

Successful graduate students must possess complex survival skills including the ability to establish relationships with faculty, meet academic expectations, engage in extra-curricular professional development experiences and manage the time and money expected to complete the degree (Benshoff, Cashwell, & Rowell, 2015; Fischer & Zigmond, 1998; Lightfoot & Doerner, 2008; Smallwood, 2004). Counselor education graduate programs also require the acquisition of complex clinical skills, personal growth, and the demonstration of emotional wellbeing (Delaney, 1997; Furr & Carroll, 2003). These secondary expectations can become overwhelming when one considers stressors and demands common among graduate students. While master's students experience challenges pursuing a degree in counseling, learning how to be a professional counselor can result in positive factors such as personal insight, enhanced meaning, and deep life satisfaction (Hayes, 2014). The purpose of the current study is to explore the complexities of the master's student experience in counselor education, using a qualitative method to allow students to voice their lived experiences both in and outside of the classroom.

### **The Graduate Student Experience**

The literature highlights a number of broad areas that students find important in their graduate counseling experience. These include traditional academic preparation, securing employment, receiving supportive mentoring and advising, as well as managing the multiple work/life roles, and fulfilling financial obligations (Doran, Kraha, Marks, Ameen, & El-Ghoroury, 2016; Fischer & Zigmond, 1998; Inman et al., 2011; Mazumdar, Gogoi, Buragohain, & Haloi, 2012; Weidman et al., 2001). Graduate school entails a socialization process requiring students take on new responsibilities and identify with the role and expectations of being a graduate student (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Professional socialization includes investment of personal, professional

development activity, and traditional in and out-of-class academic work (Weidman et al., 2001). Traditional academic knowledge acquisition can be stressful for counseling graduate students, especially real-life scenarios, fieldwork, and research skills (El-Ghoroury, Galpur, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Steele & Rawls, 2014). Graduate students must socialize to the ethics, values, and culture of a profession (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Golde, 1998; Weidman et al., 2001). This socialization can be more complicated than traditional academic learning, especially when student expectations are inconsistent with the realities they later encounter (Golde & Dore, 2001; Wells et al., 2014) or when personal values collide with that of the program or institution (Nyquist et al., 1998).

Obtaining employment after graduation has been identified as a critical but sometimes overlooked aspect of graduate school (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). Writing, communication, and networking skills are a vital part of preparing to obtain employment (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). Faculty should not assume that students who perform well in a program naturally possess the knowledge and skills needed to secure a job. The profession of counseling has readily-available theories and practices to help clients move forward in pursuit of a meaningful career; however faculty often fail to apply these concepts with their own graduate students (Ishler, 2015).

Advising and mentoring is highly important among graduate students in terms of both quantity and quality of service provided (Hesli, Fink, & Duffy, 2003; Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, & Hill, 2003; Taylor & Neimeyer, 2009). In general, mentoring appears to be linked to master's student satisfaction and persistence (Gardner, 2010; Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002). In a study of 1,219 graduate students, Maton et al. (2011) found that mentoring was the strongest predictor of student satisfaction, and thus the potential for students to successfully complete their degree. Similarly, Cohen and Greenberg (2011) reported that graduate students

were more likely to persist through the graduate program if they felt respected by faculty and treated as an important part of the institution. Interactions with faculty in and outside of the classroom and a consistent relationship with one's advisor were also important in retention (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Schlosser, Knox, Moskowitz, and Hill (2003) highlighted the benefit of both the quantity and quality of advisement among psychology graduate students. Supporting those findings, Johnson, Johnson, Kranch, and Zimmerman (1999) found that positive university climate (i.e., respect, trust, high morale, opportunity for input) impacted student performance and development.

In addition to traditional academic expectations, students are often unaware of the personal growth expectations that are key to progression through graduate programs (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Merriman, 2015; Williams, Hayes, & Fauth, 2008). Counseling programs require students to explore their own mental wellbeing and history of crisis and life struggle (Hayes, 2014). Learning basic counseling skills (i.e., empathy, reflection, genuineness, and self-reflection) can be an intensely challenging yet rewarding experience (Coll, Dumas, Trotter, & Freeman, 2013; Hayes, 2014). Personal counseling services and other personal growth activities help students build a foundation of mental health that supports competent and effective practice (Irving & Williams, 1999).

