Gatekeeping During Admissions: 
A Survey of Counselor Education Programs

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Within counselor preparation, gatekeeping begins during the admission process. This article focuses on the prevalence of screening procedures used in master’s- and doctoral-level counselor educator programs (N = 79) accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. Additionally, programs’ selection and matriculation processes are discussed along with implications for counselor education and supervision.

Keywords: counselor education, gatekeeping, admissions, screening

The admission process in counselor education is a crucial part of the ethical and legal responsibilities counselor educators embrace as gatekeepers for the counseling profession (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009). Scholars have defined gatekeeping as counselors’ responsibility to intervene with counseling professionals who “engage in behavior that could threaten the welfare of those receiving their services” (Foster & McAdams, 2009, p. 271). Specifically within the academic environment, counselor educators serve as gatekeepers in selecting, retaining, and remediating students who have the potential to become effective, ethical counselors (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010).

The ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2005) includes a general statement regarding counselor educators’ gatekeeping responsibility without specifically addressing the admission process. However, the CACREP (2009) Standards identify three key areas (i.e., academic aptitude, career goals, and ability to form interpersonal relationships) for interviewers to consider when selecting individuals for a master’s-level counseling program. In addition, CACREP identifies another five areas (i.e., doctoral-level academic aptitude; professional experience; professional fitness; communication skills; and scholarship, leadership, and advocacy potential) to consider in the selection of doctoral students. Although ACA and CACREP have articulated the ethics of gatekeeping and standards for selecting students, the full extent to which counselor educators use these guidelines in selecting students for their programs remains unclear.
The responsibility of counselor educators to act as gatekeepers for the profession during the selection process is essential to screen out applicants with deficiencies who may cause harm to future clients (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002). Deficiencies in effective professional functioning may include inadequate skills and abilities or a lack of characteristics that are considered crucial for counseling professionals (Henderson & DuFrene, 2012; Homrich, 2009). It is estimated that students with deficiencies may account for as much as 10% of all students in counseling programs (Gaebatz & Vera, 2002, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial for counselor preparation programs to be aware of research related to the development of effective counselors and establish evaluation procedures for assessing these skills and qualities during the admission process.

Researchers have asked counselor educators to identify skills and qualities that are crucial to assess in applicants during the screening process. The identified areas include both academic aptitude (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010) and nonacademic characteristics (Duba, Paez, & Kindsvatter, 2010; Halinski, 2009; Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Academic aptitude refers to an individual’s potential to perform scholastically, which is generally measured using academic performance criteria (e.g., grade point average [GPA], test scores). Nonacademic characteristics refer to qualities that characterize an individual’s interpersonal interaction style (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010), which are usually measured during interview activities.

Researchers have also examined a variety of methods that counselor educators use to evaluate applicants’ academic skills and personal characteristics (Bradey & Post, 1991; Leverett-Main, 2004; Perusse, Goodnough, & Noel, 2001; Walfish & Moreira, 2005; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Common methods used to evaluate applicants include (a) standardized tests, (b) GPA, (c) letters of recommendation, (d) interviews, (e) writing samples, (f) personal statement, and (g) experience. However, additional research is needed that more exhaustively examines the process used in counselor education programs to select students. This includes determining how the admission process of master’s and doctoral programs differs and, for programs that conduct interviews, what specifically occurs before, after, and during the interviews to guide the selection of qualified applicants. Thus, the purpose of this study is to increase knowledge within the counselor education community by describing fully the screening and selection process of master’s and doctoral applicants. One research question was posed in this study: What are the criteria and procedures used by a national sample of CACREP-accredited counseling programs at the master’s and doctoral levels to screen applicants?

