The Impact of Spirituality on Counseling Students' Self-Perceived Professional Competencies

Lindsay Cobb
Harding University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.harding.edu/jger

Part of the Counselor Education Commons

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Impact of Spirituality on Counseling Students' Self-Perceived Professional Competencies

Lindsay D. Cobb

Harding University

How to cite this article:

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this non-experimental study was to explore the relationship between professional counseling students' self-reported levels of spirituality with their perceived levels of professional competencies. The competencies referenced in this study are the eight core national standards competencies established by The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The participants for this study were a convenience sample of 55 professional counseling students from a church-affiliated university in the southeastern United States. The participants completed surveys to indicate self-perceptions of both their spirituality and professional competencies. An analysis of the results revealed a weak positive correlation between self-reported spirituality and perceived professional competencies.

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is a major factor in the lives of many individuals. The majority of Americans believe in God, a higher power, or a universal spirit (Bohecker, Schellenberg, & Silvey, 2017; Hall, Burkholder, & Sterner, 2014). In the United States alone, 75% of adults see themselves as spiritual, while 54% identify as religious (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017). Over the last several decades in America, trends toward seeking spirituality are increasing, creating a shift from traditional religious affiliation to that of spirituality (Steensland, Wang, & Schmidt, 2018). People having spiritual beliefs who do not engage in traditional religious practices consider themselves spiritual but not religious (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017; Steensland et al., 2018). Ultimately, Americans are becoming less religious, yet identifying more with spirituality (Bohecker et al., 2017).

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION DEFINED

The terms spirituality and religion are sometimes used interchangeably. Religion is being connected with specific communal practices (Hall et al., 2014) that are generally organized in structure, often outwardly expressed in the form of rituals (Bohecker et al., 2017). Spirituality, on the other hand, is a broader term referring to beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life (Hall et al., 2014), which is experienced or exists internally beyond religious boundaries (Bohecker et al., 2017). Though spirituality and religion, by definition, are separate concepts, they have the potential to overlap while boundaries between the two are not concrete.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SPIRITUALITY

Those who believe they can make a positive impact in the arena of mental health are apt to seek furthering education and

obtaining licensure in order to provide services in the helping profession. Hall et al. (2014) noted that a strong sense of purpose, or spiritual well-being, is linked to a sense of calling to the counseling profession. Established counselors' personal spiritual awareness impacts both their choice of therapy as well as their perceived competence in working with clients (van Asselt & Baldo Senstock, 2009). The impact of counselors' own spiritual beliefs is considered a pertinent factor for counselors, spanning from the decision to pursue a counseling career to active participation with clients in therapeutic relationships.

Counselors need to be cognizant of all aspects of humanity when working with clients, to include that of spirituality and religion. Robertson (2010) identified a positive correlation between spirituality and religion with overall well-being. Changes in spiritual beliefs, or the conceptualization of God, can be brought about in the therapeutic process, thereby having a positive impact in psychological function (Cashwell et al., 2016). As stated by Gerig (2018), "the counseling profession recognizes spirituality as an integral aspect of the whole person" (p. 304). This validates the need for counselors to be effective in helping clients with spiritual and religious issues as these concerns are an essential aspect of holistic wellness (Bohecker et al., 2017). Increased effectiveness in helping clients with spiritual and religious concerns can be developed through training. Particularly when working with clients with spiritual concerns, spirituality training was found to have a positive correlation with counselors' self-perceived competence (van Asselt & Baldo Senstock, 2009). Ideally, in the future, formal spirituality training for counselors would begin when they are counseling students.

SPIRITUALITY IN COUNSELOR EDUCATION
Counseling students have a need to develop an understanding of their own spiritual beliefs and how those beliefs may impact clients. Adams (2012) noted a disconnect between students' awareness of their own spiritual beliefs, and their willingness to incorporate those beliefs into the therapeutic relationship. Adams also found that many counseling students believe that they should put aside their own spiritual beliefs to avoid imposing their values on the client. This decision, however, may result in counselors leaving out an important element of themselves in the therapeutic process (Adams, 2012). Interestingly, there exists a broad range of beliefs and meanings associated with spiritual concepts (Cashwell et al., 2016). For example, the concept of God may be used to describe monotheistic religions, polytheistic religions, or as the representation of a higher power (Cashwell et al., 2016). Spirituality may be described or defined as existing within the personal, communal, environmental, or transcendental domains (Fisher, 2011). As a result of these variations, counselors need to be cognizant of their personal interpretations of such concepts in order to effectively communicate with clients regarding clients' subjective interpretations (Cashwell et al., 2016). If counselors at all levels become more aware of personal beliefs regarding spirituality, it may help them be better prepared to engage with their clients on similar issues.

