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## Advocating at the State Capitol: Experiences of Master's Level Counseling Students

Jacqueline M. Swank

*University of Florida*, [jswank@coe.ufl.edu](mailto:jswank@coe.ufl.edu)

Alisa Houseknecht

*University of Florida*, [alisahouseknecht@gmail.com](mailto:alisahouseknecht@gmail.com)

Kathryn M. Williams

*University of Florida*, [drgnfly@ufl.edu](mailto:drgnfly@ufl.edu)

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## Advocating at the State Capitol: Experiences of Master's Level Counseling Students

### Abstract

Counseling students need to develop competency in advocacy. In this article, the researchers explore students' legislative advocacy experiences at a state capitol by analyzing transcripts from 8 interviews and 17 written reflections, using a phenomenological approach. The researchers discuss five themes, including (a) learning process, (b) being an advocate, (c) influence, (d) empowerment and future advocacy, and (e) improvements; and present implications for counselor preparation.

### Keywords

advocacy, counseling students, legislative advocacy, political advocacy, phenomenological analysis

### Author's Notes

Alisa Houseknecht is now at Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences, University of South Florida.

Advocacy (n.d.) is defined as the “act or process of supporting a cause or proposal.” There is a growing movement within the counseling profession emphasizing the importance of advocacy as a distinct professional standard and component of a counselor’s professional identify (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010; Ratts & Wood, 2011; Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). The counseling profession has demonstrated the importance of advocacy through the endorsement by the American Counseling Association (ACA) of the *Advocacy Competencies* (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002), and inclusion of advocacy competency within the 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs *Standards* (CACREP, 2015). Growing interest in this area is also reflected in the number of professional publications and presentations on advocacy issues (Bemak & Chung, 2011).

Although it is clear that the counseling profession has emphasized the importance of advocacy through the development of competencies, standards, and other scholarly publications, Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) found a large number of students are not engaging in advocacy. They also reported students’ interest and desire to engage in advocacy predicted engagement. Thus, there is a crucial need to integrate advocacy training within counselor preparation programs, including opportunities to participate in advocacy experiences, and examine the effectiveness of these experiences in fostering interest and a desire to engage in advocacy.

### **Legislative Advocacy**

The social/political advocacy domain of the *Advocacy Competencies* (Lewis et al., 2002) focuses on recognizing that a client problem is a concern on a broader level and advocating at the policy or legislative level (Lewis et al. 2002). Legislative/political advocacy involves acts focused on promoting changes to policies and legislation. This broader definition is important to consider regarding legislative advocacy because advocacy is a two pronged approach that involves (a)

advocacy for clients, and (b) advocacy for the counseling profession (Chang, Barrio Minton, Dixon, Myers, & Sweeney, 2012). Thus, in addition to engaging in legislative advocacy to promote change regarding clients and client concerns, counseling professionals may also engage in this type of advocacy to encourage change regarding broader issues that affect the counseling profession, such as licensure requirements and supervision. For the purposes of this article, legislative and political advocacy are used as synonymous terms.

The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015) identify counseling and advocacy interventions as one of the four developmental domains that lead to multicultural and social justice competence. The MSJCC suggest that multicultural and social justice competent counselors intervene with, and on behalf of clients at the public policy level, which reflects the local, state, and federal laws and policies that influence client growth and development. This requires counselors to understand the sociocultural systems affecting their clients' sense of well-being and address the corresponding issues by initiating discussions and seeking out opportunities to collaborate with clients (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). Specifically, competent counselors understand how clients are shaped by laws and policies and they engage in social action to ensure laws and policies promote equitable access to employment, healthcare, and education for clients (Ratts et al., 2015).

Legislative advocacy may occur on multiple levels and involve various activities including meetings with legislators and letter writing campaigns. For example, at the local level, counseling professionals may speak at a city council meeting. At the state level, counselors may meet with state representative and senators or speak at state legislative committee meetings. National legislative advocacy may involve meeting with national legislators. Thus, counseling professionals

have a variety of opportunities to become involved in legislative advocacy. However, this requires training and the development of competency in this area of advocacy.