Method

Participants and Procedure

The targeted population consisted of counselor educators at CACREP-accredited counselor preparation programs throughout the United States. Of the 241 counselor educators contacted, 79 responded with completed
surveys (33% response rate). Every participant was from a different institution, representing 36 states. Twenty-one (27%) programs were classified as private and 58 (73%) were public, which closely represents the percentage of CACREP-accredited private (28%) and public (72%) institutions. Carnegie classifications included 12 (15%) very high research, 12 (15%) high research, 10 (13%) doctoral, 18 (23%) master’s large, 17 (22%) master’s medium, eight (10%) master’s small, and two (3%) baccalaureate. (Percentages do not total 100 because of rounding.) Fifty-nine institutions (75%) had master’s-only programs, which represented 30% of all CACREP-accredited master’s programs (CACREP, 2012). Twenty institutions (25%) had both master’s-and doctoral-level programs, which represented 35% of all CACREP-accredited doctoral programs. In regard to accredited program specialty area, there were 69 (87%) programs with a clinical mental health specialty area; three (4%) with a career specialty area; 15 (19%) with a marriage, couple, and family specialty area; 70 (89%) with a school counseling specialty area; nine (11%) with an addictions specialty area; and two (3%) with a student affairs and college counseling specialty area.

Prior to initiating the study, we obtained institutional review board approval. Counselor educators from CACREP-accredited programs throughout the country were eligible to participate in the study. We attempted to identify e-mail addresses for counselor educators at all institutions that have at least one CACREP-accredited counseling program, which resulted in contact information for 241 participants. We e-mailed one faculty member at each of the 241 institutions inviting him or her to participate in the study. Within programs where we knew faculty members, we contacted these individuals. Within the other programs, we contacted the program coordinator listed on the CACREP website or randomly selected another faculty member when we were unable to locate contact information for the program coordinator. Potential participants were sent an e-mail message with the link to the questionnaire, which was located on CounselingTechnology.net. We chose a survey method, instead of interviews or focus groups used in some previous studies (Leverett-Main, 2004; Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010), to increase the sample size and generalize the results to CACREP-accredited counselor education programs throughout the United States. Additionally, we asked participants to include their contact information if they were willing to provide more information in a follow-up telephone call. The e-mail message also included a request to forward the e-mail to another representative of their program, if they were unable or unwilling to complete the questionnaire. Program representatives who did not respond were sent a follow-up e-mail message approximately 1 month following the initial request. Participants were asked to report the name of their institution to avoid multiple responses from the same institution. This information was deleted prior to data analysis.

**Instrument**

A 60-item questionnaire was constructed by the first author on the basis of the existing literature and in consultation with other counselor educators
about screening procedures. The questionnaire included two sections: one focusing on master’s programs and the other on doctoral programs. Therefore, representatives from programs that did not have doctoral programs completed only the first half of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to indicate which listed screening procedures they used during the admission process (e.g., standardized tests, recommendation letters) and to describe the specific cutoff scores and prompts used in the applicable areas. They were also given the opportunity to write in additional procedures that were used that were not listed on the survey. Furthermore, participants were asked to describe the interview process (i.e., sample questions, experiential exercises), as applicable, and the decision-making process for selecting applicants. Participants were also asked demographic questions that included (a) institution (removed before analysis), (b) state, (c) Carnegie classification, (d) public or private designation, (e) program levels, and (f) program specialty areas.

Results

Table 1 presents participants’ reported admission criteria, procedures, and policies, which involved those included as application documents, those included as part of an interview or assessment, and those related to selection and matriculation processes.

Application Documents Reviewed

There were nine primary screening foci that were reviewed within the admission materials provided by the applicants: (a) standardized tests, (b) letters of recommendation, (c) GPA, (d) personal statement, (e) writing sample, (f) clinical experience, (g) research experience, (h) prerequisite courses, and (i) portfolio. Additionally, in an open-ended response item, participants were asked to include any additional screening procedures they

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Admission Criterion</th>
<th>MP Use</th>
<th>MP % of Use</th>
<th>DP Use</th>
<th>DP % of Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standardized test</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters of recommendation</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal statement</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing sample*</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical experience</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research experience</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prerequisite courses</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolio</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty assessments</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. MP = master’s program; DP = doctoral program; GPA = grade point average. *Materials submitted with the application packet, not writing exercises conducted during the interview.
used that were not included on the provided list. Two additional foci were added within this category (résumé and background check). In addition to reporting the occurrence of screening methods, participants were also asked to provide information about cutoff scores, prompts, rating scales, or other specific procedures. Unless noted, the standards discussed in the following paragraphs represent information reported from both master’s and doctoral programs.

