Students’ Perspectives on Gatekeeping in Counselor Education: A Case Study

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Through in-depth interviews, the authors examined 10 master’s-level counseling students’ perceptions of gatekeeping. Case analysis resulted in 3 major themes pertaining to the necessity of gatekeeping, vital components, and counseling student characteristics. Implications of the findings are also discussed.

Keywords: counselor education, supervision, professional development, gatekeeping

Counselor educators and supervisors fulfill a myriad of roles, including the ethical responsibility as gatekeepers to the counseling profession (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Counselor for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009). To protect clients from future harm is an essential function of counselor educators (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013). Although numerous terms have been used to describe students of concern (e.g., impaired, unsuitable, unqualified, incompetent), Elman and Forrest (2007) proposed the use of student first language that focuses on problems related to professional competence. Thus, gatekeeping is defined as the process of intervening with students so that only those who are competent graduate and enter the field of counseling (Miller & Koerin, 2001).

As gatekeepers, counselor educators and supervisors must provide remediation at the first indication that general methods of teaching and supervision are ineffective (ACA, 2014). Common strategies include referral to counseling and increased frequency of supervision (Russell & Peterson, 2003; Vacha-Hasse, Davenport, & Kerewsky, 2004), repetition of courses, additional assignments related to the concern, and referral to peer tutoring or a peer support group (Russell & Peterson, 2003). When remediation plans are unsuccessful, instructors and supervisors must not endorse trainees (McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007). During this process, standardized procedures and documentation are necessary to ensure that students receive due process (Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; McAdams et al., 2007; Ziomek-Daigle
Remediation and, when necessary, dismissal protect future clients and the profession by producing graduates that “are capable of interacting with clients, colleagues, and the community in an ethical and competent manner” (Miller & Koerin, 2001, p. 1).

In recent years, numerous articles have been published on the topic of gatekeeping, which has resulted in an emerging theory of gatekeeping practices (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010), predominant reasons for remediation and program dismissal (e.g., deficient interpersonal skills and poor boundaries; Li, Trusty, Lampe, & Lin, 2008), just and transparent remediation procedures (Foster & McAdams, 2009), strategies for evaluating competence (Lumadue & Duffy, 1999), and measurement of nonacademic concerns (Duba, Paez, & Kindsvatter, 2010). Furthermore, inventories such as the Counseling Competencies Scale (CCS; University of Central Florida Counselor Education Faculty, 2009) have been developed to measure counseling students’ skills along with professional behaviors and dispositions.

Although gatekeeping efforts focus on the adequate preparation of students for the counseling field, counselor education students’ voices are largely missing from discussions of this topic. It is possible that the unique vantage point of students could assist counselor educators in improving gatekeeping processes so that they are able to effectively intervene with students at admission, during formative and summative feedback opportunities, and during field work.

Research Investigating Students’ Perspectives

In a review of the literature, only seven published studies considered students perspectives, with two in counselor education (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Parker et al., 2014) and five in psychology (Mearns & Allen, 1991; Oliver, Bernstein, Anderson, Blashfield, & Roberts, 2004; Rosenberg, Getzelman, Arcinue, & Oren, 2005; Shen-Miller et al., 2011; Veilleux, January, VanderVeen, Reddy, & Klonoff, 2012). Mearns and Allen (1991) noted from survey data that 95% of students (N = 73) acknowledged knowing a student with professional deficits, and 42% indicated that they had confronted the student of concern. Faculty, who were also surveyed, underestimated the emotional turmoil their students experienced when recognizing impairment in peers. Oliver et al. (2004) found that students (N = 46) viewed the topic of gatekeeping as “highly sensitive” and “inadequately addressed” (p. 141). Students estimated that 12% of their peers were impaired, and only half were believed to be known about by faculty. Rosenberg et al. (2005) administered a survey to clinical and counseling psychology graduate students (N = 129). Contrary to the findings of Mearns and Allen (1991), students were more likely to talk to other students and avoid the student of concern than confront the student. However, similar to previous research, the students surveyed expressed the negative effect of colleagues with problems of professional competency. Students also indicated that they believed faculty members were responsible for intervening, yet the process for remediation was unclear.
Gaubatz and Vera (2006) compared faculty members’ \((N = 45)\) and students’ \((N = 62)\) perceptions of gatekeeping issues. Faculty members identified 9% of their enrolled students as presenting gatekeeping issues, whereas the students rated 21% of their peers as deficient. Shen-Miller et al. (2011) surveyed students \((N = 321)\) and found that 44% of students had observed classmates with competency issues. Students expressed concern that trainers, who they believed were aware of the competency problems in fellow students, would not intervene. Veilleux et al. (2012) surveyed 570 individuals from 169 clinical psychology training programs to investigate students’ perspectives related to peers experiencing professional competency problems. Of those surveyed, 56% indicated that they knew one or more peers with competency issues, and 54% of the students believed that faculty were aware of these students of concern. Approximately two thirds of the sample stated that they were unsure if their program had a policy in place to address students of concern. Parker et al. (2014) interviewed current and former counselor education students \((N = 12)\) to develop a theory of peer reporting of gatekeeping concerns. Students in the study expressed a need for clear protocols for reporting peers and believed that programs can reduce the number of gatekeeping issues by improving the admissions process.

