

Unethical and incompetent counselors can harm clients (Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 2008; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Homrich & Henderson, 2018; Welfel, 2015). The counselor education field has a responsibility to train counseling students that practice ethically and competently in alignment with the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015). The ethical standards describe responsibilities counselor educators have to the public and trainees including ensuring client welfare and monitoring trainee performance; being aware of and addressing trainee limitations; and not endorsing trainees who cannot adequately perform their roles and responsibilities (ACA, 2014).

Despite its importance, gatekeeping remains difficult for counselor education programs to perform effectively (Homrich & Henderson, 2018). Gaubatz and Vera (2002) found that approximately 10% of counselors-in-training were not suited for the counseling profession but only half of those students experienced any kind of remediation or dismissal. For various reasons programs continue to graduate students whose emotional, psychological, or interpersonal difficulties are likely to become liabilities in practice (Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 2008; Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Crawford & Gilroy, 2013; de Vries & Valadez, 2005; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; Homrich, 2009). The following discussion will summarize the recent challenges to effective gatekeeping faced by the field and provide a rationale for research into counselor educators' internal experiences of gatekeeping.

The first challenge associated with gatekeeping is the field's struggle to reach consensus on gatekeeping terminology and practices (Brear et al., 2008; Elman & Forrest, 2007; Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Homrich, 2009). Particularly problematic are the terms used to describe the student issue that is concerning to faculty. Brear et al. (2008) summarized this persistent confusion, noting

that terms such as “impairment”, “unsuitability”, “competence/incompetence”, and “problematic” (p. 94) have been used to describe the student issue. More recently, Swank and Smith-Adcock (2013) defined such student deficiencies as “behaviors and dispositions that might be contradictory to the qualities of effective counselors...” (p. 38).

Some researchers refer to students who require gatekeeping as having problems of professional competence (PPC), which is more accurate and less pejorative than other terms (Kaslow, Rubin, Forrest, et al., 2007; Shen-Miller et al., 2011). We have chosen to utilize the term PPC for this study. We also chose to use the working definition of gatekeeping proposed by Brear et al. (2008), which is broad yet specific enough to ensure consensus:

Gatekeeping is the evaluation of student suitability for professional practice. It is a mechanism that aims to ensure the health of the profession by controlling access to it. It involves the identification of evaluative criteria and process, and the accountability of the gatekeeper to apply the criteria and take responsibility for the evaluative decisions. (pp. 93-94).

The literature describes many gatekeeping practices, yet challenges to effective implementation remain (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013; Duba, Paez, & Kindsvatter, 2010; Henderson & Dufrene, 2011; Homrich, 2009; Homrich, DeLorenzi, Bloom, & Godbee, 2014; Kaslow, Rubin, Bebeau, et al., 2007; Wolf, Green, Nochajski, & Kost, 2014; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Effective and legally defensible gatekeeping processes protect student due process and informed consent via practices that ensure fairness, consistency and transparency (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013; Duba et al., 2010; Dugger & Francis, 2014; Henderson & Dufrene, 2011; Homrich, 2009; Hutchens, Block, & Young, 2013; Kaslow, Rubin, Forrest, et al., 2007; McAdams III & Foster, 2007; Pease-Carter & Barrio Minton, 2012; Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013; and Wolf et al., 2014).

However, counselor education programs have faced significant legal challenges to their gatekeeping decisions, which may have a dampening effect on gatekeeping efforts (Dugger & Francis, 2014, Homrich & Henderson, 2018; McAdams III & Foster, 2007).

Another difficulty is gatekeeping's subjective nature. Although objective practices exist, gatekeeping remains a largely subjective experience for counselor educators dealing with problems of professional competence (PPC) and for the students who are subject to gatekeeping (Brear et al., 2008; Rust et al., 2013). While the ACA and CACREP outline ethical standards and duties, they do not provide actionable strategies or detailed criteria, which may contribute to the variance in gatekeeping practices (Homrich, 2009; McAdams III & Foster, 2007). The subjective nature of gatekeeping affects the process by making it more difficult to reach faculty consensus and more challenging to elucidate the standards by which students exhibiting PPC are evaluated and remediated (Homrich, 2009).