Regarding ethical and appropriate approaches to matters of spirituality in the therapeutic process, current counseling programs need more counselor education. Robertson (2010) discovered that students who felt unprepared to deal with clients presenting with spiritual issues were interested in developing skills to improve in this area. Additionally, Henriksen, Polonyi, Bornsheuer-Boswell, Greger, and Watts (2015) found that professional counseling students perceived a need to incorporate spiritual knowledge into their training. Additional training is necessary in order to provide counseling to clients from different spiritual and religious backgrounds experiencing a wide variety of issues (Henriksen et al., 2015).

Improving students' understanding of the potential role of spirituality in counseling is achievable by directly incorporating spirituality training into counselor preparatory programs. Robertson (2010) found that students who took a spirituality course demonstrated increased knowledge and awareness with respect to spirituality. Fortunately, skills can be effectively acquired and improved with proper training. According to Reiner and Dobmeier (2014), it is at the graduate school level where most spirituality training occurs for counselors. Counselors are more likely to be exposed to opportunities for spirituality training during their graduate school preparation than at professional conferences or even through private personal development. Specifically, Reiner and Dobmeier (2014) recommend training on areas of spirituality related to suffering, prayer, transformation, transcendence, and forgiveness. Training and developing counseling skills in these areas have the potential to improve counseling students' understanding of the intersection of spirituality and counseling. The current lack of understanding regarding spirituality in counseling raises the question of how to effectively and appropriately develop counselor training. Souza (2002) discussed the need to include spirituality training in counselor education curriculum. Leaders in the counseling profession have shifted from the argument of whether spirituality and religion should be included in counseling training to determining in what manner this should be accomplished (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). Specifically, in 2009, the Board of Directors of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) voted unanimously to make revisions of competencies regarding spiritual and religious issues, ultimately supporting "spiritually sensitive counseling" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 3). Currently, spirituality and religion fall under the competency of multiculturalism (Briggs & Rayle, 2005). One might argue that a substantial need exists for expansion of education regarding spirituality as a legitimate competency in its own right.

Discussions about potential formats for incorporation of spirituality as a competency are circulating among leaders in the counseling profession. Incorporating a stand-alone, segregated counseling course in spirituality may be an effective way to facilitate students' knowledge and awareness of spiritual issues (Robertson, 2010). In contrast, Hagedorn and Gutierrez (2009) noted that the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) advocates for adding the competencies to current curriculum by using an infused approach, rather than developing specific, stand-alone courses. Yet another proposal by Briggs and Rayle (2005) was to include working with clients of different backgrounds during practicum and internship. There are differences in opinion

among educators about how best to incorporate spirituality training into the curriculum. However, proposals to incorporate more spirituality training through either existing or alternate curriculum courses infer that there is agreement among counselor educators that the inclusion of such training is necessary and appropriate.

Many professional counseling education programs strive to achieve and maintain nationally recognized training standards. The current national standards for master's and doctoral degree programs in counseling are established by The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (Gerig, 2018). The eight common core curricular areas are as follows: professional orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, helping relationships, group work, assessment, and research and program evaluation (Gerig, 2018). Bohecker et al. (2017) proposed incorporating spirituality and religion as an additional, ninth standard of CACREP core curriculum. Additionally, Burke et al. (1999) supported inclusion of spirituality training into CACREP curriculum, not necessarily as a separate standard, but through inclusion at different points. Indeed, these proposals lend strong evidence of the need for incorporation in order to adhere to elevated professional standards, regardless of the format in which it is delivered.

In order to achieve and maintain innovative standards in the counseling profession, it is imperative to consider all aspects of the person. Because spirituality is a considerable factor in overall health and well-being, it is also a factor in the counselor/client relationship. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how inevitable issues of spirituality and religion held by clients may be addressed. As such, spirituality and religion, with regard to both the client and counselor, cannot be ignored. Measures to diminish the gap between knowledge of spirituality and the current counseling curriculum are paramount to the advancement of professional counselor education.