### **Infusing Advocacy within the Counseling Curriculum**

Scholars have examined effective ways to infuse advocacy competencies throughout the counseling curriculum. Toporek et al. (2009) identified a need to train counselors in systems-level issues and interventions, as well as in ethical concerns regarding advocacy roles. They recommended educators integrate training throughout the curriculum, teaching students that advocacy is a component of their counselor identity. Additionally, Decker, Manis, and Paylo (2016) stated advocacy skill development should be ongoing throughout coursework and supervised fieldwork. They proposed the infusion of advocacy in the curriculum through reflective exercises, stories and articles in the media, guest lecturers, cases studies, and volunteering (Decker et al., 2016). Scholars have also discussed instructional strategies that focus on legislative advocacy specifically, including inviting legislators or campaign representatives to be guest speakers for a class, writing letters to legislators or editors of newspapers, presenting a mock legislative session in class, creating blogs on policy issues, and engaging in an advocacy trip to the state capitol (DeRigne, Rosenwald, & Naranjo, 2014).

Experiential learning is recommended as a strategy to infuse advocacy in the counseling curriculum. Murray and Pope (2010) stated service learning encourages civic commitment and allows students to apply didactic learning. Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant (2007) further remarked that counselor training needs to include service learning experiences; and legal, public policy, and educational institutions provide important venues for experiential learning.

A few researchers have developed specific approaches to advocacy training. Specifically, Steele (2008) developed the Liberation Model as a constructivist approach to develop the

necessary reflective and critical thinking skills for advocacy training. Within the Model, Steele identified areas of focus for counselor preparation including (a) discussing explicit and implicit cultural and political ideology in the United States, (b) engaging in interdisciplinary study of relevant issues, and (c) applying the Liberation Model to the practice of counselor advocacy. Additionally, Green, McCollum, and Hays (2008) created an advocacy counseling paradigm that infuses competency and ethics within a conceptual framework. The framework illustrates the process of obtaining competence informed by ethical, multicultural, and advocacy standards in the counseling profession. To be an advocate, counselors begin with awareness of the issue, increase their understanding, and develop skills that can help clients understand the issue and take responsibility for solutions (Green et al., 2008).

Bemak and Chung (2011) developed a *classroom without walls* concept to promote social justice counseling and advocacy training in graduate counseling programs that included experiences beyond the traditional classroom. By applying what is learned in the classroom to real-world settings, Bemak and Chung found students became motivated to implement social justice counseling and advocacy services in their work as counselors, felt empowered to engage as social change agents, and gained confidence about their own social justice counseling and advocacy abilities. They provided six recommendations to consider when incorporating similar field-based activities: (a) infusing cross-cultural socioeconomic social justice strategies, (b) building partnerships, (c) reframing obstacles and resistance as learning experiences, (d) redefining poor outcomes as learning experiences, (e) creating meaning from confusion, and (f) valuing self-examination as a healthy attribute (Bemak & Chung, 2011). Thus, there are some guidelines in training students in various aspects of advocacy. However, a need exists for further exploring and evaluating strategies related to specific types of advocacy. Therefore, this study focuses

specifically on exploring a strategy (advocacy trip to the state capitol) to develop legislative advocacy competency.

Despite the need to train counselors as advocates, and scholars presenting some general training recommendations, there is limited literature on the implementation and evaluation of activities to develop advocacy competencies, especially in the area of application. Specifically, Beimers (2016) reported there is limited research about students that engage in legislative advocacy days. A need exists for exploring the implementation of advocacy training and the application of advocacy skills within counselor preparation programs. This is crucial because despite an emphasis on advocacy and a clear need for advocacy within the counseling profession (i.e., advocating for counselors being able to provide services to veterans and Medicare recipients, student counselor ratios), a large number of students are not engaging in advocacy (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). Therefore, counselor educators need to know what strategies are effective for fostering student interest and engagement in advocacy. The present study seeks to expand upon the existing advocacy literature by exploring the experiences of counselors-in-training participating in a legislative advocacy experience that involved advocating at the State Capitol. The researchers used a phenomenological research approach because the purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of the participants (counselors-in-training) with the identified phenomenon (legislative advocacy) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological research question was: What are the lived experiences of master's level counselors-in-training that participated in a legislative advocacy experience that encompassed advocating at the state capitol?