### **The Effects of Gatekeeping on the Gatekeeper**

Along with the challenges presented by terminology, fairness, subjectivity, due process, and legal liability, research suggests that performing gatekeeping is emotionally difficult for counselor educators. Difficulties arise from the conflict between gatekeeping duties and counselor educators' humanistic values and desire to support students (Johnson et al., 2008; Sowbel, 2012; Vacha-Haase, Davenport, & Kerewsky, 2004). Gatekeeping becomes difficult for counselor educators who "... assume the responsibility of providing guidance, direction, and assistance to students..." (Kerl & Eichler, 2007, p. 72).

Gizara and Forrest (2004) noted that university internship supervisors described the experience of intervening with students exhibiting problems of professional competence (PPC) as "horrible", "painful", and "very sad" (p. 136). Others have described working with students with

PPC as “one of the most complex and emotionally stressful situations faced by educators in clinical training programs...” (Sampson, Kelly-Trombley, Zubatsky, & Harris, 2013, p. 26). Kerl and Eichler (2007) noted that counselor educators may experience negative gatekeeping impacts including retribution from students in the form of negative evaluations, harassment, and legal actions; conflicts with colleagues; and energy and time-intensive processes and interactions.

Jackson-Cherry (2006) indicated that gatekeeping is hard on faculty, particularly with insufficient due process for the counselor educators. Other researchers contend that universities do not adequately support faculty during gatekeeping and might exacerbate the difficulties by prioritizing enrollment and interfering in gatekeeping decisions (Kerl et al., 2002; Russell & Peterson, 2003). Many authors have suggested that faculty need additional support, training, and resources to be effective gatekeepers (Gizara & Forrest, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2008). These factors may contribute to some counselor educators ignoring or minimizing gatekeeping responsibilities, thus weakening gatekeeping efforts (Jacobs et al., 2011; Kerl & Eichler, 2007).

### **Counselor Educators’ Internal Challenges with Gatekeeping**

Further understanding counselor educators’ complex internal gatekeeping challenges may provide information about how these challenges manifest during the process and how this might impact gatekeeping efficacy. Furthermore, much of the cited research pertains to psychology faculty, training directors, and clinical supervisors. Thus, the counselor education field needs more in-depth knowledge about how gatekeeping affects counselor educators and how internal experiences of gatekeeping influence the gatekeeping process. This study aimed to provide that in-depth knowledge. The central research question for this study was: How do counselor educators experience their internal reactions within the context of gatekeeping processes for PPC? Peripheral

research questions included: What internal processes, factors, influences, thoughts, and feelings are involved in gatekeeping? What are the most salient impacts of gatekeeping on the counselor educator?

### **Method**

Gathering qualitative data directly from participants about their lived experiences and valuing their perspectives are hallmarks of qualitative research; especially when addressing complex research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). We chose the grounded theory approach because it can be used to develop theory explaining little-understood and complex processes through inductive analysis of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2017). No theory exists that explains the complex interactions surrounding counselor educators' internal experiences of gatekeeping. We sought to develop a grounded theory of counselor educators' internal experiences of gatekeeping using a constructivist framework. Constructivist qualitative research values an individual's subjective experiences and the making of meaning from those experiences; therefore, constructivist qualitative research relies as much as possible on participants' views of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Constructivist researchers study complex ideas, interactions and processes, which suits a study to understand counselor educators internal experience of gatekeeping.

### **Researcher Disclosure**

Constructivist qualitative research requires researchers to reflect on and document personal experiences and assumptions with the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This practice facilitates ongoing reflexivity and allows readers to better understand the researchers' worldviews and how their past experiences and biases may have influenced the findings. The first author is a cisgender male, Korean-American counselor educator who was at the time of the study

a doctoral student in counselor education as well as a clinician, clinic director, clinical supervisor and adjunct faculty in counselor education and had observed several gatekeeping processes for PPC. The second author is a cisgender female, biracial Japanese-American counselor educator with 15 years of experience in counselor education. She has been involved in several gatekeeping processes for PPC that ranged from frustrating and ineffective to efficient and effective. Discussions between the authors yielded the following assumptions: 1. Gatekeeping is complicated and difficult for many reasons but counselor educators could be doing it better. 2. There may be intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that influence gatekeeping processes. 3. With more understanding of those internal and interpersonal processes, counselor education programs may be able to strengthen their gatekeeping efforts.

