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## Graduate Counselor Education in the COVID Era

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**HARDING**  
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## Graduate Counselor Education in the COVID Era

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Graduate students and indeed students of all levels enrolled in a variety of American educational institutions had their educational routine disrupted by the onset of the Corona Virus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) in the spring of 2020. When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March of 2020, universities began to shift their course delivery format from traditional face to face (F2F) to online or distance education. A survey conducted with college and university presidents in March of 2020 by Inside Higher Ed and Hanover Research revealed that 98% of respondents 'Moved the majority of all in-person classes online'. The same survey indicated that future plans included moving classes online and investing in new online learning resources.

While such precautions were doubtless the safest course of action given what was known at the time, this also meant that students, faculty and staff had to make an often-challenging shift to online education in a very short period of time in order to complete the semester. Many faculty members and students alike had little to no experience with online education and the required infrastructure, pedagogical techniques and resources necessary to be successful in this conversion. Indeed, student feedback suggested that about 66% of students believe that they did not achieve the same level of learning through distance education that they would have achieved in a face-to-face environment despite about 73% of respondents reporting their professors handled the transition to distance instruction well or very well (Harding Institutional Research, 2020).

Another complicating factor is that many graduate programs in counselor education have specific requirements that must be met in order to be in compliance with accrediting entities such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). These accreditation requirements added an additional problem to solve for many programs due to requirements such as student completion of face to face interaction. For example, counseling students in practicum or internship were required to complete up to 300 hours of face-to-face counseling sessions with clients in order to comply with CACREP Standards (2016).

Obviously, things that were taken for granted such as role plays in class settings to build and develop critical skills, had to be put on hold or adapted to online education while solutions were sought out. Of course, putting things on hold raised issues with accreditation, and so it was necessary to begin the sometimes-challenging process of adapting traditional classroom exercises and field experiences to online education.

## TRENDS IN COUNSELOR EDUCATION

Counselor education has traditionally been conducted in a face-to-face environment. Historically, training programs emphasize the importance of immediate feedback from instructors, the necessity of monitoring body language of the counselor-in-training as well as the client's response, and a host of other details. However, in recent years there has been undeniable growth in the number of online or distance education as a whole as well as in counselor education programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016). This is true in general as well as those specific programs that are accredited by CACREP, the accrediting body for counseling programs. As of March 2018, there were 36 CACREP accredited institutions offering 64 online degree programs (Snow, Lamar, Hinkle, & Speciale, 2018). In a more recent article by Sheperis, Coker, Haag, and Salem-Pease (2020) the number has climbed to 79. The trend toward online instruction for at least part of the curriculum is clear and these programs are meeting student needs

Research by Hondreich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) explored the factors influencing student selection of their training location and accreditation were ranked first and second with schedule and flexibility ranked ninth. With the sudden shift to online learning, the need for quarantine and social distancing, and other factors, flexibility and the ability to deliver content via distance/online means doubtless became more important in the moment. Online education allowed for students who had to adjust their schedules due to working from home, the need to care for children or family members, or whose schedule was otherwise disrupted to continue their courses. As pointed out in Paul and Jefferson (2019) one of the chief benefits of online education is the flexibility it offers and so it seemed a ready solution to the problem the pandemic created.

## EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Moving online seemed to be the most practical and straightforward solution for many programs despite any misgivings faculty or students may have harbored. Still, the challenge of adapting to this new format was daunting. For others, it raised valid questions of effectiveness. All of these concerns needed to be addressed and in an all too short span of time. Though it seemed to be a new and novel experience for educators and students, distance education is, in fact, not a new phenomenon and has its roots in considered correspondence courses. Thus, even if the delivery method is new given the advances in technology, the concept has been around since the 1800s and shares many qualities with traditional face-to-face education. The similarities include, but are not limited to, material being presented, assignments that are turned in and graded, and knowledge acquisition being evaluated (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). So, while the core tasks in the course are really no different, the method of delivery and assessment can be quite different which raises several important questions.

Perhaps the most salient question to consider is whether or not online education is effective. Research has shown that some forms of online education at the graduate level can be well received by students, especially older learners, and most importantly, effective (U.S. Dept of Education, 2010). Neuhauser's (2002) research demonstrated that equivalent learning activities can be equally effective for online and more

traditional face-to-face classroom sections in a study that compared two sections of the same course taught by the same instructor using the same materials. The study found no significant differences in critical factors such as test scores and final grades between the two sections. Similarly, research by Paul and Jefferson (2019) demonstrated that there was no difference in performance between traditional classroom and online students with respect to modality, gender or class rank in a science course for non-STEM majors.

Still, the lingering question of generalizability for graduate counseling students remains. Because online learning, especially asynchronous modalities, is more autonomous in nature compared to traditional classrooms, it is unlikely to surprise anyone that for online students to be successful they need to be highly motivated and self-regulated (Artino & Stephens, 2009). The same investigation revealed that graduate students tended to be less likely to procrastinate and more likely to use critical thinking strategies compared to undergraduate students.

