Are Advanced Counseling Skills *Really* Valued in Counselor Education and Supervision

PhD programs?

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Introduction

The changes to the 2024 CACREP standards have called into question what aspects of doctoral-level training are truly important within the counseling field. While counseling is one of the five primary domains in the CACREP standards, clinical skills training within counseling doctorate programs is often anchored in theories and practices of psychology (Boyson & Vogal, 2008; Larkin & Morris, 2015; Lee, 2022). With counseling now being a required part of the doctoral internship in these programs, it is important to parse what exactly advanced skills training means to professionals, and how these skills are measured and valued by doctoral faculty.

In order to investigate how Counselor Education and Supervision (CES) doctoral programs consider advanced skills training and evaluation in their programs, the researchers conducted an IRB-approved focus group with six faculty members from CES doctoral programs across the country. Specifically, we conducted a Zoom-based focus group conversation about what we mean by "advanced skills" for doctoral students in counselor education, how much we value advanced skills training at the doctoral level, and what the implications are for professional identity as counselor educators. Due to the complex nature of the relationship between counseling ideologies, counseling practices, and program structures, choosing to employ a focus group format and methodology allowed for a level of flexibility and naturalistic focusing on important aspects of faculty evaluation and decision making (Powell & Single. 1996). Through the focus group structure, exchanges and interactions between participants solicited in-depth conversations in which individuals could explore and clarify viewpoints in a way that may be inaccessible with other study designs (Kitzinger, 1995). Researchers asked open ended questions with the purpose of investigating the following questions for research:

1. How much do CACREP counselor education programs value advanced skills training among doctoral students?

2. What do counselor educators identify as advanced/doctoral level counseling skills?

Initial Analysis

Focus Groups

In Focus Group research, investigators seek to engage with a purposeful sample of participants in an in-depth examination of a subject about which little is known (Barbour, 2014). Data for analysis in a Focus Group is collected through examination of categories and keywords that arise throughout the discussion. In addition, researchers include their observations of the character and tone of the discussion to supplement the transcript of the discussion itself (Barbour, 2014).

Sampling

The researchers engaged in purposeful sampling to identify counselor educators teaching in CACREP-accredited CES programs. Outreach was conducted through emails to CACREP liaisons, messages on the counselor education listserv, CESNET, and outreach to known colleagues. The resulting sample was six counselor educators in CACREP accredited CES programs representing a diversity of program variation (i.e., face-to-face, hybrid, remote with residency, remote without residency, R1, Not-for profit online, For-profit online, National and International). In addition, regional locations represented included the Northeast, South, Northwest and East Coast.

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Method

The six participants and four researchers met via Zoom for a 90-minute session where the following questions were discussed:

1) How much do CACREP counselor education programs value advanced skills training among doctoral students?

    a) If it is not valued, why not?

    b) If it is valued, why?

2) How do you feel about keeping "counseling" as central to counselor educator training, to ensure counselor professional identity?

3) The 2016 CACREP Standards require clinical counseling experience during a 100-hour practicum. What do you identify as advanced/doctoral level counseling skills?

4) The 2024 CACREP Standards require clinical counseling experience and indicate: "Prior to the internship, the counselor education program assesses doctoral students' counseling skills to ensure preparedness for the doctoral counseling internship." How can programs assess current skills to determine student readiness for a doctoral level counseling internship?

5) What does the doctoral counseling internship look like in terms of new knowledge?

6) How do you measure whether advanced counseling skills have been attained in a doctoral counseling internship?

7) What else has come up for you from this discussion?

Analysis

At the time of the writing, the researchers have engaged in a preliminary analysis of the transcript to begin to identify potential codes and emerging themes. To analyze the data gathered

from this focus group, researchers employed qualitative thematic analysis applied to the audio transcript. Thematic analysis requires collaboration on developing a list of overarching and repeating themes within the data set. Once a codebook is agreed upon, each participant statement is coded with one or more themes, allowing for an investigation of underlying participant beliefs and orientations. The following emerging themes have been identified at this stage of the analysis. These initial observations are being examined further to craft a model to consider the role of advanced skills training in CES PhD programs.

- Advanced skills are valued, but not in a consistent or universal way.
- "Counselor" is not an agreed-upon identity at the doctoral level.
- There is more room for interpretation of what is meant by "advanced skills" at the doctoral level.
- Advanced skills training is not "one size fits all" at the doctoral level.
- NEW skills might be more accurate than ADVANCED skills.

Conclusion

Counseling skills evaluation and training is a complex and multidimensional topic that requires consideration across multiple domains in order to equitably prepare students for a doctoral counseling internship. Students may come to CES PhD programs with experience in different counseling specialty areas for different lengths of time. They may also bring a variety of counseling identities and employ a vast array of skills which makes the creation of a standardized set of advanced clinical skills and assessment methods difficult to compose. Faculty participants in this study voiced their challenges and obstacles in implementing the new CACREP standards in a way that accounts for this level of diversity in their student body. Concerns regarding 'skipping over' basic skills with assumptions that they are already

developed, employing standards that uphold colonial ideologies of counseling theory, and navigating varying institutional cultures around the doctoral counseling identity are several of the nuanced difficulties highlighted by participants.

At this stage in our process, initial take-aways from our two primary questions for research are as follows:

1. How much do CACREP counselor education programs value advanced skills training among doctoral students?

    a. Advanced skills are valued but are sometimes assumed and not emphasized as a part of the doctoral training program.

    b. Advanced skills are difficult to define since students come to doctoral training with varying levels of counseling experience (i.e., years in the field, emphasis area).

2. What do counselor educators identify as advanced/doctoral level counseling skills?

    a. "Counselor Identity" is more difficult to pin down at the doctoral level due to differences in student backgrounds and program/institution values.

    b. Skills training (practicum, internship) is individually tailored to student current experience, interests, needs; therefore, it is more difficult to establish a baseline of skills and an assessment of new skills.

    c. There is value in considering doctoral skills training as "new" skills instead of "advanced" skills.

The next steps in our analysis include continued validation of emerging codes, identifying overarching themes from the data, and developing a conceptual model for doctoral

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programs in CES to consider adopting when engaging doctoral students in advanced skill

development.

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