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2017) was used to recruit participants who were full-time counselor educators who have had direct involvement with gatekeeping students exhibiting PPC within a CACREP-accredited program in the United States. After IRB approval, recruitment included electronic outreach to prospective participants via counselor educator list serves and emails from the researchers. Researchers screened prospective participants for inclusion criteria. We began with and retained 12 participants throughout the study.

Of the 12 participants, seven identified as female and five as male. Eight identified as White, one as Black/African-American, one as Hispanic or Latino/a, one as Asian and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and one as Multiple. Six participants are or were tenured and six were not tenured (or not on the tenure-track) at the time of the study. Six have been counselor educators 0-11 years and six have been counselor educators for more than 12 years. Using the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) regions, six participants were from

the Western region, one from the North Central region, two from the Southern region, and three from the North Atlantic region. Participants taught predominantly in clinical mental health counseling and school counseling programs.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection included in-person, online, and phone interviews, an online demographic survey and supplementary email communication. Researchers established participant rapport by interacting with participants prior to initiating interviews despite the physical distance to establish trust, which is essential to data saturation, theory development, and ethical research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Ethical considerations included the risks associated with participants speaking candidly about themselves or their programs that were addressed by the informed consent process, confidentiality safeguards, and IRB approval. The primary researcher interviewed each participant two separate times, with each interview ranging in length from 45 minutes to 1.25 hours.

Researchers used a semi-structured interview format which included questions derived from exploration of the conceptual context of the process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Questions included “What particular thoughts, feelings, or other internal reactions did you experience during or after the gatekeeping process with a student in your program?” and “What are the most challenging or difficult aspects of gatekeeping?” Researchers created the second-round questions after analyzing data from the first round of interviews for gaps in the emerging concepts, following the principles of theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers concurrently performed data collection and data analysis via open/axial/selective coding, memo writing, and continuous theory development to ensure that the

developed theory reflected participants' experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The primary researcher conducted open coding by analyzing all transcripts in order to label concepts and then define and develop categories based on their properties and dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Researchers performed subsequent axial coding by analyzing the codes and concepts in order to organize the data into broader concepts and categories. The authors met regularly to discuss and review the analysis and how the emerging concepts fit the data and research questions. Initial memoing by the first author (reflecting and writing about the derived codes and concepts) helped to clarify the emerging categories and concepts as well as any gaps in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

We developed second-round interview questions and conducted a second round of interviews to address gaps we identified in the emerging concepts and related conceptual structure and to enact theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Second round interviews were partially open coded and then selectively coded, by relating data to the identified core category and by filling in gaps in categories in order to achieve theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Theoretical saturation was reached when no new conceptual insights were generated by the data and repeated evidence for the conceptual categories arose from the data. Theoretical memos articulated the interactions between the main categories, the core category, and the emerging grounded theory and rich/thick description in the data also promoted theoretical saturation.

### **Trustworthiness**

We used established strategies to promote researcher sensitivity, enhance trust with participants, and maximize the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005). Prolonged engagement with participants and understanding their particular setting enhanced the richness of interview data. Timely peer debriefing with an

unaffiliated colleague helped to insure the quality and rigor of the research process and reveal any researcher bias by challenging the primary researcher to explain the emerging concepts and theory. This dialogue brought clarity to the emerging concepts and theory. Additionally, the primary researcher kept a journal throughout the study to enhance researcher reflexivity. Most importantly, after achieving theoretical saturation and constructing the theory that emerged from the data analysis after the second round of interviews, the participants were given an opportunity to provide feedback on the emerging theory via member checks. Of the twelve participants contacted, eight participants responded to the member check inquiry and all eight provided feedback that strongly supported the theory derived from their experiences and interviews.

## **Results**

Participants described a variety of internal experiences of the gatekeeping process that we conceptualized as the core category of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*, which was composed of four interacting internal processes. These four processes were *integrating identities and balancing responsibilities*, *practicing discernment*, *managing challenging emotions*, and *perceiving cohesion and capability in colleagues*. We will explain the four internal processes, give salient examples and discuss how they interact to form the core category of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*.

