight into students' experiences. However, we believe that 120 responses to the open-ended question may have yielded rich, unique insights into the impact of the pandemic on counseling students' mental well-being, academic experience, and perspectives on counselor education programs. Despite these limitations, we believe our study provides timely empirical evidence on counseling students' mental health and academic needs and their lived experiences affected by the pandemic. Implications that emerged from this study should be considered when evaluating the merit of online counselor education and revising related online instructions and pedagogies in the future.

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