

EXPLORING MASTER-LEVEL COUNSELING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN
TAKING ONLINE COUNSELOR EDUCATION COURSES

by

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As human beings, our job is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has - or ever will have- something inside that is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its impression. Mr. Rogers.

If I could go back in time and tell my younger self that I would be in a doctoral-level counseling program about to present my dissertation, I would not have believed me. I probably would have laughed or thought I was lying. Growing up with learning challenges, I always believed it would be impossible that I could ever do something so hard, both emotionally and intellectually. I am so honored to say that I have made it here. I have grown so much as a student, counselor, educator, and person. My hope is that my passion, dedication, and love for being a counselor and counselor educator will continue to grow and carry with me throughout the rest of my life.

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Karli N. Iceman

ABSTRACT

EXPLORING MASTER-LEVEL COUNSELING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN TAKING ONLINE COUNSELOR EDUCATION COURSES

by

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Adviser: Ashley Branson, Ph.D.

The purpose of this research was to explore master-level counseling students' lived experiences when taking online counselor education courses within the past five years (i.e., 2017-2022). Traditionally, counselor education programs and classes are offered through in-person learning modalities. However, the increased movement and utilization of online learning in higher education has raised the question and application of online learning within counselor education. Although past research explored the efficacy of online counselor education, there is a limited amount of research available about students' experiences with training to become counselors in an online environment. My dissertation sought to fill this gap by using a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach to learn more about master-level counseling students' experiences with taking their counseling classes through an online learning environment. Based on 13 participants' experiences, four categories emerged. Participants spoke of their positive experiences with taking online counseling classes, the challenges they experienced, the ways that they coped or adjusted with taking online classes, and how they felt that their online counselor education impacted their counselor development. The

findings of this study are intended to help provide counselor educators and counselor education programs ways to better develop and implement online counseling classes in ways that promote student success.

Keywords: online education, online counselor education, master-level counseling students, students' experiences, counselor development

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of masters-level counseling students who have taken online counselor education courses within the past five years (i.e., 2017-2022). In researching more about students' perspectives of learning in an online environment, counselors, counselor educators, and clinical supervisors will have a better understanding of their students' educational experiences. The information will also help provide further insight on the strengths of online education as well as the additional areas of support in order to provide quality online counselor education courses and programs.

The following chapter will provide background information on the use of online learning in higher education, specifically focusing on its implementation in counselor education. I will highlight the current context of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which facilitated expeditious developments of online education across the world. Because of the sudden transition to online learning, I will discuss its impact on instructors, students, and counselor education. I will also provide a discussion on what has been found in the literature and explore the ways in which my study will advance counselor education research.

Background of the Study

Distance education has been a learning modality within higher education since the mid-19th century (Emmerson, 2004). During this time, instructors and students exchanged learning materials through the postal service, which became known as

correspondence learning (Kentnor, 2015). Correspondence learning became the catalyst for distance learning within higher education because it provided more accessibility to individuals who were not previously afforded the opportunity to obtain a formal education, such as people who lived in rural areas, people of various social class standings, and women (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Emmerson, 2004). To continue growing and remain an effective learning modality, distance learning expanded through the implementation of various technologies, such as the radio, television, and audio and visual cassette tapes (Emmerson, 2004; Pregowska et al., 2021). Due to technological advances, distance education, which is often used synonymously with “online education,” is presently implemented through the use of computers, smartphones, tablets, and the internet (Allen & Seaman, 2011, 2016; Emmerson, 2004; Pregowska et al., 2021).

Online learning within higher education can take form in different ways, such as having students attend courses through online means with little, if any, in-person instruction. Within this modality, learning can occur through synchronous and asynchronous methods (Scholl et al., 2017). To provide a more structured definition of what this means, the Office of Postsecondary Education Accreditation Division (OPEAD) of the United States Department of Education (DOE) defined online education as having 50% or more of instruction occur through technological means (2012). In some cases, universities offer full degrees and professional certificates to be completed through online programs.

Because of this relatively new development within higher education as a whole, the counseling profession has also looked into the concept of online counseling services as well as online counselor education (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). Since the

establishment of the American Counseling Association (ACA) in 1952 (ACA, n.d.), there has been a historical pattern where master-level and doctoral-level counseling programs are taught through in-person instruction (Dietrich & Bowers, 2018; Woo et al., 2020). Many counseling instructors have taught their courses through a constructivist pedagogical lens (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2001; Guiffida, 2005; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). Based on a constructivist pedagogy, the instructor and student actively work together to facilitate the learning experience and ultimately co-create a new sense of meaning. In order to create a collaborative learning environment from a constructivist pedagogy, it is very common for instructors to utilize experiential activities to help develop this new sense of meaning, such as through small and large group discussions (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2001), demonstration of counseling techniques, and engaging in role-plays (Subagia, 2020).

The norm of in-person instruction within counselor education began to change after the establishment of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs ([CACREP]; CACREP, n.d.) in 1981. Due to changes in accreditation standards and program credit hours, counselor education programs, specifically those from private and for-profit institutions, introduced the concept of online learning in order to make counselor education programs more accessible and affordable for students (Bobby, 2013). Knowing that digital technologies are continuing to be integrated within the overall profession and in counselor education, the ACA's Code of Ethics (2014) has updated its latest set of ethical guidelines to reflect the use of online technologies when working with students, clinical supervisors, instructors, and clients. In Section H entitled, "Distance Counseling, Technology, and Social Media," it states:

Counselors understand that the profession may no longer be limited to in-person, face-to-face interactions. Counselors actively attempt to understand the evolving nature of the profession with regard to distance counseling, technology, and social media and how such resources may be used to better serve their clients.

Counselors strive to become knowledgeable about these resources. Counselors understand the additional concerns related to the use of distance counseling, technology, and social media and make every attempt to protect confidentiality and meet any legal and ethical requirements for the use of such resources (ACA, 2014, p. 17).

Additionally, CACREP has also updated its standards to reflect the implementation and instruction in their doctoral programs (e.g., Standard 6.B.3.e; 2016).

However, in-person instruction and experiential activities were suddenly made unavailable in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic took global effect. When the pandemic was first announced, many institutional administration members were determining if it could be safe to hold in-person classes while following social distancing guidelines. Administrative members discussed whether hybrid learning would be a viable option as it would limit the amount of time on campus for all university members, or if there was going to be a need to move to a fully online learning environment (Bhagat & Kim, 2020). Because of the increased risks of spreading the virus, universities across the world shut down their physical institutions and required instructors to transition their courses to online instruction. While instructors worked to implement experiential activities while teaching online, there were significant barriers, such as the challenges against traditional constructivist ideologies, that made this harder.

The sudden transition from in-person to online learning had a significant impact on higher education, including counselor education. For instructors, the sudden transition to online teaching was difficult, particularly due to the fact that many instructors have very little experience, if any, providing online instruction (Moorhead et al., 2013). Some instructors had not received or been offered formal support and training on how to transition and effectively run their courses with such reliance and use of technology (Moorhead et al., 2013). Given the current world circumstances, it is also safe to assume that instructors at all levels of education have not been taught how to teach during a global pandemic.

The announcement of the global pandemic and the immediate action of terminating face-to-face classes added additional pressures to instructors. Not only did they have to learn how to transform their classes to an online learning environment, but they also had to quickly adapt and learn various digital tools to help facilitate and successfully run their courses (Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021). It is also anticipated that instructors had to find ways to process their own experiences related to the pandemic, professionally and personally, as well as help their students navigate their anxieties, worries, and fears about the pandemic and online instruction.

While universities and instructors worked on how to transition their face-to-face classes online, students also had to quickly adapt to an online learning format. Many students expressed fear about how this sudden change to online learning would impact their completion of the course, their required assignments, what future academic work would look like, and even if they would be able to complete their programs and graduate (Cicha et al., 2021). There was also worry and concern for students who relied on

university resources, such as for housing, financial aid assistance, and access to digital technologies (Jones et al., 2021). These various factors, along with coping with the devastating implications of the pandemic, took its toll on students.

From an academic standpoint, students often expressed worry about their academic performance, experienced concentration problems, and sometimes felt that the workload for their online courses was much greater than it was when they were attending in-person classes (Son et al., 2020). Students also expressed the mental and emotional turmoil that the pandemic had on them, including the worries about their safety as well as the safety of others (Son et al., 2020) and feelings of anger, depression, and isolation (Cicha et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020).

Despite the growing increase in providing online courses and programs in higher education, counselor education has been particularly concerned about its ability to effectively and appropriately train students into becoming practicing counselors using this teaching modality (Reicherzer et al., 2012). Understandably, significant concerns lie within the quality of online teaching and if students will receive the adequate education to develop into professional counselors (Reicherzer et al., 2012; Wasik et al., 2019). However, the impact of the pandemic has raised questions as to if, and for how long, can online learning be a sustainable, successful learning modality. In some cases, there are even thoughts about if there is a need for strictly in-person instruction, especially knowing that the research available suggests that students do just as well, if not better, in an online learning environment (e.g., Holmes & Reid, 2017; Meyer, 2015; Smith et al., 2015). It is crucial for counselor educators to continue discussing and researching the integration of online learning in their courses not only to continue the profession's overall growth and

development, but also to continue its relevance and presence among the changes within higher education.

Problem Statement

While there has been increased awareness of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education and counselor education, the reality is that these discussions have been around throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020). To highlight this point, Harasim (2000) discussed the development of online learning in higher education and stated: “Our new understanding of the very nature of [online] learning has affected the definition, design, and delivery of education. It will alter global civilization as educators and learners worldwide adopt and adapt networked collaborative learning” (p. 42).

Although Harasim’s words were written over 20 years ago, the statement above may be applicable given current world circumstances and future developments within higher education, including counselor education. Currently, there are over six million higher education students who have taken at least one of their classes online (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Seaman et al., 2018). This number is anticipated to continue growing, especially because online learning provides more flexibility and accessibility to a diverse student population. Allen and Seaman (2016) concluded that online learning methods have had a significant impact on the way that educators and students think about higher education and that many institutions believe that online learning is “critical for [their] long term strategy” (p. 5).

Knowing that counselor education learning and instruction has typically occurred through in-person educational modalities (Dietrich & Bowers, 2018; Woo et al., 2020),

the pandemic has shifted the way in which educators and students think about higher education and how it will continue to look in the future. Understandably, there are concerns about utilizing online learning as a primary form of providing teaching and instruction, particularly focusing on if the quality of online learning is comparable to learning in-person (Reicherzer et al., 2012; Waisk, 2019). Higher education, including counselor education, may never fully return to how it was prior to the pandemic. Although in-person classes are unlikely to be completely phased out, I believe higher education institutions and counselor educator programs will be encouraged, if not expected, to be able to provide a variety of instructional modalities that include an online element.

In reviewing the literature related to online counselor education, most of the research that is available has been based on the past decade. The literature has focused on how to integrate online elements into counseling instructional modalities, such as through hybrid learning (e.g., Davis, 2019; Reicherzer et al., 2012; Renfro-Michel et al., 2010) and flipped classroom learning (e.g., Fulton & Gonzales, 2015; Merlin-Knoblich & Camp, 2018; Moran & Milsom, 2015). However, online counselor education continues to be viewed as one of the least researched areas within the profession (Barrio Minton, 2019). In order to continue developing, expanding and keeping up with the digitalization of higher education, there needs to be more research about online counselor education.

Being able to provide a variety of different learning formats, including online instruction, has significant benefits and advantages for both instructors and students. In terms of advantages for instructors, online instruction allows more flexibility in how they wish to provide instructional content and interact with students (i.e., asynchronous

delivery or synchronous delivery; Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021), having greater accessibility of sharing instructional materials with both students and faculty members (Kumar et al., 2020), and being able to provide students with immediate feedback on assignments and student engagement (Kumar et al., 2020; Szu-Yu et al., 2021). Instructors have also found that teaching online allows more creativity in their teaching (Kumar et al., 2020), a chance to increase and expand their technical skills, and provides them with the opportunity to engage in self-reflection about their teaching (Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021).

Similarly, students have shared that taking their classes online gives them easy access to all course materials and builds up more confidence and skill regarding the use of technology (Kumar et al., 2020). Outside of the academic benefits, students find that learning online provides them with more flexibility when managing their school obligations in addition to other life responsibilities, such as at work and family life (Ascough, 2002; Cook, 2007; Summers et al., 2005). While there are still areas of online learning that need continued development as well as areas that need resolution, knowing that there are advantages to online learning suggests that educators and institutions should continue researching more about how to create effective online learning environments.

Gaps in the Literature

Through this research study, my hope is to address gaps in knowledge and add to the growing literature related to online higher education, specifically related to the counseling profession. The first gap that I will explore is looking at the specific factors that support or detract from student learning in online counseling courses. I will explore this gap by being mindful of students' online learning experiences prior to the COVID-19

pandemic as well as how the pandemic has shifted the ways students learn in an online environment. The second gap that I will look at is understanding the lived experiences of masters-level counseling students participating in online counselor education classes.

Research Question

As a part of this study, the following research question emerged:

Q(1): Within the last five years (i.e., 2017-2022), what are the lived experiences of masters-level counseling students when taking online counselor education courses?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research study is to explore the lived experiences of masters-level counseling students when taking online counselor education courses within the last five years (i.e., 2017-2022). Sampling participants across the past five years allows participants to share their online learning experiences, such as their reasonings as to why they took online courses compared to other learning modalities, how they have been academically successful in their classes, and what feedback they have for instructors and peers when learning and teaching in an online instructional format. Highlighting participant voices within this timeframe also provides further insight on how the COVID-19 pandemic potentially impacted students' learning and what their experience was like to transition from in-person to online instruction. By learning more about students' experiences, my goal is to learn about what factors contributed to academic success as well as what factors are challenging when learning online. This will provide additional insight about how online learning can be structured in ways that meet the needs of both

students and instructors. I also hope to provide further insight on how counselor educators can create a meaningful learning experience through an online environment.

Significance of Study

There are multiple implications for students, counselor educators, and the counseling profession as to why it is important to learn more about masters-level counseling students' experiences when learning in an online format, especially during a global pandemic. From the student perspective, learning more about their experiences can help determine what factors facilitated their success in their online courses, which can potentially lead to more students being open to taking more online courses. It could also provide greater accessibility to counselor education programs to students who need flexible learning schedules to accommodate their other life responsibilities or for those who live in other parts of the country. This is especially imperative and meaningful for students who live in rural areas where there is a greater need for accessible mental health services and counselors (Main & Dziekan, 2012).

By learning more about students' experiences, counselor educators can develop a better understanding of what is working in their online courses, common barriers that students face when engaging in online learning, and how to obtain more support and seek additional resources to help them develop beneficial, effective learning experiences in their online classrooms. Because the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increase of clients seeking telehealth services (Haddock et al., 2020), counselor educators can develop teaching techniques and strategies that help prepare students on how to provide online mental health services. This research also contributes to the growing need of

literature on learning about masters-level counseling students' experiences in counseling courses as well as the literature regarding online counselor education.

Overview of Methodology

This study used a phenomenological qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2013), characteristics that make qualitative research distinct from quantitative research include: utilizing assumptions and interpretive frameworks to understand the problem, collecting data in a natural setting, researcher reflections, highlighting the need for change, and the results of the study include participant voices. The intention behind a phenomenological approach is to learn more about individuals' experiences to develop a universal description of the phenomenon, specifically focusing on what was experienced and how it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The specific approach of phenomenology that I applied to this study was transcendental phenomenology. The main premise behind transcendental phenomenology is that experiences need to be shared with others as a way to discover reality (Kalfe, 2013). In addition, this approach requires the researcher to bracket their assumptions and biases to make sure they are fully highlighting participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

For the current study, I used purposeful, maximum variation sampling. According to Erford (2015), purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select participants who are most able and likely to provide insight on the phenomenon. Additionally, utilizing maximum variation sampling provided me with the opportunity to learn about students' experiences from a diverse group of participants (Erford, 2015). Because I was specifically looking at students who took an online counselor education course within the past five years and completed at least one semester within their chosen programs, I also

implemented criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013; Erford, 2015). The specific criteria that I used in this study were as follows: 1) participants were current master-level counseling students or had completed their master-level counseling programs, 2) participants had completed at least one online counselor education course, and 3) participants (if current students) had completed at least one academic term in their counseling programs or (if graduated) took their online counselor education course(s) within the past five years. The reason why I specified that participants had to have completed at least one counseling course and that it is not their first semester in their counseling programs was to decrease potential factors that may be involved when first starting a counseling graduate program, such as adjusting to graduate school expectations. The size of the sample differs based on the qualitative approach applied and the intentions behind the sample size. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that data collection should continue until the point of saturation, meaning that the researcher hears similar shared experiences and that no further insights are added by participants.

To recruit participants, I sent email invitations to all masters-level CACREP-accredited programs within the United States (including Washington D.C.). I also sent a request for participation through the Counselor Education and Supervision NETWORK-Listserv (CESNET-L) where I asked faculty members and counselor educators to forward the study to eligible participants. By reaching out to counseling programs across the United States, it provided me the opportunity to learn from a more diverse population of students' experiences. As a part of my email invitation, I included information about me as the researcher, an overview of the study, and contact information. The email invitations also included a link to the study's anonymous questionnaire.

I collected data in two ways. The first way that I collected data was by asking participants to complete an anonymous questionnaire regarding their experiences with taking online counselor education courses. Questions regarding demographic information were also included in the anonymous questionnaire to better understand students and their experiences. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they were willing to participate in an individual interview, which was the second way that I collected data. As highlighted in the literature, interviews are one of the most common and highly encouraged ways to collect data using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). There are three common ways to conduct interviews: unstructured, structured, and semi-structured. For this study, I conducted interviews using a semi-structured approach. A semi-structured approach allowed me to develop a set of questions to ask each participant but also gave me enough flexibility to gain further depth into individual experiences (Erford, 2015).

Having two sources of data collection allowed me to triangulate the data (Creswell, 2013), which helped increase the credibility of my study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the data analysis portion of my study occurred in two phases. The first phase was where I coded participants' responses to the questionnaire where I highlighted important elements that stood out from their experiences. During this process, I engaged in consensual cross-analysis where I had an external peer auditor who also analyzed the data and provided me with an external perspective, which helped strengthen the trustworthiness of my study (Erford, 2015; Hays & Singh, 2012). Learning about participants' experiences prior to meeting with them provided me with a better

understanding of themes and patterns of participants' experiences, which I further explored during their individual interviews.

The second phase of data analysis took place after the interviews were transcribed. Like the questionnaire responses, my external peer auditor and I reviewed the transcriptions and made sure that my interpretations adequately reflect participants' experiences. I also engaged in member checking where I asked the participants to review their questionnaire responses, the transcription of their interview, and my interpretations of common patterns and themes, which gave them the opportunity to provide further clarification and check for accuracy.

Throughout the data analysis process, I kept an audit trail to show a detailed explanation of how I engaged in data collection and data analysis. Examples of elements that are commonly found in the audit trail include informed consent forms, interview protocols, drafts of codebooks, and transcriptions (Hays & Singh, 2012). Another element of my audit trail included my involvement in keeping a reflexive journal. Having a reflexive journal allowed me to thoroughly examine my personal biases, expectations, and my anticipated thoughts on themes and patterns that emerged from the data (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Summary

My qualitative phenomenological research study was developed to explore the lived experiences of master-level counseling students who have taken an online counseling course within the past five years. Because of the increased interest and development of online learning within higher education, it is natural and anticipated that counselor education will follow this trend. Although there has been skepticism and

hesitancy regarding the effectiveness and quality of online learning in counselor education, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the learning process where programs were forced to shift their in-person courses to an online format. Knowing the pandemic has taken place for over a year, institutions, instructors, and students raised questions and curiosities as to how, when, and if online learning could be a sustainable instruction modality. The educational experience is crucial for students in order for them to receive the proper training and education it takes to be an effective counselor in the field. My goal in conducting this research was to learn more about counseling students' lived experiences when learning online and to examine the factors that have been helpful or challenging when learning in an online environment.

As a part of my study, data was collected in two ways: (1) an anonymous questionnaire asking participants about their experiences when taking online counselor education courses, and (2) individual interviews. When I analyzed the data, I looked for themes and patterns in participants' experiences. I engaged in consensual cross-analysis with an external peer auditor who reviewed my codes, themes, and interpretations of participants' responses to determine their accuracy. The ultimate goal of my research study is to adequately portray participants' voices to provide a better understanding of what and how they experienced in their counseling courses through an online environment.

Definitions of Key Terms

Asynchronous Instruction: Learning that occurs where instructors and students do not meet in a digital space or interact with each other simultaneously. The instructors provide students with the learning materials, such as through recorded

lectures, PowerPoint slides, and other handouts. The students independently work on their tasks or assignments and complete them by the instructor's set deadline (Scholl et al., 2017).

Constructivist Pedagogy: A learning method that emphasizes how students learn new information based on their past knowledge and experiences. In this approach, the instructor takes an active role in which they collaborate with the students to co-construct and create a new sense of meaning (Bransford Brown & Cocking, 1999).

Counseling: “[A] professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, and career goals” (ACA, 2014, p. 3).

Distance Counseling: Counseling services that occur with the use of technological means (e.g., phones, computers, tablets, video-conferencing platforms, etc.; National Board for Certified Counselors [NBCC], 2016, p. 1) where the counselor and client are able to be at different physical locations. In the counseling profession, this term is also synonymous with “telehealth” or “telemedicine.”

Distance Education: An instructional modality where instructors and students are physically separated from each other during the learning process (Foster et al., 2002). There have been various methods utilized within distance education (e.g., correspondence, radio, television, etc.), but the most current form of distance education relies on the utilization of electronic technologies, such as computers

and the Internet. In the most recent literature, this term is also synonymous with “online education.”

Experiential Learning: A learning method that emphasizes the importance of experience and interaction in the learning process (Kolb, 1984). In this approach, learning effectively occurs when students can connect the material to real-world experiences (Dewey, 1938). In counselor education courses, common examples of experiential learning activities include small and large group discussions, demonstration of counseling skills, and role-plays (Subagia, 2020).

Face-to-Face (F2F) Learning: A learning environment in which course instruction occurs at a physical location (i.e., a classroom) where students and instructors are in the same physical space. While the OPEAD (2012) defines in-person learning as having 51% or more of in-person instruction, the way that I will be viewing face-to-face in this dissertation is that instruction occurs in a physical classroom setting and is required for all class meetings. This term is also used interchangeably with “in-person” and “traditional” learning and teaching.

Flipped Learning: An instructional method that involves having students learn the material outside of the classroom setting and utilize the classroom environment to review, practice, and apply knowledge (Findlay-Thompson & Mombourquette, 2014; Moran & Milsom, 2015). Many instructors utilize technology, such as videos and pre-recorded lectures, to provide instructional content to be reviewed outside of the classroom (Gerstein, 2011; Milman, 2012). In the classroom environment, students demonstrate application of their knowledge, such as through experiential learning activities.

Hybrid Learning: A learning environment where course instruction occurs in a physical classroom as well as through the use of digital means. Haddock et al. (2020) determined that there were two kinds of hybrid learning formats: 1) traditional hybrid learning where 25%-49% of learning occurs in a classroom environment, and 2) distance hybrid learning where 50-75% of classroom instruction occurs through the use of technology. For the purposes of my dissertation, I will be utilizing Haddock's (2020) definition of "traditional hybrid learning." The way I distinguish "hybrid learning" from "flipped learning" is that, in a hybrid learning environment, experiential activities and content instruction can be integrated through both online instruction and in-person instruction. Thus, it is possible to apply hybrid learning to a flipped classroom environment (Branson, 2016).

Online Education: A learning environment in which 50% or more of instruction is held through technological means (OPEAD, 2012). The OPEAD (2012) emphasized that online instruction occurs through the following ways: "(1) the internet; (2) one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communication devices; (3) audioconferencing; or (4) video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if the cassettes, DVDs, or CD-ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3)" (p. 5). Online education can occur asynchronously and synchronously. Throughout this dissertation, "remote education" and "distance education" are synonymous with "online education."

Synchronous Instruction: The instructional environment where instructors and students meet in the same digital space and interact simultaneously. This digital environment can take place through video-conferencing technologies (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, etc.) and online discussion boards. Instructors and students work together collaboratively to complete assignments and tasks (Scholl et al., 2017).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of how higher education programs have increasingly implemented online learning and how, as a result of this trend, counselor education programs have integrated online teaching into their training of future counselors. Within this discussion, I will talk about how counselor education has viewed online learning and the ways in which instructors have integrated elements of online learning into their instructional courses. I will also highlight the given context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has changed the ways in which students and instructors think about learning and teaching. Finally, I will explore the importance of counseling students' experiences regarding online learning and how they are significant for gaining future insight and understanding of how to further develop and strengthen online learning in counselor education.

The Context of Higher Education

When discussing the background of higher education in the United States, it is important to discuss how many of the first institutions were established by members of the British Empire. At the time, there were two powerful forces that had a strong impact on society: social status and religion (Geiger, 2015; Goodchild & Wechesler, 1997; Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2019). Specifically catering to young, White men, having higher levels of social status meant that one had higher levels of influence within society. Simultaneously, religion was viewed as a valuable asset that needed to be included in education. During the colonial era, these perspectives led to the development of the first

colonial college, Harvard College (now known as Harvard University), as well as eight other institutions that hold a high reputation to this day (Geiger, 2015; Goodchild & Wechesler, 1997; Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2019).

Prior to the United States gaining its independence, teaching religion, as well as overall liberal arts, dominated the coursework at established institutions. A significant reason as to why many colleges were developed during the early to mid-1700s was to establish institutions that met the needs of the colonies' religious denominations (Geiger, 2015; Goodchild & Wechesler, 1997; Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2019). However, this changed after the American Revolution. Although there were still some levels of religious influence, colleges and universities began to expand providing coursework and instruction on other important fields, including medicine, engineering, law, chemistry, and physics (Geiger, 2015; Goodchild & Wechesler, 1997; Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2019).

Questions regarding the necessity of higher education began to rise during the 1800s. Because of the Civil War and Industrial Revolution, many people, particularly young men, did not believe they needed a higher education because many of the occupations that were available did not require formal education. Even if the jobs available required or would greatly benefit from formal education training, the concept of attending a university was not available or feasible for a majority of the population. During this time, a large portion of higher education institutions were privately owned and only offered four-year programs (Helland, 1987). Paying for private university tuition was extremely expensive and many young men could not afford to be away from their families for that length of time. Although higher education was viewed as an opportunity for young men to be able to develop skills and contribute to the growth of

their families and communities (Geiger, 2015; Goodchild & Wechesler, 1997; Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2019), it was clear that higher education needed further developments to provide further benefits for more members of society.

Knowing that higher education needed to be more accessible and feasible for more members of society, the later portion of the 19th century was devoted to implementing changes for and within higher education. A significant change in higher education occurred as a result of the Morrill Act of 1862 where it provided:

...the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college in each state where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific or classical studies, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, as the legislatures of the states may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in several pursues and professions of life (Whalen, 2001, p.6).

Under the bill, eligible states received 30,000 acres of land to be utilized for higher education purposes (Whalen, 2001). As a result, many states developed more public universities and provided individuals the opportunity to attend university at a more reasonable cost.

At the same time, there was an increased growth of junior colleges, which are now commonly referred to as community colleges (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Helland, 1987). Originally developed to provide educational training for teachers, community colleges expanded by providing skill-based training for a variety of professions. What also made community colleges differ from universities was that they typically provided two-year programs (Helland, 1987). The premise behind community colleges was that

students could attend these two-year institutions and eventually transfer to a four-year institution when they were more financially ready. Due to their increased development and popularity, they were viewed as being more feasible and efficient for individuals who wanted to pursue a formal education but could not afford the time or money it took to attend a four-year institution. Entering the 20th century, community colleges were found to be a significant American development that greatly impacted the trajectory and development of higher education (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Eckel & King, 2004).

Additional significant changes that occurred throughout the 19th century further focused on providing higher education opportunities to more members of society, especially for women and the African American community. Although higher education institutions for women did exist, a majority of the universities were private. The latter part of the 19th century saw a development in more public women's colleges (Harwarth, 1997; Solomon, 1986). There was also an increase in coeducational institutions, which allowed both men and women to attend the same university as well as the growth of coeducational institutions. This allowed men and women to attend the same university. By 1897, it was estimated that 56% of all undergraduates and 60% of undergraduate women attended coeducational higher education institutions (Goldin & Katz, 2011).

In terms of race, higher education, as well as the overall concept of education, was based on segregation. Due to segregation, African Americans and other minority populations were not given the same equal opportunities to education. The 19th century began to change this concept with the development of Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which specifically aimed at providing higher education opportunities to the African American community. As a result of the Morrill Acts of 1862

and 1890 in conjunction with the end of the Civil War, many HBCUs became established throughout the nation, especially in the southern part of the United States (Boland & Gasman, 2014). While HBCUs provided African American students with accessibility to higher education opportunities, racial segregation continued to exist and remain a significant factor in higher education throughout the end of the 19th century and into the greater half of the 20th century.

The rise of higher education increased as a result of influential historical moments in the United States, especially the World Wars and the Great Depression (Geiger, 2015; Goodchild & Wechesler, 1997; Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2019). During World War I, higher education institutions were known for providing support to war efforts. Not only did institutions provide special training for military personnel, they also engaged in research that would be valuable during battle (e.g., mustard gas; Geiger, 2015; Goodchild & Wechesler, 1997; Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2019). It became commonplace that many young, eligible men were sent to help fight in the war while women learned and worked in medical care settings to help provide recovery for returning soldiers (Hevron, 2014). As the war began to end, enrollment rates at higher education institutions increased. To accommodate more students, the Smith-Hughes National Vocational Act of 1917 was established as a way to increase federal funding for public higher education institutions (Alexander et al., 2014). The government also valued the help of higher institutions and considered them to be a valuable asset to the country.

Although the Great Depression was a devastating event for millions of Americans, people were still interested in attending higher education programs. The growth of higher education was particularly true for community colleges (Brint &

Karabel, 1989; Helland, 1987). A lot of people believed that by attending college, they could learn a new set of skills that would make them more marketable during a devastating crash in the economy.

The concept of education further changed as a result of World War II. With many men sent to fight in Europe, women were required to step into various occupations in order to help keep up with war efforts. When American soldiers returned home from the war, they were faced with the options of trying to find a job or attend college. To make college a more feasible option, the federal government passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (now known as the "G.I. Bill"), which provided educational funding and other financial support for veterans (Goodchild & Wechesler, 1997; Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2019). The bill had a significant impact on helping returning soldiers acclimate back to society. It was also significant because it allowed the federal government to become more involved and invested in the development of higher education (Eckel & King, 2004). However, the G.I. Bill also faced a lot of criticism due to racial segregation, resulting in it being significantly less effective for returning African American veterans (Herbold, 1994; Katznelson, 2005). It also faced criticism because of how for-profit higher education institutions utilized the bill for personal profit at the expense of students' learning experiences (Fraas, 1990).

Although there were multiple instances of inequalities and racial segregation, the later part of the 20th century significantly impacted higher education in such a way that many of the outcomes that occurred continue to be a part of present-day higher education. A significant change in the educational system within the United States was the ending of racial discrimination. As determined by *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954),

racial segregation in public educational institutions were found to be unconstitutional. In addition to outcomes of the Civil Rights Movement, these changes meant that African American students could receive the same equal opportunities as White students, ultimately providing them with access to better quality education (Cross & Slater, 1999).

With the growing population in the United States, as well as the overall need for people to work to have sustainable lives, it became clear that having access to post-secondary education experiences was important. As President Lyndon B. Johnson told Congress, “Higher education is no longer a luxury but a necessity” (Mitchell, 2021, p. 22). In 1965, the Higher Education Act (HEA) was signed into law with its focus on providing support for public and non-profit higher education institutions. The purpose of the law was to “strengthen the educational resources of our colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in postsecondary education” (HEA, 1965, p.1219). Having more resources and financial support was extremely beneficial to low-income, underrepresented, and marginalized populations because it gave them a chance to seek further educational opportunities to help better themselves, their families, and overall society.

Knowing that students of various cultural backgrounds could receive equal educational opportunities, a further step in growing the educational system was to ensure that students of all abilities could receive similar benefits. The Rehabilitation Act (1973) was signed into law to help provide funding to states so they could implement vocational rehabilitation services for individuals with disabilities. The law was especially impactful for federal educational institutions receiving financial assistance because it made sure that they were acting in ways that did not discriminate on the basis of disability. Its

standards ultimately contributed to other laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1990) to protect individuals with disabilities from facing discrimination in education and employment settings. Higher education continued to face several changes during the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, there was an increase in student enrollment and overall development of community colleges. Attending community college became particularly popular with the increased cost of attending other higher education institutions. It was estimated that over half of all college freshmen who attended postsecondary education institutions were enrolled in community colleges by the late 1980s (Brint & Karabel, 1989). While there was continued growth in higher education, concerns about the quality of learning arose. Especially with an increased emphasis on teaching pedagogy and placing value on student learning, the worry was that community colleges were placing more emphasis on vocational training. This worry continued to grow, and more graduates of community colleges were less likely to transfer their postsecondary education to four-year institutions (Clark, 1960; Kisker et al., 2014). Despite these concerns, enrollment rates for community colleges continued to exceed those at four-year institutions (Eckel & King, 2004).

Additionally, there were changes regarding the types of higher education institutions that were offered. A significant part of this change was due to the reauthorizations of the HEA in 1972, which allowed private, for-profit institutions to receive money from Pell Grants and federal financial aid (McGuire, 2012; Perini, 2011). This led to a significant increase in for-profit institutions throughout the 1970s. Although

there were still concerns regarding the quality of education as well as the cost of attending these institutions, the amount of for-profit institutions and overall student enrollment continued to increase throughout the rest of the twentieth century and into the early 2000s.

Further changes developed throughout the 1980s when more public education institutions became privatized. Public higher education institutions previously received and relied on their largest amount of revenue to come from all levels of government (Heller, 2006). However, this took a significant turn when governments began to decrease the amount of money they provided. To highlight its impact, governments provided just shy of 50% of the revenue toward public institutions in 1980. This decreased to 35% by 2002 (Heller, 2006). To make up for the losses, there was a huge increase in the amount of tuition and fees that students were expected to pay. Between 1980 and 2003, it is estimated that tuition at four-year public institutions increased 517% and increased 387% at two-year public institutions (Heller, 2006). Although there were serious implications and concerns regarding higher education, privation continued to grow into the 21st century where there were upwards 1,000 privatized universities established throughout the country by 2007 (Hentschke et al., 2010).