### **Striving to Be an Effective Gatekeeper – Struggling to Striving**

*Striving to be an effective gatekeeper* emerged as the central process that explained participants' internal experiences of gatekeeping. *Striving to be an effective gatekeeper* captures the efforts that participants perceived themselves and their colleagues to be putting into gatekeeping and the value they placed on gatekeeping. Participants described differing experiences which formed the four internal processes and represented a range of *striving* from a lower end of

*struggling* to a higher end of *striving*. Whether counselor educators are *struggling* or *striving* to be an effective gatekeeper depended on the strength and interactions of the four main internal processes.

### **Integrating Identities and Balancing Responsibilities**

*Integrating identities and balancing responsibilities* is both an internal process and part of the counselor educator context whereby participants continually assess and reconcile their different roles, identities, values and responsibilities throughout gatekeeping situations. Although all participants were motivated gatekeepers, they sometimes struggled to balance their positive and supportive feelings towards students with the duties that arose when those students began to exhibit problems of professional competence (PPC). They described how the evaluative and gatekeeping stance of a counselor educator at times conflicted with their developmental and humanistic perspectives as a counselor.

As participants became involved in gatekeeping they had to reconcile the values and priorities of a counselor with those of a counselor educator, as this participant stated, “As counselors, we accept people as they are, where they are, and they can take as long as they want to change... [but] as counselor educators we are putting other people at risk by doing so... we have a... different responsibility.” Another participant noted the challenge as, “...we are trained, most of us, to be counselors... we are trained to empower folks and to encourage them, and not have an absolute, you are OK, you are not OK.”

As part of *balancing responsibilities*, participants took stock of their own capacity (time, energy, and other duties) and motivation as a gatekeeper. Participants often noted the lack of time and balancing other job demands as challenges to effective gatekeeping. These counselor

educators' lived experiences of their multiple duties evolved alongside their accumulating experiences of gatekeeping to contribute to their sense of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*.

Successfully *integrating identities and balancing responsibilities* seems to contribute to *striving to be an effective gatekeeper* because participants believed an effective gatekeeper is able to integrate their gatekeeping experiences and their evolving understanding of how they can most effectively enact their gatekeeping responsibility. Related to the next internal process, the participant counselor educators were able to utilize judgment in order to address the complexity of the situation. They were aware how this complexity included the multiple lens through which they viewed students and the underlying values associated with each lens. Those *striving to be effective gatekeepers* reported remaining flexible and appropriate in terms of balancing conceptualizing students from a counselor lens and a counselor educator lens. This participant illustrates the balance, "So for me it's all connected. It's not truthfully a gatekeeping issue. It's also about effective counselor education, effective counseling, they are all related."

### **Practicing Discernment**

*Practicing discernment* is the internal process of enacting introspection and self-awareness to accurately appraise, evaluate, remediate and monitor a student with potential problems of professional competence (PPC). Owing to the subjective nature of perceiving and evaluating student PPC and due to the potential for significant consequences if PPC exists, participants reported intentionally enacting a set of cognitive skills as part of their gatekeeping process. Participants endeavored to practice good judgment, self-awareness, and timely collegial consultation to be as discerning as possible in proceeding through the gatekeeping process for a student with PPC.

According to participants, fair and effective gatekeeping requires a strong level of self-awareness and appropriate use of clinical skills and judgment. This participant explained, “I can conceptualize a lot of gatekeeping issues with clinical skills.” While another participant added “...my gut, maybe my clinical sense is saying there is a problem here.” Participants exhibited self-awareness and introspection by continually examining their thoughts and feelings, as this participant explained:

I have to look inwards first. Is this pattern something that’s a trigger for me? So, I’ll do my self-exploration... first. Then I... try to observe whether that student is impacting other people that way. Or, if it seems to be me. So, I want to make that distinction I think that’s critical first is that I’m willing to look at me...

Participants often noted these two interrelated processes of introspection and ad hoc consultation. This participant explains why this self-awareness and consultation are important:

We’re people, we’re not robots and we’re going to have some... affinities for some students, and... the opposite... for other students. I try to be aware of it just like in our work with clients, if I’m having a strong reaction... I want to sit and think about why. I might talk with colleagues about it.

Participants exhibited *practicing discernment* when they recognized the need for collegial feedback to help them discern the potential PPC they were observing and/or experiencing. This participant explained:

I feel comfortable bringing that to my colleagues and... they’re very helpful if they’re saying, “Oh, yeah I’m noticing something similar” or “Here’s my take on it.” Or perhaps it’s just me, that’s my bias and I’m seeing something that’s just based on my reaction, so that’s helpful.