The research described above uncovered students’ level of awareness of other students’ competency problems, their responses to classmates of concern, and their beliefs about faculty members’ awareness and willingness to intervene. Six of the seven studies were surveys, which captured many students’ perspectives but lacked the depth that can be obtained through individual interviews. The surveys did not examine what students knew, thought, or felt about gatekeeping in the profession, nor did they explore students’ ideas and suggestions for improving gatekeeping practices. Furthermore, the impersonal nature of surveys limited researchers’ understanding of trainees’ personal stories with students of concern and their beliefs about how these issues should be addressed. Only Parker et al. (2014) investigated through interviews students’ experiences related to reporting their peers who had problems of professional competency. Using in-depth interviews, our qualitative study explored the following questions: (a) What do students think about the practice of gatekeeping? (b) How do students think gatekeeping policies should be applied? (c) What suggestions or ideas do students have to improve the gatekeeping process? and (d) What experiences do students have with peers that they view as having professional competency problems?

**Method**

This study was designed as a single case study to examine 10 master’s-level counseling students’ experiences of gatekeeping in counselor education (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005). Single case study research entails examining a specific system, which is bounded by time and location. In this study, the *case* was defined as the event of gatekeeping in a counselor education program (which is described in the Context section) over the course of one semester. Case study design is especially relevant for exploring questions related to
participants’ experiences in their natural context, in which the researcher has minimal control over events (Merriam, 1998).

The researchers (a team of four doctoral students) recruited students from five master’s-level counselor education classes. Researchers did not solicit nor interview students from their own classes in an effort to reduce social desirability and biases. Additionally, the university’s institutional review board (IRB) stipulated that the researchers not intentionally select students who had professional competency problems. In the purposive sample, students were selected based on the length of time in the program, their performance in the program, and their interpersonal skills. Eligible performance criteria included grades (i.e., As and Bs) and acceptable assessment based on the CCS (University of Central Florida Counselor Education Faculty, 2009). Volunteers who were not selected were new to the counselor education program, performing poorly in their courses, or perceived to have poor interpersonal skills.

Context

The study was conducted at a large university in the southeastern United States with a sizeable counselor education program of approximately 275 students. Students are mostly female (84%), enrolled full time (80%), and in their mid-twenties. The ethnicity of the counselor education students includes: White (79%), Latino (11%), Black (8%), and other (2%). The CACREP-accredited master’s program includes tracks for mental health counseling; marriage, couple, and family counseling; school counseling; and a counselor education doctoral program. The demographics of the student body mirrored the demographics of the participants in this study.

The admissions procedure consisted of a preliminary review of applications and supporting documentation. Qualified applicants were then invited to a half-day interview. The interview included a round of group interviews with faculty and current students. Interview group sizes were seven to eight applicants at a time; interviewers for each group typically consisted of one faculty member and two doctoral students. In addition to the group interviews, faculty observed interviewees in a group activity.

Admitted students signed off on receiving and reading the graduate program handbook. The handbook did not mention the term gatekeeping, but it included information about the possibility of students’ dismissal for being personally unsuitable for the counseling profession. The handbook included examples of problematic behavior, a distinct policy on appropriate personal and professional attributes, and an explanation of the remediation and dismissal processes. In addition, students were evaluated one-on-one in their techniques class, practicum, and internship on appropriate professional disposition.