Graduate school roles and responsibilities often compete with personal life responsibilities, causing considerable stress (Mazumdar et al., 2012). For traditional students, this can require navigating developmental tasks of young adulthood, including developing autonomy, independence, and meaningful relationships, while developing an identity consistent with their chosen profession (Committee on the College Student Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1999). Non-traditional students who re-enter the workforce after having had children

or return to school after an extended period of time struggle with challenges typically associated with mid to later-life (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Isaac, Pruitt-Logan, & Upcraft, 1995).

For older or nontraditional students, developmental tasks include managing family and personal responsibilities, caring for dependents, and meeting financial obligations, as well as coping with medical concerns (Brus, 2006; Luzzo, 2000). These tasks can be particularly intense for women with cultural expectations to put the needs of family members first, sometimes resulting in anxiety and depression (Leyva, 2011). The support of family and friends has also been found to moderate the relationship between stress and satisfaction with graduate school (Lawson & Feuhrer, 2001) and are more important than the social support offered by program faculty (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Self-Care practices have been widely cited as an important part of the developing counselor's skill set (Coll et al., 2013; Roach & Young, 2007). Self-care reduces compassion fatigue, improves stamina, and supports ethical practice (Simpson & Falkner, 2013). In many ways, wellness and self-care have "taken center stage" in professional counseling (Myers, Trepal, Ivers, & Wester, 2016, p. 29). Faculty provide little time teaching graduate students how to prioritize academic responsibilities in the context of self-care and other life-roles (McKinzie, Altamura, Burgoon, & Bishop, 2006; Peluso, Carleton, & Asmundson, 2011).

For many graduate students, financial issues are viewed as a source of significant stress (Benshoff, Cashwell, & Rowell, 2015; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Student debt can have direct implications on living conditions and transportation and makes it difficult to engage in recreation and other coping activities that can reduce stress (Doran et al., 2016; El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka, 2012; Shen-Miller et al., 2011). Financial stress related to graduate school can also postpone important life decisions or developmental milestones (Doran et al., 2016).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The challenges faced by counseling students extend well beyond the classroom environment and are therefore not always obvious to counselor educators. Normative developmental challenges, personal growth, self-care, and financial wellbeing are issues that exist within the context of graduate school. If unmet, the unique needs of graduate students can result in attrition (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000), a costly outcome for both the student and institution (Lightfoot & Doerner, 2008; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006). These challenges can impede student's ability to learn which has implications for their work with future clients.

Counseling students are the primary sources of information to help graduate faculty understand what is most important to students as stakeholders in their educational experience (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000). Research has suggested that the student perspective is vital to exploring dynamics underlying student success (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Nesheim et al., 2006; Tinto, 1993), and that student satisfaction can predict achievement and retention (Haworth, 1996; Nerad & Miller, 1996). A majority of the existing research in this area explores the experience of doctoral students and fails to address master's students, particularly in counselor education (Golde & Dore, 2001; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). In response, this study addresses the research question, "What is the experience of master's level counseling students?" The purpose of this study was therefore to more deeply understand both the challenges and rewards of counselor education from the master's student perspective.

## **Method**

This qualitative study explored the experience of master's counseling students using an open approach for inquiry. This provided a description of the complex experience of participants

within counseling master's programs across the country and reduced the researchers' imposition of their own constructs through use of a quantitative study. While most qualitative studies have small sample sizes, a large-scale qualitative approach using a university web-based survey system allowed the researchers to collect a variety of perspectives from counseling students regarding what influenced their experience while minimizing students' discomfort discussing particularly sensitive issues (Protivnak & Foss, 2009).

Large-scale qualitative study can be appropriate when the purpose is broad or exploratory in nature (Dinham & Scott, 1999; Sandelowski, 1995; Sobal, 2001). The authors modeled their study after their large-scale qualitative study of the experience of doctoral students (Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Privacy of participants and efficiency of data collection were also reasons to choose this method. Participants responded to open-ended questions to provide a rich accounting of the experiences. This method permitted the development of themes that were consistently reported throughout the data (Charmaz, 2005). Questions were generated to reflect the researchers' experiences of conversations that were common among master's counseling students and were consistent with similar studies (Cusworth, 2001; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). These questions were: (a) What has been the most difficult part of your graduate studies in counseling? (b) What has been the most helpful part of your graduate studies in counseling? (c) What compromises have you made in your personal life or values in order to achieve your graduate degree in counseling? and (d) What additional information or related supports would be helpful for you in your graduate studies in counseling?

