Article

Culturally Responsive Gatekeeping Practices in Counselor Education

Jolie Ziomek-Daigle
Deryl F. Bailey

University of Georgia

This article summarizes findings related to a qualitative study involving eight counselor educators who taught in CACREP-accredited programs in the southeast region of the United States. Data analysis revealed an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices and interwoven themes related to diversity and multiculturalism. This article presents each phase of the gatekeeping process and includes an emphasis on multiculturalism. In addition, suggestions regarding how this process pertains to counselor education will be made as well as recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, CACREP, counselor education, gatekeeping

Much of the attention given to multicultural counseling has been based on the realization that we are fast becoming a multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual society (Sue & Sue, 2002). Multicultural counseling has evolved over the last decade to include multicultural competencies (Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez, & Stadler, 1996) and advocacy competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003) endorsed by the American Counseling Association (ACA). Multicultural competence has been further researched in regards to clinical supervision (Fukuyama, 1994; Toporek, Ortega-Villalobos, & Pope-Davis, 2004). Some attention has been given to the recruitment (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Lott, 2005) and retention (Rogers & Molina, 2006) of graduate students of color. However, the research is sparse regarding how counselor educators can utilize culturally responsive practices during important and challenging times such as recruitment, retention, and remediation.

Gatekeeping may be used as an umbrella term for practices related to recruitment, retention, and remediation. Gatekeeping has been defined as the process whereby a counselor education program intervenes when candidates and students are not equipped with the requisite knowledge, skills, and values for professional practice (Ziomek-Daigle, in press). A recent qualitative investigation revealed an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices in counselor education (Ziomek-Daigle, in press). The theory includes themes related to a four-phase gatekeeping process or decision points that includes pre-admission screening (recruitment), post-admission screening (retention), remediation, and remediation outcome. While the findings of this investigation are forthcoming, space limitations precluded discussing cultural responsiveness in matters of gatekeeping in sufficient depth to adequately portray its significance. Therefore, the goals of this article are to present culturally responsive practices in matters of gatekeeping and to raise awareness of the cultural implications when doing so.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Jolie Ziomek-Daigle, Department of Counseling and Human Development Services, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602. Phone: (706) 542-4106 Fax: (706) 542-1409
Multicultural Awareness in Student Impairment, Incompetence, and Gatekeeping

It is imperative to identify, understand, and conceptualize student impairment and incompetence within a multicultural framework (Forrest, Elman, Gizara, & Vacha-Haase, 1999). The influences of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, education, and disability need to be further explored in relation to the evaluation of impairment and incompetence. Some researchers have noted that diversity is a complicated issue when assessing student impairment and that ethnicity differences can be viewed as a hindrance to effectively dealing with an impaired student (Gizara, 1997; Vacha-Haase, 1995).

Forrest et al. (1999) expressed their surprise to find “very little written about the effects of race, gender, and other demographic variables on the identification and conceptualization of student impairment” (p. 670). They also speculated about the potential influences of multicultural issues in regards to understanding impairment and suggested that student behaviors that are questionable may overlap with the cultural experiences, religious beliefs, or gender socialization of students. Often times, these experiences and beliefs are not easily identified, understood, or reversible. Therefore, students might be more open to acknowledging their limitations if cultural responsiveness is inherent in the identification of inadequacies and in the development of remediation plans. Further, there may be a certain level of anxiety when discussing potential diversity concerns for both the faculty member and student. Accordingly, it is necessary that literature on multicultural competencies (Arrendondo, et al., 1996) be reviewed and used in gaining insight into how culture may intersect with determining incompetence and impairment.

Method

Qualitative Inquiry

Researchers have attested to the “goodness of fit” of qualitative methodology with the field of counseling and counselor education (Merchant, 1997). Because naturalistic inquiry is also suited for exploratory research about which little is known, qualitative methodology, in particular, grounded theory, is appropriate for use when gathering information and constructing a theoretical explanation of a phenomena resulting from participants’ lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Forrest (1999) noted that qualitative methods would be useful for studying impairment issues and that grounded theory methods are especially appropriate in developing theoretical explanations about impairment issues. Because research on cultural responsiveness in gatekeeping is sparse and because grounded theory procedures offer a means to understand unknown phenomena, grounded theory procedures were utilized.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative research to select a sample based on knowledge or experience of the group and participants are selected because they possess common characteristics and have the potential to offer information that directly pertains to the purpose of the investigation at hand and help the theory form (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Consequently, criteria for participation in this study included being a counselor educator who was currently teaching in master’s-level CACREP-accredited programs, thus ensuring compatibility among standards and training.