In regard to the requirement of standardized tests, the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) was the most commonly reported; however, the Miller Analogies Test was also accepted in some programs. Cutoff scores for the GRE were generally around 1,000 (old scale) or 300 (new scale); however, this benchmark varied in some programs depending on the applicant’s GPA. Programs requiring letters of recommendation generally (approximately 90%) required three letters from professional references. The minimum GPA ranged from 2.4 to 3.5 for master’s applicants and from 3.0 to 3.5 for doctoral applicants.

Of the master’s-level programs that asked applicants to provide personal statements, approximately half of them included prompts focused on career goals, and approximately 20% focused on an applicant’s reason for wanting to pursue a degree in counseling. Programs also included prompts focused on volunteer/professional experience, congruence with the program’s mission, or a combination of different prompts. According to the doctoral program participants (70%) reporting the type of prompt used, doctoral programs provided applicants with writing prompts similar to those used in master’s programs. Writing samples were seldom required for admission packets to master’s degree programs. At the doctoral level, however, writing samples included providing academic papers (e.g., counseling theory paper, advocacy paper), publications, and/or grant proposals.

Prior clinical experience was required for only 6% of master’s programs and encompassed volunteer experience or 6 months to 1 year of experience in a counseling-related area. Other programs reported that clinical experience was considered but not required for admission. In doctoral programs, required clinical experience ranged from 1 to 2 years, and licensure or certification was suggested for some programs. Research experience was not reported as a requirement for any of the master’s programs and was required only by two doctoral programs. However, specific information was not provided regarding the amount of research experience required by these programs. Prerequisite courses required at the master’s level ranged from one course in various subjects (e.g., psychology, life-span development) to 24 credit hours in behavioral/social science. Additionally, half of the programs requiring prerequisite courses required a statistics course. Doctoral programs requiring prerequisite courses focused on the completion of the CACREP core master’s-level courses.

Limited information was provided about the portfolio required for admission to some master’s-level programs. At the doctoral level, the portfolio requirement consisted of a recorded counseling session or a CACREP-
related project. Additional information was not provided to further clarify the CACREP-related project requirement. In summary, these programs used a variety of documents as part of an application packet to provide useful information to assist them in making informed decisions regarding the admission of applicants.

**Admission Interviews and Assessments**

Information was also gathered about procedures that extended beyond the submission and review of the application packet, which included two primary areas: (a) faculty-administered assessments and (b) interviews. Faculty-administered assessments consisted of the Carkhuff Rating Scale, an interpersonal skills assessment, and instruments developed by the individual programs, which were administered during interviews. When asked what they would change about the admission process, five counselor educators acknowledged the desire to administer additional assessments, including a personality assessment; however, litigation was a concern. Program representatives discussed the importance of addressing this issue with legal counsel at the university prior to administering assessments.

Interviews were identified as part of the admission process in 82% of the master’s programs and 85% of the doctoral programs. Among master’s-level program participants reporting interview type \((n = 54)\), 41% reported individual interviews, 35% reported group interviews, and 24% reported both individual and group interviews. Individual interviews were reported by 48%, group interviews by 7%, and both individual and group interviews by 45% of the doctoral-level program participants reporting interview type \((n = 14)\). The most common interview length for master’s-level programs was reported as half day, and the two most common lengths for doctoral-level programs were half day and full day (both 41%). Participants were also asked to describe the activities that occurred during the interview. The responses were organized into seven categories: (a) information session, (b) questions, (c) writing samples, (d) experiential exercises, (e) assessments (described earlier), (f) informal meetings, and (g) miscellaneous.

**Information session.** The information session was described as a time to provide information about the program in a large group or in small groups according to program specialty area. This portion of the interview usually included a question and answer session as well. Some participants reported that this process was conducted by faculty, whereas others reported that students facilitated the process. This process was described similarly in master’s and doctoral programs.