### **Participants**

The researchers solicited participants by using the American Counseling Association (ACA) student member list and two national counseling listservs. The sample consisted of 224

gender and racially diverse students from all five Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) regions: 32.1% (n=72) from the southern region, 27.2% (n=61) from the north central region, 17.0% (n=38) from the north Atlantic region, 10.3% (n=23) from the western region, 10.0% (n=22) from the rocky mountain region, 1.8% (n=4) from Alaska & Hawaii with 1.8% (n=4) non-respondents. Of the participants, 75.9% (n=170) were Caucasian, 6.7% (n=15) were African American, 5.8% (n=13) were Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, 2.2% (n=5) were American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.2% (n=5) were multiracial, 1.3% (n=3) were Asian American, 0.9% (n=1) was Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 0.4% (n=1) was Arab American; and 2.6% (n=6) did not respond. Program type included 72.3% (n=162) in Clinical Mental Health/Community Counseling Programs, 15.6% (n=35) in School Counseling Programs, 6.7% (n=15) in Marriage and Family Counseling Programs, 2.7% (n=6) in Student Affairs/College Counseling Programs, 0.9% (n=2) in Rehabilitation Counseling Programs, and 0.4% (n=1) each enrolled in a separate Addiction Counseling, Career Counseling, and Pastoral Counseling programs. A total of 4.0% (n=9) did not respond. Women composed 77.6% (n=174) of the group. 66.1% (n=148) were enrolled in a program accredited by Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).

### **Researchers**

The researchers have over 25 years of combined experience teaching in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The first author is a counselor educator at a university in New England area. She is a licensed professional counselor who teaches courses within the clinical mental health counseling program and serves as the program coordinator. The second author is a counselor educator at a mid-western university, and a licensed professional clinical counselor and licensed school counselor who serves as the chairperson of the department. As counselor

educators in departmental leadership roles, the authors regularly receive informal feedback from their own master's students as well as program-generated student satisfaction surveys relating to the experiences of master's students. Further, the researchers had conducted a similar qualitative study of the experience of doctoral students (Protivnak & Foss, 2009). This line of inquiry led to numerous formal and informal conversations with other counselor educators about the experience of counseling master's students. Therefore the researchers recognized how their own experiences would inevitably impact their interpretation of the data (Patton, 2002). The researchers obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from their universities and ACA ethical codes were followed.

### **Data Collection**

The researchers randomly selected 2,000 student members of the ACA. The students were sent a letter of invitation to participate and it included a link to a university web-based survey system. The original mailing resulted in a response rate of 9.3% (i.e., 186 respondents and 71 non-deliverable email addresses). Participants who responded and reported that they were doctoral students were excluded from the analysis. The final sample of 224 master's students was achieved after the researchers sent two additional mailings to the sample of ACA student members and an additional announcement on both the Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET) listserv and the Counselor Education Students Nationwide listserv, COUNSGRADS.

### **Data Analysis**

The researchers independently conducted thematic analysis and coded the responses by emerging themes. Data analysis included creating a code list with various types of response data, a line-by-line assignment of codes, followed by data-derived themes using a structured



constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, Patton, 2002). The researchers compared and discussed the themes. The participant data reflected an overlap and repetition of ideas, allowing for the development of meaningful grouping of themes that reflected the experience across participants. Analytic bracketing was used to monitor the personal attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the researchers, to effectively avoid imposing personal sense of meaning on the data analysis (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). Bias was minimized through independent coding. For triangulation, an investigator outside the study independently reviewed the results and discussed with the researcher her perspective regarding how the themes were being coded and grouped based to reflect the data. The participant responses were continuously examined with attention to remaining accurate to the perspectives of the participants.

### **Trustworthiness**

The researchers used strategies to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data. These included constant comparison and taking analytic notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers also used two current master's students to review the data for accurate analysis. Analytic field notes were utilized to increase the credibility of the analysis and the trustworthiness of the results. The researchers continued with data analysis until a thick description of participants' experiences was achieved. An electronic record of the emerging themes was maintained throughout the research process to establish dependability. During the data analysis, the researchers discussed their perceptions about their own experience as students and the experiences of their current master's students. The researchers held the assumptions that the themes of master's students would be similar to the themes that were found in their study of counselor education doctoral students (Protivnak & Foss, 2009). The researchers attempted to

bracket their assumptions and avoid the inclusion of personal biases when identifying emerging themes.

## **Findings**

Analysis of data revealed five distinct themes: (a) academic environment (b) mentoring and advising, (c) personal growth, (d) life role balance (e) and finances.