## **Method**

### **Researchers**

The researchers are White females; one is a counselor educator and the other two authors are doctoral students. All of the researchers are affiliated with the program where participants were recruited for this study. The counselor educator earned her master's degree in a program that infused advocacy throughout the curriculum and has experience participating in advocacy trips at the state and national levels. However, she was not present for the specific trip discussed in this article. One of the doctoral students has not participated in advocacy trips at a state capitol and the other one has participated in multiple advocacy trips at the state and national levels, including the one described in this article. For bracketing purposes, the researchers discussed their beliefs about advocating for the profession and their experiences with legislative advocacy prior to beginning the study. All of the researchers believe that being an advocate is a key role and responsibility of counseling professionals and it is essential for counselor preparation programs to integrate advocacy experiences within the training of counselors. They believe training experiences should include the development of advocacy awareness, knowledge, skills, and action, encompassing classroom discussion and activities, and community engagement experiences (i.e., legislative advocacy trips). Together, these experiences contribute to the development of advocacy competency.

### **Participants**

The target population for the study was master's level counseling students who participated in an advocacy trip at a state capitol. Participants included counseling students with a specialization in either school, mental health, or marriage and family. Eight students participated in semi-structured interviews, and one student provided written responses to the interview questions

because she was not available for an interview. Additionally, 17 students gave the researchers permission to analyze their written reflections about the advocacy experience. The reflections were a course requirement; however, students were able to decide whether they wanted their reflections analyzed for the study. Because the reflections were de-identified it is unknown how many of the interview participants also provided reflections; however, it is likely that all of the interviewed participants also provided reflections. At the time of the study, all of the participants were in their second semester of a counselor preparation program at a large public institution in the southeastern part of the US and they were enrolled in a counseling ethics and/or a multicultural counseling course.

### **Advocacy Experience**

Counselor education students participating in this study attended an advocacy experience at a state capitol, which involved meeting with legislators to discuss proposed legislation related to counseling. Students enrolled in an ethics course or a multicultural counseling course were required to participate in the advocacy trip. Prior to the trip, the instructor of the ethics and multicultural counseling courses provided class instruction time focused on preparation for the advocacy trip, which involved teaching students about various types of advocacy including a discussion of the *ACA Advocacy Competency* (Lewis et al., 2002) domains, with an emphasis on legislative advocacy. The instructor also taught students how to research bills and schedule meetings with state representatives and senators. Additionally, the instructor collaborated with the Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) chapter advocacy committee to have a panel of individuals with legislative advocacy experience discuss with the classes their experiences engaging in this type of advocacy and provide recommendations for preparing for the advocacy trip. The instructor also required students to research state bills and discuss them as a class to decide which bills they would

advocate for during the advocacy trip, and then create handouts for legislators that highlighted key points about the bills. In preparation for the trip, the students were also required to schedule meetings with their state representatives and senators. The instructor was the same for both courses, and this individual is not one of the researchers for this study.

Students were provided transportation to the state capitol (multiple vans) for the advocacy trip, which consisted of one day. During the trip, students met with representatives and senators to share the importance of counseling (including personal stories), and discuss the bills they had researched and ask for support of them. An example of a bill that they advocated for was related to funding for school counselors. Another example was related to providing training to emergency personnel on how to interact with individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Interestingly, we found out that at the end of the legislative session, following the advocacy trip that this bill was passed into law. Students also attended subcommittee meetings to listen to discussions about bills. Specifically, school counseling students attended the education committee meeting and both mental health and marriage and family students attended the health and human services committee meeting. Furthermore, students toured the state capitol.

The students had opportunities to process their experience throughout the day with a faculty member, doctoral students (including one of the researchers), advanced master's students, and their peers. Processing sessions also occurred during the ride home and in the classroom following the experience. Following the trip, the instructor of the ethics and multicultural counseling courses required students to write a reflection about their reaction to the experience including what they thought they accomplished, what went well, and areas for improvement both as a group and for them individually. They were also required to write a follow-up letter/email to the legislators they had meetings with during the trip. Thus, although the advocacy trip consisted of activities

occurring on a single day, students participated in preparation and follow-up activities that extended beyond the advocacy day experience.