As more institutions privatized, it became severely difficult for the majority of American citizens to afford postsecondary education. The United States and other parts of the world experienced a severe financial downturn as a result of the Great Recession between 2007 and 2009. During this time, higher education institutions experienced further budget cuts and less funding from all levels of government. There was also a significant decline in other forms of institutional revenue, including charitable donations

and endowments (Long, 2014). Knowing that higher education was already expensive prior to the recession, the economic decline made higher education so expensive that it reached “historic highs” (Long, 2014, p. 210). Although there were more opportunities for students and their families to take out federal or private loans to help pay for tuition and additional expenses, it did not solve the problem of the overall cost of attending higher education institutions. Because these loans add interest to them, it actually made the price of higher education even higher (Heller, 2006).

Today, there continues to be increased interest in pursuing higher forms of education. People across the country have a desire to attend higher education institutions for various reasons, such as earning a promotion at their work, wanting to develop skills for employment, and ultimately wanting to provide better lives for themselves and their families. There have also been advancements in overall higher education that make it appealing to future students, including the opportunity to learn a variety of disciplines and the integration of technology in learning. However, the problems discussed continue to have a significant impact on accessibility to higher education. Because of expensive tuition and the overwhelming amounts of student debt, current students ultimately find themselves leaving their institutions without graduating and future students are less likely to pursue postsecondary education (Unglesbee, 2019).

Based on the most recent data available, the average cost of attending a higher education has doubled in the 21st century and continues to grow 6.8% each year (Educational Data Initiative, 2022). The average cost of attending a two-year institution in the state of residence is \$15,748 (including additional expenses) while a public four-year institution in the state of residence is \$25,487 (including additional expenses) per

year (Educational Data Initiative, 2022). The costs are almost 50% higher for institutions outside the state of residence and if they are for-profit and nonprofit. Because of economic recessions and the increased rate of student loans, it is estimated that the cost of attending a four-year institution can be upwards of \$400,000 (Education Data Initiative, 2022).

Given the current climate of higher education, it is clear that not all members of society are able to access, afford, and pursue forms of postsecondary education. Because of these changes, there is an extra burden placed on students and their families to be able to obtain the money for tuition and additional fees, especially for lower-income families (Heller, 2001, 2006). There is a need for higher education to return to its founding principles where the purpose of higher education is to help provide all citizens with opportunities for growth and self-improvement. I argue that one of the ways to help provide more accessibility, affordability, and flexibility in higher education is through the use of online learning and teaching practices.

Section Summary

Since its founding during the 17th century, higher education has changed and continued to be a strong, influential element in today's society. Although higher education was primarily intended for training White, male, higher-class citizens, higher education has expanded to where women and people from diverse backgrounds are able to receive postsecondary education. The additional development of creating public institutions and having government funding allowed higher education to be more accessible and affordable for many citizens across the country. In recent decades, however, the changes in higher education have made it difficult to afford and have

accessibility to postsecondary education, especially because of less government funding and increased tuition rates. To develop change, it is important to explore the ways in which higher education can be more affordable and accessible to current and future students. As a part of my research, I make the argument that it is important to explore how online education can be a valued instructional modality within higher education.

Online Learning in Higher Education

From its development in the Colonial Era to present day, there have been significant changes within higher education. One of the most prominent developments within higher education, especially in the 21st century, is the utilization of distance education, now more commonly referred to as “online learning.” To have a better understanding of how online education became a significant modality within higher education learning, I explored the historical roots of distance education and what online learning looks like in the present day. I provide a discussion on learning theories and pedagogy that currently form our understanding of teaching and learning in online education, including best practices. Finally, I reviewed the current research available regarding online education as well as students’ experiences with learning in an online format.

History of Online Education

Although digital technologies were not created and implemented until the 20th century, the development of distance education can be traced back as early as the 18th century (Kentnor, 2015). The first documented form of distance learning occurred in 1728 when Caleb Philips advertised lessons in shorthand writing through the *Boston Gazette* (Emmerson, 2004; Kentnor, 2015; Pregowska et al., 2021). Philips’ efforts in

providing lessons to the community was revolutionary at the time; however, the fact that his service was only available to those in Boston made it difficult for distance learning to grow throughout other parts of the state as well as throughout the United States.

It is recognized in the literature that distance education was established in 1852 (Emmerson, 2004). The foundation behind distance was to provide educational opportunities to individuals who did not have accessibility to traditional, formal methods of education (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). What made distance education unique, compared to Philips' lessons, was that educational instruction could occur between instructors and students without geographical location being a debilitation. In addition, distance learning was designed to help eliminate some of the barriers that prevented people from attending higher education opportunities, including wealth, social class, gender, and race (Emmerson, 2004). These factors called for educators, institutions, and members of society to develop a method of learning that would be accessible and affordable to all members of society.

Throughout the course of history, the way that people communicated and exchanged information with each other evolved due to various technological advancements. As a result, the modalities in which distance education could be provided also expanded. The following sections provide an overview of the significant teaching modalities that implemented distance education and led to what we now refer to as online education: the post, radio, television, and computers and the Internet.

Education via Post: Correspondence Education

To provide educational opportunities and accessibility to instructional resources, it was important to find a modality that could reach as many people as possible. During

the mid-1800s, the post was the most utilized form of communication between people of long distances. The use of the postal service as a way to provide educational materials to citizens became known as correspondence education. Rather than meeting at a physical classroom, instructors mailed out their syllabi, course assignments, and any course materials to interested students. Once students finished their assignments, they were required to mail them to the instructor in order to receive feedback and credit for completing the course (Kentnor, 2015).

In 1852, the Phonographic Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio was founded by Benjamin Pitman as a way to teach and publish the works of shorthand writing (Emmerson, 2004). Knowing that his students may come from other parts of the country or did not have easy accessibility to come to the Institute, Pitman engaged in correspondence learning by mailing his students their tasks and instructions. Other educators throughout the country were curious of Pitman's instructional methods. Ultimately, his efforts acted as the catalyst for correspondence education and inspired others to establish correspondence educational courses and programs.

The first recognized correspondence school in the United States was the Society to Encourage Students at Home. Daughter of a well-known scholar and Harvard professor, Anna Eliot Ticknor founded the Society in 1873 with the intention of providing educational opportunities for women who lived in rural areas, women of any class standing, or women who were obligated to stay at home and attend to their domestic obligations (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Emmerson, 2004). Ticknor's goal was to encourage women to set aside a small portion of their day to learn about something new. As a part of the correspondence school, students were required to receive instruction in one of six

disciplines: science, art, English, French, German, and history. Students' personal accounts expressed their attendance at the Society was a significantly beneficial learning experience (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). The Society closed its doors in 1897 after Ticknor's death. During the course of its existence, the Society provided education to over 7,000 women (Jónasson, 2001).

Correspondence learning continued to make a significant impact on views of education, especially adult education, as a result of the Chautauqua Movement of the 1870s. In 1874, two founders of this movement, Lewis Miller and John Heyl Vincent, established the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly (now known as the Chautauqua Institution) to provide further religious and art-related education to Sunday school teachers during the summer months (Emmerson, 2004; Kentnor, 2015). Knowing that the Society was aimed at providing women with an education, Miller and Vincent wanted to establish an educational setting for both men and women as well as provide a general education to the working middle class (Emmerson, 2004). To meet these growing needs, Miller and Vincent later expanded the program by developing the first adult education correspondence program in the country called the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) in 1878 (Kentnor, 2015; Scott, 1999). By 1894, the CLSC provided education to upwards of 255,000 students (Scott, 1999).

The success of the Chautauqua Movement had multiple implications for the growth of overall education. While its foundations began in New York, it did not take long for similar institutions, known as "Chautauquas," to spread across the country (Kentnor, 2015; Saba, 2011). While the Movement focused more on general education, it inspired other developing correspondence education to provide instruction based on

vocational training, such as in mining and farming (Emmerson, 2004). This was a great need, especially in terms of educating people on proper safety techniques. Colleges and universities, such as the University of Chicago and University of Wisconsin, were also influenced by the Movement and adopted correspondence teaching modalities to further expand their efforts to educate members of society (Emmerson, 2004; Scott, 1999).

Moving into the 20th century, discussions of distance education and its overall influence on learning opportunities continued. However, by the 1920s, the demand for correspondence education slowly declined (Emmerson, 2004). Educational materials became more accessible due to public libraries, study groups, the establishment of colleges and universities in rural areas, and the invention of the radio (Emmerson, 2004). Although education through the postal service was not as popular as it once was, it set the foundation for other instructional modalities to be considered and eventually integrated into distance learning.

Transmitting Education through the Radio

While correspondence education moved into the 20th century, the invention of the radio raised questions and curiosities about how it could be beneficial in providing distance education. The first federally licensed radio station dedicated to educational radio broadcasting, WHA, was implemented in 1907 (Engel, 1936). Some of the first institutions to offer educational radio programs included Ohio State University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Wisconsin (Emmerson, 2004; Kentnor, 2015). Significant factors that made educational radio appealing was that information could be broadcasted to people across the country and that it allowed students to be able to hear their instructors in real time, whereas correspondence learning depended on how fast the

postal service could deliver and exchange mail (Pregowska et al., 2021). At the same time, learning through the radio also had its challenges, including poor audio quality, adjusting to how to utilize the radio itself, and requiring people to set aside scheduled time so that they could listen to the educational content that was being aired (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Despite these adjustments and limitations, educational institutions took advantage of educational radio programs and even utilized the radio to broadcast campus events, such as football games and musical concerts (Buckland & Dye, 1991). The radio became a huge hit for educational opportunities throughout the 1920s. By the end of the decade, there were 176 institutions that had educational radio broadcasting licenses (Kentnor, 2015).

Unfortunately, the United States was significantly impacted at the end of the decade with the beginning of the Great Depression. Because of the economic downturn, this meant that there was not enough funding to continue supporting education through the radio. While institutions continued to broadcast education programs, it was found that only 20% of these programs survived by the end of the depression (Pregowska et al., 2021). Although the use of the radio in facilitating education declined, its implementation inspired educators and institutions to explore how other technological advancements could be integrated into the learning experience. This led to the next technological advancement, the television, and its role in distance education (Emmerson, 2004).

Educational Television

The use of television in distance education allowed institutions and educators to reflect on some of the things they valued as well as some of the challenges they faced when they utilized the radio (Emmerson, 2004). Televisions were viewed as the next

advancement from the radio because not only could students hear their instructors, but they could also see them in real time. This was especially valued because instructors could now utilize visual aids to help demonstrate and teach on important, complex concepts.

In 1934, the first university to embrace educational television was the University of Iowa (Emmerson, 2004). Other universities that followed this path included Iowa State University, Kansas State University, the University of Michigan, and American University (Koenig & Hill, 1967). Because of its increased popularity and problems with interference, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) started reserving television channels for the specific purpose of providing educational content. The FCC reserved 242 channels when it first intervened in 1952. By 1966, there were 632 channels reserved for televised educational purposes (Kentnor, 2015). During this same year, one-third of the channels available were licensed by colleges and universities (Koenig & Hill, 1967).

During the 1960s and 1970s, broadcasting educational content through televisions in higher education began to decline. A major criticism of educational television was that students did not find educational programs engaging due to their lecture-based structure (Verduin & Clark, 1991). However, televisions were still viewed as an asset because they inspired networks to provide educational content for young children. One of the most influential networks developed during this time was the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and its children's show, *Sesame Street* (1970-2015; Saba, 2011). Despite its establishment over 50 years ago, PBS continues to be a well-respected network to this day (PBS, 2020). Another important advancement that resulted from exploring television in distance education were audio and visual cassettes.

Audio and Visual Cassettes

Developed by Philips, audio cassettes (also known as “compact cassettes”) were available for institutions, educators, and students in 1963 (Pregowska et al., 2021). Audio cassettes shared the commonality with the radio in that there was not a visual component involved. However, audio cassettes had advantages, including how they were designed to be able to hold content as well as be accessible numerous times because of its rewinding abilities. In terms of distance education, audio cassettes became a popular instructional method for teaching students about music and languages (Pregowska et al., 2021). They became even more popular in 1979 when Sony created the Walkman, which allowed individuals to continue learning while with the additional benefit of portability (Pregowskia et al., 2021). Its portability and affordability further reduced educational barriers.

In the 1990s, audio cassettes were surpassed by its competitor, the video cassette. Video cassettes provided the same benefits that audio cassettes had, with the additional component of providing users with a visual component. However, they were not very practical in providing educational content at a distance because they could only hold content that was no longer than 120 minutes. Video cassettes were also made of materials that would decrease its lifespan, which also did not help with keeping down educational costs (Pregowska et al., 2021).

Computers and the Internet in Distance Education

Computers. Computers were conceptualized as early as the 19th century (Williamson, 2021), but our current understanding of these machines occurred during the 20th century. When commercial computers were produced in 1946 (Williamson, 2021),

they were extremely massive, expensive, and often required an operational staff in order for them to work. Because of this, computers were limited to major institutions, including universities and colleges, the government, and large businesses (Pregowska et al., 2021). It was not until the late 1970s when computers became more commonplace and more feasible for people to have in their homes. Some of the first computers available to members of society were the Apple II (1977), International Business Machines Personal Computer ([IBM PC]; 1981), Apple Macintosh (1984), and Microsoft Windows (1985; Williamson, 2021).

With more accessible ways of obtaining a computer, the next step was to develop ways that allowed people to store data. In the 1970s, the first form of data storage for the computer consisted of the floppy disk. These were eventually replaced with Compact Disc Read Only Memories, which are commonly referred to as “CD-ROMs” or “CDs”, by the 1990s (Pregowska et al., 2021). Both data storage products were beneficial in leading to the use of computers in education, especially in distance education. They allowed people to store printed, audio, and visual learning materials that they could access whenever they were near a computer (Pregowska et al., 2021).

The Internet. The first signs of the Internet being developed occurred in the 1960s when J. C. R. Licklider, director of the United States Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), created its network called ARPANET (Emmerson, 2004; Pregowska et al., 2021). The concept behind ARPANET was that it allowed multiple computers to communicate with each other while connected to a single network. This was a significant development, especially in terms of distance education, because it allowed people to communicate with each other regardless of geographical

location (Emmerson, 2004). It also meant people could communicate and exchange information with each other faster than was ever possible. ARPANET was the foundational piece for the Internet and led to the development of the World Wide Web in 1989, which is what we use to this day (Emmerson, 2004).

Implications for Distance Education. The combination of computers and the Internet were revolutionary in providing distance education opportunities throughout the country as well as the world. In 1989, the University of Phoenix became the first fully online institution that provided bachelor-level and master-level degrees (Kentnor, 2015; Pregowska et al., 2021). Not only did an online education program allow students to take college and graduate level courses at any geographical location, it also helped decrease the cost of tuition. Students did not need to pay the additional institutional fees that would be required if they had attended a non-local in-person institution, such as room and board. The fact that many course offerings were provided asynchronously also meant that students could be self-paced learners, allowing for more flexibility for those who also worked, had families, and other life obligations.

Throughout the 1990s, other institutions, such as Jones International University, the University of Maryland and Western Governors University, looked at implementing or creating distance education courses and programs (Kentnor, 2015). In 1995, the State University of New York (SUNY) implemented an online education consortium and developed the SUNY Learning Network (SLN; Emmerson, 2004). SLN consisted of 56 campuses that offered over 3,000 online courses and 66 degree and certification programs to students in the United States as well as worldwide (Emmerson, 2004). A similar consortium was founded in 1997 called the California Virtual University (CVU), which

consisted of featuring 100 online and distance educational programs across the State of California (Downes, 1999; Kentnor, 2015). The turn of the century left students, educators, and institutions wondering about the next technological advancements and how they would ultimately impact distance education.

The 21st Century: Where We are Today

In the 21st century, online education became the fastest growing and most dominant form of distance education (Kentnor, 2015) due to people's access to computers and the Internet. At the beginning of the century, it was found that 51% of households in the United States owned at least one computer. This number jumped to 83% by 2002 (Emmerson, 2004) and increased to 89% in 2016 (Ryan, 2018). Over the past decade, even more technology advancements, such as tablets and smartphones, have played a role in obtaining and exchanging information in an educational setting. It is now commonplace that a majority of people's technology devices are able to connect to the Internet as long as they are in a location with stabilized wireless fidelity, which is better known as "Wi-Fi."

Knowing that computers and the Internet provided easier access to higher education courses and programs, the next steps in advancing online education included its affordability to interested students and the quality of online education. In terms of affordability, the federal government implemented requirements that allowed students to be able to take upwards of 50% of their classes online (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). As more research and interest in online education continues to develop, the amount of financial aid may change. There are also multiple associations and governing bodies, such as the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), that ensure that institutions are

meeting the expectations of quality online learning. The council, which is a department attached to the United States DOE, states that its purpose is “to foster and preserve high quality, educationally sound and widely accepted distance education and independent learning institutions” (DETC, n.d, para. 1).

When looking at the overall trends of higher education, it is estimated that online education is growing at 10 times the rate compared to the two percent rate of traditional in-person higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In 2007, 3.9 million higher education students out of the 18.2 million students who were enrolled in higher education (21.4%) were enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2008). This number grew to 29.0% by the Fall of 2010 (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Throughout the past decade, higher education institutions have increased their interest and implementation of online learning and instruction. There are more than 6 million graduate-level students who have taken at least one online course, which makes up 31.6% of all students enrolled in higher education courses and programs (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018)., These numbers significantly increased due to the pandemic. In the fall semester of 2020, 2.2 million post-baccalaureate students (71%) were enrolled in at least one online course while 1.6 million of those students (52%) were enrolled entirely in online classes (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022b). The number of students also showed a significant increase in enrollment of online classes within undergraduate programs. Based on the most current information available, institutions with the highest enrollment rates for online educational courses and programs include Western Governors University (Utah), Southern New Hampshire University (New Hampshire), Grand Canyon University (Arizona), Liberty University

(VA), and The Pennsylvania State University (Pennsylvania; NCES, 2022a). With technology advances, greater accessibility, and continued growth of higher education programs, 77.1% of institutions that provide online forms of learning believe that providing online education is “critical for their long-term strategy” (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 5).

Learning Theory and Pedagogy

As highlighted in its historical roots, the concept of online learning in higher education has dramatically increased, especially within the past two decades. A significant reason behind this growth is the result of new developments in technology that allow instructors and students to communicate and interact with each other from any location that has an internet connection. Although research is still much needed to determine the most effective learning theories and pedagogies for an online learning and teaching environment, our current understanding of online learning is based on the following areas: constructivist pedagogy, the utilization of Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956), and incorporating the use of experiential learning theory and activities.

Constructivist Pedagogy

Constructivism is an instructional pedagogical approach that involves students and instructors collaboratively engaging in the learning environment to develop a new sense of meaning. This approach moves away from the traditional lecture-based instructional approach, which can be argued to be a passive form of learning, by requiring students to actively participate in what they are learning. Constructivism is an accepted approach within higher education (Tenebaum et al., 2001) and it could be argued that it is

the only pedagogical method that places significant emphasis on the learning experience for both instructors and students (Lunenburg, 1998).

Muirhead (2006) discussed how there are four main assumptions of a constructivist pedagogical approach:

(1) Knowledge depends on past constructions. We know the world through our mental framework and we transform and interpret new information through this framework; (2) Constructions come through systems of assimilation and accommodation into our existing mental framework. If information is incongruent with that framework, it cannot be assimilated. But we can develop a higher-level of cognition to accommodate this new information and zones of new development; (3) Learning is an organic process of invention, not mechanical. Knowledge is more than facts or information. Learners must be able to hypothesize, predict, manipulate, and construct knowledge; [and] (4) Meaningful learning occurs through reflection and scaffolding of new knowledge upon existing framework of knowledge (para. 3).

All members in the educational environment have a critical role in the learning experience. The role of instructors is to emphasize a student-centered learning environment where they utilize students' current stage of knowledge to help introduce new information. A constructivist instructor would ask the question, "What do students need to learn?" rather than, "What do I want to teach?" (Brandon & All, 2010). To create a student-focused learning environment, instructors utilize a variety of experiential activities and techniques to help students not only understand what they are learning, but to also help them apply their knowledge in real-life settings. In return, students are asked

to share their perspectives and challenge these perspectives based on what they have learned, thus helping students create a new sense of meaning. With all members in the learning environment working together, learning is viewed to be a more organic process (Brandon & All, 2010).

Constructivist Alignment. In education, there is a strong emphasis on student learning outcomes (SLOs). Constructive alignment is a component of constructivism that focuses on making sure that what is happening in the educational environment is congruent with what is anticipated or expected of SLOs. As highlighted by Shuell (1986):

[I]f students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes... Without taking away from the important role played by the teacher, it is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does (p. 429).

Professor John B. Biggs was the first to create and discuss constructivist alignment in his earlier works in 1999 and 2003 that continue to be influential in educational practice. There are three main stages that are required to apply constructive alignment in teaching (Biggs & Tang, 2020).

Stage 1: Defining Intended SLOs. The first stage involves defining the intended SLOs, which are utilized to set up course expectations for both students and instructors. It is common for instructors to write verb statements and reference established taxonomies (e.g., Bloom's Taxonomy) when writing SLOs because they provide a clear direction of what is going to be taking place throughout the course. Ideally, there should be three to

four SLOs per course. When developing SLOs, it is important for instructors to be mindful of the purpose of the course, the students who are going to take the course, and its implications outside of an academic setting (Biggs & Tang, 2020).

Stage 2: Choosing Teaching/Learning Activities. The next step of constructive alignment focuses on how to achieve SLOs, which are mainly accomplished through teaching/learning and activities (TLAs). This is a significant step away from traditional learning practices because it requires students to be active, engaged, and participate in learning the material (Biggs & Tang, 2020).

Stage 3: Designing Assessment Tasks and Grading Procedures. For constructive alignment to be successful, the assigned tasks (ATs) should be aligned with SLOs. There are various ways that instructors design ATs, such as requiring students to demonstrate and apply their knowledge through writing papers, conducting experiments, and creating projects on the course material. ATs are often associated with a form of outcome that provides information on student performance and the overall development of SLOs (Biggs & Tang, 2020).

Bloom's Taxonomy

As mentioned above, Bloom's Taxonomy (also referred to as the Taxonomy), is a popular tool for instructors when designing courses from a constructivist pedagogical approach. The Taxonomy was published *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) and aimed to provide a framework for how instructors could classify different learning objectives and evaluate student learning outcomes (Bloom, 1994). The goal is to encourage educators and students to use higher levels on the Taxonomy to enhance students' levels of cognitive complexity. As a part of his original Taxonomy, Bloom

(1956) identified six categories that would provide further growth toward critical thinking and cognitive complexity development. Since then, the Taxonomy was revised in 2001 and includes the following six categories: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. It is common to see the Taxonomy replicated in a pyramid-shape where the lower tier (remember) is considered to involve lower levels of critical thinking while the highest tier (create) involves higher levels of critical thinking and enhances the development of cognitive complexity.

At the base of critical thinking and cognitive development, “remember” refers to having students demonstrate their ability to recall facts and content-based knowledge. “Understand” involves having students explain or articulate the facts and content that they were asked to remember. The third tier, “apply,” requires that students demonstrate their understanding of the material, whether that is in an academic setting or in a real-life setting. The fourth tier of the Taxonomy is “analyze,” which asks students to question the information that they have learned and truly examine it for its accuracy and relevance. “Evaluate” involves asking students to judge the material they have learned in terms of if they agree or disagree with the content. The last and highest tier on the Taxonomy is “create,” which involves having students actively apply their knowledge and construct something new with what they have learned.

In relation to higher education, the Taxonomy is valuable in guiding instructors on how their teaching is encouraging critical thinking skills and cognitive complexity development, whether that is through their lectures, assignments, discussions, or course projects. While the first three tiers are essential in helping students establish a strong background on the content, they do not challenge students in terms of how they would

actively apply and utilize their knowledge. Incorporating and fostering higher levels of critical thinking and cognitive development are critical in higher education because they align with the overall mission of higher education, which is to inspire and create life-long learners (Alt, 2016).

Experiential Learning Theory and Activities

As a critical element of constructivism, having students be actively engaged in the learning process through the use of experiential activities helps with student understanding. One of the most notable founders of experiential learning is David A. Klob and his development of experiential learning theory (ELT). Klob (1984) believed that learning was “experiential” because he viewed learning as a process rather linear, which was different from the cognitive and behavioral theories of learning.

ELT is based on two major concepts: 1) the experiential learning cycle, and 2) learning styles. The experiential cycle consists of four parts. The first part is referred to as the concrete experience. This involves having learners actively participate in what is meant to be experienced. Another way of thinking of this is that the learners “do” the experience. The second component of the cycle is the reflective observation, which requires learners to take time to reflect on what they just experienced and its overall meaning. The third part of the cycle is abstract conceptualization, which involves having learners try to make sense of what they just experienced. Learners often use their previous knowledge and experiences to make sense of new information (Klob, 1984). The fourth component, active experimentation, requires learners to experiment and apply what they learned in a real-world setting.

The second concept of ELT involves the learning cycle, which also has four stages: diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating. Diverging learners are individuals who prefer to learn through watching rather than doing. They are likely to have increased awareness of emotions and have strong skills in understanding and considering multiple perspectives. Assimilating learners are more interested in ideas and abstract concepts. They enjoy learning about a variety of things and are able to keep information organized in a clear, logical way. Conserving learners have strengths in problem-solving and technical skills. Instead of interacting with others, they want to experiment and ultimately find solutions to their questions. Klob's (1984) last learning style, accommodating learners who utilize their instincts and more like to actively engage with what is being learned.

Knowing that learning is a complex, continual process, Klob (1984) believed that people could be within various stages and have various learning styles, depending on what was being learned and what was experienced. His main argument was that individuals need to engage in the learning process in order for true learning to occur.

Best Practices in Online Higher Education

Currently, an official set of guidelines that provide information on best practices for online education in a postsecondary setting is unavailable. As described by Wolf (2006), "Best practices in distance education are being defined through trial and error" (p. 52). The information that is available comes from previous literature and research studies asking instructors about their experiences teaching online. Based on the literature, I have organized the themes into two categories: instructor course preparation and online classroom environment.

Instructor Course Preparation

I define instructor course preparation as factors or requirements that instructors need established prior to teaching online. After reviewing the literature, the overarching themes that instructors consider to be crucial for their success with online teaching include institutional support, online instructional training, and course design and delivery.

Institutional Support. Knowing that many instructors have limited experience with teaching online (e.g., Allen & Seaman, 2015; Carver, 2016; Herman, 2012; Horvitz et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2014), it is understandable instructors enter an online learning environment feeling hesitant and anxious about their abilities (e.g., Baran et al., 2011; Blackmon, 2016; Hockridge, 2013; Mandernach et al., 2012). Instructors continuously emphasize the need for having a supportive institution to ultimately provide quality online teaching. As stated by Wolf (2006), successful online programs happen when institutions provide “the necessary financial, human, and infrastructure sources necessary to design, maintain, and support the distance education training program” (p. 60). Another way of thinking of this idea is that institutions need to be committed and invested into making sure that they are providing quality support and resources to faculty, staff, and students to see the results of quality online education. This means that administrators will be required to think about their institution’s infrastructure, including revising or developing institutional policies specific to online learning and teaching, allocation of necessary funding for training and equipment, developing a strategic plan for how to effectively implement online learning, and implementing a leadership team to support university members with online teaching and learning (Beaudoin et al., 2013). Institutions may also provide incentives to faculty and staff to increase their motivation

for online teaching, such as through facilitating social opportunities and providing stipends (Star, 2001). Additionally, institutions are encouraged to seek regular feedback from faculty, staff, students, and other university members about what supports are available, the quality of the supports provided, and if other supports are needed (Wolf, 2006).

Online Instructional Training. As discussed in the literature, the way that instructors teach in-person is different when compared to how they teach in an online environment (Marek, 2009; Wolf, 2006). Wolf (2006) argued that instructors are more successful at teaching online when they are provided with formal training related to online education. To assist with instructional training, many online instructors utilize Chickering and Gamson's (1987, 1991) seven principles for teaching in higher education:

1. Encourage contact between students and faculty,
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students,
3. Encourage active learning,
4. Give prompt feedback,
5. Emphasize time on task,
6. Communicate high expectations, and
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

Utilizing the principles as a foundation, Dreon (2013) tailored the principles to incorporate ways that instructors can still adhere to the principles in an online learning environment. For example, in terms of encouraging contact between instructors and students, Dreon (2013) discussed how he tries to incorporate multiple ways of how students can contact them (e.g., email, Skype, Twitter, etc.) as well as outlining clear

times where students can attend office hours. By providing more instructional training on how to teach online, instructors feel more comfortable and confident with new learning modalities and feel more prepared to create higher quality learning materials and ultimately facilitate meaningful learning experiences for students (Frass et al., 2017).

Course Delivery and Design. In addition to instructional training, instructors who teach online also need to think about their pedagogical perspectives (Baran et al., 2011; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Schmidt et al., 2013). What worked well in an in-person environment may need to be changed or redesigned to fit with an online environment. For example, a way of implementing group work in an online setting is for the instructor to establish breakout rooms that are separate from the larger group video conference call. Because of the difference in learning modalities, researchers recommend that instructors create organized, structured classes (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010) that also allow for some degree of flexibility where they can make necessary changes throughout the learning process to meet students' learning needs (Somoza-Fernández & Abadal, 2009).

When developing activities, the literature consistently shares that instructors should create creative activities that are student-centered, specifically focusing on opportunities to increase student engagement and motivation (Dewald, 1999a; Dewald, 1999b; Sachs et al., 2013). Examples of active student engagement include classroom discussions and discussion boards (Hitch & Hirsch, 2001; Dimeo, 2017), class participation (Dimeo, 2017; Mantyla & Gividen, 1997), modeling concepts (e.g., modeling how active listening works in a counseling session; Hitch & Hirsch, 2001), and incorporating material that is applicable to real-world settings (Rapchak, 2017). In addition to experiential learning activities, it is also recommended that instructors

incorporate various forms of multimedia, such as images and videos, as a way of helping with student retention, engagement, and sense of motivation to learn (Rapchak, 2017).

Online Classroom Environment

I define the online classroom environment as factors that are critical to have when developing an online learning experience. Based on the literature, the overall themes that instructors should incorporate in their online classroom environments include fostering student-instructor and peer relationships, feedback, establishing classroom expectations, and technology support.

Fostering Student-Instructor and Peer Relationships. As highlighted by Driscoll et al. (2012), “The most ubiquitous principle that underlies discussions of online teaching practices is that quality online courses must incorporate a substantial amount of interaction” (p. 315). The concept of interacting with one another may sound like a given expectation, but the ability to have frequent interaction is not always a given in an online learning environment (e.g., an asynchronous course). It is also important in that it helps increase student satisfaction of taking online courses (Bollinger & Inan, 2012). To create a more personable learning environment, instructors should consider the ways in which they can create a warm, inviting environment. Common examples include sending a welcome email to students at the beginning of the semester, providing students with a biography of themselves, and establishing synchronous class meetings, or holding office hours (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006).

It is also important to note that helping students engage with each other is important for an online learning environment. Not only does this help students get to know each other and share a common experience, but it also helps them establish an

overall sense of community (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). Examples of how instructors can help facilitate peer interactions include assigning group project (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006), implementing discussions (Tang & Lam, 2012; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006), and hosting class meetings through virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom; Sheperis et al., 2020).

Feedback. Feedback is an essential aspect of the learning process. This is especially true in an online setting where quality feedback may be the primary form of student-instructor interaction (Ekong, 2006). Feedback gives students the opportunity to see if they are truly understanding the material or if they need to ask for extra help in their learning process (Kranzow, 2013). It is recommended that feedback should be detailed, occur on a frequent basis, and involve having established evaluation and rubrics that define what is expected out of students (Baran & Corriea, 2014; Ekong, 2006; Kaufman, 2015; Northrup, 2009; Waisk et al., 2019).

Additionally, feedback is also a helpful tool that instructors can use to help them learn more about what is working in the course, what needs to be changed or adjusted, and gain further insight on how to provide students with further support. Feedback can occur through informal and formal methods (Kauffman, 2015). An example of an informal way of obtaining feedback is for instructors to check in with their students each course to see how they feel about the overall course. Instructors can also choose to seek formal feedback, such as through having students fill out anonymous surveys or questionnaires.

Establishing Classroom Expectations. Within any learning environment, it is important to have a set of established requirements that both instructors and students

must agree to follow to help ensure a more successful and meaningful learning experience. When thinking about instructors' expectations for themselves, Wilson and colleagues (2004) provided examples of roles that instructors often perform, such as creating a structured and detailed course environment, modeling collaboration skills, supervising student activity, assessing and monitoring student learning, engaging in problem solving when conflicts arise, and establishing trusting relationships within the classroom. An additional role that is necessary, particularly within an online environment, involves instructors making their digital presence known by students (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007), such as through utilizing their video cameras during lectures and responding to students in chat rooms and discussion posts. In terms of their expectations for students, instructors require that students understand how online learning works and what qualities will contribute to their success in their online classes, such as being comfortable with using technology and having self-discipline (Comer et al., 2015). Because many students have varying experiences with online learning, instructors are encouraged to be mindful of how they model expected behaviors to guide students on what is expected from them throughout the course (Comer et al., 2015).

Similarly, students also find that they have a personal set of requirements that are needed to help promote their success in online learning environments. Researchers find that students who are most successful in their online classes are self-directed learners (Fisher et al., 2001), utilize time management skills, have higher levels of efficacy (Holder, 2007), actively participate in the learning community (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996), have quality writing skills, and can manage technical challenges (Comer et al., 2015). Comer and colleagues (2015) emphasized this point by concluding, "The

performance of any student – whether in a traditional face-to-face class or a wholly asynchronous online class – relies in large part on the student’s acceptance of key role responsibilities” (p. 146). Students also enter their online classes with a set of expectations that they have for their instructors. Examples of these expectations include clear communication about course goals, learning objectives, and anticipated outcomes (e.g., detailed syllabi, directions for assignments, etc.; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Palloff & Pratt, 1999); facilitate class discussions and student engagement (McLawhon & Cutright, 2012; Wilson et al., 2004), encourage meaningful interactions and relationships with peers and instructors (Newbold et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2004), create a strong instructional presence throughout the learning process (Dixon, 2010), develop an understanding for students’ learning styles and learning needs (McCombs & Vakili, 2005), and convey a sense of understanding that students also have responsibilities in other areas of life, such as with work and family (Kasworm, 2014).