### **Academic Environment**

Traditional academic work, practical fieldwork, and online work were indicated as important elements in students' perceptions of what is challenging in graduate school. This theme captured thoughts about the structure of coursework, program requirements, preparation for entering the program, development of one's counseling specialty through academic work, and planning for future employment. This theme also included conflict with faculty or students in relation to academics, as well as issues related to workload, professional writing, dress, and religious values.

While some students struggled with the discipline or skills needed to succeed academically, many believed that coursework lacked depth. One student indicated "we write too much and discuss too little" while others stated that some assignments "seem useless... like busy work" and "routine and uncreative." At the same time, students reported appreciation for fieldwork, program flexibility, online opportunities, and faculty expressions of respect for students in the classroom. One participant referred to an impressive depth of learning:

All the self-reflection we are required to do as part of integrating the material we study. I am roughly halfway through my program and have already been changed on a fundamental level, which has changed my relationships and refined the way I approach life in general.

Participants shared a belief that the graduate program should assist in preparing them to obtain a job through professional development/socialization into the field of counseling and connections to employers. A participant remarked about the benefit of being “involved with professional organizations and advocacy groups on a local level” as contributing to their career success following graduation. Participants also desired to understand the realities of a career as a professional counselor:

We would have been assisted greatly if we would have been given a more realistic picture of what actually working as a counselor is like. The counseling field is not simply graduating and then working as a counselor; it is a progression of professional levels of accomplishment and licensure.

There was an expressed need for “openness about the field of mental health counseling and the limitations and roadblocks LMHCs will face once out of graduate school.”

Indeed, counseling licensure emerged as a significant concern in this theme. One participant indicated, “Getting a license was never really stressed or specified in my estimation.” In some cases, coursework did not meet state standards for licensure. Even if coursework was sufficient, some participants felt that programs failed to help students bridge the gap between education and practice, especially in terms of credentialing.

At the same time, one participant remarked on the support he or she felt during this critical transition:

For my final semester, an alumni started a Facebook page in which all counseling students from our University can join. It has been helpful the last half of my final semester in that it provides information about loan forgiveness, upcoming counseling

skills/techniques/therapies, seminars/training and other useful information for counselors.

[This has been a] great way to network.

Another participant shared that “when finishing my program, it would have been helpful to have a collaborative discussion providing suggestions on how to go about pursuing further aspirations, such as PhD, licensure, [and] requirements for working with specific clientele.”

Other students experienced conflict between the program and religious beliefs and practices. One participant reported feeling concerned about the religious affiliation of the university and a lack of diversity among students. Conversely, students with strong religious affiliation did not always feel supported:

There have been numerous negative comments regarding Christianity/Christians in particular classes (certainly not in most). I attempted to respond to these comments but quickly felt that it was not welcomed by the instructor. So, I just sucked it up and went along. I felt you could have any perspective on a situation except a Christian perspective, again, in some classes. In these situations, I felt outside of the blanket of diversity, but gained the perspective of someone in a minority.

In addition, one participant struggled with program scheduling that did not permit them to participate in a religious holiday or other activities related to their faith tradition. One participant indicated that the conflict forced their choice to prioritize graduate school over faith practices:

I am a practicing Catholic, and I have had class during Holy Thursday and Good Friday, which are very special holy days in the Church. Since my classes were intensive, if I missed a class, I would be missing a lot of work, so I have had to choose school over my faith life. Also, I often feel discriminated against for my traditional religious views, and I

don't feel like my religion is as tolerated as other lifestyles and beliefs. I feel like I can't speak up about where I stand on issues for fear of getting kicked out of the program.

### **Mentoring and Advising**

The theme of mentoring and advising referred to the supportive relationships of the participants with faculty and peers. Personal growth was linked to good mentoring: “The faculty who have challenged me to think” and “approachable faculty that is willing to mentor and offer support.” Participants valued the support provided by faculty: “my faculty advisor is amazing. She is willing to help even when she is not the professor teaching the class.” Faculty investment in student growth was clearly valued by the students. One participant indicated “the faculty is amazing and most of them show a definite interest in my success” and other stating “most helpful part of my program has been having such excellent professors who went out of their way to assist me and my classmates.”