## **Procedure**

The researchers obtained institutional review board approval for the project prior to beginning the study. Students in the ethics and multicultural counseling courses were required to participate in the advocacy trip; however, they could decide whether or not they wanted to participate in the study (interviews and/or submission of their reflections to the researchers) without pressure or the possibility that their (non-)participation would influence their course grade. The researchers discussed the study with the potential participants and gave them a consent form. Although the researchers were not instructors for the ethics or multicultural counseling courses, they did not obtain the students' reflections or recruit students to participate in interviews until the semester was completed. The researchers audio recorded the interviews, transcribed them, and then analyzed the transcripts and written reflections to identify themes.

## **Data Collection**

**Semi-structured interview.** The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the students. The interviews focused on the students' experience with the "Day on the Hill" advocacy trip, including their thoughts and feelings about the experience, understanding of advocacy, and thoughts about future engagement in advocacy. The interviews lasted approximately 30-40 minutes in duration.

**Written reflections.** The instructor of the ethics and multicultural counseling courses required students to write a reflection paper following the "Day on the Hill" experience. Reflections focused on thoughts and feelings related to advocating at the state capitol, including accomplishments, strengths, and areas for growth. The reflections were 2-3 pages in length.

## **Data Analysis and Verification Procedures**

The researchers used a phenomenological method (Moustakas, 1994) to analyze the interview transcripts and reflections. As an approach to promote trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the researchers discussed their advocacy experiences to explore their beliefs and assumptions about advocacy, prior to beginning the study, as discussed in the above researchers section. They also bracketed their experiences and expectation before coding. After the interviews were transcribed and combined with the written reflections, individually, the first two researchers read through the data multiple times to identify statements that were essential for understanding the participants' experiences, and then deleted similar statements, a process known as horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Next, they met together and grouped the statements by similarity into clusters and themes, known as meaning units (Moustakas, 1994), which are reported below in the findings. They also reviewed the data again to ensure that they had not missed any relevant statements. Furthermore, the researchers engaged in peer debriefing to promote trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018) during analysis of the data and writing the manuscript. This involved having an external auditor review the research process and discuss any concerns with the researchers.

## **Findings**

The researchers identified five themes and three of the themes had subthemes. The themes were (a) learning process, (b) redefining advocacy, (c) influence the legislative process, (d) empowerment and future advocacy, and (e) improvements. Within the *learning process* theme, there were four subthemes: (a) knowledge, (b) awareness, (c) skills, and (d) group experience. The theme *influence the legislative process* had two subthemes: (a) relationships, and (b) using your

voice. Finally, the *improvements* theme had three subthemes: (a) preparation, (b) duration and structure, and (c) communication with legislators.

## **Learning Process**

Through the “Day on the Hill” experience, students reported learning about advocacy that went beyond classroom learning. Specifically, students reported obtaining knowledge related to current issues and bills, the legislative process, and the advocacy process. They also discussed gaining awareness about the challenges of the process. Additionally, students expressed having the opportunity for skill development. Finally, participants discussed the group experience.

**Knowledge.** Regarding knowledge about current issues, one student stated, “[knowing] what’s going on in Capitol Hill...what they’re passing and what rules they’re making, that does affect us more than we think it does...knowing that [information] on behalf of the client.” Students also discussed having limited knowledge and understanding about the legislative process. One participant stated, “Seeing day to day what our legislators do; I wasn’t really aware of what they did.” Another participant reported, “[I] wasn’t totally aware of the process that it takes specifically for bills... it’s a long process...it’s not a one-time thing...I have to actually put [in] a lot of effort and go for the long haul.” A third student stated, “It really helped me begin to get the full picture of what is done in a subcommittee and how politicians...[are] up-to-date on...affairs in their specific assigned areas, [but are] not always informed on the issues we brought [to them].” Students also discussed learning about the financial aspect of the legislative process. One student remarked, “Everything that was brought up came down to finances, which is discouraging, but also it’s just a reminder of the reality.” Another participant discussed allocations of funds by stating, “There’s just so many competing incentives for everything that it’s tough to weigh those appropriately with the best outcome in mind.”