Technology Support. Knowing that communication, exchanging of information, teaching, and learning takes place with the use of technology in an online education environment, it is important that faculty, staff, students, and other university members have access to technology supportive services. Because both instructors and students enter the online classroom with varying degrees of experience with technology, having accessible technology supports helps both instructors and students feel more comfortable with their learning and teaching experience. For instructors, Seok and colleagues (2010) found that instructors feel more confident in their capabilities when they can seek support from technical staff members. Similarly, students value having additional resources that they can utilize inside and outside of the classroom (Chow & Croxton, 2017; Roby et al.,

2013), such as when working on assignments or having technical challenges during an exam. Moore and Kearsly (2005) recommended that institutions implement physical or virtual help desks at all university members can use when experiencing challenges with technology. For easier accessibility, instructors are encouraged to include the contact information for their institution's technology support on their syllabi and course pages.

Research on the Efficacy of Online Higher Education

Although online education is growing in use and popularity within online education, there has been a natural concern regarding its capability to be just as effective as a traditional in-person classroom setting (Hannafin et al., 2003; Lack, 2013). As a result, there was an increase in research comparing the effectiveness of online classes with traditional face-to-face classes. For example, Neuhauser (2002) wanted to examine if there were significant differences in learning outcomes between two sections of the same course. The course was a 200-level graduate course that could be taken by both business majors and non-business majors. Both sections of the course were taught by the same instructor and utilized the same learning activities, learning materials, and assessments. In total there were 62 students in both sections where 25 students were enrolled in the in-person course and 37 were enrolled in the online course. The results concluded that there were no significant differences in the effectiveness of the overall course. However, there were significant differences regarding the effectiveness of two course activities (chapter pretests and chapter reviews) in that students in the online course section found them to be "very effective" compared to the students who took the in-person section of the course. An explanation for these results may be because students in the online course section relied more on course activities to help facilitate their

understanding while students in the in-person section of the course were able to rely more on classroom discussions. Although not significant, the results also found that students in the online section rated online discussions to be less effective compared to the in-person course section. This may be due to the fact that online discussions were relatively new at this point and both students and instructors needed more experience on how to facilitate beneficial and effective discussions in an online format. Neuhauser (2002) concluded that it is possible to have an effective online graduate course and that further experience and developments could help improve online learning to the point that it became commonplace within higher education.

Now that online education has been more frequently utilized in higher education, Faulconer et al. (2017) conducted a study where they compared students' performance in an online course and an in-person course of the same introductory chemistry lecture and laboratory sections. Although the course outline and required textbooks were the same for both sections, the sections were taught by separate instructors. After the withdrawal date, there were a total of 395 students enrolled in the lecture (225 students in-person and 104 students online) and 428 students enrolled in the laboratory section (331 students in-person and 97 students online). Despite there being differences between the two sections, the results showed that there were no differences in student performance. It is also important to note that withdrawal rates between the course sections were insignificant. Interestingly, the researchers found that there were differences in grade distribution in that students in the online course were twice as likely to receive A's while students in the in-person course were more likely to receive C's and D's. An explanation for these results may be due to the fact that students in the online sections were able to review

course materials throughout their entire studying process whereas students in the in-person sections only get to experience the course a set number of times per week where they have to rely on the textbook and class notes to help them with studying. The researchers concluded that online higher education courses can be viewed as being just as effective as traditional in-person courses and that future research should look into the differences in mastery of learning outcomes by instructional modality.

To further our understanding of the efficacy of online learning in higher education, Soffer and Nachmias (2018) conducted a study to examine effectiveness, student engagement and satisfaction, and learning outcomes between in-person and online courses. As a part of the study, the researchers examined three higher education classes that had previously been taught in-person. The courses were then converted into an online format for comparison purposes. Three-hundred-sixty students participated in the research by filling out a questionnaire and were asked to rate their responses on a 5-point Likert scale. The results showed that students in the online sections of their courses were more likely to comprehend the course's overall structure, had higher levels of lecture attendance, reported higher rates of engagement and satisfaction, and had higher grades. It is also important to note that there was not a significant difference in course completion rate between course modalities. The researchers concluded their study provided further information regarding the effectiveness of online learning in higher education and that online courses will continue to be effective as instructors design their online courses based on research recommendations and overall online best teaching practices.

Student Experiences with Online Courses

In addition to efficacy, it is also important to understand how students experience what it is like being in an online learning environment. Knowing that students across various disciplines may have different experiences, I first reviewed the literature regarding students' experiences when taking general higher education courses in a virtual setting. I then review the literature from helping disciplines that are similar to counseling, such as nursing and social work.

General Higher Education. O'Shea et al. (2015) explored undergraduate and postgraduate students' narratives when engaging in an online learning environment. The researchers collected data from 19 interviews and 38 survey responses, which contained open-ended questions asking students about their experiences with feeling engaged in an online environment in relation to their peers, instructors, and their institutions. Utilizing Pittaway's (2012) Engagement Framework as a guide, the researchers developed three overarching themes related to engagement: social engagement, academic and intellectual engagement, and personal engagement. In regard to social engagement, students presented mixed views. While some participants went above and beyond in their classroom environments to connect with their peers (e.g., establishing a Facebook group), other participants felt they did not need peer connections in order to learn. Participants also described how their social engagement consisted of interacting with their instructors. They described negative experiences in developing connections with their instructors when they felt that their instructors did not adequately communicate, did not respond, or simply "disappeared" from the online classroom. In opposition, participants described positive connections with their instructors when they felt that their instructors were

actively involved in the learning process and provided frequent, timely communication.

In terms of academic engagement, participants discussed how their courses often required them to interact with the rest of the class through the use of online discussions.

Participants expressed a range of experiences, such as appreciating the opportunity to learn from others to feeling a sense of frustration if the forums were not monitored appropriately. A majority of participants also discussed that they did not feel personally engaged in their institutions due to being in an online environment and had to actively seek out opportunities in order to feel a sense of connection. With personal engagement, the participants highlighted how motivation, confidence, and perseverance were important in helping them succeed in an online learning environment. The researchers provided further recommendations that highlighted ways to increase engagement in online courses, such as developing higher quality courses, increasing forms of communication, having instructors be more actively involved in the learning process, and provide technology assistance.

Because of the increased flexibility and accessibility associated with taking online courses, Stone et al. (2016) examined first generation students' experiences in taking online higher education courses. In addition, the researchers also explored reasons as to why these students chose to attend higher education institutions, both from a general sense as well as their reasons for choosing an online learning format, and factors that they found helpful in their education journeys. To conduct the study, the researchers collected data from 87 undergraduate students where 43 students participated in in-depth interviews while 44 completed the researchers' online survey. From the interviews, the researchers found that students' experiences were organized among three themes:

motivations and influences for enrolling in higher education, choice of online education, and role of others. The participants spoke about how their decision for enrolling in higher education courses was due to a variety of factors, such as seeking better opportunities for employment, securing their current form of employment, and living out their dreams of earning a college degree. As for why they chose to take online courses, participants spoke out about the flexibility that online courses offered and how it allowed them to still uphold their family and work responsibilities. Some participants discussed how they never thought that they could attend higher education institutions and that online learning provided them with opportunities that they did not previously think were possible. When speaking about the role of others, participants highlighted the support they received in their academic pursuits from partners, parents, children, and employers. Although some participants highlighted family members who were less understanding of their decision to take online higher education courses, many of the participants spoke about how online education provided them with the ability to engage in personal and professional growth. The researchers found the study findings to be encouraging for the further growth of online education and its ability to be accessible to a large, diverse group of people.

Nursing. In reviewing the literature, research involving nursing education and online higher education began at the same time when higher education institutions were adopting the implementation of online learning and offering more online courses. As an example, Ali et al. (2004) conducted a study where they examined nursing students' perceptions of online learning experiences after completing their master's program. The researchers were specifically interested in how the students learned, how they perceived their relationships with their peers and instructors, what they thought was beneficial or

challenging about their online learning experience, and how they felt that faculty could improve online learning. Based on 12 interviews and eight web-based surveys, participants discussed how they learned through reflection, exploration, collaboration with faculty and peers, and sharing information. They commented how they utilized their learning management system as a way to help them stay informed with the course, such as finding out the dates for tests and overall classroom announcements. In terms of their relationships, participants shared that their experiences ranged from having greater forms of socialization to having very few ways of communicating with others. Those who felt connected to their peers and instructors expressed that they learned more in the course because they could hear multiple perspectives. However, those who did not feel connected discussed feeling alone and isolated. Similar discussions were also found when asking participants what they felt was working or could be different in their online education. Participants also commented on how they felt frustrated due to technical difficulties. In terms of feedback on how to improve online education, participants highlighted the importance of timely and consistent feedback from their instructors. Because the use and adoption of online learning was still new in education, the researchers discussed the importance of incorporating effective pedagogical strategies, such as those from a constructivist approach, in order to help create a stimulating and productive online learning environment.

As the use of technology and involvement in online learning became more popular, Moule et al. (2010) studied nursing and healthcare students' experiences engaging in online learning as a part of their professional training. The researchers utilized a mixed-methods approach where they reached out to various higher education

institutions across the United Kingdom. The qualitative data consisted of 41 students from six institutions who participated in focus group interviews. Based on the students' experiences, the researchers identified three themes: pedagogical use, factors inhibiting use, and factors facilitating use. In terms of pedagogical use, the students often felt that technology was underutilized because a lot of the learning material was instructional rather than engaging in experiential activities. However, when instructors incorporated more technological elements (e.g., voting systems, discussion boards, skills practice), students found the learning experience to be more beneficial. Similarly, students found that being able to access and review the material at any time was helpful in facilitating their learning. Students also found that the ability to communicate quickly through the use of email helped make their online learning experience more enjoyable. However, students also spoke of some of the challenges they faced as a part of learning online, such as having difficulties accessing computers, not feeling that they have adequate technology skills, and experiencing overall technical difficulties. After reviewing their findings, the researchers highlighted how it would be important for higher education institutions to learn more about using technology in learning and how to work with students to resolve some of the technical challenges they may face while they are becoming comfortable with learning in an online format.

In a similar study, Telford and Senior (2017) explored nursing and healthcare student experiences with engaging in a flipped classroom approach from an online classroom environment. The researchers conducted the study from a mixed methods approach where 420 students participated in an online questionnaire, which asked them about how certain learning activities improved their learning, their thoughts on the level

of online synchronous contact with their peers and instructors, and the online learning resources that were available. The study was then followed up with 10 students participating in focus group interviews. From the focus group interviews, two themes emerged: 1) factors influencing a positive online learning experience, and 2) challenges when designing e-learning resources within a flipped classroom approach. Participants described how having a variety of different interactive learning activities, the flexibility of learning at their own pace, and the student-centered approach positively contributed to their learning experiences. Participants also highlighted how that the material they were learning was applicable to real-world situations. In terms of challenges, participants discussed that it was harder for them to ask questions about the material and seek feedback on their progress in the course because of the limited amount of interaction. Participants also expressed feelings of frustration towards peers who did not complete the assigned materials. Lastly, participants in the focus group discussed the balance between online learning and face-to-face learning and concluded that having a balance between the two formats would be ideal for their overall learning.

Knowing that online learning is becoming more common and utilized by students, Bramer (2020) explored pre-registration adult nursing students' experiences with online learning in order to learn more about how an online learning environment supported their training and development as professionals. Data was collected from two focus group interviews with a total of 12 participants from the same program. From the interviews, three main themes emerged: advantages of online learning, disadvantages of online learning, and preferences about online learning. In terms of advantages to online learning, participants spoke about having access to a variety of resources (e.g., virtual classrooms,

online workbooks, etc.), the ease of accessibility from any location, and having the option to refer to course materials at any time in order to reinforce their learning. However, participants also spoke about how some of the challenges they faced involved distractions from being at home, having technical difficulties, and missing a sense of social connection to peers and their course instructor. When asked about their preferences, participants highlighted that their ideal learning environment would consist of a blend of online learning and in-person learning. In addition, participants also expressed how they preferred online learning to be structured and organized, such as through mandatory attendance and having clear expectations, in order to help with their sense of motivation.

Social Work. Unlike in nursing, there was a limited amount of research available in exploring students' experiences taking online courses. This may be due to the fact that the nursing profession has been more established compared to social work and other related clinical helping professions. However, the research that does exist used qualitative methodologies that allowed participant voices to highlight their findings. As an example, Pardasani et al. (2012) examined master's level social work students' experiences taking an online social work course. The data took place over the course of two academic semesters and all classes were taught by the same instructor. Based on 25 participants, the researchers engaged in interviews and asked students to reflect on their positive experiences, challenges, and how their recent experience had been similar or different to other courses they had taken. The data was organized into four overall themes: autonomy, emotional connectedness, technological difficulties, and knowledge acquisition. In terms of autonomy, students discussed how important it was for them to have a say in how the course would be delivered. While some students appreciated the online format because of

its convenience, other students felt that they had no choice but to take the online section of the course due to their location. With emotional connectedness, students discussed how it was harder for them to feel bonded to their peers. When reflecting on the overall course, students discussed how there were technological difficulties but that they did not significantly hinder their learning experience. Overall, they expressed learning a lot from the course and felt confident to be able to apply their knowledge in real-world settings. Because more higher education programs, especially those focused on helping professions, are increasing their use of online learning, the researchers highlighted how their study contributed to the growing need of literature in this area.

Okech et al. (2014) explored how master's level social work students' perceptions and experiences were similar or different based on taking an in-person or online course on theories and practice within the community. Students who took the course online were asked additional questions regarding some of the benefits and challenges they experienced over the course of the semester. In total, there were 52 students who participated in the study where 16 of the participants took the online section of the course. After collecting the data, the researchers identified three themes: instruction method and community practice, comfort and anxiety over method of instruction, and role of the instructor and environment in community practice. A majority of the participants, regardless of course format, expressed how the course greatly enhanced their understanding and appreciation of the course material. Students who took the online section expressed some of the advantages they experienced, such as the convenience of not having to travel to campus and being able to take more time to reflect on the material and how it applied to their future work. They also expressed some of the challenges they

experienced, such as technological difficulties and not feeling as connected to the instructor or their peers. Students from all sections of the course discussed how important it was to have an active instructor and to have a continued sense of connection with them as well as their peers. The researchers concluded that it would be helpful for online instructors to seek feedback from their students in order to improve their teaching and increase overall student satisfaction with online learning.

Section Summary

The role of technology and its integration within higher education has significantly changed. At the beginning of distance education, instructors and students relied on the mail system to help them exchange coursework materials and evaluation feedback. The advances continued to transform to better help students and instructors facilitate and create a classroom environment without being in the same physical location. Today, online learning in higher education can occur at any location and at any point in time as long as instructors and students have a technology device (e.g., computer, tablet, etc.) and a stable internet connection. Because of its increased growth among students and institutions, online learning is anticipated to continue growing across the world and remain a significant part of higher education.

With the increase in online higher education classes, programs, and universities, instructors are expected to have an understanding of how learning theories and teaching pedagogies translate in an online setting. Although there is still a need for research in this area, the most effective learning strategies focus on creating a learner-centered learning environment based on constructivist pedagogy, using Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) to increase students' critical thinking skills, and incorporating experiential learning theories

and activities in the classroom. Additionally, common themes found when examining best practices in online instruction align with a learner-centered environment. The best practices of online higher education instruction focused on working to establish strong relationships between instructors and students as well as among peers, providing clear, timely feedback to help students better understand the material, and establishing an effective online course design.

Knowing that there has been a longstanding tradition of providing in-classroom instruction, it is natural to have concerns about the quality and implementation of online instruction. Throughout the literature, the overall consensus is that online instruction can be just as effective as traditional in-person instruction. Additionally, students across multiple disciplines, including those in helping professions, report finding their online learning experience to be valuable. They also reported that there are benefits to having online courses available, such as increased accessibility to attend classes and have access to instructional materials (Bramer, 2020; Moule et al., 2010; Okech et al., 2014), increased flexibility related to course attendance and the overall learning process (Pardasani et al., 2012; Stone et al., 2016; Telford & Senior, 2017), and engaging in an active learning environment to help facilitate both personal and professional growth (Stone et al., 2016; Telford & Senior, 2017). It is important to note that students also experienced challenges in their online learning experiences that should be further discussed and reduced, such as having technical difficulties that made it difficult to fully participate in their courses (Ali et al., 2004; Bramer, 2020; Moule et al., 2010; Okech et al., 2014), managing life distractions while studying and reviewing course materials (Bramer, 2020), and missing social connections with peers and instructors (Ali et al.,

2004; Okech et al., 2014; O'Shea et al., 2015; Pardasani et al., 2012). While there needs to be continued research on providing effective learning strategies and overall best practices in online instruction, the research available highlights how online courses, programs, and universities will continue to have a significant role within higher education.

Online Learning in Counselor Education

As expected, counselor education has also needed to consider the implications of online education. Similar to the trends in overall higher education, there are concerns regarding if online instruction can be effective at training students to become effective professional counselors (Finn & Bruce, 2008; Krieger & Stockton, 2004; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009). To develop a better understanding of the incorporation of online learning in counseling, I reviewed major events that contributed to the history of counselor education. I then reviewed best practices of online teaching within counselor education. Finally, I reviewed the literature regarding the efficacy of online counselor education, including a discussion on students' experiences with taking online counselor education courses.

History of Counselor Education

Starting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Foster, 2012), the counseling profession was developed based on the core principles of other established professions, including education, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, and sociology (Kottler & Shepard, 2014). After gaining experience in vocational counseling and providing mental health services (Glosoff et al., 2017), the counseling profession was officially recognized in 1952 after the establishment of the ACA (ACA, n.d.). Since then, there has been a

significant increase in the amount of counselor education programs throughout higher education institutions across the United States. At the time of this study, I found that there were over 906 master-level and doctoral-level counseling degree programs across 434 institutions across the United States, including its surrounding territories (CACREP, n.d.c.). I explored significant organizations, such as the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES), CACREP, and the ACA's Code of Ethics (2014) to develop a better understanding of the foundation and current state of counselor education.

Association for Counselor Education and Supervision

Before the establishment of the ACA, there were organizations that helped the counseling profession grow. One of the organizations was the National Association for Guidance Counselor Training (NAGCT). Founded in 1938, the organization's purpose was to ensure the quality of counselor education and supervision (ACES, n.d.; Glosoff et al., 2017). Because of its dedication to the counseling profession, the NAGCT was one of the founding organizations that helped establish the ACA (formerly known as the American Personnel and Guidance Association [APGA]) in 1952 (ACA, n.d.; Glosoff et al., 2017). The NAGCT was replaced by ACES in 1961 (Glosoff et al., 2017).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, ACES worked with the ACA to develop more counselor education programs across the country (Foster, 2012). The organization also worked to establish a set of education standards and accreditation guidelines to further ensure the quality of counselor education and supervision (CACREP, n.d.a). Having a set of standards and accreditation status was important for the growth of the counseling community because it provided legitimacy and credibility that counseling was a respected profession. By 1981, ACES and the ACA developed an accrediting body of counseling

programs called CACREP (CACREP, n.d.). Additionally, ACES worked to develop a set of best practices regarding teaching in counselor education programs.

In 2013, the counseling community and members of counselor education expressed a need for there to be a set of best educational practices. To meet this need, ACES developed the Teaching Initiative Taskforce (commonly referred to as the ACES Taskforce) consisting of ACES President Marty Jencius (2014-2015), Dr. Susannah M. Wood as the Chair, and two representatives within each of the five regions (ACES, 2016). The ACES Taskforce stated that “the ACES leadership is committed to identifying, implementing, and evaluating pedagogical practices that optimize the learning and preparation of competent counselors, supervisors, and counselor educators” (ACES, 2016). The ACES Taskforce published its set of best practices in 2016 and provided recommendations on a variety of areas, including adult learning, course construction, online learning, and teaching excellence (ACES, 2016).

Today, ACES continues to be viewed highly within the counseling community and is considered to be the leading organization dedicated to the quality of counselor education and supervision (ACES, n.d.; Glosoff et al., 2017). As stated in its mission to provide best practices in counselor education, “The ultimate purpose of ACES - in accordance with the purpose of ACA - is to advance counselor education and supervision in order to improve the provision of counseling services in all settings of society” (2016, p. 4). To further its mission, ACES holds a bi-annual national conference and its regional sectors also hold bi-annual conferences to continuously encourage counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors to further their understanding and interest in counselor education and supervision (ACES, n.d.).

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs

Established in 1981, the purpose behind CACREP has been “to provide leadership and to promote excellence in professional preparation through the accreditation of counseling and related educational programs” (n.d.a, para 3). Having an established accreditation body was especially important for the counseling community because it provided the profession with a valued reputation and sense of trust that individuals from counseling programs were receiving educational training based on a high set of standards. It also helped the counseling profession maintain the status quo set by other helping professions (Bobby, 2013). As a part of its responsibility, CACREP establishes a set of standards and requirements that all accredited programs need to meet in order to ensure that they are providing quality counselor education.

CACREP Standards. At the beginning of its creation, CACREP adopted its first set of ethical standards from ACES (Bobby, 2013). These standards were utilized until CACREP formulated its own set of standards in 1984 and extended the standards to include areas of student personnel, mental health counseling in community and agency settings, and school counseling (Bobby, 2013). CACREP determined that it was important to review its standards every eight years to adapt to the current needs within counseling and counselor education. There have been several changes in CACREP’s standards throughout the 21st century, specifically focusing on specializations, program requirements, and implementing various elements to help unify the counseling profession (Bobby, 2013).

The most recent set of CACREP Standards was published in 2016. In the CACREP Standards (2016), the following sections are addressed:

- Section 1, The Learning Environment,
- Section 2, Professional Counseling Identity,
- Section 3, Professional Practice,
- Section 4, Evaluation in the Program,
- Section 5-A, Entry-Level Specialty Areas, Addictions Counseling,
- Section 5-B, Entry-Level Specialty Areas, Career Counseling
- Section 5-C, Entry-Level Specialty Areas, Clinical Mental Health Counseling,
- Section 5-D, Entry-Level Specialty Areas, Clinical Rehabilitation Counseling,
- Section 5-E, Entry-Level Specialty Areas, College Counseling and Student Affairs,
- Section 5-F, Entry-Level Specialty Areas, Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling,
- Section 5-G, Entry-Level Specialty Areas, School Counseling
- Section 5-H, Entry-Level Specialty Areas, Rehabilitation Counseling, and
- Section 6, Doctoral Standards for Counselor Education and Supervision.

It is important to note that Section 2 (Professional Counseling Identity) also includes a subsection on counseling curriculum where it outlines required learning areas in each of the eight common core areas: 1) Professional Counseling Orientation and Ethical Practice, 2) Social and Cultural Diversity, 3) Human Growth and Development, 4) Career Development, 5) Counseling and Helping Relationships, 6) Group Counseling and Group Work, 7) Assessment and Testing, and 8) Research and Program Evaluation.

Program Credit Hours. A significant debate among the counseling community involved the number of credit hours it would take for students to complete their counselor training. During the latter part of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first century, counseling programs required students to complete 48-semester credit hours. Various organizations, such as the American Mental Health Counseling Association (AMHCA), believed that credit hours needed to be increased to 60-semester credit hours (or 72-quarter credit hours) to make sure that students were adequately trained and prepared to work with members of the community (Bobby, 2013). Individuals who expressed concern about the increase in credit hours worried that obtaining a degree in counseling would not be as appealing compared to other helping professions. They also had concerns about how credit hours would impact students' abilities to obtain specialty degrees (Bobby, 2013) as well as how students would cope with having to pay more tuition. Individuals who supported the movement toward 60-credit hours were especially interested because it meant that all accredited counseling programs would be held to similar standards and could make it easier for license portability across state lines (Bobby, 2013).

In 2016, CACREP's published standards ended the debate by stating that all accredited programs need to require that entry-level specialty areas provide a minimum of 60-semester credit hours (or 90-quarter credit hours; Standard 1.J.). Programs were given a transitional period where they were asked to implement these new practices by July 1, 2020. However, due to program and institutional challenges, CACREP provided an updated announcement that extended the implication of the new standards until July 1, 2023 (CACREP, 2019).

Accreditation Status. CACREP has approved accreditation for various counseling programs across the country since the 1980s. Currently, CACREP provides a full accreditation cycle that is in good standing for a total of eight years (CACREP, n.d.). If programs are required to provide further information or need to implement specific changes, they are typically given a two-year accreditation status. Prior to their accreditation expiration date, all programs are required to submit an application and provide a self-study as a part of reapplying for accreditation status (CACREP, n.d.). It is also important to note that not all counseling programs are able or choose to become CACREP-accredited. Some of the reasons as to why programs choose not to become accredited is because they want to provide counselor training in a way that does not follow CACREP's standards, they are a smaller-sized program and are unable to meet CACREP's faculty number requirements, they experience little funding or do not have enough resources, and they align more with psychology practices (ACA, n.d.b).

There has been an increase in accreditation status among counselor education programs within the past decade. A significant reason behind this is because CACREP has accredited online counselor education programs. One of the first online CACREP-accredited programs was Capella University's Clinical Mental Health Program, which was established in March 2002 (CACREP, n.d., b). Online counselor education institutions experienced the most growth toward the beginning of the 2010s, which included institutions such as Adams State University (Colorado), Grace College (Indiana), Messiah University (Pennsylvania), and Walden University (Minnesota; CACREP, n.d.b.). By 2015, there were 12 counselor education institutions that were accredited and provided online forms of instruction (Branson, 2016). This number has

grown exponentially in the present day. In my most recent search, there are 58 institutions and 112 counselor education programs that are being offered online (CACREP, n.d.b). Additionally, there are currently eight institutions that are in the process receiving CACREP-accreditation, which would allow for the addition of 11 new counseling programs. If the growth of online education continues, it is anticipated that more online counselor education programs will be created or that current in-person counselor education programs will incorporate more elements of distance learning.

American Counseling Association Code of Ethics

Although counselor education implemented computer technology into its practice in 1984 (ACES, 2016), the first time that technology was officially discussed in a professional document was in the ACA's Code of Ethics in 1995. Further details regarding technology use in counseling were included in the updated version in 2005, but it did not provide any information regarding the use of technology in counselor education or supervision practices. As anticipated, people within the community expressed mixed feelings about online counselor education, supervision, and providing counseling services. Layne and Hohenshil (2005) concluded, "The future of technology in the counseling profession may be viewed as threatening to some; others will see it as a refreshing opportunity for growth" (p. 225).

The current ACA Code of Ethics was published in 2014. The Code of Ethics (2014) provides a further understanding of incorporating technology in counselor education (e.g., F.7.a., F.7.d., F.7.g.) supervision (e.g., F.2.c., F.4.a.) and overall counseling practice (e.g., Section H). Due to the increased use of digital technologies

within the counseling profession, it is anticipated that future updates to the ethical codes will reflect more information that integrate its use within all forms of practice.

Best Practices of Online Learning in Counselor Education

Because the use of online learning in counselor education is a newer concept, there is a limited amount of information available regarding best practices in online counselor education. The ACES Taskforce developed a set of best practices that could be used to help guide counselor educators on how to teach online. In its list of best practices, the ACES Taskforce stated:

The concept of “teaching” has evolved over time and in response to contextual forces. With the advent of technology-based platforms of communication, entire counselor education programs have gone “online” and generated a need for new ways to approach online teaching and learning. These approaches, too, may be borrowed from allied fields such as k-12 education, special education, and higher education. The [T]askforce must consider how to address how technology has influenced teaching in counselor education and how “best practices” must be considered with that lens” (p.4).

In terms of creating an effective online learning environment, the ACES Taskforce (2016) stated that best practices in overall learning occur through the use of active learning techniques and strategies. Examples of how to incorporate this into an online setting include “interactive multimedia presentations, demonstration videos, web-based activities, discussion boards, group projects, and case studies” (ACES, 2016, p. 52). This aligns with the fact that many instructors utilize experiential and active learning techniques from a constructivist perspective (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2001; Guiffrida,

2005; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). From this perspective, not only do instructors want to help students learn the material, but they also want them to be able to apply their new knowledge, develop multifaceted perspectives, engage in metacognition, and ultimately develop a new sense of meaning (Brandon & All, 2010).

Instructors are also asked to be mindful of their students and how to best relate the material to them in order to foster greater understanding. As an example, providing a three-hour video lecture on a topic can be a challenge for students, similar to the way it can be difficult to utilize a three-hour discussion in an in-person setting. Instead, it is recommended that video lectures are brief and that other forms of learning activities are utilized for students to further apply and understand the material (Kohn, 2014).

Within counselor education, it is also important to be considerate of how multicultural factors and ethics are factored into an online classroom setting. Because students enter into counseling programs at various stages in their lives, there needs to be consideration that some students are going to be digitally sophisticated while others are going to need extra support and assistance. There also needs to be an understanding that students have various learning styles and needs that may require additional adjustments in an online setting. The ACES Taskforce (2016) recommends that it would be helpful to provide students with written instructions, making sure that videos are ADA-compliant (e.g., include closed captioning), that rubrics and guidelines provide clear instructions and expectations, and that all learning members have access to the university's technological support if needed.

In terms of ethics, the ACES Taskforce (2016) referenced Section H of the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) and highlighted how it is becoming more apparent that students

need to be trained on how to provide online counseling services. In addition, there are a growing number of supervisors who provide their services online. The ACES Taskforce (2016) recommended that counseling professionals continue to reference the ethical code and to be particularly mindful of client confidentiality and ways to provide accommodating services to diverse clients.

Research on the Efficacy of Online Learning in Counselor Education

The literature that primarily exists in the field related to online counselor education involves comparing online and in-person modalities to examine student learning outcomes. For example, Smith and colleagues (2015) conducted a study where they examined students' perceptions of their levels of learning and learning efficacy in counselor education programs. Students were asked to choose between two courses (Introduction to Marriage and Family Counseling and Developmental Issues in Human Personality and Behavior) and two course formats (online and in-person). In total, 32 participants attended the in-person version of the offered courses while 22 participants attended their online equivalent courses. The researchers found that students who took the online version of the offered counseling courses reported higher levels of perceived learning efficacy. They concluded that the method of instruction may have played a role in how students responded due to how there are advantages related to technology, such as faster communication and more frequent opportunities to interact with peers and instructors.

In a similar study, Meyer (2015) examined how perceived counselor self-efficacy changed in a counseling skills course over a 16-week semester and compared it to counseling students who took the course in-person ($n = 19$) with students who took the

course online (n = 20). All students were first-year master's level counseling students enrolled at the same Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE)-accredited program. The instructor, requirements, and course materials were the same for both groups. To examine students' perceived sense of self-efficacy, participants were asked to complete the Counseling Self-Estimate Inventory (COSE) at the beginning and end of their academic semester. The results found that both groups reported a difference in their perceived sense of self-efficacy at the end of the semester, but that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Because both groups demonstrated a difference in perceived sense of self-efficacy, the researcher recommended that future studies continue to examine counseling courses based on various learning formats.

To examine learning outcomes, Holmes and Reid (2017) compared the perceptions of counseling students who took a face-to-face research methods course (n = 20) with students who took the same course offered in an online format (n = 20). Similar to the previously mentioned study, students were from the same CORE-accredited program where the instructor, course materials, and requirements were the same for both groups. To examine student learning outcomes, students were asked to take a pre-test and post-test of their knowledge at the beginning and end of their academic semester. The researchers also utilized the course evaluations to determine students' perceptions. The results found that while students from both groups showed a significant positive increase in scores between their pre-test and post-test, there was no statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of academic performance. The results also showed that there was not a statistically significant difference between the groups in

regard to student perceptions. Due to the limited amount of research available, the researchers concluded that further comparison studies among different counseling courses would help contribute to literature.

Student Experiences with Online Counselor Education Courses

In 2006, Ekong conducted a study that explored the factors of online education that counseling students felt were most effective for their counselor training. The study took place at Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program (CAAP), which offered the first distance-based counselor education program in Canada. To collect data, participants were asked to complete a 10-item survey where qualitative and quantitative questions were centered around factors that students perceived as having facilitated their learning. The results were categorized into four themes: personal factors, situational factors, program delivery, and instructor characteristics. Personal factors consisted of three subthemes: motivation, discipline, and time management skills. Situational factors focused on the importance of having adequate computer and technology skills while program delivery emphasized course format and the delivery of course material. The last theme, instructor characteristics, highlighted how students appreciated the quality, clarity, and frequency of instructor feedback. The researcher concluded that while the study provided better understanding of what factors are important to consider as students engage in online learning, it would be helpful to conduct a similar study with a larger, more diverse representation of participants.

Because more universities and counseling programs are considering the idea of offering more online courses, Scholl and colleagues (2017) examined master's level counseling students' perceptions regarding their sense of engagement while completing

an online counseling program. In total, 55 participants provided information on increasing students' attendance to instructor office hours and 38 participants discussed their thoughts on optimal engagement. In terms of optimal engagement, the researchers identified three themes: 1) responsibility or functioning of the instructor, 2) responsibility or functioning of the learner, and 3) quality of students' relationships with others. The participants highlighted that both the instructor and the students have a significant role in the learning process. For their instructors, participants highlighted how they felt it was important for the instructors to engage in frequent communication and provide frequent, constructive feedback on their performance in their courses. They also provided feedback on the use of instructor office hours, such as having accessibility to office hours and the structure of the meeting. In terms of their roles, students discussed how they should be responsible for communicating to the instructor when they have questions or concerns as well as attending office hours when they are available. Students also discussed how their feelings of connection, comfort, and interactions with their peers and instructors helped them feel more engaged throughout their program.

Looking at students' experiences from a more specific approach, Merlin-Knoblich and Camp (2018) explored counseling students' experiences while taking a lifespan development course that utilized a flipped classroom format. At the end of the semester, 10 students participated in a semi-structured interview based on their impressions of a flipped classroom environment. The researchers found that students enjoyed having a flipped counseling course and described their learning experience as being "stimulating," "experiential," and "interactive" (p. 309). In terms of the benefits of taking a flipped counseling course, participants discussed feeling more prepared for class and found that

they could better understand the importance and practicality of the material. While most students reported that they would take another flipped learning counseling course, some participants acknowledged some of the challenges they experienced, such as difficulties with self-directed learning and fully understanding the material. Because of the varied perspectives that the students shared, the researchers discussed further research on implementing flipped learning counselor education courses and exploring student outcomes compared to those in traditional in-person classrooms.