On the other hand, others had difficulty with advising: “The most difficult part has been my relationship with my advisor who is difficult to deal with and does not appear to be understanding.” Another participant lamented being assigned “a faculty advisor who is very much hands-off related to assisting me in course planning. I’ve felt very much along trying to figure out how to manage course profession and future career planning.” Others stated a desire for “a more aggressive approach by the faculty advisors to be pro-student, assisting the students to both schedule and plan needed coursework as well as preparing for post graduate experiences” and “a mentoring program would be incredibly helpful.” Another participant suggested “removing professors who don’t care and are just phoning it in until retirement.”

In spite of the challenges of poor advisement, some participants adapted positively: “My advisor was notoriously not available. This was frustrating in the beginning, however I quickly

learned that the entire faculty was very approachable and I received excellent advising from several faculty.” Similarly, one student expressed a desire for “more faculty and/or student mentoring... this is good/bad in that having the freedom I did created not only a space where I felt lost and unsupported – but also built initiative and resiliency.”

Peer mentoring was also repeatedly noted as valuable, for example, “I feel supported and cared for by the people I have met in school” and the value of “having very supportive classmates who go out of their way to help one another.” A participant stated, “My relationship with the other students in the program has been invaluable. Everyone is so supportive and caring toward one another and we all encourage and support each other through the program.” In contrast, other students reported that they relied on peer support for guidance: “We had to navigate the system by ourselves. There was almost nonexistent faculty advising.”

### **Personal Growth**

The theme of personal growth referred to students’ development of personal reflection, confidence, and compassion. Participants remarked on the personal work that often accompanies counseling graduate school: “My own personal growth and development has been incredibly rewarding. I feel that my own work and challenges have given me an incredible amount of insight and resiliency. I feel very lucky to continue to work in such a challenging field.”

Participants were surprised by the amount of personal growth involved in an academic program: “At the beginning, I was not expecting the amount of personal growth I was going to go through. This has been somewhat difficult.” Similarly another participant shared, “the most difficult part has been doing my own self-work, as required by the program. Self-work is hard and it takes a lot of effort to make changes.” Other participants echoed those remarks, “the most helpful part has been my own self-growth: if one engages fully with the course material, it’s like

being in full-time self-therapy.” Another participant stated, “I have spent a lot of time re-inventing myself. A new identity requires reevaluating everything.” One participant remarked, “Gaining self-awareness, while incredibly beneficial, has been a difficult process. Exposing myself to peers and remaining genuine was hard in the beginning of the program.”

Personal development also extended well beyond the classroom: “Transformation. I am less concerned about what others think about me. I am walking my own path and, regardless of the lack of any outward success I am happy to be forging my own unique path.” Lastly, participants linked personal growth with future practice: “My program in general just helped me be more aware of myself and what I need to work on...before I could help others.” Another stated that through “all of the required introspection...my levels of understanding and compassion rising commensurately, both for myself and others.” Similarly development both within themselves and applied to their relationships was an experience of being a counseling student:

The most helpful part has been the slow process of discovering myself through applying my studies to myself. I have learned a great deal about myself and, in turn, open up to being able to better empathize with the people I will be helping.

### **Life-Role Balance**

The theme of life-role balance referred to parenting, partner relationship issues, and social connections. The theme also included postponement of developmental decisions and the impact of graduate school on work performance. In this theme, participants reported problems caring for their own wellness needs including health care, social activities, and spiritual interests.

Tasks and activities related to parenting were frequently sacrificed for graduate school responsibilities:

The most difficult part was trying to fit in school, work, and family – husband, four children, five grandchildren, two parents dying, taking care of now widowed father-in-law who has dementia, and son-in-law going to Iraq, helping daughter with their children on the weekends. I ended up quitting my job, which then brought financial hardship.

Similarly, one participant stated, “(I) compromised my...family life in regards to not being there during milestones of my child.” Similarly, a participant said, “ I have also missed out on a lot of family time and time with my disabled son over the last 5 years. Another stated, “I have sacrificed time with my children. This is unavoidable, and my choice. It was worth it. I hope.” Other social connections were also negatively impacted by graduate school: “I am unable to spend the amount of time I would like to with my family and friends. I have lost friends who don’t understand the time and dedication necessary for graduate school.” There were multiple examples of serious relationship strain. One stated, “I ended a serious romantic relationship to complete my degree when it became obvious that I was not going to have support from my partner. I have placed school as my number one priority.” Sadly, another student shared, “My marriage has been pretty much destroyed. What started out as something that was agreed on, ended up being too much.”