In regards to learning about the legislative advocacy process, one participant stated, “No matter who you are, you [can] make a meeting with the senator.” Participants also discussed learning the importance of research in the advocacy process, including gathering information about “both sides of the issue,” and knowing “where most of the state funds go.” Additionally, students shared that they learned specifically how to talk to legislators. One participant stated, “Adding in a personal story allows you to explain the reason why you are advocating. It...adds another dimension...and it often grabs the legislator’s attention better than spitting out a bunch of facts.” Another participant stated, “Summarizing the bill isn’t enough...you need to bring up their voting record to show that you have done your research.” A third student reported, “Speak genuinely instead of a rehearsed speech...appeal to your audience.” Thus, the students’ statements demonstrate the multiple areas of their knowledge development.

**Awareness.** Participants also discussed gaining awareness about the challenges related to the legislative advocacy process, including thinking that legislators were “dismissive of students’ concerns at times,” thinking that they were a “nuisance” to legislators, and that legislators’ responses seemed “rehearsed” at times. In describing her frustration with scheduling an appointment with a legislator, one student stated, “I called each office twice and sent an email without any response for nearly a month. [I] wonder if I would have continued...if it were not for a class assignment...[the] process discourages individuals from pursuing meetings with their representatives.” Another student commented on how students were treated by legislators, “The arrogance shown by those men [standing in the hallway] was staggering; I distinctly remember hearing the words ‘field trip’ as I walked past one of them, which adds to my disappointment.”

**Skills.** Regarding skill development, students discussed the opportunity to practice and develop their advocacy skills. Specifically, students reported developing skills in “public

speaking.” They also reported skill development in “communication, preparation, and collaboration.”

**Group experience.** In discussing the advocacy experience, participants also discussed their experience of advocating as a group. One participant stated, “I appreciated it having been a group experience... I liked hearing the people in my cohort, their opinions.” Another participant shared, “I had a lot of good conversations with peers that I wouldn’t have normally talked to about some of that stuff.” A third student discussed processing the experience by stating, “Everyone on the way back [in the van] went around and said two takeaways, two strengths, and two things they didn’t like as much about the experience.”

### **Redefining Advocacy**

In sharing their experiences, the students discussed what it means to be an advocate and the role of advocacy. One participant reported, “The goal is to improve outcomes or environment factors or conditions.” Another participant stated that to advocate is to “take one step forward...for some of us, you just need to show up...and for other people...their step forward is directly speaking...or maybe for someone they did the research and their step forward is talking to a peer...about it.” A third student reported, “Public policy is what dictates everything we do as practitioners, and if the policies in place aren’t working for you or your profession, it’s important that you speak up about it.” Participants also described advocacy as an “information gathering” process by attending meetings, and a process of “discovery” through conducting research. Additionally, they discussed the importance of advocacy at the local level, as discussed by one of the legislative aides. One student stated, “Legislation moves slowly at the state level. The quickest way to make a difference would be to start at the district level...If we [have] positive results, then we...use that evidence to support the request for enacting a state-wide policy.” Finally, participants

discussed client advocacy. A participant shared, it's "speaking up for someone that maybe doesn't have a voice or whose voice is unheard or who doesn't feel like they have a voice." Another participant stated that as a counselor, she has the responsibility for "advocating for my clients and figuring out what they need, and empowering them to advocate for themselves as well."

### **Influence the Legislative Process**

**Relationships between counselors and legislators.** In regards to relationships, one participant stated, "He [the legislator] can use us as a reference for people that he knows that maybe are trying to seek services or just understanding what mental health counseling is in general." Another participant commented on the importance of "establishing our connections...[so] they have us as a resource,...continue advocating and talking about why our bills are so important so...they really look at the issues further, or maybe it would even sway their vote...the difference one vote can make." A third student stated, "The more we build up the relationship, the more he's going to lean on us and us on him...We could be writing our own bill [someday]...You have to have someone sign off on [it], he could be [that] person." A final student commented, "See[ing] a familiar face would be even more of a reminder that we keep coming back. We don't just come once and leave it, we're going to follow up with you and maintain this relationship."