All program coordinators in CACREP-accredited master’s programs in the south east region of the United States were contacted via electronic mail and asked to participate in the study. Fifteen program coordinators or their designees responded with interest. Of these 15, eight were eventually chosen to take part in this research based on their demographic information and availability for in-person interviews at a regional conference. A letter and consent form that detailed the investigation, discussed possible risks to participants, and requested a participant signature to attest to their
willingness to take part in this study were sent via ground mail.

Of the eight participants who volunteered, five were female and three were male. Six of the participants were Caucasian, one was African-American, and one was Asian. All eight participants held doctoral degrees in counselor education and were employed as full-time faculty members in CACREP-accredited master’s-level counseling programs. Their experience ranged from 3-14 years as counselor educators and from 6-20 years as counselors. Additionally, participants served as academic advisors for between 5 and 30 students each semester. Six participants reported teaching a cross cultural course; four of these six participants taught a cross cultural course once per academic year.

Data Collection

All eight of the participants who volunteered for this study were given pseudonyms and participated in an initial face-to-face interview that lasted 60-90 minutes that were conducted at a regional counselor education conference. All interviews were taped and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Initial interview questions were broad and general in order to elicit participants’ perceptions of cultural considerations in gatekeeping as well as their experiences. These questions were formed based on a review of literature pertaining to gatekeeping and issues of diversity in student selection, retention and remediation.

Participants’ responses to initial questions were analyzed and several initial themes emerged. Thus, the second round of interviews was scheduled with all eight of the participants involved in this study. Because participants were located in various states, electronic mail was utilized to disseminate questions that were designed to clarify and expand upon initial themes. Follow-up interview questions were also designed to allow for the emergence of new themes (Glesne, 1999). Analysis of data from the second round of interviews supported an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices and interwoven themes related to diversity and multiculturalism. Therefore, participants were asked during the third and final round of interviews to confirm or elaborate on the theory developed. As in the second round of interviews, email communication was utilized to solicit participants’ responses and only six of the eight chose to participate in the final round of data collection. Fortunately, the majority of the conceptual framework was developed after the first round of interviews in which all eight participants were interviewed.

Data Analysis

After each round of interviews, a series of coding procedures (open, axial, and selective) were utilized to identify themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding involved several readings of the transcripts that included participants’ word-for-word responses to initial interviews. After reviewing transcripts several times, common words, phrases, and meanings were separated into a series of themes, which were then categorized into properties according to the meanings they possessed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, axial coding was used to link themes and add depth to the descriptions of the categories and properties that emerged through open coding. Finally, selective coding was incorporated to organize categories around a central concept or core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As a result of these coding procedures, the categories were integrated to build a theoretical framework which resulted in an emergent theory of gatekeeping practices in counselor education and inter-related themes of diversity and multiculturalism.

Researcher’s Subjectivity and Triangulation Procedures

Throughout this investigation, several strategies were utilized to detect researcher biases or subjectivity. In particular, triangulation procedures were employed to contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings from this investigation and strengthen the grounding of theory (Glesne, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Steps to ensure the trustworthiness of results as they emerged from this investigation or the "slices of data" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 55) included a reflective journal, documents reviews,
member checks, and consultation with a peer debriefer. The primary author kept a reflective journal whereby detailed observations (e.g. incongruity of participant verbals and nonverbals or incongruity of triangulated data) were recorded as they occurred throughout the duration of data collection and analysis. Pertinent documents (e.g. application materials, student handbooks, website information) were collected and reviewed to provide additional sources of credible information and complemented the participants’ practices by verifying the accuracy of the information obtained in the interviews. The primary author conducted member checking during the third round of data collection which involved sharing transcripts, analytical thoughts, and interpretations with participants to ensure that ideas were recorded and represented accurately (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Member checking also confirmed that all participants supported the data representation. The peer debriefer, a counselor educator with experience in conducting qualitative research, reviewed and confirmed the integrity of the progress of this research, including all data collection and analyses procedures as well as the reflective journal.

**Results**

Based on analysis of participants’ responses, information obtained during the three rounds of interviews produced themes related to a process of gatekeeping that included four phases (pre-admission screening, post-admission screening, remediation plan, and remediation outcome). Cultural responsiveness was a theme that was interwoven throughout each phase. For the purposes of this research, cultural responsiveness in gatekeeping is defined as participants’ knowledge and skills when recruiting, retaining, and remediating students for issues related to diversity and multiculturalism.

**Pre-Admission Screening- Recruitment and Selection**

Based on participants’ responses and a review of program documents regarding diversity, the pre-admission phase heavily emphasized the recruitment and selection of candidates of color. Recruitment strategies were offered and discussed along with details on how students of color were selected to interview and offered admission.