To hear more of participants' voices, Sheperis and colleagues (2020) explored students' and recent graduates' experiences of attending online counselor education programs and attending online courses. Based on informal interviews, five students provided their experiences of why they chose to take online counselor education courses and what contributed to their academic success. Reasons for attending online courses and an online program included family obligations, work obligations, and overall lifestyle considerations. When asked what helped them with maintaining their academic responsibilities and what contributed to their overall academic success, participants highlighted the need for motivation, the importance of engaging in self-care, and establishing connections with peers and faculty members. The researchers concluded that online education is becoming increasingly utilized, especially in counselor education, and that additional research should explore how specific online teaching modalities (i.e., asynchronous and synchronous) contribute to effective counselor training.

Section Summary

Traditionally, counselor education programs and courses have been conducted in-person (Dietrich & Bowers, 2018; Woo et al., 2020). A critical reason for requiring in-

person counseling instruction was that it allowed instructors to better assess students' knowledge and demonstration of interpersonal skills, professionalism, clinical skills, and provide them with appropriate supervision (Blackmon, 2016; Hill & Corbett, 1993; Layne & Hohenshil, 2005; Mandernach et al., 2012; Reamer, 2013), which make up core skills of the counseling profession. However, counselor education has experienced a similar evolution to that of overall higher education in that it is becoming more common and necessary to consider the implications of learning online.

Significant forces within counselor education, such as ACES, CACREP, and the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), value the implications of online learning and believe it is important to consider in all aspects of the profession. Additionally, the ACES Taskforce (2016) developed a set of best practices within counselor education and specifically included a section on effective ways of engaging online learning in counseling courses. These standards were based on research from other professions that have a better understanding of online education within higher education. Because of the profession's tradition of teaching in-person, it is anticipated that there are people who are going to have concerns regarding the quality of counseling education that is provided (Reicherzer et al., 2012; Waisk, 2019). Similar to what was found in overall higher education, the outcomes of online learning in counselor education show that they can be just as effective, and even demonstrate strengths, when compared to traditional in-person classes. Students have also provided an overall sense of promising feedback and included recommendations on how to further enhance their online learning experiences. The fact that more programs are offering online course modalities and fully online programs are

receiving CACREP-accreditation suggests online learning can be a feasible option within counselor education.

Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education

While there are various parts to consider when thinking about online higher education, the opportunity to discuss its implications, formulate plans, and develop effective online learning environments was expedited when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Because of the suddenness of social distancing and stay-at-home orders across the United States, instructors were forced to think quickly about how they were going to transform already existing in-person classes into something that could be feasible in an online learning setting (Bhagat & Kim, 2020). During their experiences, instructors reported some of the challenges that they faced in establishing an online classroom environment, including how it required more time to create adequate online instructional content (Almazova et al., 2020) and experiencing poor technology that interfered with hosting classes (Marek et al., 2021). Although some instructors felt that they received institutional support, that was not the case for the majority, which left instructors to learn as they continued teaching. Instructors also found that they had to take on more roles to help their students navigate these changes, both academically and personally.

At the same time, college students were working hard to quickly adapt to an online learning environment. Although it is commonly assumed that students have higher technical skills, they also experienced a transition of having to learn various online tools in order to meet their courses' expectations and requirements. As a result of this, students

also reported that their workloads increased and that they experienced challenges keeping up with their courses due to a lack of access to important study materials, a quiet place to study, or stable Internet (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Doolan et al., 2021). In addition, they were also navigating the numerous concerns that arose because of the pandemic, such as finding alternative housing (Son et al., 2020), managing financial concerns (Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Son et al., 2020), and worrying about the health and safety of themselves as well as of their loved ones (Son et al., 2020). These stressors have resulted in college students reporting increased feelings of anxiety, depression, stress, lack of motivation (Cicha et al., 2021), and, in some cases, feelings of suicidal ideation (Son et al., 2020).

COVID-19 and Counselor Education

Although more information is still needed, the fact that a majority of counselor education programs are fully in-person suggests that the suddenness of the pandemic was a critical moment for instructors and counselors-in-training. Because of the pandemic's restrictions, many instructors were required to find ways to implement and redesign how courses could continue to run in an online format, if at all possible. While in-person instruction may be the preference for a majority of instructors, there is the argument that programs able to integrate more technology or programs that were already established online were more prepared for how to cope with the changes of the pandemic.

Now that the pandemic has lasted over two years, many of the in-person counselor education programs have completed at least one year of online instruction. Knowing that it can be feasibly achieved, the question that now arises is if it is possible to incorporate more online counseling courses or even transition in-person programs to a hybrid or fully online programs.

It is clear that the overall consensus of higher education is that online learning is something that will be implemented partially, if not completely. After reviewing the literature and historical foundations, there is a limited amount of literature regarding the use of distance learning in counselor education programs. The limited literature that is available focuses on comparing how students perceive themselves (e.g., Holmes & Reid, 2017), or comparing student learning outcomes between online learning and in-person learning environments (e.g., Smith et al., 2015). While researchers continue to stress the need to learn more about the implications of online learning in higher education, Barrio Minton (2019) conducted an analysis regarding all counseling-related published articles in 2017 and found that only 4% contained information about distance learning. Barrio Minton concluded the analysis by saying, “...scholarly attention to methods for and effectiveness of distance teaching and supervision is the most neglected area within counselor education and supervision.” (p. 12). More research in this area will provide further insight on the implications of online learning and digital integration in counselor education courses. As a way to learn about the impacts of online learning in counselor education, it would be helpful to hear from the lived experiences of students who are enrolled in online counselor education courses. By hearing students’ experiences, they can provide further information about what they find helpful, what they need differently, and what would ultimately contribute to a helpful online learning experience. From gathering information on students’ lived experiences within their online counselor education classes, counselor educators can further their understanding and engage in their own research on ways to create successful online learning experiences.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the development of online learning and its implications in higher education and counselor education. I started the discussion by exploring the history of higher education and key elements of the learning process, including constructivist pedagogy. I also discussed the development of distance learning and highlighted that the concept, although it has been around for over three centuries, has evolved to the point where students and instructors can attend a course regardless of their geographical location. I then discussed the development of counselor education, the use of technology in the profession, and highlighted the current debate regarding if and how online counselor education programs are as effective as its traditional counterparts. Knowing that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted higher education, I explored how there is more discussion about the acceptance and growth of developing more online programs, including in counselor education. Because of this significant change, I finished the discussion by highlighting the importance of learning about students' experiences when taking online counselor education courses and its implications for the trajectory of counselor education.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I discuss the methodological framework used in my study. I provide a discussion on the rationale and purpose of the study, including the use of a qualitative research design in relation to learning more about master-level counseling students' experiences with taking online counselor education courses. I also provide a summary of the research design, participants, and procedures that will be utilized. Lastly, I end this chapter with a discussion on data analysis procedures, overall trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of this study.

Rationale and Purpose

With the development and evolution of distance education opportunities, more higher education institutions and programs are moving toward implementing online learning formats (Allen & Seaman, 2008, 2011, 2016; Kentnor, 2015; Seaman et al., 2018). Because counselor education is primarily taught through in-person, synchronous teaching practices (Dietrich & Bowers, 2018; Woo et al., 2020), the concept of online counselor education is relatively new to the profession. Through reviewing the literature, the research that is available related to online counselor education focuses on the efficacy of online learning in counseling courses in comparison to learning in traditional in-person settings (e.g., Holmes & Reid, 2017; Meyer, 2015; Smith et al., 2015). The overall consensus of these studies concludes that learning online is just as effective as learning in-person. To develop a better understanding of how to successfully and effectively

implement online learning modalities in counselor education, there needs to be more research conducted (Barrio Minton, 2019; Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011).

Knowing that learning through an online setting presents its unique benefits and challenges, there is also a limited amount of research available that explores counseling students' experiences in taking online counselor education courses. The research that is available (e.g., Ekong, 2006; Merlin-Knoblich & Camp, 2018; Scholl et al., 2017; Sheperis et al., 2020) focuses more on answering the "why" question. This means that the literature available places emphasis on why students took online counseling courses. Additionally, some studies also incorporated quantitative elements. While these factors are important to consider and further explore, their designs may have taken away from fully hearing students' voices and experiences. There is also the gap regarding the "what" and "how" questions. Specifically, there is a lack of knowledge regarding what students experience in online counseling courses and how students have been able to be successful in online counseling courses, and what needs to be adjusted to make online counselor education a successful learning modality.

The purpose of my study was to learn more about the lived experiences of master-level counseling students' experiences when taking online counseling courses within the past five years. I conducted a phenomenological qualitative study to learn more about students' experiences and highlight their involvement in taking online counseling courses.

Methodological Framework

In the following sections, I provide a discussion on qualitative research and its appropriateness for the current study. I will also explore the research paradigm and research tradition that will be utilized in the study.

Qualitative Research

A qualitative research approach is often utilized when the research question calls for a complex, detailed understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2013), such as learning more about individuals' unique experiences related to the problem or phenomenon. As a flexible and exploratory research approach (Prosek & Gibson, 2021), qualitative methods are also utilized when the specific problem or phenomenon that is being studied is something that cannot be quantifiable or expressed through numbers. Instead, the research is expressed through words and extensive detail about what is being studied. Qualitative research has become common practice in counseling research because of its congruence with the beliefs of the overall profession and its emphasis on exploring complicated concepts (Erford, 2015; Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

The key characteristics of qualitative research that make it distinct from other research practices include utilizing assumptions and interpretive frameworks to understand the problem, collecting data in a natural setting, and the results of the study include participant voices, researcher reflections, and highlight the need for change (Creswell, 2013; Erford, 2015; Hathaway, 1995; Hays & Singh, 2012). In terms of assumptions and interpretive framework, the assumption in qualitative research is that both researchers and participants naturally have their own beliefs related to the phenomenon. Researchers are asked to collect and interpret participants' experiences and

meanings related to what is being studied (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). To do this, it is common that qualitative researchers immerse themselves into the context that is related to the problem or phenomenon. Researchers have prolonged, close contact with the participants and often utilize different data collection methods, such as observations and interviews, to fully engage with participants and to learn more about their perspectives (Erford, 2015; Hays & Singh, 2012). It is also important to note that researchers also utilize themselves as instruments in collecting data. Although researchers are asked to refrain from imposing their assumptions, values, and beliefs on participants or the data, it is also imperative that researchers engage in a reflective process regarding their impact on the study as well as the study's impact on them.

While quantitative research focuses on establishing a large sample size, qualitative researchers are more focused on finding participants who can provide rich information and detail about the phenomenon being studied (Hays & Singh, 2012). With more detail and information, qualitative researchers are able to gain insight, thoroughly interpret participants' experiences, and develop an understanding of the problem or phenomenon. Additionally, the results of qualitative research are based on words and detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and the problem or phenomenon as opposed to numerical values (Hays & Singh, 2012). There is more emphasis placed on understanding the deeper meaning of the overall problem or experience, specifically asking questions of "who," "what," "when," "why," and "how" and its relation to the phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). The overall goal of qualitative research is to describe people's experiences and develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Erford, 2015).

In relation to the overall study, a qualitative research approach is appropriate because I am studying master-level counseling students' experiences as it relates to their involvement in taking online counselor education courses. Because understanding their experiences is not quantifiable, I will be utilizing students' perspectives and the meaning that they make from their experiences with taking online counseling courses. As a part of my research, I am specifically seeking to learn more about the "what" and "how" questions, such as exploring how online learning in counselor education has changed and evolved. I intended to learn more about what has been helpful for student success in online counseling courses and what they believe would be helpful in furthering their success and satisfaction when taking online courses during their counseling programs. The overall question that is asked in this study is:

Q(1): Within the past five years (i.e., 2017-2022), what are the lived experiences of masters-level counseling students who take online counselor education classes?

Social Constructivism

In qualitative research, there are five essential core philosophies utilized in qualitative research: ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the process of knowing, including the relationship between the researcher and participant), axiology (the researcher's values in the scientific process), rhetoric (the language used to present study procedures and findings), and methodology (the process and procedures used in the study; Creswell, 2013; Erford, 2015; Hays & Singh, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005). These philosophical concepts are integrated in research paradigms, which are used to help guide the researcher on philosophical assumptions that impact the overall methodological

framework of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hathaway, 1995). In my dissertation, I utilized a social constructivist paradigm to understand, conceptualize, and conduct my study.

Within a social constructivist paradigm, the researcher seeks to develop an understanding of individuals' experiences with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). There is an assumption that a singular and objective "universal truth" cannot exist because there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of the particular phenomena (Hays & Singh, 2012; Sciarra, 1999). As an example, two students who are enrolled in the same online counseling course can have completely different perspectives of their overall satisfaction of the course and both of their perspectives are viewed as being valid. To develop an understanding of the phenomena, it is important to hear from the participants and their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Social constructivists believe that knowledge is co-constructed within the researcher and participant interactions (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). This concept aligns with the constructivist pedagogical approach utilized in counselor education practices (e.g. Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2001; Guiffrida, 2005; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). Creswell (2013) also highlighted that the interactions are impacted by social, cultural, historical, and political influences that occur in people's lives. Because each person has different experiences and understandings, they work together to ultimately create a deeper sense of meaning related to the phenomena (Ponterotto, 2005).

Similarly, it is important to note that social constructivist researchers cannot separate their values and experiences from the research process. The researchers spend a significant amount of time learning about participants' experiences and constructing new

meaning, therefore making it natural that both the researchers and participants will impact each other (Ponterotto, 2005). Researchers are encouraged to acknowledge and “bracket” (meaning to set aside) their assumptions, biases, and beliefs so that the findings truly reflect participants’ voices. To make sure that participant voices are highlighted, social constructivists write from a first-person, personalized perspective. Researchers are also encouraged to include a detailed description of their experiences related to the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). Lastly, the methodology of the qualitative study ultimately focuses on the goal of understanding the lived experiences of individuals who engage with the phenomenon on a daily basis (Erford, 2015; Schwandt, 2000).

Transcendental Phenomenology

The specific qualitative research tradition that I used in my study is transcendental phenomenology. Phenomenology is one of the most utilized research traditions in qualitative research (Hays et al., 2016) and shares alignment with the counseling profession (Hays & Singh, 2012). Based on the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology is described as a research tradition that “aims to focus on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them; a focus on people’s lived experience” (Langdridge, 2007, p. 4) as it relates to a particular phenomenon. Another way of thinking about this concept is that phenomenological researchers are interested in learning about the perspectives of the phenomenon from individuals who have direct contact with the experience in their everyday lives (Hays & Wood, 2011). As highlighted in overall qualitative research, phenomenological approaches are appropriate for questions that are complex, would benefit from a deeper understanding and meaning, and cannot be quantified. The ultimate goal of

phenomenological research is to gain a collective meaning and essence of a phenomenon to help generate overall understanding and empathy of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Prosek & Gibson, 2021) by focusing on “what” was experienced and “how” it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994).

In relation to my study, I will be focusing on the phenomenon of taking online counselor education courses. A phenomenological approach aligns with the social constructivist paradigm in that my question allows for there to be multiple truths related to the same experience. It also aligns with my research goals of wanting to capture the essence of what is like for master-level counseling students to engage in online counselor education courses. By highlighting the voices and experiences of master-level counseling students, it gives a chance for students to share what has been both beneficial and challenging in taking online counseling courses. Highlighting student voices brings more awareness to the lived experiences of counseling students as they train to become future mental health professionals. In addition, understanding student perspectives enhances the shared knowledge regarding online counselor education and contributes to the available body of literature on counselor education.

Phenomenology is a unique research tradition because there are different schools of thought. The specific tradition of phenomenology that I will utilize in my study is transcendental phenomenology, which is based on the overall premise that experiences need to be transcended as a way to discover reality (Kafle, 2013). Within a transcendental phenomenological approach, an emphasis is placed more on participants’ experiences and voices rather than the researcher’s interpretation of those experiences of the studied phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To make sure that participant voices are accurately

highlighted, researchers are asked to engage in a process referred to as “epoch,” which means that they refrain from making judgements about the experiences and phenomenon (Erford, 2015; Hays & Wood, 2011). This is especially important because the focus is on highlighting the essence and meaning of the phenomenon from people who are actively involved in the experience. Engaging in the epoch process allows the researchers to bracket their assumptions and learn about the phenomenon with a new, unbiased perspective (Hays & Wood, 2011). Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach within this study is critical as it allows me to acknowledge any of my assumptions, biases, and beliefs I have related to online counselor education. Due to my personal experiences with taking online counselor education classes at the doctoral level, I will be mindful and address these biases. I will also ensure my research design is rigorous so that it minimizes the amount of personal influence or interpretation of the data.

Research Design

Role of the Researcher

Within qualitative research, the researcher often acts as an instrument in the data collection and data analysis process (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). Researchers are increasingly becoming utilized as instruments in qualitative research for various reasons, such as their ability to be interactive in the process and conceptualize pieces of information into a holistic meaning (Sanjari et al., 2014). Specifically in phenomenological research, researchers are used as an instrument to ultimately transform the data collected from the lived experience and develop a collective understanding of the phenomenon (Smith, 2007; Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Patton (2002) summarized the

researcher's role by stating, "The credibility of qualitative methodology...hinges a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork" (p. 14).

I served as an instrument in this study because I researched the gap that is in the counseling literature and developed the research question for this study. I was also actively involved in the research design and data collection process, including conducting interviews, transcribing the interviews, identifying the themes that emerge from the data, and representing the findings in a way that highlights participants' voices and experiences of taking online counselor education courses.

Additionally, I needed to be considerate of my personal connection to the phenomenon being studied. Although I did not take online counselor education courses during my master-level counseling program, I experienced what it was like to engage in a fully online counselor education course during my doctoral program. While my doctoral program is traditionally conducted through in-person learning, my program switched to an online format during the COVID-19 pandemic to be mindful of university members' safety and to decrease the spread of the virus. I have also engaged in conversations with counseling students (both master-level and doctoral-level) about learning in an online format, which ultimately led to the development of my personal views. Although having a student perspective may provide me with benefits in being able to relate to participants' experiences, I was aware, acknowledged, and became mindful of the fact that my experiences may be completely different from their experiences. In addition to being a doctoral student, I co-taught hybrid and fully online counselor education courses. Having these experiences allowed me to gain experience with designing and implementing instructional material in online counseling courses, which may have then impacted my

abilities to learn and be successful in my own online counselor education courses.

Therefore, it was important for me to set aside my assumptions, biases, and personal experiences through keeping a reflexive journal, working with a peer coder, and engaging in the member checking process in order to remain as objective as possible.

Procedures

After obtaining approval from my university's institutional review board (IRB; see Appendix A), I sent email invitations (see Appendix B) to all master-level CACREP programs within the United States (including Washington D.C.), which helped me connect with counseling programs across each of the five ACES regional districts. I reached out to programs' administrative assistants, CACREP liaisons, and department leaders where I provided a description of my study and asked them to forward my study's invitation to students who fit the criteria for the study. Additionally, I also connected with programs by requesting participation through CESNET-L. The email invitation included my name, contact information, and an information sheet that outlined the overall purpose of the study and data collection process (see Appendix C). In the information sheet, I provided information regarding the study's criteria and informed consent process, including participant rights and procedures to ensure confidentiality (e.g., assigning participants to numbers, using pseudonyms). Attached at the end of my invitation included a website link to the questionnaire where eligible and interested participants could consent and have access to the first part of the study. After participants completed the questionnaire, they were asked if they would be interested in participating in an individual interview. The participants who consented to engaging in the individual

interview were asked to provide their name and contact information to schedule a time and date for the interview.

Data Sources

Questionnaire

Screening Questions. The participants were given access to a Qualtrics link where they were asked to confirm their understanding and consent to engage in the study. After providing consent, the participants were asked a set of screening questions that determined if they were an appropriate fit for the study. Specific questions included asking participants if they were currently enrolled or if they have graduated from a master-level counseling program, if they completed at least one online counselor education course, if the counselor education course they took occurred within the past five years, and if they took at least one online counselor education course within the past five years (see Appendix D).

Demographic Questions. After completing the screening questions and determining their fit for the study, participants were directed to a set of demographic questions, such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and if they were a first-generation college student and graduate student. The participants were asked questions related to their learning styles, the type of program of university they attended (i.e., in-person, hybrid, and online), the number of online counselor education courses they completed, and if they had any prior experiences to online education, such as during their secondary and undergraduate level studies (see Appendix D).

Qualitative Questions. To hear about their experiences, participants were asked to complete a set of open-ended questions related to what it was for them to take online

counselor education courses. Allowing participants the opportunity to have insight into the study provided them with the opportunity to continue reflecting on their experience, which could further enhance the interview portion of the data collection (Hays & Singh, 2012). The open-ended set of questions prompted participants to write about the barriers they experienced, benefits they received as a result of taking an online counseling course, how they were able to adjust to an online learning format, and how taking online counselor education classes impacted their development as a student and counselor. They were also asked about if they would recommend online learning to other students, what advice they would give to students who are considering the idea of taking online counselor education classes, and what feedback they have for instructors when it comes to teaching counselor education in an online setting (see Appendix D).

Once participants completed the set of open-ended questions, they were asked if they would be willing to participate in an individual interview. Interested participants were prompted to provide their name and contact information in order to schedule the individual interview.

Individual Interviews

I contacted the participants who agreed to furthering their involvement in the study in order to schedule individual interviews (see Appendix E). Interviews are viewed to be the primary form of data collection in phenomenological research studies (Creswell, 2013; Erford, 2015). Due to the pandemic and overall theme of the study, all interviews were conducted online through a secure platform version of Zoom. It also provided participants the opportunity to share other insights or reflections that they had after completing the questionnaire portion of the study. The interviews averaged 49 minutes in

length (not including the informed consent process) and were audio recorded for transcription purposes.

The interviews were semi-structured, which means that I formulated a set of questions prior to the interview but modified the format throughout the interview process (Erford, 2015) in order to obtain rich information. Throughout the interview protocol, the questions were slightly adjusted or reworded to ensure their alignment with the overall research question (Castillo-Montoya, 2016) as well as to meet the needs of the participants. The interview questions and protocol were designed based on previous research studies that examined online education, higher education, and counselor education. Because of its substantial role within the data collection process (Patton, 2015), it was also important to include questions that took current world circumstances into consideration. The interview questions utilized in this study are included in Appendix F.

Participants

The study utilized purposeful, maximum variation sampling. Purposeful sampling refers to recruiting and selecting participants who can provide rich detail related to the phenomenon and that the experiences are assumed to be similar in nature (Erford, 2015; Hays & Singh, 2012). Additionally, maximum variation sampling provides the opportunity to learn about the phenomenon from a diverse group of participants (Erford, 2015). I also utilized snowball or chain sampling, which refers to having participants identify other potential participants who have experienced the phenomenon and can provide rich information regarding their experience (Creswell, 2013; Erford, 2015). As a

part of my study, I encouraged participants to share information regarding the study to other potential participants who meet the criteria.

As a part of the study, the following criteria were used: 1) participants were current master-level counseling students or had already completed their master-level counseling programs, 2) participants had completed at least one online counselor education course, and 3) participants (if current students) completed at least one academic term in their counseling programs or (if graduated) took their online counselor education course(s) within the past five years. I asked participants regarding their experiences with online counselor education courses over the course of five years for two main reasons. The first reason is that I was interested in seeing the change that occurred within online counselor education, especially since it is a new learning modality within counselor education. The second reason was that I wanted to be mindful of the current world context of COVID-19 and how this may have impacted participants' experiences. I also asked participants who were current students to have completed at least one academic term because their experiences could have been impacted by the online learning environment as well as their new experience in a master-level counseling program. Participants who completed additional education beyond their master-level counseling programs were excluded from the study to maintain consistency in the overall essence of the phenomenon.

While quantitative research emphasizes having a large sample size in order to generalize, qualitative research places more emphasis on the quality of information provided. As a result, phenomenological research can range from as little as three to 10 participants (Dukes, 1984) while others argue that the sample size can be as large as 25

participants (Ary et al., 2013; Polkinghorne, 1989). The overall consensus among qualitative researchers is that data collection can conclude when the depth of information has been accumulated (Wertz, 2005), or when the researcher reaches a point of saturation where participants no longer provide new information related to the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal is to maximize the amount of understanding and essence of the phenomenon rather than the quantity of participants that participate in the study (Erford, 2015).

Based on the initial questionnaire responses, a total of 59 people participated. After removing incomplete responses and removing participants who did not meet the criteria of the study, there were a total number of 31 participants. Because participation in the individual interview was optional, this resulted in a total number of 19 participants. I contacted participants who said that they were interested in participating in the interview portion of the study. While a majority of participants responded, there were participants where connection was not made. Out of 19 participants, 13 participants responded and scheduled a time to interview. Therefore, the study consisted of 13 participants.

Data Analysis

Regarding data analysis, Moustakas (1994) identified four key steps for researchers: 1) bracketing their assumptions about the experience (also referred to as epoche), 2) engaging in a process referred to as horizontalization, 3) establishing meaning units that describe the phenomenon and essence of the experience, and 4) organizing meaning units into themes. Due to the fact that I was an instrument within the study, I kept a reflexive journal where I was able to process and separate my assumptions, biases, thoughts, and reactions throughout the research process. Reflexive journals are

commonly used within phenomenological qualitative research (Erford, 2015). Engaging in this process helped me to process my experiences, keep an open and fresh perspective about the phenomenon, and ultimately reflect on how my experiences may impact on the data (Creswell, 2013). It also allowed me to keep an audit trail of how the data was collected and analyzed (Hays & Singh, 2012).

As I collected participant data, I engaged in the process that Moustakas (1994) referred to as horizontalization. Horizontalization is where the researcher reviews the data and highlights significant statements of how participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) highlighted that the researcher needs to be “receptive to every statement of the co-researcher’s [the participant’s] experience, granting each comment equal value and thus encouraging a rhythmical flow between the research participant and researcher” (p. 122). For the open-ended survey questions, I engaged in horizontalization by reading participants’ responses line by line and highlighting anything that stood out regarding the phenomenon. As I prepared for the interviews with each participant, I included questions and notes regarding these elements so I could gain further insight or clarification on their experience and how it related to the phenomenon. With the interviews, I used a secure platform version of Zoom to conduct and audio record. After the interviews, I listened to the interviews multiple times and transcribed them verbatim (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by utilizing Zoom’s transcription function as well as with the use of a transcription pedal and NCH Software Suite. By transcribing the interviews personally, I became familiar with the data, immersed myself in the data, and had the opportunity to make sure that the transcripts were transcribed accurately (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The next step in the data analysis process involved reviewing the data and establishing meaning units, which is also a process referred to as coding. Single words, phrases, or entire statements that capture the essence of the phenomenon can be considered as a code (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also highlighted this concept by identifying two important criteria that codes are required to meet: 1) the code should be heuristic, meaning that it should provide information relevant to the study and encourage critical thinking about the phenomenon outside of what is presented, and 2) the code should be able to be interpretable by itself without the presence of additional context or information. To engage in the coding process, I reviewed the open-ended questionnaire responses and individual interviews line by line. When something significant appeared in the data that resonated with the phenomenon or the participants' unique experience, it was coded. Having both the open-ended survey questions and interview transcripts allowed me to triangulate the data, which is the process of using multiple sources to collect and cross-check data between across participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout this process, I worked with a peer auditor who also completed her own set of individual codes. We met together multiple times to discuss each code. Having these conversations allowed my peer auditor and I to discuss my possible biases and assumptions when coding the data. My peer auditor continued to meet and review the data and develop meaning units where the codes were grouped together to represent the same interpretation and meaning. (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Richards, 2015).

After identifying codes and meaning units, my external peer auditor and I began exploring themes in the data (Creswell, 2013). A theme, which also may be referred to as

a category in qualitative research literature, is “a pattern, a finding, or an answer to the research question” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204). Having the opportunity to process and discuss the emerging themes and subthemes without someone unassociated with the study gave me an opportunity to determine the accuracy among findings and explore contradicting or alternative explanations for how to conceptualize the data (Erford, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

An additional way that I determined the accuracy of my codes and themes was through engaging in the member checking process. Member checking is where the researcher invites the participants to review the data and comment on the researcher’s interpretation of their experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Maxwell (2013) concluded that member checking was a critical part of data analysis and stated that it was “the single most important way for ruling out possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do...well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed” (p. 126-127). After I transcribed and analyzed the data, I asked participants to review their responses to the survey questions as well as their interview transcripts. Similar to my process in analyzing the data, participants and I explored the data and discussed codes and themes. Engaging in the member checking process gave the participants an opportunity to provide confirmation, clarification, or rejection of my interpretations. Based on our discussions, codes and themes were modified to further enhance the interpretation’s accuracy. It also allowed participants to further share their voices and become an active member in the research process.

Trustworthiness

Similar to quantitative research where there is an emphasis on the establishing internal and external validity (Erford, 2015), qualitative research is focused on establishing the trustworthiness of the study. Trustworthiness refers to the study's rigor (Morrow, 2005) or overall confidence that the findings are truly and accurately reflected in the findings of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four areas of trustworthiness that need to be established in qualitative studies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy of the study (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asked, "How congruent are the findings with reality? Do the findings capture what is really there?" (p. 242). Within my study, credibility was established in three main ways: 1) triangulation of the data, 2) consulting with an external peer auditor, and 3) engaging in the member checking process. To collect data for the triangulation process, I asked participants to provide responses to open-ended questions on a questionnaire as well as asked them to participate in an interview. Throughout the data analysis, an external peer auditor was involved to make sure that I was accurately interpreting participants' experiences and that my biases, assumptions, and beliefs were not imposing on the data. Before establishing the findings of the study, I contacted participants where they had the opportunity to provide feedback, clarification, and elaborate on their meanings in order to fully capture their experiences of the phenomenon.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be generalizable and applicable to other contexts and settings (Gay et al., 2011). Qualitative research is known for experiencing challenges in establishing transferability because the phenomenon and participants who engage in the study are very specific and unique (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although generalizability is often associated with quantitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), it is still an important concept in qualitative research that needs to be established as a way to increase the overall rigor of the study. Therefore, I established transferability by providing a detailed and thorough description of the processes that were utilized in the study. My goal was that researchers would be able to review my study, follow the study's outline, and ultimately replicate the study in their setting.

Dependability

Dependability refers to how consistent the results are over the course of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability can be viewed as going a step above establishing credibility by establishing strategies that show how similar findings are consistent with other interpretations and previous literature findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). To establish dependability, I used an external peer auditor while engaging in the data analysis process. I also compared the study's findings to what has been found in previous literature to determine consistency.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study accurately reflect participant voices and experiences of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Another way of thinking of confirmability is to reflect on how neutral the researcher was in presenting the findings of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). To provide confirmability in the study, I utilized the written responses to the open-ended survey questions as well as the interview transcripts. Additionally, I kept a reflexive journal that served as an audit trail for how the data was collected and analyzed (Hays & Singh, 2012), therefore allowing me to monitor how my potential biases impacted the data (Erford, 2015).

Ethical and Multicultural Considerations

In any research, it is important to discuss the ethical and multicultural considerations of the study and its implications. To maintain ethical standards, I provided a detailed outline of the research process and sought approval to conduct the study from my university's IRB. I also followed the ACA's Code of Ethics (see section G; 2014). Board members of the IRB were able to review the study and ask questions or require modifications to ensure that participants were safe and represented accurately throughout the study. Participants were given an opportunity to review the information sheet prior to their participation, which highlighted the study's overall purpose, their role in the study, and protections to ensure confidentiality (see Section G.2., 2014). I also articulated that participation throughout the study was completely voluntary and that they could remove themselves at any point during the study without any sort of penalty or negative consequence (see G.2.b., 2014).

In addition to ethics, it is important to also factor in multicultural considerations. Within any research, it is important to consider and question if the findings are culturally appropriate. To adhere and maintain cultural integrity within research, Im et al. (2004) highlighted the importance of cultural relevance, contextuality, and mutual respect.

Cultural relevance refers to the research question's efforts to address issues and interests of the cultural group. Contextuality refers to the researcher's mindfulness related to interpretation of participants' experiences and overall research setting. To help provide context and accuracy, I engaged in the member checking process and allowed participants the opportunity to convey if my interpretations of their experiences were accurate or inaccurate. The interviews were also conducted in an online format, which gave the participant the flexibility to conduct the interview in a space that made them feel more comfortable. Mutual respect refers to treating participants with dignity, being mindful of potential power differences, and being mindful of researcher biases. Throughout the research study, I kept a reflexive journal in order to bracket my biases and assumptions so that they did not interfere with participants' lived experiences. While there may be perceived power differences due to individuals' roles within the research process, both researchers and participants worked together to accurately represent their lived experiences.

Limitations

Similar to all forms of research, it is important to discuss the limitations related to the methodological framework of my study. A limitation that can be found in this study is that it does not include individuals who have taken online counselor education classes more than five years ago. Hearing about individuals' experiences with online counselor education classes, especially at the beginning of online learning within counselor education, may highlight the growth, development, and adjustments that have already taken place within the field. Additionally, I am asking for participants who have some experience taking counselor education classes (i.e., participants need to have completed

at least one academic term). Learning more about students' experiences with online counseling courses, especially at the very beginning of their programs, may provide further insight on benefits and adjustments that are needed in order to provide quality and effective online classes. Additional limitations include confounding variables, such as overall world context, which were outside of the control of the study.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the methodological foundations of my study. At the beginning of the discussion, I provided a rationale as to why it was important to engage in a study that explored master-level counseling students' experiences with taking online counselor education classes within the last five years. I then described my rationale for conducting a transcendental phenomenological study. Lastly, I discussed information related to how participants were recruited and selected, the data analysis process, and how trustworthiness was established.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

In this chapter, I will discuss the results of my study regarding master-level counseling students' experiences taking online counselor education classes within the last five years. I provide an overview of participants' demographic information and provide a summarized overview of each participant. All participant names and other identifiable information have been changed to pseudonyms or modified to protect participants' confidentiality. I will also provide a report of the results, including direct quotes from participants' survey responses and individual interviews. To help with reader ease and clarity, I modified the direct quotes by removing filler words, such as "um," "like," and "so", and filler phrases, such as, "right?" and "you know" from participants' responses (Richardson, 1990).

Participant Descriptions

Within the questionnaire, I asked participants to provide demographic information, such as gender identity, age range, if they were a first-generation college student and/or a first-generation graduate student, type of program (i.e., in-person, online, hybrid), and if they had a preferred learning style. A summary of participants' demographic information is located in Table 1. For the purposes of this study, all participants were master-level counseling students or master-level counselors who took at least one online counselor education class within the last five years (i.e., 2017-2022).