Participants

The participants were full- or part-time master’s-level student volunteers; the age range of the students was 23–34 years ($M = 27$). The sample was
composed of eight women and two men: five White, two Latino, one multiracial, one Black, and one categorized as other. Of the students, five had completed 10 or more classes in the counselor education program, and the remaining five had completed at least five classes.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected via semistructured interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes that were conducted at the university site. A definition of gatekeeping was provided for students at the beginning of the interview. Students were then asked open-ended questions on gatekeeping, and probes were used to promote in-depth responses that would capture students’ personal stories and experiences. Some of the prompts used in the interview were as follows: (a) Tell me about an experience with a student who in your view possesses characteristics that may impede them as a future counselor, (b) Describe personal characteristics of students that you are concerned about, and (c) What do you think nonacademic dismissal criteria should include? Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researchers.

**Data Analysis and Verification Strategies**

Analysis of a case study involves examining the data to identify patterns, which illuminate overarching themes and issues (Stake, 2005). We began this process with transcription of the interviews verbatim. Following transcription, we immersed ourselves in the data by reading and rereading all 10 transcripts in their entirety. This was followed by identification of preliminary codes in the first four transcripts. We then met to discuss the transcripts and precursory codes. We focused on the context of the students’ gatekeeping experiences. A codebook was created, and we returned to the remaining transcripts to complete the coding process. We met again to discuss and classify emerging themes and subthemes (Stake, 2005).

Six verification strategies were used to establish the confirmability of the results: (a) investigator triangulation, (b) statements of positionality, (c) researcher reflexivity, (d) external audit, (e) negative case analysis, and (f) thick description. Each of these improves the trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that the participants’ perspectives are accurately portrayed. First, triangulation was used to limit research bias and provide readers with a clear understanding of the interviews (Stake, 2005). This was achieved by all four researchers (the three authors and one additional graduate student) collecting and interpreting data. Our perspectives were compared, challenged, and discussed, resulting in full agreement on the themes. Second, each researcher clarified her personal bias at the onset of the study through a statement of positionality. We explored our vantage point as both doctoral students subject to the gatekeeping process as well as gatekeepers of master’s students in our roles as instructors, practicum supervisors, and leaders of personal growth groups. Each of us described a personal experience with a student of concern and experience in the remediation process. We shared a common belief that students who present with professional competency problems are entitled to
remediation procedures that are designed to foster growth, and, if remediation fails, students should be dismissed to protect future clients. Third, we engaged in reflexivity by journaling personal reactions to the interviews and transcripts. We found that, as stated by Protivnak and Foss (2009), “our recent experiences as doctoral students were sometimes set aside; at other times, our experiences were used to help understand the perspectives of participants” (p. 243). Fourth, an external audit was conducted by a qualitative research expert who was not associated with the study. An audit trail, including transcripts, research notes, and the codebook, was provided to the reviewer. The auditor reviewed the coding process and agreed that the themes accurately reflected the students’ experiences on the topic of gatekeeping. Fifth, we used negative case analysis to identify exceptions to emerging themes. After locating alternative viewpoints, we reconsidered our initial interpretations of the data to ensure that the analysis accurately captured the students’ perspectives. Lastly, we use thick description here to report the findings. Verbatim quotes help the reader hear students’ lived experiences related to gatekeeping.

Findings

Three predominant themes emerged from the students’ interviews with regard to their perceptions: (a) gatekeeping is a necessary function of a counseling program, (b) there are vital components to gatekeeping that should be considered, and (c) there are preferred and nonpreferred characteristics that should be identified in counseling program applicants and students. The themes are explored below using direct quotes from the students (note that pseudonyms are used to protect the students’ identities).

Necessity of Gatekeeping

All 10 students believed that gatekeeping is necessary. Specifically, they thought that faculty must establish and implement gatekeeping procedures, notify students of such procedures, and dismiss inadequate students when necessary. Students wondered how faculty members would know that problems existed and indicated that they knew of students with competency problems and believed the faculty were not aware of them. All of the students agreed that professors have an obligation to intervene with students who are experiencing difficulties. Betty, a 34-year-old White woman, shared, “I would say pretty high up there in responsibility . . . because, they are like giving the degrees and saying, ‘Okay, it’s okay for you to be a counselor.’”

Along with the need for programs to establish and implement gatekeeping procedures, the students identified the need for clear, advanced notification of gatekeeping policies. Some students indicated that they were not initially aware that gatekeeping was a function of the counseling program and felt shocked or surprised when they learned about gatekeeping in their ethics class. Paloma, a 28-year-old woman in the racial category other, stated, “Yeah, I didn’t know it existed. I think it’s great that it happens. But, it was just like, wait, start over. It was not anywhere in my awareness. I don’t remember anything about like that being spoken about.”
Regarding the necessity of gatekeeping policies, several students appeared visibly uncomfortable with the concept of dismissal for nonacademic reasons (e.g., whispering the answer, pausing for a long time, stating “I don’t know”). Betty stated, “Gosh, that is kind of tough. I don’t know criteria. I mean it has to be something more, something has to be more specific.” Amanda, a 24-year-old Black woman, shared, “Umm, I don’t know . . . maybe committing a felony or a suicide attempt. But, they should still get the chance to come back into the program later.”