Developmental tasks were also delayed. One participant reported that she “gave up dating.” Graduate school also impacted work performance: “Balancing (midnight shift) full-time job with school/homework/practicum/internship. My full-time job also requires my presence on random days/hours throughout the day, which interrupted my sleep. On top of that I was dealing with a medical ailment.”



Specific self-care strategies and techniques were shared by participants, such as incorporation of leisure activities and exercise, as well as ways of coping with illness, stress, loss of motivation and burnout. Participants expressed the need for personal time and reported on experiences of attending counseling. Unfortunately, it appeared that some participants compromised self-care in an effort to meet the demands of their programs. One participant indicated that a primary challenge was “managing to fit self-care into an already packed schedule. Often self-care would be left out.”

For some students, the profession’s emphasis on self-care was beneficial. One participant indicated: “The most helpful part of my studies was being around peers and faculty that understood the emotional, mental, and academic stress I was going through.” It appears that the pressure of graduate school helped some participants to learn “about stress-reducing techniques like meditation, deep breathing, muscle relaxation and employing them.” Another participant further suggested “a mandatory self-care course for during and after graduate school at least once a year, to ensure that all students have a good understanding of healthy self-care.” A number of participants emphasized the need for students to have personal counseling, calling for a “resource for finding recommended and reputable mental health professionals in our area that cater to graduate students.”

One participant stated, “I think therapy for students should be provided and mandatory.”

## **Finances**

Finances appeared to have a significant impact on the graduate student experience for many participants. Elements within this theme included tuition, living costs, savings, and commuting costs. Participants remarked their frustration with lack of funding, “I am in debt up to my eyeballs”, “I have exhausted my savings”, and “I worry about paying the loans back with

the low salary in this field.” Similarly other stated, “getting this degree has been brutal, and it will be years before my wife and I can pay off our student loans to buy a home and start a family.”

Participants indicated that student loans and graduate assistantships were insufficient in helping them meet financial needs. Many participants reported exhausting savings and taking on financial burdens that required working excessively to make ends meet during school, and anxiety about recouping losses after graduation:

Balancing (midnight shift) full-time job with school, homework, practicum, [and] internship. My full-time job also requires my presence on random days/hours throughout the day, which interrupted my sleep. On top of that I was dealing with a medical ailment, which I had prior to starting the graduate program. Finally, the thought of having to pay back all the loans that I borrowed.

The sacrifices students made in relation to finances were remarkable. One stated, “I had to work full time and go to school full time to make ends meet, that added a lot of stress to my life.” Sacrifices included moving in with family, bypassing vacations, working multiple jobs or leaving lucrative careers: `

I gave up a 6 figure job to pursue this as a career, not to mention, benefits, bonuses ... because this is what I feel I am called to do... I am a midlife career changer who is now in debt to the tune of 45,000.”

In addition, relationships appeared to suffer due to financial burdens. One participant stated, “I went significantly into debt. It put strain on my relationship with my spouse.”

Other participant shared the sequence of associated financial difficulties that contributed to other problems:

I was unable to get sufficient loans and worked out a living arrangement that in the end fell through. The cascading events put me over \$10,000 in credit card debt, without a car (it was stolen), without a home, and in a tumultuous relationship.

Participants suggested in multiple ways that financial assistance such as scholarships and grants and graduate assistantships would have been helpful. One participant indicated that the program prohibited students from full time employment, while another found unpaid internships particularly challenging. For many participants, obligations that interfered with their focus on their program such as paying for their mortgage, transportation, childcare, and eldercare complicated graduate studies in ways that were not always understood by the program faculty.

### **Discussion**

This study provides master's students' perspective regarding the aspects of the graduate counseling student experience, including both challenges and rewards. Participants provided large amount of data that contributed to the development of the five themes that support and expand upon prior findings in the literature. While many participants valued the high degree of faculty expertise and meaningful challenges in the classroom, a number of participants in this study described their coursework and counseling program as lacking rigor. Previous research supports the perspective that students are more likely to persist if they feel that they matter, and if excellence is expected and then recognized (Schlossberg & Warren, 1985).

Participants in this study reported that the experience participating in fieldwork was significant in their graduate school experience. This finding reflects the power of integrative learning experiences wherein students learn to apply theory to practice. Participants described a variety of experiential "doing-centered learning" that was beneficial to their graduate school experience (Conrad, Duren, & Haworth, 1998, p. 71) is also critical in evaluating learning outcomes in counselor education (Furr & Carroll, 2003).