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender Identity	Age Range	Race/ Ethnicity	Generation Education Background	Type of Program
Audrey	Female (cis.)	50+	White/ Caucasian	N/A	Online
Carol	Female (cis.)	50+	White/ Caucasian	N/A	In-person
Daisy	Female (cis.)	18-25	White/ Caucasian	N/A	In-person
Ester	Female (cis.)	26-33	White/ Caucasian	First gen. graduate student	Online
Jessica	Female (cis.)	43-50	White/ Caucasian	First gen. college student First gen. graduate student	Online
Lacy	Female (cis.)	26-33	White/ Caucasian	First gen. graduate student	In-person
Megan	Female (cis.)	43-50	White/ Caucasian	First gen. graduate student	Hybrid
Messi	Female (cis.)	26-33	Hispanic/ Latinx	N/A	In-person
Michelle	Female (cis.)	43-50	White/ Caucasian	N/A	Online
Rose	Female (cis.)	18-25	White/ Caucasian	N/A	In-person
Ruby	Female (cis.)	26-33	Hispanic/ Latinx	First gen. college student First gen. graduate student	Hybrid

Table 1 -- Continued

Participant	Gender Identity	Age Range	Race/ Ethnicity	Generation Education Background	Type of Program
Summer	Female (cis.)	18-25	White/ Caucasian	First gen. college student First gen. graduate student	Hybrid
Tom	Male (cis.)	26-33	Biracial	N/A	Online

In this study, there were 13 participants. Of the 13 participants, 12 participants identified as female (cisgender; 92.31%) and one participant identified as male (cisgender; 7.69%). Participants were also of different age ranges. Three of the participants (23.08%) identified as being between 18-25 years old, five participants (38.46%) identified between 26-33 years old, three participants (23.08%) identified as being between 43-50 years old, and two participants (15.38%) identified as being 50 years old or older. In terms of race and ethnicity, 10 participants (76.92%) identified as white/Caucasian, two participants (15.38%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx, and one participant (7.69%) identified as biracial. Participants also identified as having different generational backgrounds. Three participants (23.01%) identified as being a first-generation college student and graduate student, three participants (23.01%) identified only as a first-generation graduate student, and seven participants (53.85%) did not find the statement applicable to them. Participants came from counseling programs from across the United States. One participant (7.69%) was from the northeast, three participants (23.08%) were from the Midwest, three participants (23.08%) were from the south, and six participants (46.15%) were from the west. Eleven of the participants (84.62%) lived in the same state where their counseling programs were located. Of the remaining participants, one participant (7.69%) continued her graduate studies while she moved to another state and one participant (7.69%) chose to attend a program that was located in a different state. Lastly, the participants attended counseling programs that provided different teaching modalities. When asked this question, participants were asked to report their program's teaching modality prior to the pandemic (i.e., if they attended

their classes in-person prior to the pandemic, then they attended an in-person program). Five participants (38.46%) reported that their counseling program was primarily in-person, five participants (38.46%) reported that their counseling program was primarily online, and three participants (23.08%) reported that they attended hybrid counseling programs.

Audrey

At the time of the interview, Audrey was a student in an online master's counseling program. Audrey discussed that she specifically chose an online program in order to meet her other life roles and responsibilities. Audrey stated that she did not have online learning experience prior to starting her counseling program. Audrey described herself as preferring a visual learning style. Outside of being a student, Audrey's other roles included being a partner, parent, pet owner, full-time employee, and actor in her local community theater.

Carol

At the time of the interview, Carol was a practicing counselor who attended an in-person master's counseling program. However, due to pandemic, Carol's classes transitioned to being provided remotely when she was in the middle of her program and continued to remain virtual until she graduated in December 2021. Carol stated that she did not have academic-related online learning experience prior to her program, but she took online classes based on her areas of interest. Outside of being a student, Carol's other roles consisted of being a partner, a parent, a family member, and an employee.

Daisy

At the time of the interview, Daisy was a student in an in-person master's counseling program. Daisy said that she began her program during the Summer 2021 semester and that her classes were only offered online as a result of the pandemic. Her classes eventually transitioned back in-person during the Fall 2021 semester. Daisy stated that she did not have online learning experience prior to starting her counseling program. Daisy described herself as preferring kinesthetic learning styles, but she also stated that all learning styles were helpful in her ability to learn. Outside of being a student, Daisy's other roles consisted of being a partner, pet owner, family member, friend, roommate, and teammate on a soccer team.

Ester

At the time of the interview, Ester was a practicing counselor who attended an online master's counseling program. Ester discussed how she recently graduated in May 2022 and that she specifically chose an online program due to her other life roles and responsibilities. She expressed that attending an online program was beneficial because she could continue her program after moving to another state for her partner's job. Esther stated that she did not have online learning experience prior to starting her counseling program. Esther described herself as an audio learner who needed to keep herself occupied with mundane tasks, such as doing the dishes or folding laundry. Outside of being a student, Esther's other roles consisted of being a partner, parent, family member, and full-time employee.

Jessica

At the time of the interview, Jessica was a student in an online master's counseling program. Jessica described that her program, while offered online, required students to attend two week-long residencies. During these residencies, she went to a physical location where she engaged in in-person learning with her instructors and peers. This gave her the opportunity to practice and apply her clinical counseling skills in a supervised setting. Jessica discussed how she preferred online classes in order to avoid the heavily populated area and traffic of where her program is located. She also stated that she did not have online learning experience prior to starting her counseling program. Outside of being a student, Jessica discussed how her other major life role consisted of being a full-time employee.

Lacy

At the time of the interview, Lacy was a student in an in-person master's counseling program. However, due to the pandemic, Lacy's classes transitioned to being remote after completing her first semester in-person. Her classes remained virtual until the Spring 2022 semester. Lacy stated that she had some prior online learning experience when entering her counseling program because she took an online course and a hybrid course during her undergraduate studies. Lacy described herself as being neurodivergent and that she preferred a kinesthetic learning style. Outside of being a student, Lacy's other roles consisted of being a partner, family member, pet owner, and employee.

Megan

At the time of the interview, Megan was a student in a hybrid master's counseling program. Megan described that she started her program in 2020 and was given the choice of attending classes in-person or online. She took a majority of her classes online because it allowed her to fulfill other life responsibilities, especially as she worked on changing careers. Megan stated that she had prior online learning experience because she took online classes during her undergraduate studies and completed her first master's degree through an online program. Megan described herself as preferring a visual learning style. Outside of being a student, Megan's other life roles consisted of being a partner, a parent, a full-time employee, and a newly established business owner.

Messi

At the time of the interview, Messi was a student in an in-person master's counseling program. Messi started her program in the Winter 2020 semester, which meant that all of her classes transitioned remotely while she was in the beginning of her program. She took online classes during her undergraduate studies and expressed negative experiences with them. Because of this, Messi specifically chose to attend an in-person master's program. Messi described herself as preferring a visual learning style. Outside of being a student, Messi's other life roles consisted of being a full-time employee and the primary caregiver of her mother.

Michelle

At the time of the interview, Michelle was a student in an online master's counseling program. Although her program was primarily online, Michelle discussed

how the summer semesters were dedicated to providing course intensives where students and instructors attended classes in a physical space. However, due to the pandemic, the summer intensive classes were only offered online. Michelle specifically chose her program to be online due to location limitations and it being the only program in her state that offered her desired specialty. She reported that she had prior online learning experience because she took online classes during her undergraduate studies. Michelle described herself as preferring auditory and visual learning styles. Outside of her role as a student, Michelle's other roles consisted of being a parent, family member, and full-time employee.

Rose

At the time of the interview, Rose was a student in an in-person master's counseling program. Rose started her counseling program during the middle of the pandemic and stated that many of her classes occurred in a hybrid format. However, due to the rise of pandemic concerns, her classes transitioned to being remote. Rose discussed that she did not have online learning experience prior to attending her counseling program. She also described herself as preferring a visual learning style. Outside of being a student, Rose's other life roles consisted of being a family member, a roommate, and a full-time employee.

Ruby

At the time of the interview, Ruby was a student in a hybrid master's counseling program. Ruby started her program during the pandemic, which meant that all of her classes were online. Ruby stated that, after one year of being fully online, her program

began to reintroduce in-person classes. This meant that some of her classes were in-person while other classes were remote. Ruby explained that she had online learning experience prior to starting her counseling program because she completed her entire undergraduate degree from an online program. She described herself as preferring a visual learning style and expressed appreciation for instructors who model techniques and interventions in order to further enhance her learning. Outside of being a student, Ruby's other life roles consisted of being a partner, a parent, and full-time employee.

Summer

At the time of the interview, Summer was a student in a hybrid master's counseling program. Summer started her program during the pandemic where all of her classes were provided remotely with the expectation that they would return to more in-person classes when feasible. Since it has been deemed safe to return to in-person activities, Summer expressed how she was under the impression that her hybrid program would primarily provide in-person classes with occasional online learning opportunities. However, her program offered more hybrid and online classes with occasional offering for in-person classes. Summer explained that she had online learning experience prior to starting her counseling program because she took both online and hybrid classes during her undergraduate studies. She described herself as preferring a kinesthetic learning style and stated that she learns better when she applies her knowledge, such as through participating in role plays. Outside of being a student, Summer's other life roles consisted of being a partner.

Tom

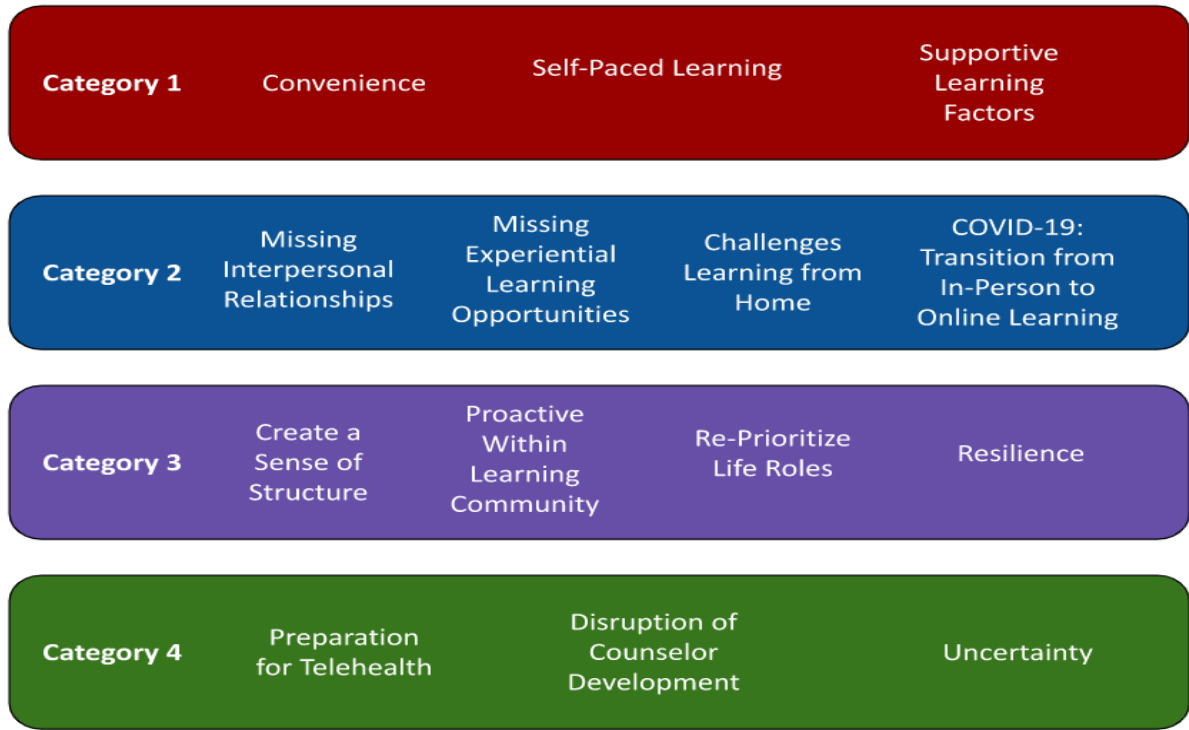
At the time of the interview, Tom was a practicing counselor who attended an online master's counseling program. Tom expressed that he specifically chose to attend an online program after learning about other people's experiences with online programs. He became interested in an online graduate program that would be more affordable and convenient based on his other obligations. He also described having online learning experience prior to attending his counseling program because he took some online courses during his undergraduate studies. Outside of being a student, Tom's other life roles consisted of being an employee and supportive friend.

Analysis of Findings

Based on participants' rich information regarding their experiences when taking online counseling classes within the past five years, I found multiple insights. As mentioned in Chapter III, my external peer coder and I reviewed participants' questionnaire responses and individual interview transcripts. We met multiple times in order to determine a list of codes, which were then utilized to help identify themes and categories. Through this organization process, four theme categories were identified: (1) positives of online learning, (2) negatives of online learning, (3) ways of adjusting and coping with online learning, and (4) impact on counselor development. A visual representation of these categories and their overarching themes is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Categories



Positives of Online Learning

The first category I found involved the positive experiences and factors of learning in an online environment. I was mindful of the fact that participants may have intentionally chosen to take online counseling classes or that they may have been required to take online counseling classes given the current world circumstances. With this consideration in mind, all of the participants expressed that they received benefits or advantages as a result of their experiences with online learning. In the following section, I have provided a discussion of participants' experiences and the benefits and advantages that they found based on taking their counseling classes online. The main sub-themes that

were identified by participants include convenience, self-paced learning, and supportive learning factors.

Convenience

During the data collection process, participants were asked what benefits or advantages they experienced, if any, based on having their counseling classes provided within an online learning format. All of the participants discussed how they found a sense of convenience, but they described experiencing convenience in varying ways. The following themes emerged based on participants' responses: accommodation to other life roles, ability to multitask, having more access to electronic learning materials, and not having to commute to a physical campus.

Accommodating to Other Life Roles. When discussing the convenience factors of online learning, seven of the participants spoke of how they felt that taking their counseling classes online gave them the flexibility to be able to manage their other life roles, such as being an employee, a parent, and a partner. As Megan wrote, "I love the convenience of taking classes online. I don't know if I would have had the time to return to school for a midlife career pivot without them." Audrey also shared a similar experience to Megan in that her desire to become a counselor involved making a change in careers. In her interview, Audrey explained that being able to take her classes gave her the opportunity to pursue her career goals while also working.

Similar to Megan and Audrey, Jessica spoke about how having online counseling classes provided her with the accessibility of attending a counseling program. She stated:

I'm pretty self-motivated and I work full-time as well, so having the ability to take the class online and do the reading and the writing and all of the assignments when it fits my schedule has been important because I wouldn't feasibly be able to go to school and work at the same time if I had to be at the campus at certain times during the week, especially if it's during the day. So, it worked well, for sure.

Throughout her interview, Jessica expressed how online counseling classes provided more accessibility to students despite where they are geographically located in the country. She concluded that it was valuable and more convenient to her to be able to integrate online counseling classes into her existing schedule.

In addition to work, many participants shared that they were also parents and partners outside in addition to attending school. As Ruby explained during her interview, "I also have a family and kids and different things like that, too, which makes that staying at home portion really convenient and really accessible to me." Participants, such as Ester, shared similar statements. As a partner and mother, Ester expressed how she also felt that being able to take online counseling classes while working from home was convenient. Furthermore, she discussed how she was able to continue her education after finding out that she and her family were moving because of her husband's job. She said:

So, I liked that it was online and that I could do classes at a distance, so it works really well for my position and what I was doing. And then it turned out that a year into the program I moved states, and so that was even more beneficial

because I wasn't able to continue at my same school while living in a completely different state, which [was] great and it worked out really well.

The overall conclusion made by participants was that it was very important to them to be able to attend and complete their online counseling classes in a way that also allowed them the time to balance their other major life obligations.

Ability to Multitask During Class Breaks. As busy adults who were attending online counseling classes, it was understandable that four of the participants talked about how they would try to use the break given during their classes as an opportunity to finish a quick household task. Daisy discussed how she utilized her classroom breaks. During her interview, Daisy said, "I could go do an errand over lunch, or get a load of laundry done. And it makes my week just feel less rigid, I guess." Megan also shared a similar statement in her written questionnaire response. During her interview, Megan further elaborated on her ability to multitask by discussing how she found that she is able to retain more information when she is busy engaging in other activities, such as folding laundry or exercising on the treadmill.

Lacy also agreed with Daisy and Megan. During her interview, Lacy discussed how she tried to utilize her classroom breaks in productive ways. She stated:

[I]t was still so nice to just, like, 'Okay, here's a 10-minute break. Let me run and do my laundry, or feed my cat,' or whatever. Like any number of things I could do in those times, it was so nice to be able to do that. So I think that was probably the biggest benefit.

Like Lacy, Rose also talked about how it was helpful to be able to use her breaks to be able to complete similar household tasks. Even if it was a 10-minute break or 15-minute break from instructors' lectures, participants found that it was helpful to use their breaks in useful ways with the goal of having more free time throughout the rest of their day or week.

Using Electronic Learning Materials. When reviewing the data, four of the participants spoke highly in terms of the benefits of utilizing technology-based learning materials, such as listening to recorded lectures or listening to audio-textbooks. Megan described the convenience of audio-textbooks and said:

The fact that a lot of my textbooks were - had a voice to text feature enabled on them was amazing because I could listen to textbooks in the car. I had a 25-minute commute when I started to my then job, so I could get in the car and throw my textbook on the voice-to-text and listen to what I need you to listen to and gain information that way.

This quote demonstrated that having access to electronic learning materials allowed Megan to continue learning regardless of her location. Ester's responses also resonated to what Megan discussed. During her interview, Ester also spoke of the convenience of audio-textbooks and said having access to electronic class materials, such as recorded lectures, were helpful during times when she was unable to attend the synchronous class.

Michelle also found that electronic learning materials were helpful, especially during her asynchronous online counseling classes. She said:

[T]he thing that has saved me is having these textbooks in an electronic format online where I have the option of listening to it. For me that has been a lifesaver and I don't know if other people do that, but I know a lot of - listening to books on tape, someone narrating a book, has become very popular. I think it's because a lot of people actually receive information better that way, but that's just my opinion...I feel like, for me, being able to listen to it and read it at the same time, then being able to scroll back and find the spot and reread it, that format for textbooks has been fabulous.

This quote represents how access to electronic learning materials can be used to help supplement instructors' overall course materials. Michelle felt that she would have struggled throughout her online classes if the accessibility to these eclectic learning materials were not provided.

Even though he was a recent counseling graduate, Tom also spoke to how it was helpful, and continues to be helpful, to have electronic learning materials. Tom spoke of how he continues to reference his textbooks when looking up theories and interventions when working with his clients. He said, "The textbooks were all PDF files, so they're saved on my computer. If I need it, I can just dive into it and get what I needed." This quote demonstrates that having accessibility to different electronic learning materials provides the additional benefit of helping counselors when engaging in professional practice.

No Commute to a Physical Campus. Given the concerns of the virus's contagiousness (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Cicha et al., 2021; Doolan

et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020) and the economic challenges (e.g., economic recession, inflation, etc.) that have occurred after navigating how to live in a post-pandemic world (Child, 2021; Wang, 2022), eight of the participants highlighted how it was convenient that they did not need to travel to a physical campus in order to attend their classes. The flexibility of online classes allowed participants to attend their online counseling classes or complete assignments at home, or in Messi's case, during her work hours. In their interviews, participants often spoke about how they avoided traffic and did not have the same time barriers that are typically associated with driving to campus. In terms of traffic, Ruby and Jessica talked about how their institution's campuses are located in the middle of major metropolitan cities. Because many of their classes occurred in the early evenings, they appreciated how their online counseling classes did not require any travel, thus helping them avoid rush-hour traffic. Ruby also shared that the additional benefits she received from not commuting to a physical campus consisted of "saving gas money, saving time, [and] saving a little bit of stress."

Daisy and Summer also provided a discussion related to how attending their classes online resolved the challenges of commuting to a physical campus. Daisy shared, "I commute 45 minutes every day to be on campus. It was nice to not immediately have to commute and just to be at home and not have to worry about bringing my lunch, or anything like that." When reflecting on her written questionnaire response, Daisy explained how not having to commute to a physical campus helped her classes run more "efficiently." Summer also provided further insight into her experience during her interview. She stated:

I think the biggest benefit has a lot to do with the economy right now, but just not having to drive to campus. I mean obviously gas prices have been crazy and, you know, inflation, like all of those things, so being able to just stay at home and participate in Zoom or do like online classes helps in that way because I don't necessarily have to go anywhere, and it's not wasting gas...And I don't – I think, especially for my program, I am and a lot of my friends live 45 minutes to an hour away from campus, and so that's - that's a pretty good drive, you know, so it saves time and then I'm not driving there and back and, like the gas aspect. So you get a little bit of time back that you would have spent you know driving and doing that kind of thing.

Based on her statement, Summer conveyed that it was important to her to be able to use her time effectively. Instead of having to travel to a physical campus on a daily basis, Summer was able to use that time to complete assignments or other learning activities that enhanced her overall learning experience.

Self-Paced Learning

A second common theme among participants included how taking online counseling classes allowed them to learn at their own pace. Six of the participants spoke about how they were able to do assigned readings, papers, and projects at times that were more convenient for them. This sentiment was shared by Summer and Tom. In her questionnaire response, Summer wrote that she could finish her courses at a faster pace in order to accelerate her progress toward her degree compared to her current in-person classes. Similarly, Tom wrote, "It allows you as the student to take the education into

your own hands.” Later in his interview, Tom discussed how he also completed his courses at a faster pace, which allowed him to graduate one year earlier than his anticipated graduation date. This also allowed him to gain full-time employment as a practicing counselor more quickly.

Other interesting insights related to self-paced learning involved the overall feasibility of taking classes as well as how much is actually learned through an online learning format. Regarding the feasibility of self-paced learning, Jessica wrote, “I have the ability to work on coursework when I have the time and availability, which allows me to take this program. Otherwise, I could not attend school full time.” During her interview, Jessica explained that a major reason for intentionally choosing to take online classes was because of her busy schedule. She expressed that she uses a lot of her spare time to complete all of her coursework.

In terms of learning, Daisy wrote, “Overall I’ve been surprised at how much I still feel like I learn. You get through the content more quickly and concisely when you’re doing it online because there isn’t all of the extraneous stuff.” When asked to provide further clarification on what she meant by “extraneous stuff,” Summer explained that she was referring to casual side conversations that she felt would take away from her class time. This sentiment was also shared by Summer. In her interview, Summer provided more information regarding her experiences with self-paced learning. She described how she felt that having more flexibility in her learning gave her more time to look up additional learning resources, such as reading books on counseling, listening to

counseling-related posts, and watching YouTube videos on different techniques and interventions.

Supportive Learning Factors

The last theme shared by participants involved factors that were helpful and supportive when learning in their online counseling classes. While participants wrote about the benefits and advantages in their questionnaire responses, they were also asked to expand upon their ideas in more detail during their interviews. Based on participants' responses, the following themes were found: instructor support, smaller class sizes, and development of additional learning skills.

Instructor Support. When asked about what factors helped support participants while learning online, a statement shared by a majority of participants involved how supportive their instructors were during the overall learning process. Ester discussed what instructor support looked like in her interview and stated:

[T]he teachers and professors knew that we were all working and that the online structure is different than in-person and so they were able to be flexible in ways that were required for those kinds of courses. For example, they had set office hours but they could still meet you at any time, and they were fluent enough at using Zoom that they were able to make meeting at a distance easier. I find that meeting over Zoom creates a better connection than just talking on the phone did, so...that was really helpful.

Ester further explained in her interview that, especially when there were time zone differences between where she lived and where her online classes were being held, it was

important for her to be able to have accessible and accommodating instructors if she needed help.

Sharing a similar perspective to Ester, Jessica also talked about how it was important to her that her instructors showed support during her online counseling classes. Although her survey indicated how much instructors' support meant to her, she provided further detail in her interview when she said:

The professors make all the difference...And it's not just one or two of them. It's all of the professors in this program who've been communicative, supportive, and they seem to get the nuances of trying to teach in this platform, you know, and some previous experience with doing it because they're very good at it.

In addition to providing her with support throughout her learning experience, Jessica also valued how her instructors had technical skills and could even provide students with assistance when needed. Jessica further described how having instructor support was a "necessity" in any online learning experience.

While Ester and Jessica were participants who intentionally chose to take online classes, I wanted to be mindful of the fact that there were other participants who were required to move to an online learning environment as a result of the pandemic. I thought that it would be both helpful and informative to learn about how participants perceived their instructors during their adjustment to online teaching. From those perspectives, Carol, Lacy, and Messi discussed that they felt that their instructors showed their sense of support throughout the transition and overall learning process. For instance, Carol described her practicum instructor as being a "whiz" at technology and how she worked

hard to help students get the most out of their learning experience, such as through having students show videos of their counseling sessions. Lacy provided further insight into what it looked like for her instructors to show their support during her learning experience when she said, “I think the professors that really did well with the online format were the professors that are human, that recognize the human element in counseling to begin with.” Throughout her interview, Lacy expressed that she valued how her instructors were able to take into consideration the changes that students faced as a result of taking online classes and worked to be as receptive to students’ needs as much as possible.

Implement Classroom Expectations. In addition to having support from their instructors, five of the participants also shared that they wanted professors to implement clear classroom expectations. When discussing their need for more classroom expectations, participants primarily talked about providing a detailed overview of what was to be anticipated throughout their courses both inside and outside of the online classroom. In the online classroom setting, Messi and Rose discussed the importance of having classroom rules and expectations. With Messi’s experiences with online learning, she discussed how she felt like her learning experiences were more meaningful when her professors set and modeled their classroom expectations, such as requiring all members within the online classroom to have their cameras turned on at all times during synchronous meetings and requiring all students to actively participate during classroom discussions.

Similar to Messi's feedback, Rose commented about how she also appreciated having established expectations by her instructors. She stated:

I think my professors did a good job of ensuring there were roles and boundaries about people being on Zoom and being like, 'You should still treat it like you're in a classroom. Don't be driving, or don't be in your bed. Sit at your desk.' So I think they did a good job of having those sorts of boundaries, which I would definitely promote.

Rose further explained that, because of these classroom expectations, she and her peers felt more accountable and responsible to treat their online classrooms with a sense of professionalism and show respect to each other.

Outside of the classroom, Messi and Ester talked about how it was helpful when instructors provided detailed syllabi and online course pages. Ester explained the importance behind having a detailed outline of the course by saying, "Their online Canvas course is where I go to get almost all the information [for the course]." She explained that when her courses provided less detailed information on their online course pages or on their syllabi, it made the course challenging and the overall learning process frustrating. Therefore, she recommended that it would be helpful if instructors provided clear and current information about assignment deadlines or any changes happening in their courses in order to help students feel more prepared during their learning experiences.

Small Class Size. In addition to instructor support, Carol, Ester, and Lacy provided a discussion regarding their preferences for smaller class sizes. Ester shared that

she found it helpful that her interpersonal-based classes, such as her clinical skills course, consisted of no more than 10 students. Carol also agreed with the concept of having a limit on how many students could be enrolled into a single course. When reflecting on her practicum class, Carol stated:

We had a small class, you know. It wasn't overwhelming to have everybody in the same virtual environment because there was only, like, seven of us. I think if there was a big group, you would have gotten lost and maybe wouldn't be as impactful. But that was really good.

Further in her interview, Carol described her ideal class size as, "A small group, maybe no bigger than seven."

Similar to Carol, Lacy also preferred to have a class size limit within her online classes. She described her experiences within her classes and said:

[A]ny class where I had to scroll to see everyone was a pain and that there were just too many people. Nobody wants to speak up. Nobody felt connected. Nobody felt good. But the classes that were smaller that had, you know, [a] maximum of like 15-18 students, we were able to engage a lot more, we were able to get to know the professors and each other a little bit. And it felt like an actual class a little bit more, rather than just an online video that I had to engage with.

Even though Carol, Ester, and Lacy had different views on what an ideal online counseling class size would be, they shared a similar view in that it was important to have a class size that would encourage students to have engaging discussions without there being so many students that it would be too hard to develop connections.

Development of Additional Learning Skills. Even though participants engaged in online learning in order to pursue their goals of becoming counselors, some participants spoke about how they also learned additional skills that were applicable both inside and outside of the classroom. Within her interview, Audrey explained how her online counseling classes helped her learn how to engage in problem-solving skills. She stated:

[A] benefit that I definitely think comes from an online program is being able to work through things on my own. Because I have to. I mean, yes, I can send an email, or, you know, text one of my classmates, or something like that. But if there's something I don't – maybe it's not quite, like, the gears aren't quite catching up with each other. I have to figure out how to make...those connections. Where if I'm in a classroom, I'd just be like, 'I don't get it,' where [online] I don't have that immediate response that you have with a classroom setting.

Audrey further explained how engaging in problem-solving skills and developing connections among different topics was something that she was going to have to do when working with clients, especially when engaging in case conceptualization.

Similar to Audrey, Tom discussed how having his counseling classes in an online environment helped him enhance his life skills. In his interview, he stated, "Discipline, dedication, and routines were all something I learned and cultivated during those three years of online schooling." Later in his interview, Tom explained that these life skills have been critical when working with clients at his private practice. His overall

conclusion was, “I rarely forget things now due to the schedule/routine the online classes forced me to develop.”

While all of the participants experienced positives that came as a result of attending online counseling classes, there were differences among the participants about what convenience looked like for them. For example, the participants who attended in-person programs were more likely to talk about the convenience of not having a commute while the participants who attended hybrid or online programs were more likely to express how the convenience of online classes helped them fulfill their other life roles. Additionally, participants spoke of how they appreciated the ability to learn at their own pace as well as have learning support, such as from their instructors and their overall class structures. However, it is important to note that all participants also experienced challenges as they engaged in online learning when taking counseling classes. Some of the challenges they experienced included missing the opportunity to build relationships with others, wanting to engage in more experiential learning activities, and navigating how to learn while in their home environments.

Negatives of Online Learning

The second category that was found in the data involved how there were negative experiences or factors when learning in an online environment. Similar to how I viewed the benefits and advantages of online learning, I was mindful of the fact that students’ perspectives could have been impacted based on their level of choice when learning in a virtual setting. I provide a discussion of the following themes that emerged: missing interpersonal connections, missing experiential learning opportunities, challenges of

learning at home, and the impact that the pandemic had as it related to participants' experiences of taking online counseling classes.

Missing Interpersonal Relationships

A theme that emerged from the data involved how participants missed developing interpersonal relationships. All participants expressed finding it difficult to be able to fully establish bonds with members within their learning community, which often led to feelings of isolation. When discussing her overall experience, Audrey spoke to how she felt that she was “missing” a critical part of her learning experience. Similarly, Daisy said that, “[W]hen you log into Zoom it’s just like, ‘Okay, we’re here. What are we doing? Let’s get to it.’ There’s no chatting or getting to really know you when it’s over Zoom.” This response is conflicting based on what Daisy shared earlier regarding how she valued the convenience of how she could focus more time on learning during her class time. Daisy explained that she valued the informative nature of her online classes but felt that her online classes could be both informative and designed in ways that encouraged communication and connection with her peers and instructors. Messi resonated with Daisy’s shared experience. In her survey response, she wrote, “I feel that counseling a in person connection and i was not able to make any connections with professors or classmates. It was hard to make friends or networks.” Based on their perspectives, it was clear that many of the participants longed to be able to develop interpersonal relationships in order to further facilitate their learning experiences.

As participants provided further insight on their experiences with taking online counseling classes, they talked about missing a sense of connection with their peers as

well as with their instructors. In terms of feelings disconnected from peers, Daisy explained, “I feel like we were kind of told, ‘Oh, connect [with] your peers. You’ll be able to lean on them for things. You’ll need each other for support.’” But then it was really hard to make those connections right away. Daisy further discussed that, although she was encouraged to connect with her peers, there were very few opportunities provided to her to be able to interact with others. She expressed her disappointment by sharing that she would have appreciated it if her instructors or her counseling department would have created virtual events, such as an open house, where students could meet each other and develop bonds. Ester also resonated with Daisy’s experience because she talked about how she missed having moments of small-talk before and after class with her peers, which were her usual ways of meeting and establishing friendships with her peers.

Messi also discussed how she missed having moments of connection with her peers. Her sense of frustration was further explored throughout her interview where she discussed moments where she felt like her peers were disconnected. In her interview, Messi explained that she often developed relationships with her peers from engaging in activities, such as through small-group discussions or working on projects together. However, she felt that her peers were less committed to developing connections with each other. She stated:

I just feel like through Zoom, people get very distracted. Some people, I did notice that, they’ll put their camera off, and it’s just like, ‘Are you even present?’

Or, they will not participate...a lot of people turn the camera off. And it's just like, 'Okay, so we're not doing this exercise?'

Messi concluded that the lack of connection among her peers left her feeling as though she was not able to make strong friendships, which ultimately contributed to her feelings of isolation.

Similar to Messi, Tom also discussed how not having opportunities to build connections with his peers impacted him throughout his online learning experience. During his interview, Tom discussed:

I think the hardest part, and this really didn't come to fruition until internship, was the lack of contact. The lack of human interaction, both with classmates and then being able to use [clinical skills] practically in a practicum. It was all online, it was all book work, it was all writing...So, going from that...I'm talking to a screen. I don't even know these people. I can't even see these people's faces. I don't know what my classmates look like. I know - I just know their writing, and I know their names because I see it on screen. So it could be a little lonely at times. And then, like I said, when I got to internship, it was a lot harder to take that - what I learned and apply it because I didn't have that interaction. I didn't have that connection with a client.

Based on other parts of his interview, Tom provided conflicting statements about the nature of online classes. While he appreciated the convenience that online learning provided him, there was also a part of him that missed and felt impacted by the limited amount of interactions with his peers and instructors. Because of these missed

opportunities to practice, apply, and receive feedback on his interpersonal skills, Tom stated that he struggled with interacting with his clients, such as stuttering or having his mind “blank” on what to say. Throughout the rest of his interview, Tom discussed how a major part of his practicum and internship experience involved learning how to develop connections and establish therapeutic rapport with his clients.