When participants were able to enact a high level of *practicing discernment*, they felt capable and effective as a gatekeeper thus enhancing their sense of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*. This participant notes, “As a gatekeeper... I am the person who has to ensure that what I am witnessing or observing or experiencing with this particular individual is not going to happen to a client who may be far more vulnerable than me.” Conversely, participants described lower levels of *practicing discernment*, perhaps because one does not have trusted colleagues to consult with, as contributing to lower levels of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*. This relationship between *practicing discernment* and having trusted colleagues to consult with will be explored later in this paper.

### **Managing Challenging Emotions**

*Managing challenging emotions* captures participants’ internal experiences of managing a wide variety of feelings throughout the gatekeeping process including the emotional consequences of gatekeeping outcomes. The seriousness of gatekeeping consequences alongside participants’ desires to be positive towards students led to participants experiencing a wide range of difficult emotions. Experiencing these emotions seemed to have an impact on participants that took its toll and often felt like a heavy burden.

Participants experienced anxiety as a part of gatekeeping as this participant stated, “But just the idea that you’re essentially holding someone’s potential career in your hands is quite anxiety-provoking for a number of reasons.” Along with anxiety, participants also shared feelings of self-doubt, dread, and worry about the anticipated gatekeeping processes. These related emotions were often quite negatively impactful on participants.

Participants also reported feeling anger, disappointment, frustration, disbelief, guilt and sadness as illustrated by this participant “... you wanted them in your program... you are invested

in their training and... in their success... And then something happens, right? So, you have to deal with that.” This participant highlighted another common internal reaction, “I feel really bad because this person is not cutting it and I am going to have to be the one to hold that person accountable.” Participants felt a variety of strong emotions towards students exhibiting PPC throughout the associated gatekeeping processes.

Participants also felt empathy for students who were unable to meet program expectations, as this participant emphasized, “It’s heartbreaking. Because he wants this so bad, he wants to be a therapist so much and he is just not, at this point anyway.” Empathy and compassion for students exhibiting PPC were commonly felt experiences during gatekeeping. These emotions loom large especially after unsuccessful remediation attempts, leading to the most emotionally difficult aspects of the gatekeeping process for most participants.

Two of the most emotionally difficult tasks during gatekeeping are giving a student feedback about their poor performance and dismissing a student from the program. These events heightened the associated difficult emotions. As this participant stated:

I am the one that has to tell the student the news... this isn’t going to be a fit and we are not allowing you to continue. I have dreaded those meetings, I have dreaded those conversations. I think that’s to me the worst part...

Participants experience emotional difficulty because they perceive themselves to be hurting the student in some way- by delivering bad news and thwarting students’ aspirations. This participant added, “... the most disruptive and painful experience [is] to remove a student against their will.”

Another participant elaborated:

The hardest part is when... they’re crying because of the information you’ve delivered. They hear it and they’re like, “I get it, I suck,” ... There’s shame, there’s

guilt, there's remorse. There is grief and there is a part of me that just wants somehow to fix it.

Participants described coping with these difficult emotions through different processes. Oftentimes, participants took comfort in knowing that they acted in concert with their colleagues in fulfilling a difficult but necessary ethical responsibility. Participants reassured themselves that "It's not fully my decision... and again at the end of the day, should this person be counseling vulnerable populations and if the answer is no, then what we are doing is correct." Additionally, participants sought to reframe the experience for themselves and for the student with PPC, as this participant described:

This person is really miserable...but...that means now they have the opportunity to find the thing that they're going to be able to do well. Because this isn't it, but there is something out there, now they're not wasting their time here anymore.

Participants also reported feeling disappointment or regret when they allowed students to graduate whom the program should have dismissed. In these gateslipping instances, sometimes similar adaptive and hopeful thoughts occurred, as this participant noted:

I also kind of trust something bigger than us, that people won't get employed or that they won't be successful and they will go find another job or that they won't pass licensure, who knows... But when I haven't been successful, I hope that that comes into play... that something larger than us prevails.