**Using your voice.** Participants also discussed letting their voices be heard. This included the power of advocating as a group. One participant stated, "The more people we have show up could possibly encourage the representatives to realize mental health is a really big thing. There's all these people that care about it; they're all here on the same day." A second participant shared, "Advocacy does not have to be done solo. A big group of us came together to deliver our educated opinions about mental health services and issues. Advocacy can be impactful when it is collaborative." A third student reported, "We were turning heads and people were asking why are

you guys here.” A final participant stated, “By not attempting to change it, we guaranteed that no change would happen...Advocacy rests on everyone who is capable of doing it, and it is essential to protect the people that we serve as well as the profession.”

### **Empowerment and Future Advocacy**

Students shared how they felt empowered after the “Day on the Hill” experience and how they will engage in advocacy in the future. In regards to feeling empowered, one student stated, “Face-to-face contact with important people ignited a light in me...I really gained understanding...I trust that I will start small but hopefully I can transition into making bigger impacts within the community, the state, and possibly even the nation.” A second participant shared, “It ended up that one of the bills that we spoke about actually got passed....to see the impact that we had...changed my perspective and my outlook.” A third participant remarked, “It showed me that it’s something that I can really do and it’s not like everyone is just kind of helpless with what the government decides and that we actually have a voice.”

Students discussed their increased awareness about the importance of advocacy and how it is currently influencing their behavior and will continue to do so in the future. One participant commented, “I [now] see how...mental health is not given credit. I think doing this experience I’m much more of an advocate now...I’m more willing to do experiences like that or follow a bill or email my representatives, [or] letter writing campaigns.” Another student stated, “My awareness is definitely getting higher and just bigger for more topics, but also that maybe I’m not doing as much as I could be...I realized that being vocal is only one step...[there is] the doing part.” A third participant reported, “I will continue to advocate for counseling everyday by just simply having conversations with people around me about why counseling is so important and effective.”

## **Improvements**

**Preparation.** Participants discussed the importance of having adequate information and being educated before the advocacy day, including logistical information (e.g., map of the State Capitol), and knowledge and skill in the legislative process and how to advocate. One participant stated, “I have no experience with speaking with legislators...seeing a demonstration would have been helpful.” Another participant stated, “Spending a class period completely devoted to advocacy and speaking with legislators or government officials...[having] a foundation [for going to the capitol].” Participants also acknowledged components of the existing preparation process that went well, including having an “organized plan” about who was going to speak and what they were going to speak about, and developing a “handout” about the bills to reference during meetings and then give to legislators. Furthermore, participants reported gaining self-awareness through the completion of questionnaires about their thoughts and feelings about advocacy before the experience, as well as completing them again after the experience. Participants also discussed preparation related to recruiting a large, diverse number of people to participate in the advocacy trip. Specifically, participants discussed the importance of getting more individuals in the counselor education program involved, including additional faculty, and also involving participation from people in related professions. One participant shared, “Having more people from the program [come] because it brings more expertise and support...maybe involving outsiders...a related field.”

**Duration and Structure.** Participants commented on the amount of time spent at the State Capitol with some advocating for an extended trip. One student suggested, “Having an extended version of this trip, maybe two or three days and not making it mandatory...an extended experience.” Participants also discussed the structuring of the time spent at the State Capitol and

balancing structured activities with the freedom to choose how time is spent on advocacy day. One student commented on her perception of this balance, “We had kind of a free reign on how we wanted to spend our time at the Capitol. There were committee meetings that were structured, but the time in between could be used to learn things on your own.” Another participant discussed how to improve on the structuring of activities in stating, “Empowering students to know that it’s okay to do what they want to do within the big constraints...setting your own meeting, talking with people, maybe a chair of a committee and not necessary someone from our district...giving that option.”