**Questions.** Participants reported asking applicants questions individually, as well as in small groups and assessing group interactions (e.g., the ability of group members to reach consensus). Another small group strategy involved each interviewer selecting a question to ask all the applicants and then having the faculty members rotate through each small group of applicants. Across programs, the questioning portion of the interview was structured in different formats and focused on different purposes.
One participant described questions used by his or her program to assess the competencies outlined in *The Professional Counselor: Portfolio, Competencies, Performance Guidelines, and Assessment* (Engels, Barrio Minton, Ray, & Associates, 2010). Other participants described various questions that were categorized into six areas: (a) general/warm-up, (b) self-description (skills/experiences), (c) reasons for entering counseling (past, present, future), (d) counseling specific (scenarios), (e) academic related, and (f) document review. Also, one participant described a series of questions related to examining personal biases. Within the series of questions, applicants are asked to share an area of personal bias, when they became aware of it, how it might influence their thoughts and feelings when working with this group, and how they might address their own biases to become more tolerant of others’ viewpoints. In interviews for doctoral programs, additional questions were asked about applicants’ interest in research. See Table 2 for sample questions in each area.

**Writing samples.** In describing specific aspects of the interview process, 16 participants reported using writing samples with varied prompts (e.g., respond to a case study, write a personal statement of cultural awareness, review or reflect on a journal article, discuss trends in the counseling profession). In this activity, applicants are given 30 to 60 minutes to write and the writing samples are assessed for content, writing skills, and American Psychological Association (2010) formatting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Category</th>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General/warm-up</td>
<td>Books or movies that have special meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-description (skills/experiences)</td>
<td>Successes and challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counseling related/helper experience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strengths and weaknesses (self and others’ view)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How you cope with stress/self-care in the program</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Experience with people from diverse backgrounds</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How others (supervisor/student/client) describe you</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-responsibility (internal locus of control)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback (themes, response, changes you made)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Risk taking/flexibility/boundaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reason for entering counseling (past,</td>
<td>Why counseling?</td>
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<tr>
<td>present, future)</td>
<td>What experiences influenced your decision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why this program?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What will you contribute?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal job after graduation in 5–10 years</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greatest challenge for you as a future counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling specific (scenarios)</td>
<td>What to do with a challenging client you cannot refer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diverse client scenarios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic related</td>
<td>What type of student are you?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greatest strength/challenge as a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Questions about application materials</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Experiential exercises. Although 38% of the participants reported using experiential activities during the interview process, only 4% described specific activities. These activities included engaging in problem-solving tasks, role-playing, interviewing another candidate and introducing the person to the group, developing a topic and format for a presentation at a counseling conference, participating in an individual 5-minute public speaking exercise, taking part in a group discussion about characters in a movie (e.g., Whale Rider; Barnett, Hübner, Sanders, & Caro, 2002) focusing on cultural considerations and conceptualizing the characters as if they were clients, and taking part in a group viewing of a poor counseling session (but not being told that it is problematic) and discussing the session afterward.

Participants reported that during experiential exercises, interviewers evaluated the applicants through the observation of verbal and nonverbal skills, engagement with others, professional dispositions, self-critique, and ethical thinking and behavior. In addition, some interviewers offered applicants feedback and then evaluated their openness to the feedback. Applicants were also offered the opportunity to evaluate one another in some programs. Taken together, the use of experiential activities provided an opportunity for program faculty to evaluate applicants across various domains (e.g., interpersonal communication, speaking ability, conceptualization skills, multicultural competencies).

Informal meetings. Participants (8%) also discussed various informal meetings that took place during the interview process. A variety of individuals were included in these meetings, including program faculty, students, alumni, and department and college-wide faculty and staff. Additionally, the meeting encompassed a variety of activities, including meals and receptions.

Miscellaneous. Participants also described other activities that occurred during interviews. Some activities were related to the program or college (e.g., tour of the department, opportunity to sit in on a class). Other activities focused on general aspects of the university (e.g., meeting financial aid personnel, tour of campus).