Related to their academic training, specifically towards the end of their programs, participants had concerns about understanding the licensure process, and finding employment after graduation. It is important that students are assisted with the process of obtaining licensure and preparing to be competitive in the job market. For example, students can learn the relative strengths and weaknesses of a license in a particular geographical region or employment setting and how that would impact a student's marketability as a professional counselor.

Participants repeatedly referred to the importance of faculty to demonstrate respect for students' perspectives in the classroom. Indeed, graduate counseling students – traditional and non-traditional students - have a variety of life experiences relevant to counselor education. Counselor educators should model respect for the experiences, skills, and perspective that master's students bring to the classroom, as these experiences can inform and enrich classroom discussion. In addition, counseling program administrators should consider the benefits of program flexibility and online opportunities as they were reported to be helpful for participants. Some students indicated that a master's degree would not be possible without program accommodations for the needs of students with considerable work and family responsibilities.

It was surprising that references to faculty and advisement did not include any aspect of the overall department climate (i.e., departmental leadership, conflict between faculty, interdisciplinary competition for resources). Department climate, including environmental safety, and developing a culture of caring and respect, has been linked to doctoral student satisfaction (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Brus, 2006; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Veilleux, January, Vanderveen, Reddy, & Klonoff, 2012). It is possible that master's students' reduced time spent within a department could shield them from broader aspects of the department that can be problematic.

In this study, participants often referred to the help and encouragement of graduate program classmates and mentors. This is consistent with other studies showing the relationships with classmates as a factor in creating a more positive graduate school experience (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Haskins et al., 2013). Indeed in comparison with other disciplines, students in counselor education programs can have unique opportunities to connect with other students more authentically through counseling role plays and pertinent self-disclosure related to counseling. Mentoring was often referenced as helpful whereas poor advisement had the potential for causing great difficulty. These supportive relationships are helpful for graduate students to cope with stress (Clark, Murdock, & Koetting, 2009).

Participants in the current study found personal reflection, growing confidence, and increased compassion as important aspects of their training. Completing a master's program often involves a challenging personal transformation that often results in personal growth and development (Bruss & Kopala, 1993). For counselors, self-awareness is particularly important for practice (Williams, Hayes, & Fauth, 2008). Similar to some of the participants in this study, personal counseling and other wellness strategies appeared to be beneficial for overall functioning and self-efficacy (Hermon & Hazler, 1999; Prosek, Holm, & Daly, 2013; Roach & Young, 2007). This is consistent with a study by Ruggerio, Rabino, Richards, and Martin (2013) who found that students who experienced increased self-knowledge and compassion also had increased levels of counseling self-efficacy.

Issues outside of the graduate program impact students' graduate school experience (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Findings suggested that parenting concerns, partner relationship issues, financial concerns, and social connections were particularly challenging. Graduate student persistence was reported to be higher in students with supportive partners, children, and parents

(Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). The strength of the relationships with family is significant to counseling students as it can reduce stress (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Roach & Young, 2007) and promote stamina in practice post-graduation (Freadling & Foss-Kelly, 2014). Participant's remarks about their perceived need to postpone developmental decisions were a unique finding, as it is not often discussed in the literature.

Consistent with Protivnak & Foss (2009) study of counselor education doctoral students, master's participants also compromised self-care. Promotion of wellness in counselor education is important in avoiding impairment and maintaining stamina (Roach & Young, 2007). For example, activities like meditation have been found to help clinicians self-nurture, manage stress, and maintain social connectedness (Boellinghaus, Jones, & Hutton, 2013). Yoga, meditation, and qigong have also been used in counselor education resulting in beneficial personal and professional outcomes (Christopher, Christopher & Dunnagan, 2006). Other mindfulness practices have been recommended for increasing student self-efficacy in counseling practice (Greason & Cashwell, 2011). It is useful to consider the types of activities that could be incorporated into the academic coursework, encouraged by faculty advisors, or led by peers through student organizations such as Chi Sigma Iota.

Given the rising cost of tuition and current economic stressors, it is not surprising that financial pressures were commonly noted as a significant concern among study participants. The stress of financial issues was similar to a study of graduate psychology students wherein finances and debt were highly rated as a significant stressor, second only to academic coursework (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Other research by Hyun, Quinn, Madon and Lustig (2006) suggested that graduate students' financial needs were relevant to their mental health. Unfortunately, faculty are often unaware or dismissive of the financial issues of their graduate students.