Participants commented that ACA ethical codes (ACA, 2005) and CACREP standards (CACREP, 2000) that address diversity play a role in the recruitment and selection of applicants of color. A participant, Wendy, discussed her program’s vision in the recruitment and selection of minority applicants. “We are encouraged to promote acceptance of visible and non-visible students of color. We reach out to these groups and make opportunities available to meet and discuss our program. We hope to appeal to them and show that we are seeking diversity.” One participant, Alan, expressed a commitment to recruiting a diverse faculty and student body, “If diverse populations are not represented within the faculty and student body, then we are likely to act from a culturally encapsulated position.” Alan’s experience in accordance with *ACA’s Code of Ethics*, specifically F.11.a, that mandates counselor educators to be committed to recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty.

Some participants reflected on their struggle with the recruitment of diverse students based on their geographical location. Wendy discussed how her program heavily recruits from the undergraduate level at her institution but also at a neighboring historically Black college/university (HBCU) to increase the enrollment of students of color, “Because we have difficulty recruiting and retaining racially diverse students due to our rural location and lack of ethnic diversity, we hold informational seminars for undergraduates in hopes they will stay at their home institution and for our near-by HBCU.” Programs who have been identified as making considerable efforts to attract and retain students of color reported establishing relationships and linkages with historical institutions of color for the purpose of creating a pipeline of students (Rogers & Molina, 2006).

The selection of students included the review of application materials, interview, and admission offer. Nedra shared her experience regarding her program’s procedures, “We are a bit more
lax on GPA and GRE requirements with some diverse student groups. We know that the GRE is a culturally insensitive measure of knowledge. Therefore, we make some allowances based on our understandings but, at the same time, do not accept someone based on the box that is checked. We want well-rounded students and that can include various attributes.” This supports Bowen and Bok’s (1998) charge that thoughtful admission policies consider many factors in assessing student potential including test scores, grades, recommendation letters, interpersonal skills, socioeconomic status, geographic location, leadership potential, and the projected class composition as a whole.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed faculty and current students of color must be visibly present during the interview. Nate reflects on his involvement during interviews, “At times, I do feel like the token faculty of color at my institution. But, I know how important it was for me to see my color in my professors and supervisors. So, I make it a point to be visible on interview day and at other times during the year and to have my current students of color involved also.” This is in accordance with several author’s assertion to have diverse candidates experience positive interactions with faculty and students of color in hopes of future mentorship (Lott, 2005; Rogers & Molina; 2006; Speight, Thomas, Kennel, & Anderson, 1995).

Participants also discussed that admission offers have to be alluring. Helen commented on how she is noticing the increase in financial packages, “It seems that in the last few years, we have lost some diverse candidates to other programs that were offering high paying assistantships and tuition waivers. We communicated this to our provost. But, even though our university at large wants students of color enrolled in graduate programs, we are still not allocated funds to make these sorts of offers.” All of the programs reported as making strides in recruiting and retaining persons of color provide some type of financial aid package that ranged from full tuition waivers for the duration of the graduate program to partial funding (Rogers & Molina, 2006).

Post-Admission Screening- Student

Development, Coursework, and Retention

The gatekeeping process also entails post-admission procedures which assessed student development through coursework and interpersonal interactions. One participant, Nancy, discussed her multicultural course, “My students receive a broad range of grades in the multicultural course as they [grades] reflect their [students] current knowledge and competence regarding multiculturalism. The grades truly range from A’s to C’s.” Cultural beliefs and attitudes are often revealed during interpersonal interactions. Helen described how students’ cultural beliefs are revealed during informal discussions and that there are times when faculty members must intervene, “Students have quoted the Bible in their papers, talked about God during mock counseling sessions, and have hinted toward intolerance during general discussions. I provide this feedback and work with students in hopes of broadening their minds in trying to move them from a dualistic way of thinking to a relativistic one.”

This phase also includes the implementation and execution of program policies and practices related to cultural responsiveness. Another participant, Nate, discussed his programs’ practices related to diversity, “We regularly assess our policies and practices to ensure that we are being as proactive and supportive of diversity as possible. We also engage our students in this process and ask for regular, anonymous feedback to assist us.” Nate continued and discussed his program’s core beliefs on internship placements, “We train our students for work in diverse settings. If they choose a placement with an obvious clientele of White, upper class families, then I question their [students] dedication to social justice and diversity.” Nate’s expectation is aligned with Ponterotto's (1995) assertion that internship students should work with a clientele that is at least 30% of color. Ponterotto also stated that faculty, students, and program support staff should also comprise 30% representation of color or critical mass (see also Green, 1988).