Selection and Matriculation Processes

Counselor educators described various procedures used within the selection process. Within some programs, formalized procedures were used that involved rating forms to evaluate admission documents and the interview process. Within these structured processes, some participants reported giving more weight to interview activities in comparison with submitted documents. In contrast, other programs reported using an informal process involving general discussions among faculty. Furthermore, some programs reported accepting all applicants—as long as no red flags were presented—when they had the space.

In addition to screening and selecting applicants for admission, some programs implement a matriculation process. Participants described the matriculation process as a probationary period for students upon entering the program. Some participants described their master’s-level programs as
having a specific period established in a matriculation policy, whereas others followed a university policy requiring review and full admission to the program following completion of a set number of hours. The length of the probation period varied and ranged from 3 to 20 hours of course work. Respondents reported that the required course work, taken within the probation period, represented key areas (e.g., introduction to counseling, ethics, theories, counseling skills) within the curriculum. Program representatives (6%) also identified this evaluation period as occurring prior to registering for specialty and clinical courses. Successful completion of the probation period signified candidacy within some programs. Furthermore, programs described a provisional or conditional admission for students who did not fully meet all admission requirements (e.g., lower GPA or GRE score, limited or no course work in social sciences, an area of concern identified during the interview).

Following the matriculation period, programs reviewed the progress of students to determine who should be fully admitted into the program. This review included grades; performance in class; and, in one program, interviewing again with faculty and writing another goal statement. Faculty identified the strengths and areas of concern for students during this review, and remediation plans were developed for students with significant deficiencies, with full admission to the program pending the completion of the remediation plan.

The matriculation process was discussed by faculty at only two doctoral programs. At one university, all students were admitted under probation status for their first semester. The other program admitted students provisionally only if they had not completed all required master’s-level course work or if they needed additional clinical experience. The matriculation process appears to be clearly outlined within some counselor education programs; however, this is a process that is used by few programs.

**Evaluation of Admission Practices**

Participants were asked to report the strengths and areas for change within their current admission process. Responses were grouped into three areas: (a) efficiency, (b) consistency, and (c) screening for dispositions/psychological issues. Efficiency was a frequent concern for programs. Participants described the admission process as time consuming. Therefore, there was a reported need for implementing procedures that make the process fluid and efficient. Strategies used and/or suggested by participants included the use of technology and online resources to streamline the process. Additionally, program representatives described the importance of having consistent procedures, which included the development of psychometrically sound evaluation forms to increase interrater reliability so as to consistently rate applicants fairly across faculty. Finally, participants discussed the need for reliable assessments that measure professional dispositions and screen for psychological issues. Participants reported difficulty with implementing procedures to assess this area because of legal concerns. Background checks were presented as one way to begin collecting information. Notably,
participants emphasized counselor educators’ ethical responsibility for not admitting students when they have noted areas of concern.

Discussion

The current study presented some admission strategies in counselor education that were consistent with procedures identified by previous researchers (Bradey & Post, 1991; Perusse et al., 2001; Walfish & Moreira, 2005; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Application materials, such as transcripts, standardized test scores, letters of recommendation, and personal statements, were endorsed for screening both master’s and doctoral program candidates. However, program directors in one study reported that GRE scores and letters of recommendation are the least effective methods for screening applicants (Leverett-Main, 2004). Letters of recommendation, in particular, are seen as unhelpful because they are often focused on only positive qualities of applicants (Nelson, Canada, & Lancaster, 2003). However, counselor educators still endorsed them as necessary and found them to be most effective when references were asked to rate specific characteristics (Homrich, 2009).