While developing relationships with their peers was important, participants also expressed how they missed interacting with their instructors and felt that the opportunities to build connections were less available due to the structure and setting of online learning environments. As Carol described:

I think, you know, it’s fun to talk to your professors on break about their life and that didn’t happen. When you went on break on Zoom, everyone shuts their computer off and they walk away. I think that’s lost. I think some of the joking around is lost because you don’t come in early, you don’t stay late, it’s all sort of business when you’re there. So, yeah, I do think some of that is lost.

Carol’s statement is interesting to note because it presents conflicting views on students’ experiences. While some of the participants felt that having classroom breaks provided them with the convenience of being able to complete household tasks or engage in self-care, other participants felt that the use of breaks in their online classes took away time from being able to make connections with their peers and instructors. Additionally, Carol used the word “business” to describe what her experiences looked like when it came to communicating to her professors. She further expressed her sense of disappointment

when she shared one experience by saying, “I actually didn’t even speak to one of my professors at all during it [the course]. It was all very bizarre.”

Rose also related to feeling like she was missing opportunities to further connect and interact with her instructors. Like Carol, Rose discussed how she often used the breaks during her classes to get to know her instructors. She stated:

I think it would be just because, you know, you miss out on, even just while you take a break from class, or there’s a few minutes before class, you know, ‘Oh, Dr. Smith, it’s a nice day out,’ or whatever, like, you know, ‘Oh yeah, I was able to take my dogs for a walk and - Oh, what kind of dogs do you have? How many dogs?’ You know, you can have those kind of smaller personal connections that just aren’t really a thing over Zoom because you’re, you know, you got your phone and you’re texting your sister until, ‘Okay, now it’s four o’clock. Start class,” instead of having those more personal connections with professors.

While Rose spoke earlier of the convenience of being able to complete a household chore during her classroom breaks, she also expressed that the classroom breaks took away from moments to develop interpersonal relationships. Rose discussed later in her interview that she felt that a lot could be learned from her professors, even if it was engaging in casual conversations, and that her online learning environment made it challenging to be able to have those rapport building opportunities.

Foster Relationships Within Online Classes. In terms of finding ways to manage their desire to build relationships with their peers and instructors, seven of the participants discussed that they wanted instructors to help students develop more

relationships with each other when engaging in their online learning environments.

Similar to how participants shared that they valued being able to connect, they expressed that having instructors help facilitate their connections was important to initially establishing peer relationships. When reflecting on her experiences in her online classes, Ruby shared what instructors did to help students connect with each other. She stated:

[M]y professors so far have done such a great job that, even from our first two quarters, I remember I had a professor at the end of class, she would leave the Zoom link open for about 30 minutes, and she would leave. She's like, 'I'm gone. I'm not here. You guys stay and connect and chat.' Because she knew how we might feel differently if she was there participating. And sometimes she would stay and say, 'Hey if you guys want to talk with me specifically,' or if our discussion ran over... it wasn't like a time limit, and like, 'Okay, alright, all of our class is over,' and then cut off.

Ruby expressed that she appreciated how her instructor was thoughtful about how to provide students the opportunity to interact with each other. She also expressed that it was helpful for her to be able to develop relationships with her instructors when they provided extra space for rapport building connections. Ruby concluded her discussion by suggesting that instructors provide additional time in their online classes, such as before or after class, in order to give students time to be able to engage in small talk, exchange phone numbers, and get to know each other.

Michelle also stated that she appreciated when her instructors made additional opportunities to be able to engage in rapport building connections. She further explained

that having moments of talking with her instructors helped her feel comfortable to be able to meet with them independently to ask questions and receive extra help when needed. Michelle emphasized her point by stating, “It [referring to having connections within her learning community] really makes all the difference.”

As Ruby and Michelle mentioned when sharing their experiences, Jessica placed emphasis on how she recommends that instructors and students work to build connections with each other. She stated:

I think that the instructors have been an important piece, too, because if they were not communicative and not on the ball about it, it'd fall apart, too. It would - you just wouldn't get the feedback...So instructors have to be communicative, we have to be communicative, and we have to be diligent about the work.

Jessica further explained that it was very important to be able to develop connections in the classroom so that students are able to receive the feedback that they need in order to continue their progress throughout their courses. She said, “The professors make all the difference in my curriculum.” Because Jessica felt a sense of connection to her instructors and believed that they were invested in her academic success, she felt that she was more receptive and better able to apply the feedback she received.

Tom's experience was similar to the other participants. Additionally, he expressed the importance of how instructors need to be particularly active when teaching asynchronous online counseling classes. During his interview, Tom stated:

Stay active. Stay engaged with students. It's so crucial to the success of students for you to be involved, especially in an environment where it's a lot of self-

teaching, where you're not doing a lot of teaching on your own. You need to be engaged, you need to be interactive with students, and you need to be sure that they know certain things and concepts. It's your job to teach, and the best way to do that, especially online if you're not able to give lectures, is to stay engaged.

Watch the chats. Watch the group talks. Talk to students.

When asked about how his instructors worked to establish relationships, Tom stated that his instructors often incorporated different discussion topics where they would also engage in the discussion with their students and ask them further questions about how the material related to their personal experiences. Tom also expressed that he found it meaningful when his instructors personally reached out to him and expressed their feedback to him. He said that, while it was difficult to receive critical feedback at times, he appreciated that his instructors took the time to show that they were truly invested in his success in his online counseling classes.

Missing Experiential Learning Opportunities

Regarding the challenges or disadvantages of taking online counseling courses, a majority of the participants expressed that they needed more opportunities to see how counseling experts, such as their instructors, applied different techniques, theories, and interventions through live observation during their synchronous online classes or through the use of video demonstrations. Additionally, they expressed needing opportunities to apply what they were learning in their classes, such as through role plays or engaging in classroom discussions. Ruby wrote in her questionnaire, "I do feel like you lose a lot of

communication and ways to respond by being online and its difficult to do more creative activities together.”

Knowing that each participant had different experiences, it was important to obtain further insight into what their classes typically looked like and what elements they expressed that they needed in order to create a beneficial learning experience. Like Ruby, Carol also experienced moments where she missed having more interactive learning moments in her group counseling class. Carol stated:

Yeah, I remember taking a group counseling class with no groups. No opportunities. And it was really frustrating and I definitely lost out on that experience for sure, which was a bummer because you can’t really do group counseling with papers, you know, and reading. It didn’t work.

Carol provided further information throughout her interview and described her experience in her group counseling class as “frustrating.” She also said, “I mean, it just, we were supposed to come up with an idea, but then we didn’t actually do it or put into practice. So you don’t know if [it] worked.” Ultimately, Carol expressed that not having the opportunity to apply group counseling techniques and interventions as well as receive critical feedback left her feeling disappointed in her learning experience.

Megan could also relate to the experiences shared by Carol and Ruby. Although Carol referenced her group counseling class, Megan discussed how she experienced less engagement in her content-based classes. When asked this question during the questionnaire portion of the study, Megan wrote, “Content-based courses still rely on lecture to convey the material. At this level, we need to be engaged in application and

discussion in order for the material to be utilized in our professional careers.” During her interview, Megan explained that she desired to have a learning experience that provided in-depth exploration of counseling concepts, ideas, theories, and overall practice. As conveyed in her questionnaire response, Megan provided more information and expressed feelings of disappointment. She stated:

It felt like there was - there were opportunities for discussion and there are opportunities for application that just didn't happen, and so it felt like a learn and regurgitate situation. Like you had to learn it, and had to regurgitate it, you - and then that that was it. And they expected that you learned it, or retain and regurgitate, I should say. But it's - I felt like there was a lost opportunity in those situations to be able to really dig deeper into some of that information.

Although Megan felt like her instructors were providing her with information, she conveyed that she needed to engage in various activities that would allow her to further explore the counseling field.

Michelle resonated with Megan's experience because she also shared that there were moments where she felt she was not fully learning the material within her counseling classes. She stated:

I watched them [her instructors] on a video, and then I read, and then I write a paper or take a test, and move on. It just feels different and I think it's that human connection piece that, for me, is important.

During her interview, Michelle explained that her views of engaging in interactive, experiential activities involved more than watching recorded lectures or engaging in synchronous online class meetings. She emphasized this point when she said:

[W]hen I get lectured at and don't have a chance for the interactive piece, I feel like, for me personally, my ability to retain information, and apply it on a broader scale and into other parts of my life, especially with clients, is limited. And there are some classes I've come away with, not so much recently, but have come away where I feel like, if I just been given the textbook, I would have come out just as well as I did.

This quote demonstrated that it was important for Michelle to be able to apply what she was learning from lectures and readings in order to help facilitate her understanding and her ability to effectively work with her future clients. Ultimately, Michelle felt that her classes were not as valuable when they did not include interactive, application-based activities.

Desire for Increased Experiential Learning. After learning more about their unique experiences, a majority of participants discussed how they wanted to have more experiential learning opportunities, such as being able to participate in role plays, provide recorded videos where they could practice certain techniques, or engage in thought-provoking discussions. Although some of the participants shared that they had moments of active engagement, the overall consensus was that they wanted to have more interactive, application-based learning activities in their online classes. During her interview, Carol talked about how a majority of her online classes focused more on

providing content information. While she found the information beneficial, she said, “I personally think there should be just as much focus on being in session with people - role playing, going through scenarios, watching people doing therapy, talking about it.” As she further explained during her interview, Carol felt that it is important for students to be able to apply the information they are learning in order to provide them with the skills that they will need when working with clients.

Like Carol, Lacy also discussed how beneficial it was for her understanding of the material when she was able to apply theories and techniques. In her interview, Lacy described how she took a class on addictions and reflected on how having the opportunity to be interactive during her class encouraged her to continue her learning outside of the classroom. When asked about what kinds of experiential activities she would want instructors to include in their online classes, she stated:

[There are] a lot of different ways to engage, finding games, or making games, or showing different interventions, and letting us practice those interventions based on the material that we’re learning. You know, there are really cool and creative ways of teaching online to counselors, but it takes a lot of creativity and it takes a lot of time that they don’t always have.

Lacy also recommended that instructors work to integrate different teaching methods in order to be more inclusive of students’ diverse learning styles. She believed that it is important to have a balance between delivering content in interactive, creative ways while also encouraging and challenging students to apply critical thinking skills in ways that made them think about how they could use their knowledge with their future clients.

In addition to interactive activities, Megan discussed how she valued hearing instructors' experiences in their work with clients. During her interview, she said, "I wanted them to be able to bring their own professional experience to that because I feel like that's really where the expertise lies is in their experiences." From this direct quote, Megan expressed that it was important for her to learn what counseling looks like outside of the classroom and felt that it would be helpful to have more opportunities to learn about what to expect when she enters the counseling field. In terms of advice for instructors, she concluded:

[D]on't be afraid to apply it for yourself, and your own practice, or your own experience, but then also allow space for your students to apply it to theirs as well. And so - because sometimes in that discussion, that's when the real application and that real learning takes place.

Messi also shared a similar outlook that Lacy and Megan provided. For Messi, she talked about how it was important for her to have experiential learning activities not only to help facilitate her learning of the material, but to also help her stay focused during classes. She stated:

[O]ne thing that I do expect from my professors is also do some sort of participation activity because I do tend to get bored if we're just doing lecturing... So it's like - I like to engage in classes. I feel like I'm able to learn a lot more and hearing different perspectives from my classmates or my professors. So that engagement is very important to me.

Messi also expressed that having participation activities would help students become more involved in the learning experience, which would then help make group-based classroom activities more impactful.

Challenges Learning from Home

An additional theme that was discussed across participants was the fact that they experienced challenges when learning at home as opposed to learning in a physical classroom setting. In reviewing some of the challenges they experienced, the following themes emerged: difficult to balance life roles and increased workload.

Difficult to Balance Life Roles. While participants discussed how they valued the time and flexibility that online learning provided them in terms of managing their other life roles, it is also a common experience among graduate students that they experience challenges related to how to balance their various responsibilities while also maintaining their roles as students. In my study, three of the participants expressed that they experienced struggles when it came to maintaining their role as online counseling students in addition to being parents, partners, and employees. Throughout her interview, Audrey expressed how difficult it was to accept the fact that many of her roles, including her role as a student, began to suffer because of how much she was trying to manage when working full-time while also going to school full-time. During her interview, Audrey stated:

My family was definitely not near the top of the list when I had all of the things going at once, and neither was myself. I'm just like - it was really rough - it was about three months [referring to the length of her academic term], and it was

really rough. And I can't do that again. I wasn't able to give the 110% that I wanted to [give to] school. They got like 98%. You know, I don't feel like I gave everything - like I just didn't give everybody anything, nobody got everything. And my family got even less, and that's not okay with me.

As she provided more information regarding the challenges she experienced, Audrey expressed a sense of sadness and shared that the results of these challenges negatively impacted her mental health.

Ester also expressed challenges related to how she needed to balance her other life roles in addition to being a student. She described her experience by saying:

[B]alancing all of those things was very challenging because school took up - school and work took up so much time that it was hard to find the balance between all my other roles. And definitely some of those roles got put on the backburner to allow me to spend more time doing the ones that were required the most effort and energy, which was mostly school and being a mom.

Similar to Audrey, Ester expressed a sense of sadness in knowing that she experienced challenges when it came to being a student in her online counseling classes while also working to balance her other life responsibilities. She concluded by saying that she felt that she had to make "compromises" in order to ensure that she could fulfill her main roles of being a counseling student and mother.

Ruby's experience was similar to Ester's experience in that they were parents to young children. When asked further questions about her roles, Ruby shared the realities

of managing multiple roles while also taking online counseling classes. In her interview, she stated:

Well, the master's program, in general, is taxing. And a lot of it is time consuming, it's stressful, there's a lot of work that I have to - that I'm putting into it. And so I already have full-time positions at home and, you know, at my work that I can't compromise because I have to work to pay for my program to go to school, to get the job I want.

This quote conveyed that Ruby valued her other roles, but that she also felt torn because the roles in her life were not optional. She felt that, in order to become a counselor, she needed to find ways to fulfill her role as a student while also working to find a balance within her roles as a mother and full-time employee. Similar to Ester, Ruby also felt that she needed to make compromises, including in her role as a student, in order to fulfill her other important life roles.

Increased Coursework. In addition to finding ways to balance other life roles, participants expressed that they noticed a shift in the amount of coursework that was required for them to complete when taking their online counseling classes. For Tom and Jessica, they discussed how they were under the expectation that they would have a higher amount of coursework from the onset of their programs. They explained that they were under this expectation based on their previous experiences with taking online classes as well as through their own research on how their counseling programs provided online instruction. However, they both expressed that the amount of work that they were required to complete could be stressful at times. In his interview, Tom stated:

I mean, just a regular week would be [to] read three chapters, which are probably about 100 pages, participate in discussions, which you have to start your own topic and discuss with three other topics, and then if there's any added projects, usually a PowerPoint to kind of 'present.' It's a lot. It can add up real quick. Similarly, Jessica also shared that the amount of coursework in her program could be "daunting." Both Tom and Jessica expressed that it was very difficult to keep up with the pace of their online counseling courses if they ever fell behind on assignments or readings.

Participants who transitioned to online learning as a result of the pandemic also talked about the increased amount of coursework required from them. In Lacy's experience, she discussed how it was very difficult to manage the high amount of coursework. In her interview, Lacy stated:

There was one professor in particular who - she expected a lot of reading, a lot of engagement, a lot of papers. I did the math and she expected and that - and maybe this is normal in other places, but this is not normal for us, she expected - it was a paper a week that was like seven pages long, every single week that had to do with several books that we had to read. So it was just like inundated with information.

Later in her interview, Lacy discussed how she found it very challenging to keep up with the pace of her course in addition to taking her other online counseling classes. She concluded that there were moments where she chose to prioritize her mental health in order to make sure that she could continue with her online counseling classes.

Similar to Lacy, Messi talked about the challenges of keeping up with a high amount of coursework, especially during her accelerated classes. During her discussion, Messi shared, “[H]aving these classes can - like a seven week - they’re very intensive. Like it’s on the go, and it’s homework every day, like reading three books in seven weeks, and it’s just like, ‘Man, that’s a lot of stuff!’” As Messi continued to discuss her experiences, she expressed that she experienced a sense of burnout and that the amount of coursework that she was required to complete had an impact on her mental health.

COVID-19: Transition from In-Person to Online Learning

Due to the timing of my study, it is important to note that a majority of the participants in this study transitioned to fully online learning as a result of the pandemic. Because of this, they frequently discussed how the pandemic had a significant role in their learning experiences. While participants who reported attending fully online counseling programs stated that they experienced increased workload as a result of their classes being online, they reported that they did not feel their learning experiences were as significantly impacted by the consequences of the pandemic. On the other hand, eight of the participants who attended hybrid and fully in-person programs expressed experiencing challenges. The following themes were identified by participants who felt that their learning was impacted by the pandemic and the transition to fully online learning: unexpected push for online learning and navigating technology.

Unexpected Push for Online Learning. The participants who were required to transition to taking their counseling classes in an online setting expressed a shared commonality in that they, as well as their counseling departments and institutions, did not

fully understand the impact that the pandemic would have on what learning looked like and how learning was different compared to an in-person setting. In Carol's experience, she discussed how she was attending classes when her institution made the announcement to transition to online learning for the safety of their community. When first asked about how the pandemic impacted her learning experience, Carol discussed how she was under the impression that her experience with learning in an online environment would be temporary. As she explained, "[T]he first thing they said was, 'It's going to be 10 days or two weeks.'" However, she realized that her ability to return to in-person learning was not going to be feasible during the rest of her learning experience. When reflecting on what it was like to learn during the pandemic, Carol stated:

I think also what happened during COVID was that nobody knew for sure whether they should really invest and change into that space because we thought that it would be over, you know, and then they would just go back. So I think for us that particular department just didn't know whether it was worth investing in because it felt like it was going to go back [to being in-person].

From this quote, Carol conveyed that she felt that she lost important learning experiences due to her classes being required to transition to an online learning space as a result of the pandemic. These frustrations were further escalated when she felt that she was not able to have direct interactions with her instructors. Although Carol missed the interpersonal interactions and experiential activities that were available to her in her in-person classes, she discussed how some of her frustrations subsided when she was in her more advanced counseling classes, which were often smaller in class size and focused primarily on peer

and instructor interactions. Carol concluded that, while she witnessed how her instructors and overall department became more invested in online learning, it did not resolve her feelings of overall disappointment and frustration.

Lacy also talked about how she felt that it took time in order for her instructors and counseling department to accept the fact that their online learning and teaching experiences were going to be more long-term than they anticipated. During her interview, Lacy shared:

I think that we did not really end up going online fully and recognizing that it just needed to be online for long-term for a long time, so it was really difficult and just kind of being in this limbo space where I felt that we needed to be online, because the cases were so high...So there was a lot of back and forth of, ‘We want to go back. We want to go back. We want to go back. Next semester. Next semester. Next semester. Two weeks. Four weeks. A month. A year.’ You know, it just it felt back and forth, and there was a certain point where I was - I really just wanted them to be okay with us being online rather than getting our hopes up to be [able to] to back in-person over and over and over. So going online, while it was difficult, I knew it was a necessary evil.

Similar to Carol, Lacy also found it frustrating that there was a sense of ambiguity when it came to the possible return of in-person classes. The description of how Lacy viewed her experiences with online learning as “a necessary evil” demonstrated that she felt that online learning was necessary given the world circumstances and that she wanted her

department and institution to become more committed to providing quality online learning experiences.

Although she shared a different experience compared to Carol and Lacy, Rose also talked about how she experienced challenges entering her counseling program during the time that her classes were only offered through online modalities. Rose discussed how she started her program virtually because she did not realize the strong impact that the pandemic had when it came to being in public spaces. When reflecting on her experiences entering her online counseling classes, Rose stated:

I didn't even stop to think about how learning might be different or changed from the original plan of being totally in-person. And I wasn't really thinking about how or if learning would continue to be total - move online...I figured, 'Okay, by the time it's fall, it'll be figured out. And I was going to a smaller school, so we'll just be in-person.' And then we didn't.

Throughout her interview, Rose expressed that there were moments where she struggled to learn in her counseling classes because everyone within her learning community was trying to develop ways to effectively engage in an online learning environment. Although it was challenging, Rose concluded that she felt better knowing that she was at the beginning of her program where she mainly took content-based courses, which helped her feel as though she was not missing out on critical skill-building learning moments.

Navigating Technology. Due to the sudden transition to online learning, it was understandable that many students, instructors, and institutions were navigating how to use technology in effective ways while also being engaged in the learning process.

Although participants understood that there were moments of technology issues that were outside of their control or their instructors' abilities, four of the participants expressed that the challenges made their overall learning experiences difficult. During her online learning experience, Carol discussed the impact that uncooperative technology had during her classes. She said, "[T]here were definitely times when the class didn't happen because of technology issues or we met for, like, 20 minutes."

Summer's experience was similar to what Carol shared. During her interview, Summer provided more discussion of what it looked like to attend her online counseling classes while members within her learning community also navigated how to use technology. She stated:

And then, technology just never wants to work when you want it to and there's always issues with trying to share something on the screen, or people not being muted when they need to be, and just weird little things like that kind of interrupt the things that are happening, and so that can be really difficult.

Summer further discussed how technology challenges within her online counseling classes made it difficult for her to be able to feel fully engaged in the learning process.

Like Summer, Rose understood that members within her learning community, particularly her professors, had varying degrees of online teaching and overall technology experience. In her survey, Rose discussed how she felt feelings of frustration during moments when her classes were paused in order to find a solution to technology concerns. When asked about her experiences during her interview, she described:

I think one of the barriers that I faced was just my professors also trying to figure out technology, and the best way to facilitate, and lead classes online. Just with their own experience with the different materials, or programs, that you can use online. Trying to get those in alignment with what we were doing in classes, and kind of the frustration of, you know, when you watch somebody else use the Internet, it's so much more painful than if you're just like, 'Just click the button that's right there!'

While it was a challenging experience at the time, Rose expressed that it took patience in order to be able to manage her emotions while also trying to be considerate of her instructors' experiences. Although Rose appreciated that her experiences in taking online counseling classes happened at the beginning of her program, she stated that she missed many of the elements that she anticipated to receive in her in-person classes, such as the opportunity to interact more with her peers and instructors. She concluded that the challenges of technology were an additional layer to her experience that negatively impacted her views of online learning.

Based on the data, all participants expressed having negative experiences when it came to learning in an online environment. All of the participants resonated with the concept of missing the opportunity to build relationships with their peers and instructors. Additionally, they expressed a desire to be able to have more opportunities for experiential learning, such as through interactive role plays and video demonstrations. A significant number of participants shared that they experienced challenges with attending their online classes in their homes due. In order to learn more about their experiences, it

was helpful to explore and discuss the ways in which they were able to adjust or cope with the concept of online counselor education. Participants found it was helpful to have a sense of structure, to be actively involved in their learning spaces, to re-prioritize their life roles, and to build a sense of resiliency when managing ways to learn online.

Ways of Adjusting and Coping with Online Learning

The third theme that emerged from learning about participants' experiences as they took online counseling classes involved how they managed to adjust or cope with some of the challenges they expressed while engaging in an online learning environment. It is important to note that, while some participants actively chose to take online counseling classes and attend online counseling programs, they also needed to find ways to manage some of the obstacles that are associated with learning online. In terms of ways of processing some of the challenges they experienced when learning online, the overarching themes found within participants' experiences involved creating a sense of structure, being proactive within the learning community, reprioritizing their life roles, and developing a sense of resilience.

Creating a Sense of Structure

Six of the participants discussed that it was important for them to create a structured schedule in order to ensure that they were meeting assignment deadlines. They talked about how it was important to develop a structured schedule in order to help facilitate the sense of routine that they would often receive when taking in-person classes. When asked about her experiences, Audrey explained how, in most areas of her life, she

did not follow a sense of structure or routine. However, she discussed how her views changed when taking her online counseling classes. She stated:

I knew early on that I was going to have...to do something. Like I needed some sort of system...So in order to be able to do what I want to do there, do what I have to do with work, and what I want, and have to do with school, I had to - I had to have it - I had to make it [a schedule]. There wasn't - there was no choice. It had to be structured. And it was hard making myself do it the first couple of weeks. But then I realized it was not only working, but it felt more normal and it felt back into that, 'Okay,' kind of the ease of school thing that I had before.

When further asked about her schedule, Audrey discussed how she used the days that she does not work as opportunities to complete her assignments. She stated that she treated her schoolwork similar to how she managed her job, specifically mentioning that she completes her coursework between 8:30am and 4:00pm.

Daisy also discussed that she had a structured routine for when she attended her online synchronous counseling classes. She explained that her online synchronous courses were day-long classes, which meant that it was important for her to be able to have a routine established. During Daisy's interview, she stated:

I try to get up, and eat breakfast, and make coffee an hour before class starts. And then I have a little - it's like a guest bedroom-office, so I would get that all set up...And then class would usually start around 9:00am. That was a normal start time...And, yeah, and then we would usually end by 4:00pm. We - I always tried to then go outside and go for a walk, or do something that's not involving a screen

for a little bit. And then I would - I usually tried to get all my assignments and homework done.

Throughout her interview, Daisy explained that she tried to follow her schedule as much as possible in order to make sure that she was completing all of her coursework before it was due.

Although Ester's online counseling classes were offered at night, her experience resonated with how Daisy expressed having a structured routine. She described what a typical day looked like when she was taking online counseling classes:

So, I worked eight hours a day and then I took classes after work. Yeah, often the classes I took often, most - most of the time it was one class every evening and I took two to three classes each semester, so it was like one class every evening just two to three evenings a week...So I would work, and then I do school, and then I'd have class in the evening, and then on the other days of the week I would work, and then I'd do homework most all evening and usually on Saturday as well.

Ester later discussed in her interview, "[T]hings had to happen at a certain time in a certain day and I had to stick to that really, really hardcore to be able to make other - everything fit in."

Other participants, such as Megan and Tom, also shared detailed outlines of what a typical day or week looked like when they were taking their online counseling courses. When learning more about her experience, Megan discussed what was helpful about keeping her structured schedule. She said:

I think - I'm a firm believer and habits. I like to make sure that I can reserve my learning and decision making for the things that don't, so I have a lot of things that are automated in my life in terms of routine.

Megan further discussed that having established habits gave her more mental energy to focus on other areas in her life that needed her attention, such as her schoolwork and her family.

Be Organized. In terms of organization, Audrey, Megan, and Ruby discussed how important it was for them to be aware of their weekly schedules as well as important assignment due dates. As they shared in their questionnaires and individual interviews, they stressed how critical it was to be diligent about their roles as students because it was very easy to fall behind in their classes but very difficult to make up work in such a fast-paced learning environment. Audrey and Ruby especially appreciated having their organizational tactics because they shared that they did not develop their strategies until they began taking their online counseling classes. In her interview, Audrey discussed how having a planner helped her organize what assignments she needed to do, what assignments still needed to be completed, and what assignments were turned in. She discussed her process further when she said, "I was never very good at keeping a planner or anything...I have it, it's literally right here, beside me, and it's open all the time." During her discussion, Audrey explained that part of the problem that she had with planners in the past was that they often were kept out of her visual sight, such as in her backpack or in a desk drawer. In order to develop a sense of organization, Audrey found

that keeping her planner in front of her served as a visual reminder of the tasks that she needed to complete throughout her classes.

Similar to Audrey, Ruby also discussed how she has worked to incorporate organized strategies to help her complete assignments prior to their due dates. She explained:

I have reminders on my phone of, 'This is when I should start and end this assignment, even though it's due on this date because I also have these other two projects that I need to [do].' So my calendar's become my best friend.

Ruby discussed that, while her organization strategy may not be one that works for others, it is more important to find strategies that work for each individual's needs. She concluded, "It's a little chaotic, but I like it because it gives me a reminder of, 'Hey, you're supposed to be doing this thing!'"

Although Megan conveyed that she naturally developed organizational skills, she discussed how it was helpful when managing her other life roles. In her interview, she stated:

Google Calendar has saved our family because we're all on the same calendar, and so if it's not in the calendar, it doesn't exist. They [referring to her partner and children] figured that out, so it's - everyone has their own color and everybody can kind of coordinate with everybody else and figure things out.

Megan further discussed that, similar to how she had to make her role as a student a priority in her life, she needed to keep a detailed schedule in order to manage her different responsibilities. She expressed that having a structure of organization was

helpful in making sure that she was keeping up with her course material and serving as a reminder for important dates.

Be Self-Disciplined. In addition to being organized, four of the participants recommended that students needed to have a sense of discipline when taking online counseling classes. When asked about what self-disciplined looked like in her experience, Jessica stated:

[F]or myself, I have to do a little bit every day, even if it's half-hour, an hour, two hours. To get the work done, you have - I have to do something along the way, every day, and I know that if I skip a day and there's a day where I didn't do work because I was doing something else, my schedule was too packed, what have you, then I have to make it up somewhere and it can't be at the last second.

Jessica further expressed that, especially in an online learning environment, instructors spend less time "prodding" students to turn in their assignments. She concluded that students need to be directed, motivated, and independent throughout their learning experience.

Megan also resonated with Jessica's statement and echoed how students needed to be responsible and motivated in order to be successful in taking online counseling classes. During her interview, she stated:

I would say be ready to be accountable for what you're learning. I think that what you get out of, like anything in life, what you get out of it is what you put into it, and so you need to be ready to be accountable for the things that you're learning. This is not something that you're going to do and walk in with zero effort and

walk out with maximum information. This is not something like that, and so, if you're going to do an online course or an online program then make sure that you're prepared to put in the work.

This direct quote conveyed Megan's emphasis that students needed to be willing to be actively involved throughout their learning experiences in order to obtain the most out of their education.

Similar to Jessica and Megan, Tom also expressed how critical it was for students to be actively involved in their learning experiences. In terms of being disciplined, he stated:

I think, especially with online, the most important thing for you to know is discipline. There's not - there's structure, but it's all on you. It's all on you to make the decisions. It's all on you to do what you gotta do because, otherwise, you're paying for it. You get what you put in essentially. So, it's different. It's easy to fall behind if you're not disciplined, but it's all in your hands and students might be looking to that, you're taking, you're learning, you're doing it your own way. The materials available, whether you choose to do it or not, your call.

Tom further explained that discipline and structure look different based on individual preferences and needs. He concluded that having a sense of discipline was something that, "[y]ou need more than anything" when thinking about taking online counseling classes.

Proactive Within Learning Community

In addition to having a structured schedule, participants also found it helpful to become proactive members within their learning communities. Participants discussed three ways in which they become involved in their online learning environments. The first way involved how participants worked to facilitate connections within the online counseling classes. The second way referred to how participants needed to become active learners throughout their overall learning experiences.

Facilitating Connections. Four of the participants articulated that, in order to feel a sense of connection with their peers and professors, it was important for them to find ways to interact within an online setting. In terms of developing connections with their peers, Audrey talked about how she bonded with her classmates based on the classes they had. For Audrey, she said, “[W]ithin the first three weeks of school, I had two phone numbers already. So we have a little - we have a little chat group that we are back and forth all the time.” She further explained that she valued her connections to her peers and viewed them as a “lifeline” throughout her learning experience.

Ruby also felt that it was helpful to develop connections to her peers. During her interview, she said:

We’ve had such a strong cohort and I have been encouraged to build that connection and so now, when we meet in-person, it’s like, ‘You’re not a stranger to me,’ and so there’s that level of comfort there that happens, too.

Ruby stated in her interview that, as someone who experiences moments of social anxiety, that having the opportunity to build connections in her online counseling classes

helped her feel more relaxed when she was able to return to in-person learning and to interact with her peers in an in-person setting.

Like Audrey and Ruby, Summer also found that she was able to manage some of the challenges she faced during her online learning experience because she was able to facilitate connections with the other people in her cohort. She stated:

[T]here's about three other girls in, I guess my cohort, graduating together, that when we did have in-person classes, there's sort of that way you just kind of gravitate towards different people in class. Like it just happens that way. And I think the four of us kind of were able to connect in different ways, personality, be friends, and also to be able to, we kind of text each other like, 'Hey, I'm kind of confused on this paper. What did you do? What are you doing about that?' And so I think that's one way is just being able to find a smaller group of people to communicate with and bounce ideas off of, and also just related to, grad school is stressful, that kind of thing. We're just friends and we're students together, that kind of thing.

Summer conveyed that it was important for her to not only make connections with her peers for the purposes of enhancing her learning experience, but that it was also important for her to find connections where she could share her experience of being a graduate student.

Outside of the classroom setting, Daisy found that it was important to also work to build connections with others through other ways of meeting. During her interview, she stated:

One of the biggest things I did is tried to attend the events or things going on where I knew my peers in my program would be to kind of initially meet people. So I went to one meetup that was happening in our program and I met a few other people starting in my same cohort, and then we made a GroupMe group, and added all of the people - tried to add all the people in our cohort, and then we used that GroupMe to say, like, 'Hey, let's all - after this class we have together, let's all go out, or let's go get dinner,' whatever we wanted to do.

Daisy continued her discussion by expressing that her connections with her classmates developed into stronger friendships to the point where she met with many of her peers outside of school events, such as meeting for coffee.

In addition to making connections with peers, Audrey and Summer also discussed that they actively worked to build relationships with their professors. Because Audrey was committed to her goal of becoming a future counselor, she felt that it was important for her instructors to have a deeper understanding into the way she processed what she was learning in their online classes. She said, "I know my professors know me. I know they know - they probably know how I'm going to answer something before I answer it." As the interview continued, Audrey explained how her efforts at establishing a rapport with her instructors worked because she got "name dropped" in the middle of one of her lectures, which was something that she valued. Summer also said that her efforts to connect with her instructors was meaningful to her because it helped her feel comfortable enough to go to her professors with questions or ask for advice related to career goals.

Establishing Connections Within Learning Community. When reviewing participants' shared experiences, a majority of them shared that they wanted other students to know how important it is to be actively involved and build relationships within their learning communities. In terms of establishing connections with peers, Audrey expressed that she strongly recommended that students need to make an effort to build relationships with each other. As she stated in her interview, Audrey said:

Make friends. You know, it's not - it's not just - I'm fortunate that my classmates are close by. It's not going to be that way with everybody in an online program...But find your people. Find your people within your group, and even if it's no more than texting, it's still making that connection. You have to have that connection.

Audrey talked about two classmates that she became close with in her program and conveyed that the connections she made helped to facilitate life-long relationships.