HYPOTHESIS

It is hypothesized that there is be a relationship between counseling students' personal spiritual beliefs and their self-perceived professional competencies.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants for this study were a convenience sample of 55 professional counseling students from a church-affiliated university in the southeastern United States. This sample included students on the school counseling, clinical mental health counseling, and dual counseling tracks. Regarding the 55 counseling students surveyed, 67% were female and 33% were male. Racial makeup consisted of 90.9% White, 3.6% Black or African American, 1.8% Hispanic or Latino, 1.8% both White and Hispanic or Latino, and 1.8% did not identify. Participants on the clinical mental health track made up 61.8% of the students surveyed, 30.9% were dual track (both school and clinical mental health), 5.5% were school track, and 1.8% of students did not provide a response. Age groups were calculated using 54 participants as there was one error where a student reported two mutually exclusive age groups. Thirty-three percent of students were in the age ranges of 18 to 24, 33.3% were 25 to 34, 3.7% were 35 to 44, 22.2% were 45 to 54, and 7.4% were 55 to 64.

INSTRUMENTATION

The primary instrument of data collection for this study was a Professional Counseling Student Survey created by the researcher. The instrument consisted of a total of 36 items. The first portion of the survey were items obtained from the Trait Sources of Spirituality Scale (TSSS) (Westbrook et al., 2018). These were 24 Likert-scaled items to which participants were required to select from one of the following options in response to each of the items regarding their spirituality: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree. Items were rated on a five-point scale where one represented "strongly disagree" and five represented "strongly agree". Higher scores indicated greater spirituality in each dimension. The next eight were Likert-scaled items to which participants were required to select from one of the following options regarding perceived professional competencies: Very Competent, Somewhat Competent, Neutral, Somewhat Incompetent, Very Incompetent. Items were rated on a five-point scale where one represented "very incompetent" and five represented "very competent". Higher scores indicated greater levels of perceived competence. Finally, there were four items used to collect demographic information about the participants. A copy of the Professional Counseling Student Survey is included in the Appendix.

PROCEDURE

Once IRB approval was obtained for this nonexperimental study, the students were recruited by an email sent to their school email account. The students were free to choose to participate. The email contained a link to the survey which was posted using Google forms. Google forms is a password protected website that allows for the confidential collection and organization of survey data. Students who completed the survey were considered to have given their informed consent. Once administration was complete, the surveys were collected and scored by the researcher. To analyze the data and test the hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was used to determine if there was a relationship between students' spirituality and their self-perceived levels of competence. The hypothesis was examined at an alpha level of 0.05.

RESULTS

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between self-reported spirituality and perceived professional competencies among counseling students. A weak positive correlation was found r (53) = 0.33, $p < .05$ (two-tailed), $r^2 = 0.11$; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis supported (See Figure 1).
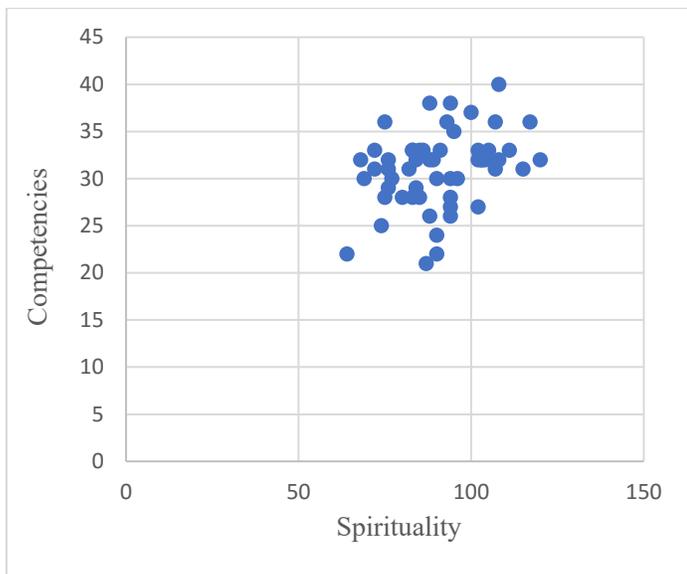
Figure 1: Relationship between spirituality and professional competencies

DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This study revealed a correlation between spirituality and counseling students' perceived professional competencies. This finding is similar to that of van Asselt and Baldo Senstock (2009) who reported that counselors' spiritual awareness impacts their self-perceived competencies. They also found that spirituality training for counselors was positively correlated with their self-perceived competencies, particularly when working with clients having spiritual concerns. However, there are other factors that may correlate with student competencies. For instance, Cates, Schaefle, Smaby, Maddux, and LeBeauf (2007) revealed that higher levels of general competency were demonstrated by culturally-sensitive counseling students when compared with students who did not receive multicultural training. It is notable that spirituality is currently addressed in the curriculum through multicultural classes.