Although many of the screening procedures discussed by participants in the current study were consistent with the literature (e.g., Bradey & Post, 1991; Perusse et al., 2001), the prevalence of use differed for many procedures. Whereas Bradey and Post (1991) found that 81% of counselor education programs used GPA and letters of recommendation, we found that master’s and doctoral programs in the current study used GPA (94% and 98%, respectively) and letters of recommendation (96% and 100%, respectively) more frequently. Test scores were used less frequently in the present study (70% and 90% of master’s and doctoral programs, respectively) than in the Bradey and Post study (100%). Two procedures were also identified with a higher use in the present study than in the studies by Bradey and Post and Perusse et al. (2001). Respectively, interviews were used by 82% and 85% of the master’s and doctoral programs in the current study as compared with 57% and 69% of the programs in the Bradey and Post and Perusse et al. studies. In the present study, personal statements were used by 89% and 95% of the master’s and doctoral programs, respectively, as compared with 76% of the programs in the Perusse et al. study. A comparison of these results indicates that most counselor education programs view the interview process as a crucial component in selecting students but continue to consider academic performance criteria (e.g., GPA, test scores). Interview processes seem to help counselor educators evaluate students’ academic and nonacademic qualities.

In doctoral program admission, the review of information concerning applicants’ research and clinical experience and competencies is routine. Nelson et al. (2003) reported that applicants admitted without prior clinical experience might require a different degree of support in a counseling doctoral program. Nevertheless, program representatives reported that it was challenging to make decisions based on prior clinical experience because many applicants have limited experience (Nelson et al., 2003). Furthermore, the current study
revealed that the way documents are used in making decisions about admitting applicants varies by program. Some programs have formalized procedures for evaluating these documents (e.g., rating scales, evaluation forms), whereas other programs use discussions to reach consensus.

This study expanded on previous research to examine the procedures that occur within the interview, especially in terms of the focus on and evaluation of nonacademic criteria. This is crucial because program faculty reported that interviews were the most effective and important screening method (Leverett-Main, 2004; Walfish & Moreira, 2005). The process for on-campus interviewing of applicants seems fairly consistent across programs (e.g., individual and small group interviews, information sessions, experiential activities); however, several creative ideas emerged from this study that programs may consider in enhancing their admission process.

Programs use creative interview strategies, such as the use of movie characters to conceptualize clients, use of novel questioning approaches to assess cultural competencies, and group tasks to observe interpersonal skills and other nonacademic characteristics. The interview component is a cornerstone of the screening process because these experiential activities facilitate students’ learning about program expectations beyond simply hearing about them. Applicants are exposed to activities that they will be expected to engage in during the program and have the opportunity to develop self-awareness (Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2013). Consistent with findings from the current study, prior research has cited the importance of having multiple interactions with applicants during the interview to reveal information that is not easily assessed through the review of documents (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Nelson et al., 2003; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Furthermore, the importance of using nonacademic criteria in making admission decisions as well as standardization (e.g., use of rating forms) of the interview process has also been suggested by researchers (Nelson et al., 2003).

Comparing master’s- and doctoral-level admission procedures and requirements is unique to this study. The prevalence of using recommendation letters and interviews was similar for both levels. Additionally, GPA was used for both levels; however, doctoral programs required a higher minimum GPA. Personal statements were also used about equally, and, surprisingly, the prompts were similar for both levels. Program liaisons have reported that goal or philosophy statements are useful (Nelson et al., 2003), and developing focused prompts, instead of using a general prompt for all programs, may solicit more useful information (Homrich, 2009).

Differences were also noted between program levels in the use of some screening methods. Test scores, writing samples, clinical experience, research experience, prerequisite courses, and portfolios in making decisions about applicants were more often used in doctoral programs. The use of test scores, writing samples, and portfolios may be viewed as crucial to assess applicants’ ability to meet the academic rigor of a doctoral program. Furthermore, prior experience was identified as an area for greater consideration in doctoral
programs; however, the amount required was limited (1 to 2 years) and was recommended, but not required, in most programs. This finding might be related to many applicants to counselor education doctoral programs having limited experience within some applicant pools (Nelson et al., 2003). Faculty-administered assessments were used more frequently in master’s-level programs; however, the overall use of this method was limited (10% of programs). Faculty reported reluctance to use these assessments because of concerns about litigation. Participants’ concern about meeting with legal counsel regarding admission criteria and the decision-making process was consistent with previous research (Nelson et al., 2003).