Some participants indicated that while knowledge is being obtained through coursework and experiences, the development of multicultural
competence should also be occurring during this time. For example, Stacy stated, “Valuing and respecting diversity are components of many of our core courses, so we are able to see development in this area throughout the duration that students are with us. I expect to see growth from coursework through internship. If students were not demonstrating multicultural competence while completing their field placements, then I would pursue remediation in this area.” Another layer of Stacy’s comment addresses embedding multiculturalism in several core courses. Linking multiculturalism to core courses sends a powerful message that multiculturalism is central to the training of counselors (Ponterotto, 1995; Ponterotto, Alexander & Grieger, 1995; Rogers & Molina, 2006). This practice is also in accordance with ACA’s Code of Ethics, specifically F.11.c, that states that counselor educators actively infuse multicultural competency in training and supervision practices.

Remediation Plan- Culturally Responsive and Focused

Most participants agreed that remediation that is culturally focused may include requiring students to enroll in an additional (advanced) multicultural class or directed study, attend additional supervision sessions, participate in cultural immersion experiences, and complete a special project related to diversity with a targeted population. In regards to requiring students to attend additional supervision sessions, Frank shared his experience, “We remediated a student of color as there were some disagreements between this student and a white faculty member during one-on-one supervision. We suggested that the student meet with a faculty member of color in order to increase our level of support.”

However, some participants raised concerns regarding the gatekeeping function and the “clashing” of culture. One participant, Nate, described his thoughts, “Gatekeeping issues with a student may be due to cultural differences. A student should not be blamed for behaviors which are culturally based. However, if a behavior is not acceptable and in accordance with established standards of conduct, then the student needs to be oriented as to why the behavior is unacceptable. Compromise needs to be achieved in cases where differences are value based.” In regards to Nate’s experience, Forrest et al. (1999) raised concerns about the potential influences of multicultural issues on gatekeeping. They concluded that students’ inappropriate behaviors may overlap with their cultural experiences, gender socialization, or religious beliefs, and that these experiences are not easily reversible. Therefore, it is imperative, as Nate stated, to practice cultural sensitivity when identifying behaviors and developing remediation plans.

Remediation Outcome- Cultural Efficacy

Participants remarked on the difficulty in assessing remediation in terms of multicultural competence. One participant in particular, Fred, discussed his ambivalent feelings regarding gatekeeping for multicultural issues, “I think it is best to have remediation plans for students who are struggling with diversity issues. However, I wonder how effective they can be as views on culture are formed early in life and are difficult to change.”

Alternatively, some participants witnessed multicultural development with the aid of remediation plans and focused attention in this area. Stacy felt that her students benefited from remediation for multicultural concerns, “It is not easy to sit with a student and initiate a discussion on culture are formed early in life and are difficult to change.”

Discussion

Based on analysis of the data, a theory of gatekeeping emerged along with interwoven themes of diversity and multiculturalism. During the pre-admission screening phase, emphasis was placed on the recruitment and selection of candidates of color. Several strategies were present such as establishing relationships and linkages with the undergraduate institutions and HBCU’s. Cultural considerations should be apparent in considerate admissions policies that include several factors and characteristics. Additionally, the interview process
should include specific questions related to diversity for candidates to answer in an individual or group process or in a writing sample. This will send a message that the program values diversity. It is attractive for candidates of color to see diversity in faculty and the current student body and interact with individuals of color. Finally, in order to recruit and retain students of color and compete with other programs, an attractive admissions offer should be made that includes an assistantship and/or tuition waiver. The post-admission screening phase included coursework and field experiences focused on diversity. Gaining multicultural competence was seen as a process that occurred throughout the academic and interpersonal development of a student’s matriculation. Additionally, embedding diversity in all coursework is continuing to send a message that diversity is valued.

Developing a remediation plan related to increasing cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills entails students enrolling in additional or advanced multicultural courses, completing focused projects or directed studies, immersion experiences, or attending additional supervision. Similarly, it was also noted that if remediation is necessary that a checks and balances needs to present to ensure that the remediation is not culturally biased. Remediation outcome was a final theme suggested. Assessing remediation related to diversity may prove difficult as cultural biases are formed early in life. However, it was suggested that openly communicating with students and having “those tough conversations” increases their awareness and learning.