IMPLICATIONS

The greatest implication of this study is the need to incorporate spirituality training in counselor education. The existence of a correlation between counseling students' perceived levels of competencies with their self-reported levels of spirituality may be considered an indication of the importance of spirituality in the lives of counseling students. If this is the case, then making sure that this aspect of counseling students' sense of self is tapped into during their professional preparation is worthy of further exploration. Furthermore, the existence of the relationship between spirituality and perceptions about competence among counseling students may have implications for therapeutic relationships with future clients that need to be explored.

LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations in this study. For instance, the small sample size significantly limits the generalizability of the study. Furthermore, the demographics of the sample in this study may not truly reflect those of student populations in other parts of the country. Finally, the self-report nature of the instrument poses a limitation regarding construct validity in the study. It was, therefore, difficult to eliminate the possibility that respondents were not merely providing responses that were socially desirable in a church-affiliated university setting.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies of this phenomenon should incorporate larger, more diverse samples of both professional counseling students and active professional counselors. Similarly, there appears to be an unmet need and desire among many counselors for issues of spirituality to be addressed as part of the preparation for the profession (Bohecker et al., 2017; Briggs & Rayle, 2005; Cashwell & Watts, 2010; Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009; Souza, 2002). Ultimately, as the research in this aspect of counselor education advances, additional studies would be beneficial in determining the specific impact of spirituality in the counselor/client relationship, as well as to identify the most effective ways to incorporate spirituality training into the curriculum.

REFERENCES

Adams, J. R. (2012). Spiritual issues in counseling: What do students perceive they are being taught? *Counseling and Values, 57*(1), 66-80. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-007X.2012.00009.x

Bohecker, L., Schellenberg, R., & Silvey, J. (2017). Spirituality and religion: The ninth CACREP core curriculum area. *Counseling and Values, 62*(2), 128-143. doi: 10.1002/cvj.12055

Briggs, M. K., & Rayle, A. D. (2005). Incorporating spirituality into core counseling courses: Ideas for classroom application. *Counseling and Values, 50*(1), 63-75. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-007X.2005.tb00041.x

Burke, M. T., Hackney, H., Hudson, P., Miranti, J., Watts, G. A., & Epp, L. (1999). Spirituality, religion, and CACREP curriculum standards. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 77*(3), 251-257. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.1999.tb02448.x

Cashwell, C. S., & Watts, R. E. (2010). The new ASERVIC competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling. *Counseling and Values, 55*(1), 2-5. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-007X.2010.tb00018.x

Cashwell, C. S., Young, J. S., Tangen, J. L., Pope, A. L., Wagener, A., Sylvestro, H., & Henson, R. A. (2016). Who is this God of whom you speak? Counseling students' concept of God. *Counseling and Values, 61*(2), 159-175. doi: 10.1002/cvj.12035

Cates, J. T., Schaefle, S. E., Smaby, M. H., Maddux, C. D., & LeBeauf, I. (2007). Comparing multicultural with general counseling knowledge and skill competency for students who completed counselor training. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development, 35*(1), 26-39. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-1912.2007 .tb00047.x

Fisher, J. (2011). The four domains model: Connecting spirituality, health and well-being. *Religions, 2*(1), 17-28. doi: 10.3390/rel20 10017

Gerig, M. S. (2018). *Foundations for clinical mental health counseling: An introduction to the profession* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Hagedorn, W. B., & Gutierrez, D. (2009). Integration versus segregation: Applications of the spiritual competencies in counselor education programs. *Counseling and Values, 54*(1), 32-47. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-007X.2009.tb00003.x

Hall, S. F., Burkholder, D., & Sterner, W. R. (2014). Examining spirituality and sense of calling in counseling students. *Counseling and Values, 59*(1), 3-16. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-007X.2014.00038.x

Henriksen, R. C., Jr., Polonyi, M. A., Bornsheuer-Boswell, J. N., Greger, R. G., & Watts, R. E. (2015). Counseling students' perceptions of religious/spiritual counseling training: A qualitative study. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 93*(1), 59-69. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.2015.00181.x

Lipka, M., & Gecewicz, C. (2017). *More Americans now say they're spiritual but not religious*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center website: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/

Reiner, S. M., & Dobmeier, R. A. (2014). Counselor preparation and the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling competencies: An exploratory study. *Counseling and Values, 57*(2), 192-207. doi: 0.1002/j.2161-007X.2014.00051.x