## **Implications for Counselor Educators**

The results of this study lead to a number of implications for improving counselor education, from the perspective of master's students. The perception of the students can be helpful for counselor educators to understand the factors that impact graduate counseling students. Student success completing the program and obtaining employment is impacted by both personal factors and their experiences with the counseling program (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

Upon first contact with the Counseling program faculty, students would benefit from information regarding funding opportunities within the program and university (Protivnak & Yensel, 2017). Counselor educators can advocate for greater financial support for graduate students by developing new graduate assistantships and working with alumni to develop new scholarship. Counseling program can host trainings on financial success strategies while students are enrolled in graduate school and distribute information options for managing student loan debt after graduation (i.e., loan forgiveness for service in high need and underserved areas).

Students nearing graduation are often anxious about job prospects and early career decisions. Discussions about employment should begin early in the program. Addressing these issues during the last semester of internship can be too late to reduce anxiety and sufficiently prepare students. Early in the program, students should identify personal career goals and create a plan for achieving those goals. In this way, counseling students can leave the program with more direction, confidence, and a competitive edge in the job search process. Counselor educators can integrate information about credentialing into the entire curriculum so that students have clear expectations about how they will transition into the workforce.

Physical and mental health related issues clearly impact graduate counseling student experiences. Counselor educators or advanced counseling students (i.e., doctoral students) can provide workshops, resources or referrals related to making healthier life choices, effectively managing time, increasing professional stamina, and advocating for oneself (Roach & Young, 2007). To help address work-life balance, counselor educators can help students or advisees clarify values and prioritize life roles (Newgent & Fender-Scarr, 1999). Counselor educators can also model appropriate work-life balance and communicate their commitment to personal development outside of their professional role (i.e., not sending or responding to emails at 2 a.m.). In addition, counseling programs could aim toward a family-affirming culture where opportunities for the involvement of families/partners are encouraged, and the student's sources of support are blended, extended, and strengthened.

To bolster mentoring and advising, counselor educators can proactively outreach to students rather than waiting for students to come to them. Administrators within a counseling program (i.e., program director, department chair) should regularly monitor all students to identify those who are disconnected or do not have proper mentorship (Hazler & Carney, 1993) and then provide advising or assign them to another faculty who will provide mentorship. Advanced students or student organization leaders can help with student outreach through formal mentoring programs, social events, or learning opportunities that build connection and community within the program.

Counseling programs encourage students to become reflective practitioners who can integrate and apply complex knowledge and skills within their own value system and personal counseling style (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Schon, 1983). It is often through supportive faculty relationships that students can develop a deeper appreciation for the work of counseling and



therefore increasingly identify as a professional counselor. Counselor educators can create opportunities for reflection and personal growth, emphasizing the intrinsically rewarding aspects of the counseling program (i.e., greater insight, self-knowledge). For example, the program orientation might include a student self-assessment of self-care and healthy personal adjustment, to set the stage for a self-reflective journey through the graduate program (Ruggiero et al., 2013). The formal orientation and other co-curricular supports can help students clarify roles, processes, and expectations to help students successfully transition to the graduate counseling student role (Hesli, Fink, & Duffy, 2003).

Although this study highlights the perceptions of master's counseling graduate students experience, it is not without limitations. The qualitative approach provided an opportunity for students to voice their perspectives; however it became apparent during data analysis that the broad nature of the questions introduced challenges in distilling the wide variety of experiences into common themes. Future research should refine questions to provide more focus. Researchers could extend the research questions by asking not just what was beneficial for the experience, but how it specifically benefited the student. In addition, internet-based participant solicitation using membership and listservs can result in a participant group that is more motivated or engaged in extra-curricular activities (i.e., because all participants were ACA members or members on a counseling listserv). In this way, the important voices of master's students who were disengaged or disaffected might not be included in the data. Future research should continue to explore issues important to students through quantitative studies to examine issues related to mentoring and advising with more specificity – such as how student and faculty perceptions differed or how counselor educators responded to such student issues or concerns.

Counseling master's students are faced with a variety of challenges. The themes of this

study – academic environment (b) mentoring and advising, (c) personal growth, (d) life role balance, and (e) finances provide a narrative of the experience of master’s students in counseling, contribute to the counselor education research base, and provide issues for counselor educators to consider when advising, teaching, and leading within their counselor education programs. To continue to improve counselor preparation, counselor educators have an obligation to hear, evaluate, and respond to the experiences voiced by our master’s students.

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