**Communication with legislators.** The final improvement subtheme focused on communication with legislators and included training on how to arrange a meeting with a legislator, meeting size (smaller group meetings), timing of meetings, and speaking directly with legislators. One participant stated, “I am not very familiar with the way government works, so to set up a meeting with my legislator... is a very foreign concept. I would like to have more knowledge of the best way to approach [it].” Another student commented, “Form a more open relationship with representatives...we could go sporadically throughout the semester...making it more collaborative and ongoing.” A third participant remarked, “In the future make sure we’re able to talk to an actual representative instead of their aide...the message can get passed along, but...45 kids just sitting in front of you advocating, I think it’s just a different experience.” Thus, participants expressed a variety of suggestions for improving the experience.

### **Discussion**

This study expanded upon the existing literature about legislative advocacy. Specifically, the researchers explored the experiences of counseling students who engaged in an advocacy experience at a state capitol. Five themes and multiple subthemes emerged from the data. Students

shared how the experience helped them further their development in the areas of knowledge, awareness, and skills. Regarding skill development, scholars support the use of experiential activities to extend classroom knowledge by having students observe and practice skills (Kim & Lyons, 2003). They also shared enhancing knowledge and skills that can be transferrable to other areas of counseling. Counselor educators can infuse the advocacy competencies into counselor training by giving students the opportunity to practice applying advocacy strategies (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). Counselor educators can also encourage students to view advocacy as a component of counseling; and therefore, use their basic skills in the advocacy process (Goodman, Morgan, Hodgson, & Caldwell, 2018). This helps students bridge advocacy to their role as a counselor, instead of viewing it as something unrelated. This advocacy experience went beyond classroom learning to further assist students in developing advocacy competency. This is crucial because researchers found that advocacy experiences, such as an advocacy trip to the state capitol, help students develop confidence in their advocacy skills, which was related to their engagement in future advocacy experiences (Beimers, 2016). Participants also highlighted the benefits of engaging in the experience as a group, stating that it provided them with the opportunity to process their thoughts and feelings about the advocacy trip with their peers who shared in the experience. Steele (2008) emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for students to process their thoughts and feelings and interpersonal interactions that occur during class. Therefore, processing as a group was a crucial component of this advocacy experience.

In regards to becoming an advocate, participants were able to clearly articulate a definition for advocacy, based on their experience, and how counselors should be involved in advocacy. This understanding is crucial and aligns with the counseling literature emphasizing the role counselors have in the advocacy process and the importance of teaching counselors about this role during

their preparation programs (Chang et al., 2010). Students also shared how they can influence the legislative process through developing relationships with legislators, and using their voice to be heard. Ratts and Hutchins (2009) emphasized that social-advocacy-minded counselors are systems change agents that understand the importance of speaking out. Students commented on having a greater awareness about the effect they could have on the legislative process by being an active participant in advocacy efforts. Furthermore, they expressed feeling empowered to engage in future advocacy work in various ways as a practitioner. This is supported by Bemak and Chung's (2011) classroom without walls model that provides students with opportunities to take what they have learned in the classroom and apply it to real-world situations, as well as Beimers' (2016) findings that advocacy experiences that develop confidence in advocating correlate with future advocacy activities. Thus, counselors feeling empowered to be advocates is crucial in facilitating a culture among counselors that embraces advocacy activities. Participants also discussed strategies for improving an advocacy trip experience, which is informative due to the lack of literature about students that engage in advocacy trips (Beimers, 2016). The participants' perspectives expressed within this theme are consistent with scholars' recommendations of providing a variety of advocacy experiences throughout the training program (Decker et al., 2016; DeRigne et al., 2014).

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Research**

There are various limitations related to the current study. First, the researchers explored the legislative advocacy experiences of students in only one counselor education program and the researchers obtained limited participant demographic information. Additionally, the researchers were affiliated with the program where the participants were recruited for this study, which may have influence the participants' responses during the interview. However, the researcher that was

involved in the advocacy trip discussed in this article did not conduct the interviews. The study also focused solely on one legislative advocacy experience that involved students advocating at a state capitol.

Future research may expand upon this study by exploring the experiences of students in other programs and engagement in other types of advocacy activities, such as advocacy on the client level during clinical experiences, as well as engagement in local advocacy efforts. Researchers may also focus on examining the competency development (awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions) of students following an advocacy experience, as well as throughout their counselor preparation program. Additionally, researchers may examine effective facilitation strategies for advocacy experiences in counseling programs. This includes examining the group process, since this was a significant component of the experience explored in this study. Furthermore, scholars may also examine advocacy competencies and the advocacy experiences of counselor educators and practitioners.