If participants managed the emotionally challenging aspects of gatekeeping well, they reported it helped them to sustain as gatekeepers and led to higher *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*. Conversely, if they had difficulty managing these challenging emotions they described

that it negatively affected *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*, especially over time as this participant states:

It feels like a heavy burden being responsible for people in that way...of being responsible for their development and problems.... So, I think that piece is like burnout, I think that's been a consequence.

Managing these challenging thoughts and emotions would seem to involve personal coping and resilience, but the sense of cohesion and support that participants felt with their colleagues is what strongly influenced how well they coped with the emotional challenges, as the next section illustrates.

### **Perceiving Cohesion and Capability in Colleagues**

*Perceiving cohesion and capability in colleagues* is the internal process whereby participants perceive the absence or presence of helpful gatekeeping-related qualities and behaviors among their counselor educator colleagues. Participants reported perceiving and experiencing such qualities as trust, support, mutual respect, shared motivation, and gatekeeping competence, which affected their internal experiences of gatekeeping. This sense of cohesion and capability interacts with two of the other processes already mentioned: *practicing discernment* and *managing challenging emotions*.

Researchers conceptualized *perceiving cohesion* to include the trust, mutual respect, support and shared motivation that participants perceive within and among their colleagues. Because gatekeeping is an interpersonal endeavor, participants reported needing to trust and rely on their colleagues to carry out their gatekeeping responsibilities. Evaluating students as a team is essential to the gatekeeping process, as this participant illustrated:

Gatekeeping is the hardest part of our job... and to work as a team with people where gatekeeping is part of all of our jobs, I have to be able to trust that everyone else is holding students to a high standard...

The importance of having sufficient trust and respect among colleagues became clear as numerous participants reinforced this theme. The participant quoted above also described their team as "... probably the most collaborative team I've ever worked on.... we know each other well and we've worked together well for several years... and we trust each other." Most participants felt this level of trust with at least some of their colleagues, which facilitated collaborating with them. However, low levels of trust can impede collaboration as this participant pointed out, "... if you don't trust that you will be incorporated in the process, you won't be in the process."

Participants perceived varying levels of support, respect, and motivation for gatekeeping. A high level of mutual trust, respect, support and motivation was encouraging as this participant noted, "Our faculty dynamics quite frankly are amazing. I mean I consider myself really blessed. I think we all are always thinking about our students. We are very student-focused..." This high level of perceived support naturally led to increased collaboration and enhanced individual counselor educator gatekeeping endeavors.

However, some participants perceived both a lack of interpersonal trust and a lack of motivation as this participant observed:

I think what makes it hard is when there is no trust and confidence, and I think...

Can I really trust this person if I have a gatekeeping issue? Do I trust that this person will: a) support me, have my back, or b) do something about it?

Some participants associated lower gatekeeping motivation with less investment in the quality of the program, as this participant observed:

There's only a few of us that are that invested... in the gatekeeping process.... It becomes clear the people who are passionate about the field of counseling and preparing people to be effective in the field. I think those folks who are passionate about it tend to be a little more invested in the gatekeeping function.

As might be expected, these participants felt more isolated in their gatekeeping efforts and the lack of trust and motivation also led to decreased levels of consultation (essential for *practicing discernment*) and less support when *managing challenging emotions*.

*Perceiving capability* includes perceptions of colleagues' gatekeeping competence and capacity. Some participants perceived their colleagues' gatekeeping competence to be low, as this participant noted, "I don't perceive them to be capable of discerning those students' needs and helping them identify and work through them..." Other participants perceived a much higher level of competence, like this participant:

If \_\_\_\_\_ comes and says, "You know what, I'm really worried about student X." I'm like, "Me too then, I'm totally worried too. I trust your judgment absolutely.".... There's some credibility, because I've seen her in the past say "I'm worried about this student" and she's right.

*Perceiving capability* also involved evaluating whether colleagues had adequate time and energy, because participants knew how time-consuming gatekeeping could be. Participants noted that their colleagues who are motivated for gatekeeping made the time for it. This participant explained, "I think it has to do with who has enough energy to follow it through... that means that the people who are most passionate about it, will be the ones to follow it through."

How participants experienced their colleagues throughout gatekeeping strongly affected their sense of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*. Higher levels of *perceived cohesion* seem to

enhance the collaborative relationships and necessary actions that help participants feel like they are sharing the gatekeeping work and the emotional consequences. The results strongly suggest that, for most participants, having higher levels of *perceiving cohesion and capability* augmented not only *managing challenging emotions* but also *practicing discernment*, thereby contributing to striving individual gatekeepers and more collaborative gatekeeping processes.