Regardless of the types of activities used, reliable evaluation of students continues to be a concern and programs seem to approach this problem differently. For example, some programs screen only for red flags, maintaining a relatively open admission process and relying on matriculation periods, whereas other programs use more strenuous evaluation methods (e.g., rating scales, multiple observers) to screen applicants. Nevertheless, counselor educators articulated a strong and overarching concern about how to evaluate students in a fair and reliable manner, identify professional dispositions, and screen for psychological impairment.

**Limitations**

The present study included only participants from CACREP-accredited counselor education programs; therefore, the results may not be generalizable to programs that are not CACREP accredited. Additionally, participants were not chosen at random and included a single representative from various programs, which may not represent the viewpoints of all faculty members within a specific program. The current study is also descriptive, and findings do not necessarily represent effective ways to screen or select students. Furthermore, participants discussed specific interview activities within an open-question format, which resulted in varying degrees of responses, and they were not asked to relate the procedures to academic and nonacademic qualities screened for during the admission process.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research may focus on examining the effectiveness of using specific admission procedures to screen applicants. Researchers may focus on developing psychometrically sound assessments to use during the screening process to promote efficiency and consistency. Studies also are needed that focus on how to best screen during interviews for factors related to counselor effectiveness (e.g., acceptance, empathy, self-awareness, open-mindedness, genuineness, flexibility; Halinski, 2009; Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000). Additionally, future research may explore students’ perspectives about the interview process. Finally, researchers may expand on this study by examining the admission procedures of programs that do not have CACREP accreditation and comparing them with the results in this study.
Gatekeeping for the counseling profession is a crucial responsibility for counselor educators, and it begins during the admission process. In this study, counselor educators identified the need for efficiency, consistency, and the reliable and valid measurement of applicants’ professional dispositions during this process. The establishment of formalized evaluation procedures may assist counselor educators in addressing these overarching needs. We were unable to locate any formally established screening instruments used during the admission process. However, researchers have created assessments to assess the professional behaviors and dispositions of students throughout counselor training (e.g., Counseling Competencies Scale [Swank, Lambie, & Witta, 2012], Personal Characteristics Evaluation Form [Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995], Professional Performance Review Policy [McAdams, Foster, & Ward, 2007]). Therefore, counselor educators might use these established measures to provide a guide for the development of screening tools. In aligning screening instruments with current measures of counseling competencies, counselor educators establish consistency with identifying and measuring personal and professional dispositions throughout counselor preparation.

Potential ethical and legal ramifications are important to consider when developing screening procedures for applicants. This might involve discussions with legal representatives at specific institutions. Ongoing research regarding the importance and effectiveness of screening procedures may also add credibility to the establishment of formalized procedures. Finally, implementing fair, consistent, and documented procedures for evaluating applicants may also provide a precedent if admission decisions are challenged by applicants.

Some programs used matriculation processes. This extended probationary period for ongoing screening of counseling students for academic qualifications and nonacademic characteristics offers promise for addressing the need for effective and formalized gatekeeping. However, many programs do not use a formal matriculation process, and for those that do, it can be complicated by many of the limitations that compromise the effectiveness of screening applicants prior to admission. Therefore, we also recommend taking a closer look at how programs design and implement matriculation programs. Integrating formalized matriculation processes within a program’s gatekeeping policy, much like the admission process, would involve making them structured, transparent, and measurable. Matriculation ceremonies, for example, could be used as a way to induct students into the counseling profession. Developing a transparent matriculation process is essential in getting students invested and keeping faculty engaged in the gatekeeping process at all stages (Foster & McAdams, 2009).

Through the establishment of admission and matriculation procedures within gatekeeping policies, counselor educators articulate to students early on the professional and personal attributes upon which they are evaluated for continued growth and development throughout the program. In learning the importance of these academic and nonacademic areas of evaluation at the beginning of the admission process, students may reflect on their
competencies and develop greater self-awareness and self-critique skills. In this way, counseling students take ownership in their own growth and development from the beginning of their preparation program.

References