### **Implications for Counselor Education**

Counselor educators have the responsibility to teach students about advocacy and provide them with experiences to develop their awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions. This is crucial in the development of multicultural and social justice counseling competencies. Educators may use the illustration of the six advocacy competency domains (Lewis et al., 2002) to help students understand the various types of advocacy, as well as the counselor-advocate-scholar framework (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014) to help them comprehend the importance of these areas separately, as well as their relationship to each other. Training should also include advocacy experiences throughout the counselor preparation process (Decker et al., 2016; DeRigne et al., 2014). The integration of multiple advocacy activities facilitates multiple points of comprehension that

promotes students' interest and engagement (Meade, 2016). This may include experiences within the classroom (i.e., lectures about the legislative process, guest speakers, researching proposed legislation and discussing how the legislation may affect clients) and beyond the classroom (i.e., advocacy trip to the State Capitol, visiting legislators in their home offices, writing letters or calling legislators, visiting local leaders including school board members or city council members). Through the integration of multiple experiences, students begin to develop advocacy competencies and receive a continuous, consistent message that being an advocate is a crucial responsibility and role for counselors.

When integrating a legislative advocacy experience, counselor educators must provide sufficient time to prepare students. The findings revealed that some students lacked an understanding about how the legislative process works, and had limited knowledge about proposed mental health legislation and how to research proposed legislation. Many students will likely have limited advocacy experience; and therefore, require support and encouragement during this process. This may include providing experiential learning opportunities before going to a state capitol (i.e., demonstrations and role plays of conversations with legislatures) that help them prepare for the trip and lessen their anxiety. Students may also require support during and after the experience. In addition to faculty support, educators may also collaborate with community members who have experience with legislative advocacy to provide support. Furthermore, counselor educators can encourage continued engagement from students through collaboration with the CSI chapter advocacy committee.

The study participants discussed challenges related to scheduling meetings with legislators and coping with legislators' reactions to them. Counselor educators can prepare students for challenges by explaining that wanting to protect oneself and the status quo is a normal response to

change and should not discourage them. Educators also need to help students understand that legislative advocacy can be challenging with issues creating controversy and tension, requiring courage, and changes to policies and laws being a slow process requiring patience (Goodman et al., 2018). Counselor educators can also help students develop confidence in becoming advocates by encouraging them to use their counseling skills in developing advocacy competency. Sharing a story and using their basic counseling skills can help students connect with a legislator, which promotes engagement and an openness to hear the students' message (Goodman et al., 2018).

In planning the experience, it is important to balance structured with unstructured activities (also discussed by the participants) to provide students with some freedom, while also providing some stability and control. This challenges students to go beyond their comfort zone, while providing support and boundaries so they are not so overwhelmed that they have a negative experience that inhibits growth. This is important because many students may feel fearful and apprehensive about engaging in advocacy (Meade, 2016). Counselor educators may also lack experience advocating at a state capitol; however, they can serve as powerful role models for their students by engaging in this process with their students and then processing the experience with them. Trip facilitators may provide additional support by designating mentors for the day that may include individuals with legislative advocacy experience (i.e., faculty, advanced students, other counseling professionals), which was integrated within the present study. Feedback provided by mentors may help students develop confidence in their advocacy skills (Beimers, 2016). Additionally, students noted they wanted more involvement from the counselor education community, including faculty, and other helping professions. Faculty and community participation communicates to students that advocacy is important and valued. This will hopefully encourage

students to continue to advocate for their clients, themselves, and the counseling profession throughout their career.

### **Conclusion**

This study focused on exploring master's level counseling students' experiences engaging in an advocacy trip to the state capitol. The students reported learning from the experience and feeling empowered to continue advocating, while also identifying challenges and areas for improvement for the advocacy experience. The findings from this study contribute to the growing body of research aimed at identifying and exploring innovative strategies to develop legislative advocacy competency. This is crucial because fostering competency among students may help promote continued engagement in advocacy throughout one's counseling career.

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