On the other hand, some motivated gatekeepers may be thwarted in their *striving to be effective gatekeepers* by low levels of *perceiving cohesion and capability* among their colleagues as mentioned above. Although high personal motivation may offset a lack of *perceiving cohesion and capability*, it will eventually take its toll, as this participant admitted:

Personally, it's exhausted me... it has worn me out; it's given me lots of opportunities to reflect if this is the right field for me. If I'm meeting so much resistance with what I'm trying to do, is it me or is it the field? Or the environment of where I'm at?

In conclusion, *integrating identities and balancing responsibilities, practicing discernment, managing challenging emotions* and *perceiving cohesion and capability in colleagues* represent the main processes that counselor educators experience as they perform gatekeeping. The most salient interaction is between the first three processes and the crucial process and experience of *perceiving cohesion and capability in colleagues*. It seems that counselor educators are able to sustain the other challenging internal processes of gatekeeping within a supportive and effective collegial environment, as this participant notes, "Our faculty dynamics quite frankly are amazing.... We all really respect each other... I count myself really lucky to be able to work with three other individuals whose opinion I really value." On the other end of the spectrum, this participant notes how a lack of collegial support has affected them, "If I

misjudge it... and think this person will fit and it turns out no... Previous colleagues that I have had were not so supportive..." while another participant states, "I am the only one that puts any effort and specific attention to gatekeeping. I'm completely isolated..." Without crucial support from colleagues, counselor educators struggle to maintain their efficacy as gatekeepers and perhaps as counseling faculty but with such support, they are able to sustain in their gatekeeping roles – successfully *striving to be an effective gatekeeper*.

### **Discussion**

The theory of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper – struggling to striving* and the related internal processes answers the research question by providing a richer understanding and an organizing model for the internal experiences of counselor educators during gatekeeping. These results highlight the challenging internal and interpersonal aspects of gatekeeping, how participants integrate values and roles, and the emotions that gatekeeping often produces. The theory's four internal processes elaborate on the research on these aspects of gatekeeping.

The challenges inherent in *integrating identities and balancing responsibilities* support the observations of researchers who noted similar challenges among faculty and supervisors in counselor education, social work and psychology programs (Johnson et al., 2008; Kerl et al., 2002; Rust et al., 2013; Sowbel, 2012). Participants' reports of inadequate training concur with the call for increased gatekeeping training (Homrich, 2009; Jacobs et al., 2011; Russell, Dupree, Beggs, Peterson, & Anderson, 2007). Of note, the complexities of having a counselor/clinical background which both augments (e.g. enhancing discernment) and complicates (e.g. humanistic tendencies towards students) counselor educators' gatekeeping responsibilities have been brought forward in new and detailed ways.

*Practicing discernment* arose as a part of participants' internal experience which supports prior research that emphasizes the importance of "... introspection, self-knowledge, and self-awareness..." during gatekeeping (Jacobs et al., 2011, p. 178). This critical aspect of gatekeeping experiences concurs with recommendations by Rust et al. (2013). The importance of the complex cognitive processes (e.g. countertransference) and the different lens by which counselor educators carry out their gatekeeping responsibilities has been made clearer by the current study.

The difficulties with *managing challenging emotions* are consistent with previous authors who have noted the emotional difficulties inherent in gatekeeping (Gizara & Forrest, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2008; Kerl & Eichler, 2007). The intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges that participants noted strongly correspond to the "personal barriers" such as "... competency set, avoidance, resentment and fear, empathy for the parties involved, and fear of legal action..." put forth by Jacobs et al. (2011, p. 178-179). In particular the internal conflict between empathizing with struggling students and enacting the gatekeeper role seen in multiple internal processes corresponds to research by Brown-Rice and Furr (2016) that finds that most counselor educators experience this empathy conflict. The extent to which these results correspond with previous findings is encouraging.