However, the students stated that there might be situations in which such dismissal was warranted, such as substance abuse, ethical reasons, legal issues, breaking school policies, boundary issues, closed mindedness, disruptive behavior, and inability to connect or be empathic with others. “We need to be held accountable . . . I would hope someone would hold me accountable if I was completely unwell and needed counseling,” said Jean, a 29-year-old White woman. Still, the students viewed these issues as difficult to evaluate and hard to measure. Zach, a 25-year-old White man, stated, “You know, it’s like hard to quantify things like caring and motivation. I don’t know, it’s difficult.”

Components of Gatekeeping

The students identified the program admissions process as the first important component of gatekeeping. The students were asked about their own admissions experiences and what elements they believed should be included in entrance interviews. The students generally felt that the interviews for a counseling program should be in-depth and comprehensive. They believed it was important for faculty to really get to know the candidates to make more effective selections. Ike, a 28-year-old Latino, shared, “I think . . . really careful analysis as to a person and their abilities and personality are really important. . . . We need to know that they’ll be good with people in this helping profession.”

Students shared a wide variety of opinions of their interview experiences. For example, Katrina, a 23-year-old Latina, shared, “I really liked questions that were asked, like populations that I wouldn’t feel comfortable working with, ’cause it really made you have to be human and honest.” Others expressed dissatisfaction with the size of their interview group (typically 6–7 students interviewed by faculty members and doctoral students), which students felt prevented the interviewers from getting to know the candidates well. Amanda shared, “I felt like I was just herded in with a ton of other people.” The students believed that to select the best candidates, more time may be necessary and a variety of the methods may improve the screening process (e.g., group, individual, assessments, supporting documents).

In addition to identifying admissions interviews as a component of gatekeeping, the students discussed concern with regard to the inherent subjectivity involved in the gatekeeping process. Therefore, they believed a crucial component is concrete parameters that are communicated to students. Although they believed that clear parameters should be set, the students experienced difficulty defining such guidelines. Betty stated,
Because I can say she is acting in a narcissistic or self-centered way, but well is that going to be on the list because how can you define someone that way? Ya know, the only thing I can say if it’s some kind of blatantly disruptive behaviors, or, ah illegal behaviors, but it is really hard to define.

Additionally, Josephine, a 33-year-old White woman, stated, “I mean it has to be something more, something has to be more specific, like maybe in practicum . . . because then you can actually see how they really are engaging with clients.”

Another component that the students identified as important in gate-keeping is remediation. The students believed that remediation should be available for all students, unless there were clear reasons to dismiss. The students reported that consistent, continuous feedback is a vital component of remediation. Yet, they wondered about the feasibility of providing frequent feedback, specifically in the context of their large master’s program. Still, they believed it is essential. Ike stated,

A student who is in danger needs clear communication and clear warning. . . . I think a lot of the issues could be addressed and remedied. You know, I don’t foresee, unless it’s something really crazy, like the student is a terrorist or something, that you could really say that’s it. You’re done.

Paloma added, “Having professors really take the time . . . would be beneficial.” Amanda said, “Having an honest conversation with the student about any problems should definitely be the first step.”

**Student Characteristics**

All 10 students acknowledged that they know students in the program that they have concerns about in terms of their functioning. For example, Han-nah, a 23-year-old White woman, shared, “And I hate, I hate to say this but at one point I was thinking, this person should not even be in this program. . . . I just shake my head sometimes like how did they get in?” She shared that she has talked to a friend about problematic students and felt guilty about it, although the friend agreed that there are two people who should not be in the program. Jean added, “I see people get by academically, but they lack empathy and a genuine desire to be a counselor.” Students shared characteristics of classmates who exhibited professional competency problems, including giving advice, emotional disconnect, unresolved personal issues, judgmental attitude, unwillingness to accept feedback, negative attitude, self-absorption, lack of emotional stability, lack of interpersonal skills, and substance use or abuse.