Similar to Audrey's advice, Daisy recommended that students interact with each other as a way to facilitate a sense of overall connections and support. As Daisy mentioned throughout her interview, she expressed that she valued moments where she could talk to her friends about assignments and the overall stressors that are associated with being a graduate student. She stated:

I would say definitely to prioritize still making social connections. So if they're [referring to future students] looking at a fully online program, how can they still find a community of people to get support from, and be around, and get to know.

And if it's like a hybrid program or like in my situation, I think just reaching out and trying to find your people.

This quote demonstrates that Daisy felt it was necessary and recommended that students from all learning modalities make efforts to establish relationships with their peers.

In addition to establishing connections with peers, Rose and Summer talked about how it is important for students to create connections with all members of the learning community, including instructors. As Rose shared during her interview, she believed that students needed to “advocate” for making connections with their peers and professors. Similarly, Summer discussed how developing questions with both peers and instructors makes it easier for students to be able to ask questions throughout their learning process.

In terms of facilitating connections with instructors, Carol and Michelle talked about their experiences. With Carol, she encouraged students to actively reach out to their instructors and schedule Zoom meetings with them so they could visually see each other on their digital screens. Michelle also agreed and further shared her experience about what it was like for her to develop connections with her instructors. She stated:

[B]uild the rapport with your professors so they know who you are. I think that makes a difference, no matter, whether you're in-person, asynchronous, synchronous, find a way to make a relationship with your professors...But keeping in touch, keeping that open dialogue with professors, letting them know where you're at, what's going on, that's been a lifesaver for me.

Michelle continued to discuss how establishing a rapport with instructors helps the instructors know how to better provide support to students or how to resolve problems

before they escalate. To further emphasize the importance of establishing relationships within the overall learning community, Michelle concluded:

I feel like every person, every personal connection I make, I value that as a part of my resource file, whether it's just me personally, or if I share that bond with clients or whatnot. I feel like relationships are crucial and key, no matter what we do.

Becoming an Active Learner. In addition to facilitating connections with peers and instructors, Lacy and Megan also found that it was helpful to become actively involved in their learning processes. Knowing that she experienced challenges during her online counseling classes, Lacy explained that she continued to further her learning by trying to relearn material throughout her different classes. She explained:

A lot of what my techniques classes have been – has been relearning things that I was already taught and just learning how to do it in practice, which I think for me, anyway, that's the way I learn to begin with, like implementing that information.

I'm going to remember it a lot better and I'm going to be better at doing it.

To provide an additional example, Lacy talked about how she utilized her practicum classes to help develop a better understanding of what it was like to use assessments. She expressed that by having more of an active role in her learning, she was able to further her understanding of how to use assessments in a counseling setting.

Megan also discussed how it was important for her to be actively involved throughout her learning process. During her interview, she stated:

There's a lot more responsibility on the learner in an online program than there is in an in-person program...With an online program, particularly with asynchronous style, you really - there is a lot more responsibility on the learner. That's something that I needed to have a lot more maturity of - emotional maturity, to be able to do well and get out of the program what I needed to get out of it.

Megan concluded that she had to make her learning a "priority," whether that was by engaging deeper into the material, exploring counseling topics in more depth outside of the classroom setting, and actively communicating with her professors about her questions.

Reprioritize Life Roles

Because there were times when participants experienced challenges with balancing their other life roles in addition to their role as a student, it was understandable that they discussed what changes they needed to make in order to continue taking their online counseling classes. The first way that participants reprioritized their roles was to engage in self-reflection and have communications with the people in their lives. The second way involved having a support network that focused on helping participants balance their roles as students in addition to their other responsibilities.

Communicating with Self and Others. When discussing how to re-prioritize their roles, Audrey, Daisy, and Ruby explained that they engaged in self-reflection as well as communicated with significant people in their lives about what they needed in order to make being a student and their other roles manageable. Audrey explained how

she knew that something within her life needed to change in order to be able to give herself to her important life roles. During her interview, she stated:

Yeah, that break over Christmas, there was a lot of internal dialogue about what was going to be - what was okay and what was not okay. And making peace with the answers that came up, and it was not doing theater, as much as it kills me to say...But that was the first thing that I knew that I had to - I knew that was something that I had to not do. Like that had to be the first cut made. And that was a hard - that was a hard cut to make, but it was never not an option to cut it, if that makes sense.

Audrey further explained that, while it was a difficult decision, she felt that she was able to cope with her mixed emotions because she felt that she had a choice in what roles needed to be reorganized. She also stated that she found it comforting to know that having to step away from acting in her community theater for a temporary period of time.

Daisy also acknowledged that she needed to reprioritize her life roles in order to make sure that she could meet all of her obligations. During her interview, Daisy discussed that she found it helpful to have open conversations with her partner, friends, and family about the demands of her online counseling classes. When reflecting on a recent conversation, she stated:

My partner and I have recently tried to implement once a week date nights where we don't talk about anything else going on in our lives and just focus on each other. Because I think at first we were both kind of doing our own thing and so

busy that it was just hard to maintain that connection. So having that intentional space has been important.

Daisy further expressed that, while some of her conversations were more challenging than others, she found it helpful when it came to determining what life roles were important and meaningful to her.

Similar to Daisy's experience, Ruby discussed how it was important for her to be able to communicate with others, such as with her work and with her family. As she discussed during her interview:

Communication is important, too, when I'm talking about balancing all those different roles. I communicate - being honest with myself and where I'm at, and then communicating with my work, communicating with my family about where I'm at and my expectations, and different things like that. It's been really important, too.

As Ruby emphasized in her quote, it was important for her to clearly express what she needed from others in order to balance her life roles in a more manageable way. As an example, she discussed how she often communicated with her partner and children about what they plan to do while she was attending her online counseling classes. An expectation that she communicated with her family was that they needed to be quiet during the times that she was in class so that she could fully focus and engage in her learning environment.

Having a Support Network. In addition to communicating about how to further balance and reprioritize their life roles, participants also talked about the importance of

having a support network that helped them in the ways that they could as they took their online counseling classes. Megan expressed that it was important to be able to have her family's support and assistance with managing the household during the times that she was busy with her coursework. She further explained that her children understood that they also had a role in making sure that the family household ran efficiently. During her interview, Megan stated:

[I]t's interesting because it really does take a village in this - this kind of situation.

The fact that my oldest is going to be a senior and can drive is - it was an absolute gift when that - when he finally got his license it was like, 'Oh, this is the best thing ever.' But because my kids have really had to take on different roles and things when - as I've done this, but, and so is my husband he's had to do a lot of rearranging on his life as well.

Megan concluded that having the support of her family made it feasible for her to be able to manage her other life responsibilities in addition to completing her online classes.

Michelle also discussed how much she valued the support of her friends, family, and overall community. She said, "I don't feel like I'm doing this alone. I feel like I have so many hands pushing behind my back supported me." Like Megan, Michelle felt that her children played a significant role within her support system. She stated:

You know what, I have awesome kids. I feel like I have the best kids in the world.

And they were like, 'Mom, you can do this. You can do this, Mom. You're awesome.' And then if I was just struggling, they're like, 'Mom, go do your

homework!’... And so they were pushing me because they knew it was important to me. It was important to all of us.

During her discussion, Michelle talked about how things became even more challenging due to having multiple personal losses within a short period of time. Michelle shared that, although she needed to rearrange her school schedule in order to be more involved in her personal life, she felt a sense of care and support from her instructors and institution faculty. She concluded by saying, “[M]y professors and staff in the program, they’ve been really great. And I feel like they’re cheering me on.”

Similar to Megan and Michelle, Ruby discussed how her household chores and responsibilities changed so that she could provide more effort to her other life roles, such as being a student and being a mother. Ruby described how, prior to her online classes, she was the primary member of the household who cooked and cleaned. However, she explained how she and her partner needed to rely more on each other to contribute to the household, especially during the times when her partner was also taking online classes. She stated:

And so we’ve communicated, and since I started this in that, in order for me to have time for my school work that I have to do, I can’t do all of this, too, so I need your [referring to her partner] help. And so, I mean, in that way, we have a system now that wasn’t in place of taking turns cooking, and caring for the kids, and different things around the house.

Ruby further expressed feeling a sense of gratitude that she was able to have support while taking her online counseling classes as well as balancing her additional life responsibilities.

Resilience

The last theme that emerged when participants discussed their experiences with coping and adjusting to taking their counseling classes within an online learning environment involved how participants developed a sense of resiliency. While they acknowledged the fact that there were both benefits and challenges related to their online learning experiences, Audrey, Carol, and Michelle reframed their way of thinking in order to encourage them to reach their goals of becoming counselors. The concept of resilience resonated with Audrey and Carol. In their experiences, both participants shared how they were committed to making sure that they would be able to be successful in their online counseling classes. In her interview, Audrey said, “[T]aking a pause from school was never an option. Taking time from theater was an option...I even considered taking time off of work. I never considered not doing school.” A similar statement was also shared by Carol. Although she was disappointed by her online learning experiences, she expressed that she was going to make sure that she would be successful in her classes. Carol concluded by saying, “I always knew I was going to do whatever I needed to do to be good at what I was going to do.”

Michelle also shared a sense of resiliency and stated that one of the main motivating factors that helped her continue to take her online counseling courses was her children. As a single mother, she expressed that it was important to be able to utilize her

experience in a way to help motivate her children wherever they faced challenges in their lives. Michelle stated in her interview:

[B]eing a single parent, that's a lot in and of itself. I know I'm not unique in that and there are a lot of other single parents in the program. As some of what I do, I do for them, as an example, as their parent, to show you can keep working and you just keep going. You fight through things. You can do tough things... It's doable. It's something that can be done, but without support, and accommodation, and understanding that this is just a portion of our lives and not the only thing that we do with our lives.

This quote demonstrates that Michelle relied on her personal strength in order to manage her other important life roles in addition to attending her online counseling classes.

Whether students purposely chose to or were required to take their counseling classes through an online learning environment, they expressed that they needed to find ways to manage and cope with some of the challenges or stressors associated with online learning. About half of the participants discussed needing to create a more organized sense of structure in order to be successful in their online classes. This often led to them needing to become more systematic in their approach to learning and more self-disciplined. Additionally, a majority of the participants expressed that they found it helpful to be proactively involved within their learning communities. Although some of the participants shared that they experienced challenges with managing their student role with their other important roles, they expressed the importance of having conversations and developing a support network as helping them manage their experiences. Three of the

participants also spoke of how they developed a sense of resiliency from having to find ways to adjust and cope with online learning. Knowing that online learning within counselor education is a growing learning modality, it was important to be able to learn more about how students viewed their learning experiences as having an impact on their counselor development. Although participants discussed some of the positive and negative ways in which their online classes impacted their development, a majority of the participants were unsure of its impact.

Impact on Counselor Development

As a part of this study, it was important to learn about how participants perceived the impact of the online counseling classes when they reflected on their current for future roles as counselors. Therefore, a fourth theme emerged, which involved participants' reflections of the impact that their experiences had on their counselor development. Within this overarching theme, additional concepts emerged. The following themes were developed based on participants' experiences with online counselor education classes: participants' preparation for providing telehealth counseling, experiencing disruption in their counselor development, and uncertainty.

Preparation for Telehealth

Four of the participants described how they felt that their experiences with taking their counseling classes online helped them feel more prepared and confident in providing telehealth counseling services. As Ester wrote in her questionnaire response, "Being online prior to the pandemic helped me be more prepared for things during the most remote of the pandemic." Jessica also shared a similar perspective. During her

interview, she discussed how being able to provide telehealth counseling services to more clients who may not have had the accessibility to receive help. Similar to Jessica, Ruby discussed that there have been significant improvements with technology that make telehealth counseling secure so that clients feel safe throughout their counseling experiences. She stated:

I know that with - since COVID has happened, there are a lot of telehealth services that are available and a lot of work-from-home positions that offer telehealth, or phone health, or different things like that within counseling. In a sense, being able to kind of be really familiar with different forms of utilizing Zoom, or Teams, or HIPAA-compliant platforms, has been - I'm sure that [it] will be really useful when providing those services.

Ruby concluded that she was curious to learn more about what telehealth entailed and was curious to know if it was possible that telehealth counseling services could be just as helpful, if not more helpful, when working with clients.

Disruption of Counselor Development

Other participants, such as Carol, Lacy, and Messi, felt that their experiences with online learning had a negative impact on their counselor development. When talking to the participants, they all shared that they felt that they did not get what they wanted out of their online learning experiences. In her interview, Carol said, [T]he ease of online classes is definitely palatable, but I don't think that I got the education that I paid for. Not their fault [referring to her instructors and institution], it was COVID's fault." Because Carol expressed that a majority of her online counseling classes were primarily lecture-

based, she felt that she missed out on important learning opportunities that would have allowed her to apply, observe, and receive feedback on her understanding of important counseling topics. Although she experienced concerns related to her efficacy as a future counselor and value of her education, she was able to remain resilient throughout her learning experiences. Carol concluded that she would need to seek further supervision, knowledge, and continued training in her practice with clients if they presented with concerns that she did not feel that she was adequately prepared to work with based on her experiences with online learning.

Lacy shared a similar perspective to Carol. She explained, “I do feel like it has really stunted my growth as a counselor and I’m - I feel like I’m really growing and becoming a counselor now [referring to how she transitioned back to in-person learning].” Lacy further explained that she felt unconfident about her abilities to fully understand or apply counseling skills because her online learning experiences did not fit with her learning needs. Because Lacy had transitioned back to attending in-person classes by the time of the interview, she explained that has used her current classes to help her fill in the gaps in her lack of understanding so that she feels more prepared to work with future clients in her practicum and internship classes.

Messi also shared her sense of disappointment because of having to take her counseling classes through an online learning format. When asked about the impact of her learning experiences as it related to its impact on her development as a counselor, Messi stated:

If I'm being honest, I feel like, because I've taken a couple of classes in the beginning...I didn't really get a lot out of those classes...I feel like there's information that I missed out on. So I feel like that could impact me on something that I could have used with my clients in the future.

Although Messi did not impact the specific impact that her online classes had on her overall counselor development, this may be due to the fact that Messi was still early in her counselor development at the time of the interview. It is common for counselors-in-training to struggle with how to fully articulate the limitations in their learning and how they may seek additional resources in order to increase their understanding of important concepts. Messi concluded that she was hopeful that she could better learn and understand the concepts that she needed to learn prior to engaging in clinical practice.

Uncertainty

When participants were asked this question on the questionnaire and during their interviews, a significant number of participants explained that they did not really know how to answer the question. Audrey, for example, felt that she was unable to fully answer the question because she only had experiences with online counseling classes. She explained that she did not have anything else to compare it to, such as having in-person counseling classes. Similarly, Michelle also expressed that she was unaware of the impact that her online counseling classes would have on her development. In her questionnaire, she wrote, "I am not sure yet, but I have in the past done better hands on and in person, I will assume it is." Michelle's direct quote was similar to other participants' experiences. This quote demonstrated that many participants are still in the beginning stages of their

counselor development and that they may need more time and experience in order to fully articulate the significant impact of online learning.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the 13 participants' demographic information as well as a summarized description of each participant's experience. Within their individual summaries, I highlighted the kind of institution that they attended (e.g., online, hybrid, in-person), if they were a current student or graduate of their counseling program, if they had identified specific learning styles, and other life roles that they had while also attending their online counseling classes. I then discussed the four categories that were found through the data analysis process. The four categories found in this study are as follows: (1) positives of online learning, (2) negatives of online learning, (3) ways of adjusting and coping with online learning, and (4) impact on counselor development.

When exploring the benefits or advantages of taking their classes online, participants spoke of how learning in an online environment provided them with convenience. The concept of convenience meant different things for each participant, such as having the ability to manage other life roles, multitask during classes, utilize electronic learning materials, or not having to commute to a physical campus. Participants also spoke of other positives, such as having the opportunity to learn at their own pace and receive support during their learning experiences, such as having instructor support, the implementation of classroom expectations, smaller class sizes, and the ability to develop additional learning skills.

Although the positive elements were important to consider, participants also expressed some of the negative experiences and challenges they faced from taking their counseling classes through an online learning format. Many of the participants expressed missing opportunities to be able to connect with each other and their professors. Additionally, they talked about how they wanted and needed more experiential learning opportunities in order to further facilitate their overall learning. Knowing that many participants did not have prior experiences learning in an online environment, another theme that was discussed involved the challenges of learning at home, such as how to manage other life roles and complete additional coursework. Due to the pandemic having a significant role within online learning, it was also important to discuss how students felt that their learning experiences changed, especially for participants who went from primarily in-person learning and were required to transition to a fully online learning environment.

Despite the challenges they faced, participants also provided a discussion on the ways that they worked to manage their experiences learning in a virtual setting. A significant number of participants highlighted the need to develop a sense of structure, which often required them to become organized and self-disciplined. Additionally, a majority of the participants spoke about the importance of becoming actively involved in their learning communities, such as establishing connections within the learning community and becoming an active learner. Some participants spoke of how they needed to engage in conversations and develop a support network in order to manage some of the ways that they engaged in an online learning environment, especially when it came to

balancing the roles they fulfilled outside of being a student. Lastly, a few participants spoke of how they were able to develop additional skills and a sense of resiliency as a result of managing their experiences within an online learning environment.

In terms of counselor impact, some participants viewed their experiences with taking online counseling courses as developing skills that would ultimately prepare them for providing telehealth services. Other participants expressed that they felt like they experienced a hindrance in their overall counselor development. Based on their level of development, two of the participants were able to articulate the ways in which they felt hindered by their online experiences. One participant also expressed that she felt that her counselor development was hindered due to her experiences with online learning, but she expressed difficulty articulating its impact and the limitations of her learning. However, it is important to note that a majority of the participants discussed how they were uncertain about the impact that taking their counseling classes online had on their sense of counselor development. Because of the continued growth of online counselor education, it would be important to further explore this concept in future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Due to the increase in technology developments, there is a growing use of online learning within higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2011, 2016; Emmerson, 2004; Pregowska et al., 2021). This development is also consistent within counselor education (ACA, 2014; Bobby, 2013; CACREP, 2015) and continues to be pertinent as a result of the pandemic. While counselor education has historically been taught through in-person learning modalities (Dietrich & Bowers, 2018; Woo et al., 2020), there is research to support the efficacy of online education in providing quality training to future professional counselors (e.g., Holmes & Reid, 2017; Meyer, 2015; Smith et al., 2015). Despite this information, online learning is viewed as one of the least researched areas within counselor education (Barrio Minton, 2019). Because of this, there is a limited amount of research available that looks at students' experiences within online counselor education classes. The research that is currently available on students' experiences with online learning in counselor education typically focuses more on why students chose to take online counseling classes (e.g., Ekong, 2006; Merlin-Knoblich & Camp, 2018; Scholl et al., 2017; Sheperis et al., 2020). Many of these studies are quantitative in nature, which limits the amount of depth in our understanding in terms of what students experience when they take online counselor education classes. Therefore, it was important to engage in research in a way that provided an in-depth exploration of students' experiences when taking online counseling classes. To contribute to this area,

my qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of master-level counseling students in taking online counseling classes within the past five years (i.e., 2017-2022). The results of this study could be used to inform the ways in which counselor educators design and implement online learning strategies and techniques within their classrooms in order to provide effective, quality learning experiences. The results can also contribute to the conversation about the need, use, and impact that online learning can have within counselor education.

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the findings of my study. I also provide a discussion of how the findings relate to the existing research. I then discuss the implications of my study as it relates to counselor educators and counselor education programs. Lastly, I conclude this chapter by discussing the limitations of my study and recommendations for future areas of research.

Summary of Study

Due to the limited amount of available research, my study contributed to the literature by exploring the lived experiences of master-level counseling students in taking online counselor education classes. The overarching question of my study was:

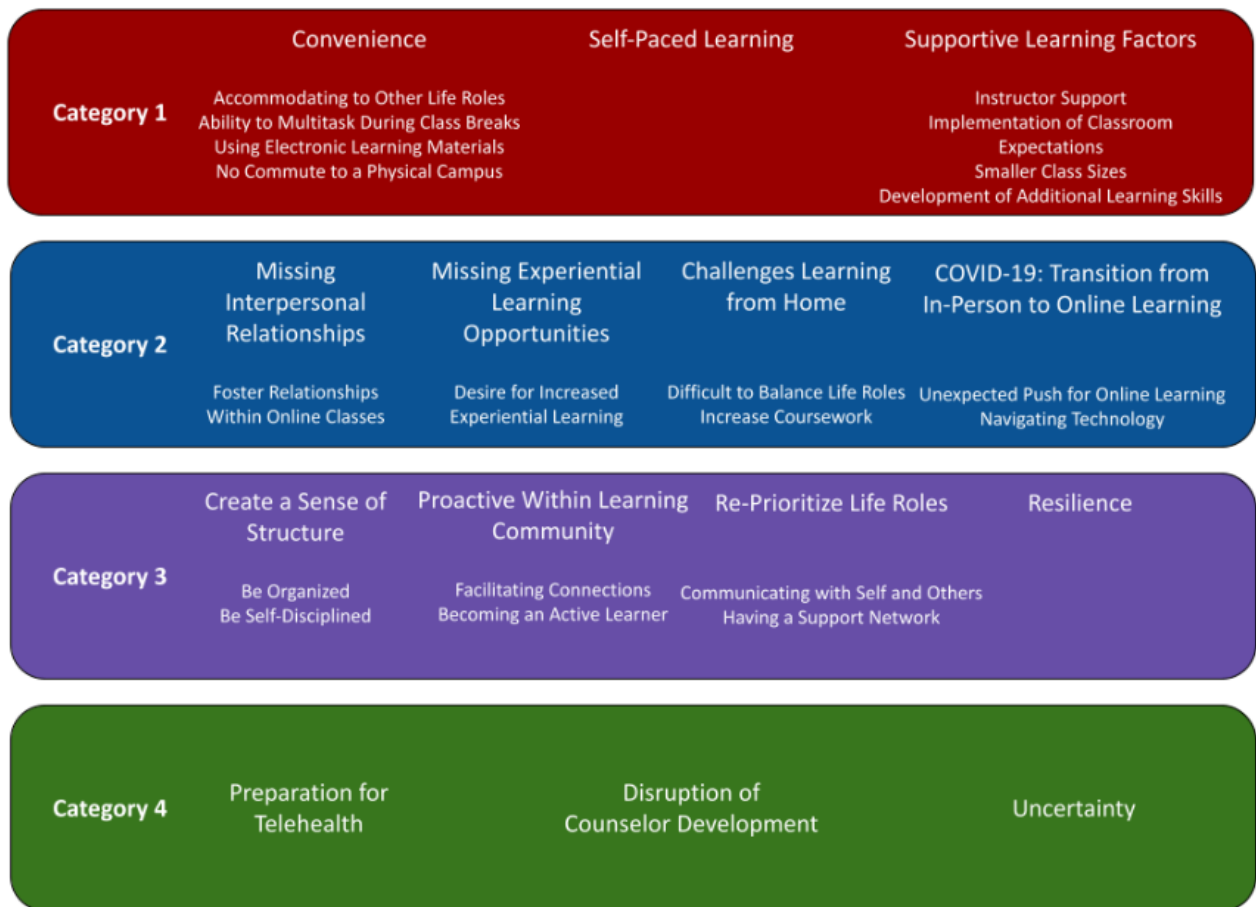
Q(1): Within the last five years (i.e., 2017-2022), what are the lived experiences of masters-level counseling students when taking online counselor education courses?

Using a phenomenological qualitative methodology, I explored the lived experiences of 13 participants. After the data analysis process, I identified four theme categories: (1) positives of online learning, (2) negatives of online learning, (3), ways of adjusting and

coping with online learning, and (4) impact on counselor development. Within these theme categories, multiple themes and sub-themes emerged. A visual representation of the categories, themes, and sub-themes is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Categories, Themes, and Sub-Themes



The following section provides a discussion of these themes and sub-themes and how it relates to the existing literature.

Discussion of Study's Findings

In terms of the positive elements of online learning, all participants shared that they found that taking their counseling classes in an online environment provided them with a sense of convenience. The idea of convenience looked different among the participants based on their individual experiences and personal needs. Seven of the participants discussed how taking their counseling classes online gave them the opportunity to manage their roles outside of being a student, such as a parent, partner, and employee. Some of the participants shared that their ability to attend their counseling classes would not be feasible if online learning options were not available. This finding is consistent with what is available in the existing literature as it relates to the benefits of online learning (Ascough, 2002; Cook, 2007; Sheperis et al., 2020; Stone et al., 2016; Summers et al., 2005). The finding is also consistent with what is found in the counseling literature related to how online counseling classes and programs provide increased accessibility and affordability to students who may not have the means otherwise (Bobby, 2013).

Four of the participants discussed how they found their online counseling classes to be convenient because it allowed them to be able to multitask during their classroom breaks. Even if their classroom breaks were 10-15 minutes long, participants talked about how much they benefited from using that time to engage in quick household tasks, such as folding laundry or doing the dishes. They expressed that having these small moments of time to be able to multitask while also attending their lectures helped their day and week run smoother.

Four of the participants discussed how they found their online counseling classes to be convenient because of the use of electronic learning materials, such as having digital versions of textbooks, audio-textbooks, and the opportunity to watch recorded lectures. Participants discussed that they found it helpful for being able to accommodate their individual learning styles as well as being able to learn while engaging in other activities, such as driving to work. The concept of using electronic materials, such as audio-textbooks and video-recorded lectures, is consistent with the history and development of online learning within higher education (e.g., Emmerson, 2004; Kumar et al., 2020; Pregowska, et al., 2021) and what Bramer (2020) found in her study when exploring the lived experiences of pre-registration adult nursing students in taking online classes. Although Bramer's (2020) finding was not specific to counseling, it suggests that students from other helping professions, such as counseling, may find electronic learning materials helpful in their understanding and processing of information.

Eight of the participants also commented on how it was convenient to be able to take their counseling classes in an online format because it meant that they did not have to commute to a physical campus in order to learn. For two of the participants, they talked about how not having to commute to a physical campus was convenient because they avoided the traffic that would have happened as a result of living and attending campuses located within major metropolitan cities. Other participants talked about how they had long commutes to their campuses and that they were able to avoid the additional costs of driving, such as spending money on gas. The convenience of not having to commute to attend classes was consistent with what was found in the literature of other

helping-related professions (Okech et al., 2014). While these results show that convenience was a significant benefit in terms of creating a positive online experience, it is important to note that the way that the participants experienced convenience was based on their individual experiences, needs, and preferences.

The second theme that emerged from the data in terms of the positives of online learning was the ability to engage in self-paced learning. Six of the participants expressed that they found self-paced learning to be beneficial based on their learning style preferences. One participant shared that he was able to graduate his counseling program one year early because he completed his classes based on his fast-paced learning preference. Similarly, another participant discussed that being able to learn at her own pace gave her the opportunity to further her learning outside of the classroom, such as through listening to podcasts, reading books, and watching YouTube videos on counseling concepts. Although this finding has not been specifically referenced in the counseling literature, it is a consistent finding in other helping-related professions (e.g., Bramer, 2020; Moule et al., 2010; Telford & Senior, 2017). While it is possible that the participants in my study were more aligned with being independent learners, the findings of my study suggest that counseling students may benefit from having a self-paced learning environment in order to help them adapt their online learning to meet their learning style needs.

The third theme that was found when exploring the positives of online learning was supportive learning factors, which consisted of instructor support, implementation of classroom expectations, having smaller class sizes, and developing additional learning

skills. The concept of having instructional support was consistently discussed by a majority of the participants. The participants discussed the ways in which their instructors provided them with support during their classes, such as by expressing their awareness of the unique factors that are associated with online learning and by effectively communicating with students. This finding was applicable for participants who came from traditionally in-person counseling programs and transitioned to online learning due to the pandemic. The importance of instructor support has been supported in the counseling literature (Scholl et al., 2017) and research in helping-related professions (Okech et al., 2014; O'Shea et al., 2015). It is also supported as being one of the best practices of online higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991; Dreon, 2013).

In addition to having support from their instructors, five of the participants discussed how they found it helpful when they had a clear understanding course expectations (e.g., having access to the course syllabus) and when their courses implemented classroom rules (e.g., all members of the learning community need to have their video cameras turned on during class). The participants discussed that having implemented classroom expectations helped them feel that their learning experiences were meaningful. Although this finding was not explicitly found in previous counseling literature, this finding is supported by what is found in other helping-related professions (Ali et al., 2004) and in the best practices of online higher education (Bordeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991; Dreon, 2013; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Wilson et al., 2004).

Three participants discussed how they viewed having smaller class sizes as being beneficial in their online learning experiences. The participants had different views on the number of students that should be allowed to enroll in their classes, but they shared the same sentiment that having a smaller class size allowed them to get to know their peers and instructors more and made it easier to analyze and discuss difficult counseling concepts. Although the recommended classroom size was not discussed in the previous literature, CACREP recommends that professional practice courses, such as practicum and internship, should not exceed more than 12 students (CACREP, 2015).

The last supportive learning factor that two of the participants identified was the development of additional learning skills. One participant described that she was able to learn and apply her problem-solving skills during situations where she was not able to have immediate contact with her peers and instructors. She stated that having the opportunity to enhance these skills helped her feel more confident when she is working with clients. The other participant talked about how he learned how to develop a sense of self-discipline due to the online nature of his courses. Overall, participants concluded that there were positive elements from having their counseling classes provided in an online learning environment.

While it was important for participants to be able to articulate their positive experiences, it was just as valuable to learn about some of the negative barriers and challenges they faced from their online classes. The first theme that all participants identified in terms of barriers and challenges they experienced while taking online counselor education classes was that they missed having opportunities to develop

interpersonal relationships. In their questionnaire responses and individual interviews, they discussed how many of them missed the opportunity to be able to engage in casual conversations with their peers and instructors in order to help them build stronger connections. This finding is consistent with what has been found in the research from other helping-related professions (Bramer, 2020; Okech et al., 2014; Pardasani et al., 2012). In order to manage their feelings of isolation and lack of connection, seven of the participants talked about how they made efforts to develop connections with their peers and instructors. One participant specifically mentioned that it was helpful when her instructors incorporated moments where students could interact with each other, such as having virtual classroom meeting links accessible before and after class. This finding is consistent with what is found in the counseling literature (Scholl et al., 2017) and what is encouraged in the best practices of online higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991; Dreon, 2013; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). It is clear that the ability to help students and instructors connect to each other and build relationships is a significant factor in an online learning environment.

A second theme that emerged when a majority of the participants discussed the negatives of online learning was that they were missing experiential learning opportunities. A common sentiment shared by the participants was that they felt that the lack of experiential learning opportunities made it difficult for them to fully understand and apply important counseling concepts. One participant described her learning experience as a “learn and regurgitate situation” while another participant shared that she felt that what she learned in her classes without experiential activities was equivalent to

what was provided in her textbooks. This finding is consistent with what has been found in other helping professions (Moule et al., 2010; O'Shea et al., 2015). A majority of participants expressed that they valued the opportunities when they were able to engage in experiential learning and recommended that counselor educators continue to incorporate these interactions within their classes. This finding is consistent with Telford and Senior (2017) and Pardasani and colleagues (2012) because the research and participants emphasized that having more experiential activities gave them more practice on how to apply their clinical skills and knowledge in real-world settings. The use of experiential learning is also consistent with how many counselor educators align with a constructivist pedagogical perspective (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2001; Guiffida, 2005; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998) and overall best practices within online higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991; Dreon, 2013). Because experiential learning provided participants with the opportunity to practice the material that they were learning in the classroom, it is critical that counselor educators continue to develop activities that promote application-based learning.

A third barrier to online learning that participants identified was the challenges they faced while trying to learn at home. The first challenge that three of the participants discussed was that they experienced difficulty when it came to managing their other life roles in addition to being a student. While many of the same participants talked about how they viewed online learning as being convenient when it came to managing their other life responsibilities, they also talked about how they needed to make compromises in order to ensure that they could be successful in their classes. For example, one

participant shared that she had to postpone her passion for participating in her local theater in order to make sure that she could be a parent, partner, employee, and student. Although this finding was not explicitly found in past research, it resonates with Bramer's (2020) finding that students reported experiencing challenges with managing at-home distractions, such as children and pets.

The fourth overarching barrier that four of the participants mentioned consisted of how they felt that the workload was much more compared to when they took in-person classes. The participants shared that the amount of work that was required often felt overwhelming and stressful. While this finding was not found when reviewing the literature of students' experiences within online counseling classes or online classes related to other helping professions, it was expressed by students when they first adjusted to an online learning environment due to the pandemic (Son et al., 2020). It would be important to learn more about what students anticipate their coursework will look like in an online learning environment and how they feel this is different from attending in-person classes.

An additional barrier that eight of the participants expressed involved the overall transition from in-person learning to online learning as a result of the pandemic. From their questionnaire responses and individual interviews, participants identified two sub-themes related to this barrier: (1) the unexpected push for online learning, and (2) navigating the use of technology. In terms of the sudden push for online learning, three of the participants shared how they felt that their programs and institutions experienced challenges accepting the need for online learning and the long-term application of online

learning. Because the COVID-19 pandemic is a new phenomenon, there is still a need for research in terms of how counseling programs and institutions were impacted by the sudden change in learning and teaching modalities. However, based on the information available, this finding is consistent with the fact that many traditional in-person institutions needed to quickly transition their classes to an online environment in order to ensure the safety of the learning community (Bhagat & Kim, 2020). As more research becomes available, it will be interesting to see how counselor educators and counseling programs that primarily provided in-person classes adjusted to the transition and what they did to ensure quality learning experiences.

In addition to adjusting to an online learning environment, four of the participants discussed the challenges they experienced with the reliance on technology. A majority of the participants shared their experiences with technology difficulties, such as screens freezing and poor internet connections, and how it impacted their ability to concentrate or fully learn from the lecture. This finding is consistent with the research that is available in other helping professions (Ali et al., 2004; Bramer, 2020; Moule et al., 2010; Okech et al., 2014). One participant expressed that she experienced feelings of frustration because she felt that many of her instructors were trying to learn how to implement technology into their classes, which often took away from their class time. Although this finding is not found when exploring research related to students' experiences, it does highlight how many instructors could benefit from proper training in order to more effectively teach in an online learning environment (Beaudoin et al., 2013; Wolf, 2006). Because of the continued growth and development of online education, these findings suggest that it is

critical to have proper online education training for instructors and within counseling programs and higher education institutions.