Collegial issues explored in *perceiving cohesion and capability in colleagues* further illuminates earlier research that supports the central idea of the interactive nature of gatekeeping and the strengths and challenges inherent in conducting such a complex and important task with one's colleagues (Forrest et al., 2013; Gizara & Forrest, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2008). The interaction between the internal and the interpersonal facets of gatekeeping are elucidated, in particular the importance of *perceiving cohesion and capability in colleagues* to the

internal gatekeeping processes of *practicing discernment* and *managing challenging emotions*. The results call for further exploration of this complex aspect of gatekeeping.

Overall, the results of this study corroborate and further illuminate the existing literature and the theory of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper* captures and conceptualizes disparate internal experiences into a coherent and holistic model. The results contribute to the gatekeeping research by increasing our understanding of counselor educators' internal experiences of gatekeeping. The complexities and emotional challenges of gatekeeping have been further elucidated. This research also points to the importance of the interactions between counselor educator internal processes and collegial/faculty dynamics as part of the complex process of gatekeeping in counselor education.

### **Implications for Counselor Education**

Implications for doctoral counselor education programs are clear. Doctoral programs can better prepare future counselor educators to perform gatekeeping by exploring the cognitive, emotional, ethical and interpersonal challenges of gatekeeping as part of the formal curriculum in counselor education and supervision. Furthermore, they should provide knowledge and skill development designed to increase competencies in discernment, emotional management, and collegial consultation.

Counselor education programs should enact practices that enhance professional development, support gatekeepers, and prevent burnout associated with gatekeeping challenges. Junior faculty would benefit from gatekeeping-specific training and mentoring. Programs that assign coordinators and directors with an outsized proportion of gatekeeping responsibility risk burning out those counselor educators. Programs should recognize the true costs of gatekeeping and seek to equitably share the gatekeeping responsibility while also bolstering support and

resources for those counselor educators who bear the brunt of gatekeeping duties. As this study has demonstrated, the challenges of gatekeeping, if not adequately supported or mitigated, can have a deleterious impact on gatekeepers.

Lastly, practices that seek to improve faculty cohesion and gatekeeping capability would enhance collaboration and individual counselor educator self-efficacy. Intentional time, training, and discussions focused on improving faculty processes, decision-making, team and relationship building, etc. could enhance both faculty cohesion and gatekeeping abilities within counselor education programs. Counselor education programs should periodically review their gatekeeping, in terms of both process and outcomes to maximize efficacy of gatekeeping and to monitor the impact on counselor educators.

### **Limitations**

Limitations may include bias during the data collection, data analysis and theory generation or factors due to participant demographics. Despite rigorous attention to grounded theory methods, the primary author's relative inexperience with this methodology might be a limitation. Similarly, insufficient researcher reflexivity might contribute to bias in the theory though researchers conducted activities that promote trustworthiness.

Participants were volunteers; therefore, another factor to consider is selection bias. Participants might have a different perspective on gatekeeping than non-participants. Also, while the pool of participants seems diverse (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, geographic region, type of program, tenure status, etc.), many more variations among counselor educators exist than were presented in this study.

## **Future Research**

Further research on factors such as tenure status, being the program or clinical coordinator, and professional identity would inform how these factors might affect one's internal experience of gatekeeping. Future research might study gatekeeping among different types of counselor education programs such as rehabilitation counseling or addiction counseling. Replication studies would ascertain whether researchers overlooked aspects of counselor educators' internal experiences of gatekeeping or whether the theory and its components coalesce and operate in different ways than proposed.

An important line of future research would further examine how identity and diversity issues influence gatekeeping. Counselor educators need to know more about how the intersectional identities of both students and counselor educators affect gatekeeping processes and outcomes, especially for women and minority counselor educators. Only one prior study (Shen-Miller et al., 2012) has examined the contextual influences of diversity issues in gatekeeping. Other research highlights the importance of cultural competence in gatekeeping in general but few guidelines exist (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016; Rust et al., 2013). A few study participants who identify as faculty of color did mention possible instances of implicit bias or microaggressions (towards them, as faculty) as part of a gatekeeping process which is a phenomenon that warrants further research and which mirrors other experiences of faculty of color (Shen-Miller et al., 2012).

The theory of *striving to be an effective gatekeeper* furthers our understanding of counselor educators' internal experiences during gatekeeping for PPC. The authors hope that this knowledge will lead to better understanding of the complexity and challenges inherent in gatekeeping and increased recognition, support and resources for counselor educators performing this crucial ethical duty.

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