Due to the qualitative inquiry of this investigation, a theory of gatekeeping emerged including interwoven themes of diversity and multiculturalism. Some of these findings are new to the literature while others are aligned with previous research (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Forrest et al., 1999; Lott, 2005; Ponterotto, 1995; Ponterotto, Alexander, & Grieger, 1995; Rogers & Molina, 2006; Speight, Thomas, Kennel, & Anderson, 1995), standards offered by CACREP (2000), and ethical standards emphasized by ACA (2005). Several researchers have raised concerns regarding gatekeeping and cultural biases (Forrest et al., 1999; Vacha-Haase, 1995). To that end, this investigation offers some evidence that counselor educators do in fact engage in the practice of gatekeeping and consider multiculturalism when doing so. A comprehensive gatekeeping process that includes multicultural considerations can assist counselor education programs with their policies regarding the recruitment, retention, and remediation of students. Further, these findings can guide counselor educators in suggesting remediation strategies for students who struggle with issues of diversity.

Implications
The results of this study provide an emergent theory of gatekeeping with interwoven themes of diversity and multiculturalism grounded in the perceptions and experiences of counselor educators who teach in master’s-level CACREP-accredited counseling programs in the southeast region of the United States. Therefore, implications can be made as they pertain to counselor education programs, standards proposed by CACREP, and the ethical guidelines and multicultural competencies set forth by the ACA.

Counselor Education Programs and Related Disciplines
Counselor education programs may benefit from this research in many ways. Based on participants’ responses, culturally responsive practices were embedded in a theory of gatekeeping. Compared to previous frameworks and practices presented in the literature (Baldo, Softas-Nall, & Shaw, 1997; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007), the gatekeeping process that emerged from this research is more comprehensive in nature in two ways. First, it includes cultural considerations in the four distinct phases. And, the process begins prior to admissions into graduate programs. Thus, programs can utilize these culturally responsive practices and develop a model or incorporate parts into the gatekeeping procedures that they currently practice. Information from this research might also offer support to counselor educators and supervisors
who are struggling with specific students or issues related to the process of gatekeeping and related cultural considerations. Literature has indicated that other mental health, healthcare, and related disciplines struggle with issues that pertain to academic and non-academic student concerns, the overall process of gatekeeping, and related cultural concerns. Therefore, findings from this investigation might offer strategies and ideas for those who teach and supervise in areas related to social work, psychology, psychiatric nursing, teaching, or other related disciplines.

**CACREP and ACA**

Since CACREP and ACA are dedicated to maintaining the integrity of the counseling profession, results of this investigation illustrate how some counselor educators actively adhere to standards and recommendations regarding gatekeeping and multiculturalism. In particular, the gatekeeping theory that emerged from this research closely adheres to CACREP standards that outline program development and student monitoring and retention, thus these findings might offer specific, culturally responsive strategies and guidelines for counselor educators. Since guidelines related to the process of gatekeeping can often be vague or ambiguous, professional credentialing bodies may use the findings from this study to develop a model of gatekeeping or more detailed information for dissemination or advisement. Furthermore, ACA standards address gatekeeping; therefore, findings offered in this research might be incorporated into future iterations of the ACA ethical standards.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

The results of this investigation offer insight into issues related to diversity and multiculturalism in the practice of gatekeeping and offer a foundation for future researchers to base their work on. As stated earlier, gatekeeping can be an umbrella term for practices related to student recruitment, retention, and remediation. Because this is the first study to address issues of diversity and multiculturalism in gatekeeping, additional research is needed. Future qualitative studies could expand on the findings from this research and include CACREP-accredited programs beyond the southeast region of the United States. Both qualitative and quantitative methods could be utilized to address various aspects of cultural responsiveness in gatekeeping. In particular, researchers could explore how cultural considerations in gatekeeping practices may differ across any number of variables including: (a) culturally diverse programs (including faculty and students) vs. non-culturally diverse programs, (b) CACREP-accredited vs. non-CACREP accredited, (c) large urban vs. small rural universities, and (d) pre-tenure vs. tenured faculty members.

**Limitations**

While triangulation procedures and other measures were taken to ensure the credibility, trustworthiness, and dependability of findings, like all research, limitations exist. Although generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research, it should be noted that participants’ descriptions of gatekeeping and related cultural considerations might not be reflective of all counselor educator’s. Participants in this study were selected from CACREP-accredited counselor education programs located in the south east region of the United States. Therefore, findings might not be reflective of counselor educators who teach in CACREP-accredited doctoral programs, non-CACREP-accredited programs, and who live in other parts of the country. A final limitation of this investigation pertains to the use of electronic email as the primary means of collecting data during the second and third rounds of individual interviews. The lack of face-to-face interaction precluded the use of qualitative interview techniques such as probing and attending to non-verbal cues which would have yielded more information.

**References**


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