Robertson, L. A. (2010). The spiritual competency scale. *Counseling and Values, 55*(1), 6-24. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-007X.2010.tb00019.x

Souza, K. Z. (2002). Spirituality in counseling: What do counseling students think about it? *Counseling and Values, 46*(3), 213-217. doi: 10.1002/j.2161-007X.2002.tb00214.x

Steensland, B., Wang, X., & Schmidt, L. C. (2018). Spirituality: What does it mean and to whom? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 57*(3), 450-483. doi: 10.1111/jssr.12534

van Asselt, K. W., & Baldo Senstock, T. D. (2009). Influence of counselor spirituality and training on treatment focus and self-perceived competence. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 87*(4), 412-419. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6678.2009.tb00125.x

Westbrook, C. J., Davis, D. E., McElroy, S. E., Brubaker, K., Choe, E., Karaga, S., … Hook, J. (2018). Trait sources of spirituality scale: Assessing trait spirituality more inclusively. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development, 5*(2), 125-138. doi: 10.1080//07481756.2017

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lindsay Cobb is originally from Shreveport, Louisiana. She is on course to earn an Ed.S. and an M.S. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling in May 2021. She also has an M. A. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology. Her interests lie in mental health counseling, especially where it intersects with spirituality. After graduation, she hopes to work in environments where mental health is understood to be a critical aspect of holistic wellness and where exploring creative ways to enhance that wellness is encouraged.

APPENDIX A

Professional Counseling Student Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gather information regarding spirituality among counseling students. The results of this study will be used as part of a graduate research methods course project. Although you will not be required to provide any personally identifying information, please answer four demographic questions at the conclusion of the survey. Any information you provide will be treated with confidentiality. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me, Lindsay Cobb, at lcobb1@harding.edu.

* Required

1. Section 1 - Considering your spirituality, please respond to these items. *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My connection with God/personal deity provides a sense of meaning and purpose in my life.	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝
My relationship with God/personal deity provides a sense of significance for my life.	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝
My relationship with God/personal deity is one of the most important parts of who I am.	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝
My relationship with God/personal deity influences everything I do.	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝
My ability to have a sense of closeness or connection with God/personal deity is the most important thing in my life.	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝
I often seek a sense of closeness in my relationship with God/personal deity.	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝	⃝

2. Section 2 *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My connection with Nature provides a sense of meaning and purpose in my life.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
My relationship with Nature provides a sense of significance for my life.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
My relationship with Nature is one of the most important parts of who I am.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
My relationship with Nature influences everything I do.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
My ability to have a sense of closeness or connection with Nature is the most important thing in my life.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
I often seek a sense of closeness in my relationship with Nature.	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭

3. Section 3 *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My connection with Humanity provides a sense of meaning and purpose in my life.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My relationship with Humanity provides a sense of significance for my life.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My relationship with Humanity is one of the most important parts of who I am.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My relationship with Humanity influences everything I do.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My ability to have a sense of closeness or connection with Humanity is the most important thing in my life.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I often seek a sense of closeness in my relationship with Humanity.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

4. Section 4 *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My connection with the Transcendent provides a sense of meaning and purpose in my life.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My relationship with the Transcendent provides a sense of significance for my life.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My relationship with the Transcendent is one of the most important parts of who I am.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My relationship with the Transcendent influences everything I do.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My ability to have a sense of closeness or connection with the Transcendent is the most important thing in my life.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I often seek a sense of closeness in my relationship with the Transcendent.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

5. Section 5 – Please identify your perceived level of competency in each of the following core curricular areas. *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Very Competent	Somewhat Competent	Neutral	Somewhat Incompetent	Very Incompetent
Professional Orientation & Ethical Practice	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Social & Cultural Diversity	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Human Growth & Development	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Career Development	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Helping Relationships	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Group Work	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Assessment	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Research & Program Evaluation	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

6. Indicate your age group.

Check all that apply.

	Under 18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 or Older
Age	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

7. Identify your gender.

Check all that apply.

	Male	Female	Other
Gender	☐	☐	☐

8. Select on which professional counseling track you are.

Check all that apply.

	School	Clinical Mental Health	Dual (Both School & Clinical Mental Health)
Professional Counseling Track	☐	☐	☐

9. Identify your ethnicity.

Check all that apply.

	White	Hispanic or Latino	Black or African American	Asian/Pacific Islander	Native American	Other
Ethnicity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