In addition to identifying qualities of students that they were concerned about, students shared qualities that they perceive counseling students should possess, such as self-acceptance, listening skills, genuine care for others, and wellness. “Receptiveness to feedback and being willing to learn and grow . . . are really important,” said Amanda. Francis, a 25-year-old multiracial woman, stated, “I think self-awareness actually I would put at the top. . . . ‘Cause if we’re not self-aware, no matter how good your interpersonal relationships
are, you wouldn’t seem like genuine to another person. You would seem fake.” Ike added,

I think it’s more than a nine-to-five sort of job. I think . . . the traits; you know a lot of the Rogerian things we learn about, empathy, warmth, and genuineness. Those sorts of things that I believe have to be ingrained into a person’s personality.

Throughout the interview, there were indications of discomfort and feelings of guilt for judging other students. Katrina stated, “I’m trying to be cautious of what I say. Um, just, well I don’t know, it’s more of a sense with someone [referring to a student of concern]. . . everyone’s scared. But, I don’t know, maybe, never mind.” (The student then indicated she wanted to change the subject). Zach asked, “How specific do I have to be? You don’t want me to name names, right?” Overall, the students expressed that they are not in a position to judge others and rationalized some of the student behaviors they observed.

Discussion

The overall findings indicated that counseling students believe in the necessity of gatekeeping, although they were initially unaware of the process. It was evident that the gatekeeping process needed to be explained more fully, beginning at the admission interviews, addressed again for incoming students, and then discussed frequently throughout the program.

Students also identified essential components of gatekeeping, including adequate screening through admissions interviews, clear parameters, frequent feedback, and remediation. Finally, all students shared experiences with colleagues with professional competency problems and reported feeling concerned about these students entering the counseling field. They agreed that it is the faculty’s responsibility to intervene, yet they were unclear about steps for remediation and/or dismissal. Lastly, students shared both detrimental and positive qualities for counseling students, confirming previous research and providing additional insight in this area.

The purpose of this case study was to uncover master’s-level counselor education students’ perspectives on the topic of gatekeeping through the use of in-depth, semistructured interviews. Three primary themes were identified as a result of data analysis: (a) counseling students believe that gatekeeping is a necessary function of a counseling program, (b) there are components to gatekeeping that should be considered, and (c) there are preferred and nonpreferred characteristics that should be identified in counseling program applicants and students.

There are a number of findings that provide new insight into students’ personal experiences with gatekeeping. This is one of two known studies (see Parker et al., 2014) to qualitatively explore students’ perspectives of the interview process, as suggested by Swank and Smith-Adcock (2014). Students in the present study emphasized that gatekeeping must begin in earnest during the interview process to select the best possible candidates,
which may entail more comprehensive interview procedures. Our findings suggest that group interviews may not be enough to effectively screen counseling applicants. The students indicated that in-depth and thought-provoking questions were an important aspect of the group interview but also acknowledged the difficulty of assessing candidates’ competence from only one interview. They recommended a longer interview process with a mixture of modalities to get to know the candidates better.

Many of the students in the present study expressed not knowing about gatekeeping from the start and suggested making the gatekeeping process and parameters clearer to incoming students. Moreover, our findings suggest that informing students about gatekeeping should be a continuous process. Overall, the students expressed that clear communication and consistent feedback on performance between faculty and students is paramount. Students desired concrete parameters for their academic and nonacademic performance, including what is acceptable behavior in and out of the classroom. Although they wanted clear guidelines, the students had difficulty determining what those should be, alluding to the gray area that gatekeeping involves.

An important aspect revealed by interviewing students on their personal experiences was the degree of discomfort in judging their peers. Although they indicated feeling frustrated by problematic peer behaviors and characteristics, they were quite hesitant to discuss this during the interviews. The students reiterated that the program and faculty bear the responsibility of gatekeeping; however, they attempted to openly share their concerns.

The students identified characteristics they believed were detrimental for counselors and would warrant remediation. The counseling students identified several problematic behaviors that were consistent with other studies (e.g., Li et al., 2008; Shen-Miller et al., 2011): substance use and abuse, poor boundaries, intolerance toward others, deficient interpersonal skills, potential mental health concerns, difficulty receiving feedback, and unwillingness to consider alternate viewpoints (i.e., rigidity). In addition, the students identified qualities of concern not discussed in previous research: inappropriate displays of emotions (e.g., outbursts in class), low self-esteem, inability to accept responsibility, apathetic attitude toward the counseling profession, and inability to show warmth and empathy. Overall, the students acknowledged the importance of considering personal qualities of counseling trainees in the gatekeeping process.