Taken together, the above research seems to support the notion that online education can be effective at the graduate level and counselors can learn the necessary skills and acquire the critical knowledge to be effective in their future careers. Artino and Stephen's (2009) research resulted in three recommendations for successful online learning programs at the graduate as well as undergraduate level. First, provide explicit instructional support and structure; second, develop students' self-efficacy, and third, scaffold online discussions.

## TECHNOLOGY'S ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In terms of instructional support and structure, it was necessary to ensure smooth delivery of content. Many universities utilize Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard, Canvas or Moodle. Since these were pre-existing, they allowed for a foundation to build upon to deliver course content to students. However, these systems, while robust and feature rich, do not necessarily meet all of the needs of faculty and students. Fortunately, several technology enterprises rose to assist educators and students during this time. Zoom, an audio-visual telecommunications platform, lifted the 40 min account limitation on their free basic accounts on March 23, 2020 (Zoom website) making access for students and educators more viable as a method of holding class. Zoom's ability to record also allowed students to capture their role plays for review and critique.

## CHALLENGES

Despite the evidence that not only is online education effective for graduate counselors in training, but also allows for flexibility during an uncertain time there are some challenges that must be considered. Technological and other concerns must be considered in order to provide the highest quality education possible. A few of the concerns raised and potential ways to address those concerns are presented below.

Some obvious disadvantages reported include reduced interaction with instructors and co-learners (Thanji & Vasantha, 2018) as well as lack of instant feedback, increased frustration, anxiety and confusion (Conkova, 2013). The lack of engaging with classmates and professors in the same room with activities

such as discussing content, role-playing, and processing the integration of theory and practice can hurt counseling students' learning process (Shook, 2020).

Being able to occupy and analyze the same physical space has created a void that is crucial to counseling students' normal development and training. Alongside the in-class relational challenges, there is also the lack of relational contact with peers and professors outside of the traditional learning environment. Despite the traditional relational connections that are lost in the COVID era, Shook (2020) notes that counselor educators can counter the relational deficits through creative and inclusive teaching methods, alongside intentional availability for students outside of instructional hours. For example, Christian et al. (2020) suggest an integrated model of briefing, doing, and debriefing to allow for an integrated pedagogy. Interactions both within and outside of the classroom experience allow students to have concrete experiences with course content (Christian et al., 2020). These interactions can combat increased experiences of loneliness, addiction, and depression due to living in the COVID era (Powell, 2020).

It is also important to note that the stamina exerted to maintain focus while listening to a traditional lecture seems to take a more significant toll on Zoom or other live virtual platforms than it does in the physical classroom. Embedded within the nature of participating in an online class are the side effects of scattered attention, "Zoom fatigue," and exhaustion as students express the toll that virtual learning has on cognitive and emotional wellbeing (Sklar, 2020).

Coupled with the increased time spent on live virtual learning platforms is the practice of programs providing their textbooks online. The increased screen time has added to exhaustion, frustration, and anxiety experienced by students. Awareness of increased screen time can help those involved in counselor education focus on making the learning experience more manageable, experiential, engaging, and concise for both educators and students (Shook, 2020).

Not to mention, the rise in issues for those without easy internet access. According to Douglas Broom's 2020 article on the World Economic Forum, around half of the world's population has no access to the internet. While online courses were all that could be offered, many were left unable to properly connect at all. Broom (2020) goes on to explain that in the United States alone, more than 6% of the entire population is without high-speed internet connection. Not only is this issue a great inconvenience, but it also creates additional stress and anxiety for students. In the search to find adequate connection, students are required to consider all other possible dilemmas that may arise due to this problem. The considerations of confidentiality and connectedness are again pushed to new extremes due to this challenge.

## CONCLUSION

Given the nature of the uncertainty concerning the COVID era, it is useful to consider flexible adjustments, alternatives and assessments to better accompany counselor education programs in the future. Regular evaluation of the efficacy of pedagogy and encouraging teachers to focus more on evaluating resources, training, and support that they have utilized and are seeking to incorporate will help to produce successful outcomes

(Gonzales & Griffin, 2020). The integration of Tech Assisted & Distance Counseling courses will be useful and vital for the immediate future and long-term success in counselor education programs. Providing more training and experiences with administering telehealth services can help students feel better prepared to enter into practicum, internship, and the workforce amid the COVID era. Those who have yet to complete their educational track have the potential to gain greater freedom and a wide range of opportunities through distance learning, if this process is accepted and appropriately structured.

In conclusion, it is crucial to encourage students and faculty members alike to take advantage of mental health resources as they seek to adequately and ethically serve their student and client populations through a pandemic (American Counseling Association, 2014, Section C.2.g; Norcross, 2013). Being mindful of incorporating the necessary adjustments and conduct pertinent assessments to evaluate its efficacy is vital to counselor education programs' success in the COVID era.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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