Finally, the findings provided insight into students’ perspectives regarding dismissal from counseling programs. Although they indicated strong feelings about the personal qualities of counseling trainees, the students felt uncomfortable with the idea of dismissal for nonacademic reasons. However, they did acknowledge the potential necessity in the field of counseling. Thus, although they affirmed the necessity of gatekeeping, they had difficulty defining specific criteria for nonacademic dismissal. Furthermore, all students believed that everyone deserved a remediation plan and that even serious situations should allow for a second chance.
Limitations

These research findings must be considered by taking into account their limitations. First, the study’s design was limited to a single interview of students. Future studies may consider conducting a follow-up focus group or a second round of interviews to confirm the initial themes. Second, all of the students were selected from one university, which may have resulted in an institutional bias on the topic of gatekeeping. A final limitation was the inclusion/exclusion criteria, which was stipulated by the university’s IRB. Because of these constraints, we were unable to conduct interviews with students who have experienced or are in jeopardy of remediation or termination. However, despite these limitations, this study addressed the gap in the research literature by examining gatekeeping from students’ perspectives through in-depth interviews, providing further insight on the topic. Thus, the results of this research study may assist counselor educators in refining both their admission and gatekeeping processes, which was also recommended by the students interviewed in the study conducted by Parker et al. (2014).

Implications for Counselor Educators

Although all of the students in the present study acknowledged concerns about students with professional competency problems, the majority were unaware of the formalized process of gatekeeping. However, once they understood the concept, they acknowledged the necessity of gatekeeping procedures in the counseling field. These findings emphasize the importance of informing counseling students of the terms, definitions, and policies related to gatekeeping. Specifically, problematic behaviors need to be operationally defined in program handbooks so that students can understand what is expected of them prior to beginning a counseling degree (Brown, 2013). Moreover, specific parameters for problematic behaviors can help students reflect on their own performance and identify peers in need of assistance (Brown, 2013). It may be helpful to provide students with a list of expected nonacademic behaviors and dispositions. A written document may help students to understand program expectations, identify potential problem areas, and conduct self-assessments (Li et al., 2008).

Although inclusion of gatekeeping definitions, policies, and procedures in the handbook is necessary, and discussion of this information at orientation is important, it is not enough. Research suggests that students may forget or fail to fully comprehend the gatekeeping information presented at the beginning of a program (Foster & McAdams, 2009; Oliver et al., 2004; Shen-Miller et al., 2011). Thus, gatekeeping policies and procedures should be described at interviews, upon entrance into a program, in meetings with advisors, and reiterated in each class. These standards, once established, should be clear and applied consistently and fairly (Hutchens, Block, & Young, 2013). Furthermore, the policies should be based on up-to-date...
research and current counseling standards and frequently evaluated for effectiveness (Rust et al., 2013). This is an essential step, because universities and colleges with clear, formalized gatekeeping policies are more likely to intervene with identified students (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). In developing and applying these standards, counselor educators must be cognizant of the potential long-term ramifications of labeling a student as problematic (Goodrich & Shin, 2013) and respond to students in need of remediation with sensitivity and respect.

Students in the present study were aware of and concerned about colleagues who they deemed to be unfit for the counseling profession. Students noted specific characteristics of concern, including several that had not been uncovered in previous research: emotional instability, low self-esteem, inability to accept responsibility, apathetic attitude toward the counseling profession, and inability to demonstrate warmth and empathy. These findings provide additional indicators of personality deficiencies that can be used to help refine current gatekeeping policies, screening procedures, and professional fitness assessments.

When students believe that faculty members are overlooking counseling students with professional competency problems, it can affect their morale (Oliver et al., 2004), their view toward the counseling profession, and the overall learning environment (Brown-Rice, 2011). It may also affect students’ understanding of the importance of personal wellness for counselors (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006). It is important that counselor educators understand the potential detrimental effects of avoiding interceding with deficient students.

Conclusion

This study addressed the gap in the literature on gatekeeping in counselor education through in-depth interviews with students. It provided insight into counseling students’ thoughts, feelings, and perspectives regarding gatekeeping issues. Students desire concrete guidelines for their performance and frequent feedback about their functioning. The students provided ideas related to the interview process and how this can be improved. In addition, students acknowledged the complexity of determining the criteria for nonacademic evaluation, yet, despite the challenge of quantifying these behaviors, students expect counselor education faculty to intervene for the sake of future clients and the profession. Most important, we found that it is critical for counseling programs to provide continuous education about the gatekeeping process. We hope that these findings will enhance the gatekeeping and selection process and that future research will continue to examine student perspectives on the topic.

References