Although participants' negative experiences were important to learn, they also spoke of the ways in which they coped and adjusted to learning in an online environment. One of the ways in which six of the participants expressed coping and adjusting to an online learning environment was by creating a sense of structure. Many of the participants shared what their daily routines looked like when they attended class and how they specifically scheduled periods of time where they could complete assignments. In order to do this, they found that they needed to be organized and self-disciplined. This finding is consistent with how Ekong (2006) found that students needed personal factors, such as motivation, discipline, and time management skills, in order to be successful in their online counseling classes. Developing a sense of structure is also aligned with best practices of online higher education (Holder, 2007).

The second theme that emerged when participants discussed their ways of coping and adjusting to an online learning environment involved their emphasis of being actively involved in their learning communities. Participants described two ways in which they were able to become more involved in their learning environments: (1) facilitating connections with others, and (2) becoming active learners. Based on their experiences, a majority of the participants expressed that it was important for them to be able to find ways to establish connections with their peers and instructors. Not only was this helpful in terms of finding others with shared experiences, but it was helpful in their abilities to develop a strong sense of community and feel satisfied with their overall learning

experiences (Bolinger & Inan, 2012; Driscoll et al., 2012). Four of the participants shared how they were able to develop connections with their peers and instructors within their online learning environments, such as through exchanging emails, developing group chats, and, if feasible, finding ways to meet in-person. This finding is consistent with what O'Shea (2015) found in their study regarding how students utilized different forms of communication, such as Facebook, to connect with each other. This finding is also consistent with what is found within best practices of online higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991; Dreon, 2013).

The second way in which two of the participants discussed their involvement within their learning communities was by being actively involved in their learning processes. Both participants discussed that they utilized their class time effectively by applying their understanding of the material as well as asking their instructors further questions to ensure their comprehension of the material. Although this finding was not consistent with the previous research related to students' experiences in taking online classes, it aligns with how many counselor educators teach from a constructivist pedagogical perspective (Brandon & All, 2010); Muirhead, 2006) and incorporate experiential learning in their classes (Klob, 1984). This finding is also consistent with what is found within the best practices of online higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991; Dreon, 2013; Fisher et al., 2001).

The third theme that emerged from participants' experiences was that they had to re-prioritize their life roles in order to adjust and cope with learning in an online environment. Knowing that many of their life obligations were just as important to them

as it was to be a counseling student, they talked about the ways in which they were able to find a sense of balance between home, work, and school. Three of the participants talked about how they had to engage in self-reflection as well as have important discussions with the significant people in their lives about the challenges of balancing their life roles in addition to being a counseling student. One participant expressed that she had to make the hard decision of not pursuing her hobbies until she was officially done with her degree. Similarly, three of the participants discussed how they needed to rely on their support systems in order to manage their life roles. All three participants expressed that they received support from their family members and one participant further explained that she received further support from her local community. This finding is consistent with what Stone and colleagues (2016) found when exploring students' experiences with taking online higher education classes. Because of the nature of higher education and that many students have other important life roles in addition to being a graduate student, it would be helpful to continue exploring the ways in which students manage their different roles through engaging in further research.

The last theme that three of the participants identified in their ways of adjusting and coping with taking online counselor education classes was by developing a sense of resiliency. Two of the participants expressed that, even though there were challenging moments within their experiences with online learning, they were still driven, determined, and persistent in their education. One participant shared that she was also determined to continue her education despite the challenges she experienced in order to set an example for her children. She explained that she wanted her children to learn how

to be resilient when they faced challenges so they could continue pursuing their goals. It would be important to further learn about how resiliency is an important quality when learning online, especially within online counselor education.

Because online learning within counselor education is a relatively new concept, it was important to learn how participants perceived their online learning experiences as having an impact on their development as counselors. The first way that participants felt that their experiences impacted their counselor development was that it helped prepare them for being able to provide future telehealth services. This finding was not consistent when reviewing the literature on counseling students' experiences with taking online counselor education classes. An explanation as to why this may be the cause is because the concept of telehealth counseling services became a popularly used form of treatment during the pandemic. However, it is important to note that this finding suggests that the use of telehealth counseling is going to remain relevant within our society. Therefore, this finding highlights how it is necessary for major organizations, such as the ACA and CACREP, to continue implementing guidelines and requirements that teach counselors-in-training on how to utilize technology within the counseling field.

The second theme that emerged when participants discussed how their experiences with online learning impacted their development was that they felt it led to a disruption in their growth as counselors. Two of the participants expressed that they felt that they did not receive the education that they hoped for due to the challenges and limitations of an online learning environment. Additionally, one participant shared that she felt that she missed out on important information that she would need in order to

successfully work with clients. Although the overall consensus is that online learning is just as effective as online learning, these concerns are supported in the counseling literature (e.g., Reicherzer et al., 2012; Wasik et al., 2019). It is important to note that the three participants who identified with this theme were students from primarily in-person counseling programs who were required to transition to online learning as a result of the pandemic. With this in mind, it is possible that the participants already had negative associations with online learning and would not have made the choice to take online classes. It is also possible that the participants felt negatively impacted based on the fact that their counseling programs and instructors had limited experience with online teaching. This possibility would be supported by the literature in that many instructors are given little formal training on how to teach in online learning environments (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Carver, 2016; Herman, 2012; Horvitz et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2014). Overall, this finding in my study suggests that it would be important for counselor educators to develop an understanding of how an online learning environment impacts counselor development. It also provides support for the fact that there needs to be more formal training provided for instructors who choose to or are required to teach online.

The last theme that emerged was that a large number of the participants shared that they were uncertain as to how taking online counselor education classes would impact their development as counselors. As one participant explained, she believed that online counselor education classes did have an impact on her professional development, but she was unsure in what ways. Because many participants related to this shared theme, it may suggest that student counselors and counselors at the early stages of their careers

and development may struggle to fully explore and articulate its impact. Therefore, it is important to engage in future research regarding how teaching students how to become counselors in an online environment impacts their development as counselors.

Through this discussion, I found that many of my findings were consistent with what has been found in past research, such as the benefits of convenience and instructor support, the challenges of engaging in interpersonal relationships in a virtual setting, and the importance of having a sense of structure. The findings of my study also add to the literature, such as the impact of online learning on students' lives outside of graduate school, how to promote and support student resiliency, and the ways in which online counselor education impacts counselor development. My hope is that the findings of this study will further our understanding of online learning and promote further growth and improvements to make online counselor education an accessible and effective way of training graduate students on how to become successful, competent counselors in their communities.

Implications

The findings of my study provide multiple implications for counselor educators and counselor education programs. My study also provides implications for students who are currently attending online counseling programs, taking online counseling classes, and students who are thinking about attending online counselor education programs or taking online counselor education classes. The following section provides a discussion of the implications in each of these areas.

Considerations for Counselor Educators

Based on the findings in my study, I have four recommendations for counselor educators who are currently or are anticipating their involvement in online teaching. The first recommendation involves the way in which counselor educators design their online classes, specifically incorporating a variety of experiential learning opportunities. As found in my study, all of the participants discussed how they wished that they had more opportunities to be interactive and apply their knowledge within their classroom environments. The use of active learning is also consistent with what many counselor educators utilize in their teaching practices (Eriksen & McAuliff, 2001; Guiffreda, 2005; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). While this is particularly important to highlight, the use of experiential learning activities can provide further benefits within the classroom. For example, by having students engage in various activities, such as small group discussions, debates, and role play scenarios, they are increasing their participation in the class as well as their overall engagement. Students also find it helpful when they are able to connect what they are learning to how it can be applied in real-world contexts, which then increases students' sense of self-efficacy for when they are working with their future clients. The use of experiential learning activities can also be a way for instructors to develop connections with their students as well as encourage students to establish peer relationships. When instructors and students have more opportunities to interact and learn about each other, they are building opportunities to create a strong learning community.

In addition to experiential learning, my second recommendation for counselor educators is to develop and implement additional ways to establish strong connections

within the learning community. From my study, I realized that many of the participants said that they missed some of the nuances of attending their in-person classes, such as being able to talk to their peers and instructors before, during, and after class. One way to create a similar experience, as shared by one participant, is to have instructors provide students with online meeting links (e.g., Google Meet, Zoom, etc.) that they can join before and after class. Another way to help facilitate connections is to have students actively share how the material they are learning relates to their personal experiences or how they could view themselves applying the information when working with future clients. By creating opportunities for instructors and students to talk to each other, it can help decrease students' feelings of isolation that is often associated with attending classes in an online learning environment. It can also help students feel more comfortable participating in their classes and seeking additional help from their instructors during their scheduled office hours.

My third recommendation for counselor educators is to establish clear classroom expectations for their online learning environments. One way to do this is to review their in-person classroom expectations and find ways to translate these values in an online setting. For example, instructors in an in-person setting may walk around the classroom when implementing small group discussions to make sure that students are staying on task and are fully understanding the material. This can be translated to an online environment through the use of online breakout groups. To implement small group discussion in their online classrooms, instructors can create online meeting rooms for small groups of students to be able to work on activities together. Similar to how they

would walk around in a classroom setting, instructors can move themselves between each of the breakout rooms in order to monitor students' progress and understanding. Another way for instructors to implement classroom expectations in their online classroom environments is to provide a detailed agenda of the tasks and activities that will be accomplished during a class period. In both synchronous and asynchronous classroom settings, instructors can use this agenda to help guide students on what information is going to be covered during each learning unit. Having this guide also encourages students to become actively involved in their learning experiences and helps them engage in more self-directed learning.

My final recommendation for counselor educators is to elicit feedback from students about how they are experiencing their online counseling classes. Instructors can obtain students' feedback through formal means, such as having students fill out an anonymous survey, or through informal ways, such as having a discussion about their experiences at the beginning of a class period. Having this information allows instructors to better understand what students are finding helpful and what things need to be changed in order to enhance students' experiences with online counselor education. It also encourages students to become actively involved and invested in their learning experiences.

Considerations for Counselor Education Programs

Knowing that online learning is a relatively new concept within counselor education, my first recommendation is that counselor education programs should integrate uses of technology in their classes. After reviewing the history of education and

the growing use of online learning, it is apparent that technology has, and will continue to have, a lasting impact on education. By integrating more technology within their classes, both instructors and students can increase their technical skills to the point where they feel more confident and competent about various technology tools, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and their learning management systems. Integrating more education and application of technology also helps prepare counseling students for their future roles as counselors. As mentioned by the participants in my study, they appreciated having accessible electronic learning materials. Not only did participants find these additional electronic learning materials helpful when trying to manage their other life roles, but they also found it to be helpful to have the opportunity to review these materials at any point while they were studying for quizzes, exams, and completing assignments. Some of the participants spoke of how electronic learning materials allowed students to learn in ways that better fit their learning style needs. For example, participants who identified as auditory learners spoke of how they benefited from utilizing audio-textbooks to help them better retain information. Additionally, there has been a growth in the use of telehealth counseling services. While this growth was mainly a result of the pandemic, telehealth counseling services are starting to be viewed as more accepted and viable forms of treatment (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). If students gain more knowledge and application of how to utilize technology in their training, it will help them to feel more adequately prepared in their professional roles.

In addition to integrating more forms of technology, I am also mindful of the fact that many instructors have not received adequate training on the nuances of online

teaching (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Carver, 2016; Herman, 2012; Horvitz et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2014). As highlighted by Wolf (2006), online programs are successful when they have the support from their institutions. Therefore, my second recommendation is for higher education institutions to provide their instructors with proper training on how to teach in an online learning environment. By providing instructors with proper training, they will increase their technology skills so that they feel more comfortable integrating and utilizing more forms of technology. If instructors feel more confident in their proficiency with technology, they can better model and help students who need technology assistance. It can also help provide instructors with a better understanding of how to integrate or develop course materials that are effective within an online learning environment. In order for more institutions and programs to be able to effectively provide online forms of learning, it is crucial that institutions properly invest their resources to ensure that all university members feel prepared and confident to engage, learn, and teach in an online setting.

While my first two recommendations involve how counselor education programs should increase their application of online teaching and technology, my third consideration involves how counselor education classes are designed, specifically referring to the number of students that are able to be enrolled in each course. As discussed by the participants in my study, there was an overall consensus that they valued having smaller class sizes in order to be able to fully discuss material and establish stronger connections with their peers and instructors. Based on the most recent standards, CACREP (2015) recommends that interpersonal-based classes should have no more than

12 students enrolled in a single course. Especially within interpersonal-based classes, it is important for there to be a smaller number of students because it allows instructors to better understand their students and provide adequate, detailed feedback in order to help students be successful in future courses as well as in their work with future clients. Depending on the size of the counseling program and the availability for instructors to be able to teach multiple sections of the same course, it may not be feasible to have a small number of students enrolled in content-based classes. In order to manage some of the challenges of having larger classes, instructors can implement small breakout groups where students can interact with smaller groups of peers. These smaller groups can then share with the larger class, which can then help facilitate a sense of community within the classroom. Another way to help manage the challenges of having larger classes is by using co-instructors, such as doctoral-level students. Because doctoral-level students understand what it is like to be a student and are in the process of developing into future counselor educators, they can find ways to help facilitate connections and provide more detailed, individualized feedback for students.

Lastly, counselor education programs should consider offering their classes through different learning formats (i.e., in-person, hybrid, online). It is clear that many students and instructors have a strong preference and comfort with learning in a physical classroom, which is why in-person learning is a learning modality that will continue to stay relevant within education, particularly in professions like counseling which rely on interpersonal skill development. However, it is important to note that having the option to take classes through hybrid and online formats can also provide students with benefits,

such as the ability to fulfill their roles outside of being a graduate student. By providing more learning modality options, students are able to have the ability to choose what learning modalities best fit their learning needs.

Considerations for Current and Future Counselor Education Students

In the questionnaire and in their individual interviews, I asked participants to provide any feedback for advice that they would want to give to current or future students who are interested in online counselor education programs and online counseling classes. The participants were eager to share any sort of helpful information they could when it came to learning in an online environment. The first recommendation is that students need to understand the importance of establishing relationships and connections within their online classes. As all of the participants shared, attending their counseling classes in an online environment could feel lonely because they did not have as many opportunities to get to know their classmates and instructors. Many of them shared that they gained an appreciation for the nuances of in-person learning, such as being able to talk with their peers and instructors before and after class. While these nuances may be more challenging to replicate in an online setting, it is encouraged that students find other ways to interact with their peers and instructors. Some of the ways in which the participants in my study were able to connect with their peers consisted of email, texting, video chats, and meeting in-person if they lived in the same area as their peers. Participants also shared that they were able to get to know more of their professors through email and by attending their office hours. Many of the participants expressed that being able to

establish these kinds of relationships helped them feel more connected in their learning communities.

A second recommendation, which was strongly supported by a majority of participants, is that students should develop a good understanding of what an online learning environment looks like and what is expected from them in their student roles. As the participants in my study shared, they felt that they had to become actively involved in their learning experiences, such as coming to class prepared to ask questions and learn important information that they will need to be able to effectively work with their clients. They also shared that attending online classes requires students to be comfortable with self-directed learning, which often requires them to be structured and disciplined in order to make sure that they are completing all of their required tasks. While these are important qualities that any graduate student should have, many of the participants shared that these skills became greatly enhanced because they took primary responsibility for their learning experiences. While it is recommended that students gain experience with taking online learning prior to taking online counselor classes or attending an online counselor education program, it is also recommended that students explore different learning modalities in order to find which learning environments best fit their learning needs.

My last recommendation is for students to consider how taking online counselor education classes relates to their length in their programs and opportunities for employment after graduation. As one participant mentioned in his interview, he was able to complete his coursework, graduate, and obtain employment earlier than anticipated

because of his ability to take online classes. This is particularly important for current and future students to consider for multiple reasons. As mentioned in Chapter II, the overall cost of attending higher education programs continues to increase. Additionally, CACREP is continuing to change its standards to where master-level counseling programs are requiring students to complete 60 credit hours, including a 600-hour internship that is not guaranteed to be paid. Because a majority of students are not in the position where they can afford to pay the increased costs of attending their professional programs, the option of taking more online counseling classes can be an affordable, effective option. Not only can students continue their other forms of employment while they attend their online counseling classes, but they may also be able to finish their programs earlier and obtain employment faster. Although there is still continued progress that needs to be made within online counselor education, it is important to note that online learning may become a feasible, affordable, and necessary option for students.

Limitations of Study

As with any research, it is important to consider its limitations. When reviewing and reflecting on my study, I identified four primary limitations. The first limitation in my study involves generalizability. In my study, I specifically looked at master-level counseling students' experiences in taking online counseling classes within the past five years (i.e., 2017-2022). I was also intentional about recruiting participants from across the United States in order to get a greater understanding of students' experiences. However, it is important to note that my findings do not consider how master-level counseling students perceived their experiences with online counselor education prior to

2017. Especially given the fact that technology has significantly changed within the past decade, my findings may not align with how students perceived online counselor education prior to 2017. Additionally, master-level counseling students who had not completed at least one academic term were excluded from my study. Including this population into my study's findings may have provided a greater understanding of how students view their experiences with online learning, especially when they first enter a counseling program. With these factors in mind, I worked to increase my study's transferability by detailing the processes I took to complete this study so that other researchers could tailor and replicate similar studies.

The second limitation that I found in my study involved the distinction between asynchronous and synchronous classes. While I asked the participants to describe their experiences taking their counseling classes through online methods, I did not specifically ask them to describe their experiences regarding what it was like for them to take their classes asynchronously or synchronously. Because of this, it is possible that the participants' experiences varied based on the structure of their online classes. For example, some participants may have felt more comfortable and prepared taking their classes asynchronously while others may have preferred or needed to take their classes synchronously to best meet their learning needs. This distinction in the way that online counseling classes would be an important factor to discuss in future studies.

The third limitation that I identified in my study is the impact of COVID-19 when it came to master-level counseling students' experiences in taking online counseling classes. As mentioned in earlier chapters, the COVID-19 pandemic, which was declared a

global pandemic in March 2020, happened in the middle of my study's time frame (i.e., 2017-2022). Because of this, I could not separate the fact that the pandemic had an impact on counselor education and the way in which participants perceived their experiences with taking online counseling classes. However, it is important to note that seven of the participants attended programs with the understanding that a significant number, if not all, of their classes would be taught in an online format. The other six participants were required to take online counseling classes due to the concerns surrounding the pandemic. The fact that some of the participants had a choice in attending online classes while other participants were required to move to an online learning environment could have impacted the results of this study. If the participants who attended primarily in-person counseling programs felt that they had a choice in taking their counseling classes in an online learning environment, it is possible that their perceptions of their experiences would have been different.

The fourth limitation of this study involves credibility. It is important to note that my interpretations of the data had a significant role in the findings of this study due to the limited number of responses during my study's member checking process. Although all participants were contacted and asked to provide their confirmation, clarification, and feedback about my interpretations of the data, only five of the 13 participants (38.46%) responded. To help increase the study's sense of credibility, I was mindful about how I triangulated the data. For example, I reviewed participants' questionnaire responses and further explored their meanings when I met with participants during their interviews. This allowed me to clarify any questions I had as well as develop a better understanding of

how participants perceived their online learning experiences. I also used an external peer coder during the data analysis process. While analyzing the data, my external peer coder and I met multiple times to discuss the commonalities and complexities of each participant's experience. Having an outside perspective helped me remain neutral and helped reduce the impact of my biases and assumptions on my interpretation of the data.

Recommendations for Future Research

My study aimed at further exploring and understanding the lived experiences of master-level counseling students when taking online counseling classes. While my study contributes to the growing need of research related to online counselor education, it is also important to consider additional areas of research. One possible area of research involves learning more about how students perceive their online learning as impacting their counselor development. While this study asked participants to share their perspectives, a majority of the students expressed that they were not able to fully understand or provide information about its impact. An explanation for their responses may be due to the fact that a majority of the participants in this study were still at the beginning stages of their counselor development. By engaging in future research in this area, researchers and counselor educators will develop a better understanding of online counselor education. They may be able to develop different techniques and implement different learning theories in order to better help students obtain the education that they want and need in order to be effective, successful counselors.

Another area of future research involves further exploring students' experiences in taking online counseling classes through asynchronous and synchronous methods.

While I did ask students to discuss their overall experiences, I did not specifically ask students to share their experiences related to how the structure of the course may have impacted their overall experiences with taking online counseling classes. By engaging in further research in this area, counseling students and counselor educators may have a better understanding of what students experience and what they prefer or need done differently within their classes in order to still have a satisfying, engaging educational experience.

A third area of future research involves looking at doctoral-level students' experiences in taking online counselor education classes. Knowing that doctoral-level programs encourage and facilitate students' abilities to engage in independent learning, it would be important to learn more about how doctoral-students are able to manage some of the nuances of online learning. It would also be interesting to learn how doctoral-level students felt about some of the challenges that master-level counseling students shared, such as experiencing barriers when it came to developing close relationships with their peers and instructors.

A fourth area of future research is to learn more about instructors' experiences when teaching online counselor education classes. As highlighted in the literature, a significant portion of instructors receive limited training when it comes to teaching online. This is especially true within counselor education because of the fact that providing counselor education has primarily been conducted through in-person settings. With that said, it would be important to learn more about instructors' experiences because they would be able to share some of the positives, negatives, and ways of adapting to

online teaching. Additionally, it would be important to learn more about how instructors perceive the amount of coursework they assign in their classes, how they are able to apply experiential learning within an online learning environment, and how their experiences are similar or different when teaching within different course modalities. This information could then be presented to program administrators so that they could help facilitate needed changes and support to help instructors provide quality online teaching experiences.

The last area of future research that I found when reflecting on my research is to learn more about the experiences of students and faculty who started with online learning and transitioned to in-person learning. In terms of exploring students' experiences, it would be interesting to learn about how students view their transition as well as the ways that they have had to adjust or cope with learning in a physical space with their instructors and peers. As one participant in my study highlighted, there are differences between the distractions that students face when learning online (e.g., family, pets, laundry, etc.) and the distractions that they may face while learning in a physical classroom (e.g., students talking, using technology devices for unrelated classroom tasks, tardiness, etc.). Similarly, it would be important to learn how instructors view their experiences with teaching in different modalities and to further explore any similarities and differences, if any, between different teaching methods.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the lived experiences of master-level counseling students when taking online counseling classes within the past

five years (i.e., 2017-2022). The findings from this study revealed that participants experienced positives, negatives, and found ways to cope and adjust with how to learn in an online setting. While there are benefits and challenges with any situation, it is important to know what students found helpful or difficult because it means that both students and instructors can work to promote and embrace the positives while finding ways to alleviate, reduce, or resolve the negative elements. It also highlights the importance of developing a better understanding of how online learning impacts counselor development. My study adds to the growing need for literature about online counselor education. Because more counseling programs are exploring their use of virtual learning modalities, it is important that they consider the elements that they need in order to make online learning a successful experience for both instructors and students.

Appendix A. IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board

Date: May 27, 2022

Study #: IRB-FY2022-338

Study Title: Exploring master-level counseling students' experiences in taking online counselor education courses

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Exempt

Research Team:

Karli Iceman

Ashley Branson

Ashley Branson, Hayley Guertin

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Notes for Researcher(s):

This submission includes the following approved documents:

- Recruitment Email
- Participant Email Regarding Interview
- Information Sheet V 5/27/2022
- Qualtrics Questionnaire
- Interview Questions

Letter and Consent Document:

This letter along can be found in Cayuse in the [Submission Details](#) page under [Letters](#).

The IRB approved consent (Information Sheet) document must be used in consenting participants.

Permission from Research Site(s):

Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your files.
- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:

Any changes to this exempt project must be reviewed by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Record Retention:

Exempt projects will be retained by the IRB office for three years after the last action on the project.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

Appendix B. Study's Email Invitation

Study's Invitation Email

Exploring Master-Level Counseling Students' Experiences in Taking Online Counselor Education Courses

My name is Karli Iceman and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education program at Oakland University under the direction of my dissertation chair, Dr. Ashley Branson (Assistant Professor, Department of Counseling). I am conducting research as a part of my dissertation, which is called "Exploring Master-Level Counseling Students' Experiences in Taking Online Counselor Education Courses". The research involves learning more about master-level counseling students' experiences in taking online counseling courses within the past five years (i.e., between 2017-2022). I am reaching out to you to see if you could forward this study to current students and alumni.

The study will involve asking participants to complete a demographic questionnaire, answer open-ended questions related to their experiences in taking online counseling courses, and potentially participate in an interview where they are able to meet and discuss their experiences in more depth. All portions of the study will be completed online. Participation in this research will help further the understanding of online counselor education, teaching methodologies, and how to improve overall counselor education programs.

I have attached a more detailed description of the study and the roles of what would be asked of participants. If participants are interested and eligible to partake in the study, they can click this link (https://oakland.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_2awzUGJo6ItZPqC?Q_CHL=preview&Q_SurveyVersionID=current) where they can review the purpose of the study, provide consent, and continue with their participation.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and participants are able to remove themselves from the research study at any point in the study.

I would also appreciate it if you could forward this research study to others who you think would be interested and eligible in the study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at kniceman@oakland.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Karli Iceman, MA, LPC, NCC
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counseling
Oakland University

Appendix C. Information Sheet

Information Sheet

Exploring Master-Level Counseling Students' Experiences in Taking Online Counselor Education Courses

Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study that is being done by Karli Iceman, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling at Oakland University, under the direction of Dr. Ashely Branson, an assistant professor in the Department of Counseling at Oakland University, the faculty advisor for this project.

Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary. You can choose to stop your participation at any time or skip any part of the study if you are not comfortable. Your decision will not affect your present or future relationship with Oakland University, the researcher, or the Department of Counseling.

If you are a student or employee at Oakland University, your decision about participation will not affect your grades or employment status.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to examine master-level counseling students' lived experiences in taking online counselor education courses within the past five years. Traditionally, counselor education courses have been taught in-person. However, there is increased interest in providing more online courses and programs, including within counselor education. Additionally, the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic resulted in many in-person counseling programs to transition to providing online learning experiences. Therefore, it is important for educators and researchers to understand students' experiences regarding their involvement in online counseling courses to determine what could be helpful when developing and implementing future online counselor education courses and programs.

Who can participate in this study?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you meet the following criteria: 1) you are a current master-level counseling students or have completed a master-level counseling program, 2) you have taken at least one online counselor education course, and 3) you (if you are a current student) have completed at least one academic term in your counseling program or (if you have graduated) have taken online counselor education course(s) within the past five years.

Where will this study take place?

All components of this research study will take place using the Internet at a time and place that you choose.

What do I have to do?

You will be asked to participate in completing the questionnaire with possible participation for the individual interview portion of the study.

1. You will be asked to complete a questionnaire asking demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational background, etc.) as well as questions regarding your experience of what it is/was like for you to take online counselor education classes. At the end of the questionnaire, you will be asked if you would be willing to participate in an interview with the primary investigator, Karli Iceman. If you are interested in participating in the interview, I will ask for your name and contact information so we can schedule a day and time for the interview.
2. For the individual interview, you will be asked questions related to your experiences in taking online counselor education classes. The interview will be audio recorded in order to be transcribed and analyzed for further themes. This information will be de-identified in order to protect your privacy. The interview is estimated to last between 45-60 minutes. I will email you a version of the transcription and identified themes for confirmation that I am representing your experience accurately and honestly.

How long will I be in the study?

The study is broken down into two sections: 1) filling out a questionnaire, and 2) participating in an individual interview. The questionnaire includes asking demographic information and open-ended questions. It will take approximately 15-25 minutes to complete. At the end of the questionnaire, you will be asked if you would be willing to participate in the interview portion of the study, which will take between 45-60 minutes. If you consent to the interview portion of the study, you will be asked to provide me with your name, email, and phone number to schedule a day and time for the interview. In total, the estimated amount of time in this study is 85 minutes.

Are there any risks to me?

For this study, the potential risks are minimal. There may be a risk that someone who is not part of this research study may accidentally see your personal information. We will try to make sure that this does not happen by keeping your research records as confidential as possible. When the results of this research are published or presented at conferences, no information will be included that personally identifies you.

The study will involve audio recordings of the interviews for transcription purposes only. The recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study.

Additional potential sources of discomfort could include feelings of anxiety due to reflecting on your personal experiences in taking online counselor education classes. In the event that you experience distress from participating in this research, a list of available resources will be provided at the end of this document.

Are there any benefits to me?

The possible benefits to you for participating in the research study are having the opportunity to reflect on your personal strengths and development as a student, counselor, and overall ability to learn through various learning modalities. It is also an opportunity for you to explore any barriers to your learning process and how you were able to remain resilient while taking online counseling courses, especially if you experienced a sudden transition in learning modalities. Your participation in this research study will further the research for distance education and its role in counselor education as well as how to improve future clinical courses.

Will I receive anything for participating?

You will not receive anything for participation in this study.

What if I want to stop participating in this study?

You may stop participating in this study at any time. By clicking "next" through the Qualtrics questionnaire link, you are providing consent. If you want to stop participating during the online questionnaire, close your browser before clicking "submit." If you click "submit," it will not be possible to stop participating. If you wish to discontinue your participation after the interview, please contact Karli Iceman at kniceman@oakland.edu. Participation can be withdrawn at any time up through the member checking stage of data analysis.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

For questions regarding the research study, you can contact the principal investigator, Karli Iceman, at kniceman@oakland.edu or at (248) 860-1908. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this study, Dr. Ashley Branson, at branson@oakland.edu or at (248) 370-2714.

For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human subject research, you may contact the Oakland University Institutional Review Board at (248) 370-4898.

As highlighted in the information sheet, there is a possibility that feelings of discomfort and anxiety may occur as a result of your participation in the study. In the case that you are in need of extra support and help to be able to process your feelings and experiences, please refer to the list of mental health resources provided below.

List of Mental Health Resources

Crisis Text Line

<https://www.crisistextline.org>

Text “HELLO” to 741741

Disaster Distress Helpline

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

Call or text 1-800-985-5990

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or 1-888-626-9452 for Spanish or use the Lifeline Chat through the website: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

<https://www.samhsa.gov>

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

The Trevor Project

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org>

Call 1-866-488-7386, text 678678, or use the website’s online chat option at

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/>

Veterans Crisis Line

<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net>

Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and press 1, text to 838255, or use the Veterans Crisis Chat through the website: <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help-now/chat/>

Appendix D. Questionnaire

Qualtrics Survey
Screening, Demographic, and Qualitative Responses Questionnaire

Exploring Master-Level Counseling Students' Experiences in
Taking Online Counselor Education Courses

Screening Questions

1. Are you currently a master's student in a counseling program or have graduated with a master's degree from a counseling program?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. Have you participated in at least one online counseling course?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. Have you participated in at least one online counseling course within the past five years (between 2017-2022)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. If you are a current master's counseling student, have you completed at least one academic term in your counseling program? If you have already graduated from your master's counseling program, please check "Not Applicable (N/A)."
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not Applicable (N/A)
5. If you have graduated from a master's counseling program, have you continued your formal education? If you are a current student in a master's counseling program, please check "Not Applicable (N/A)."
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not Applicable (N/A)

Demographic Questions

6. What is your age?
 - a. 18-25
 - b. 26-33
 - c. 34-42
 - d. 43-50
 - e. 50+
 - f. Prefer not to answer
7. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Female (cisgender)
 - b. Male (cisgender)
 - c. Female (transgender)
 - d. Male (transgender)

- e. Nonbinary
 - f. Genderfluid
 - g. Prefer not to answer:
 - h. Other: _____
8. What is your race/ethnicity? If you identify with more than one race/ethnicity, check all that apply.
- a. White/Caucasian
 - b. Black/African American
 - c. Asian
 - d. Hispanic/Latinx
 - e. Native American
 - f. Pacific Islander
 - g. Biracial
 - h. Prefer not to answer
 - i. Other: _____
9. I am a (check all that apply):
- a. First generation college student (first generation college students are students who are the first in their family to attend and/or complete a four-year degree at a college and/or university)
 - b. First generation graduate student (first generation graduate students are students who are the first in their family to attend and/or complete graduate level coursework)
 - c. Prefer not to answer
 - d. None of the above
10. Do you have any learning styles that resonate with you (e.g., auditory, visual, kinesthetic, etc.) and/or require specific accommodations to help with your learning experience? If so, please describe. If this question is not applicable to you or you would prefer not to answer, please write “Not Applicable (N/A).”
11. When thinking about your **counseling program**, I attend/attended a (check all that apply):
- a. Fully in-person counseling program (i.e., prior to the pandemic, you attend/attended your counseling classes in a physical location and classroom environment over 75% of the time).
 - b. Hybrid counseling program (i.e., prior to the pandemic, 50%-75% of your instruction and interaction between instructors and peers occurs/occurred online with some opportunities for in-person attendance).
 - c. Fully online counseling program (i.e., prior to the pandemic, you attend/attended your counseling classes through online means over 75% of the time with very limited or zero requirements to attend campus or class in a physical setting).
 - d. I am unsure if my counseling program is fully in-person, hybrid, or online.
12. If you experienced a disruption in your counselor education courses and/or program due to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., you attended your classes in-person prior to the pandemic and switched to fully online learning as a result of

the pandemic), would you say that you were positively, negatively, or neutrally impacted by this change?

- a. I was and/or have been positively impacted.
 - b. I was and/or have been negatively impacted.
 - c. I was not and/or have not been impacted.
 - d. Other (please explain):
 - e. This did not and/or has not applied to me (e.g., I attended a fully online program pre-COVID-19 and/or post-COVID-19 and did not experience disruption in my learning and/or program).
13. During your counseling program, how many online counseling courses have you taken/did you take? Please list the course name(s) or general topic(s) (e.g., theories, counseling skills, ethics, research, etc.) related to the course.
14. Have you had any prior experiences with taking fully online courses (e.g., K-12, undergraduate coursework, continuing education, etc.)? A fully online course (a fully online course is defined as total instruction and interaction between instructors and students via the use of technology.
- a. Yes. If so, please specify which course(s): _____
 - b. I have taken hybrid courses (a hybrid course is defined as 50%-75% of instruction and interaction between instructors and students via the use of technology with some opportunities for in-person lectures). If so, please specify which course(s): _____
 - c. Other. If so, please specify: _____
 - d. No

Qualitative Response Questions

15. What was your overall experience in taking one or more online counselor education classes?
16. When reflecting on your experience with taking online counseling classes, what were some of the barriers and/or challenges you experienced?
17. When reflecting on your experience with taking online counseling courses, what were some of the benefits and/or advantages you experienced?
18. Were you challenged by taking your counseling class(es) online? If so, please explain.
19. What were some of the similarities and/or differences you experienced when taking interpersonal-based courses (e.g., a clinical skills course, practicum, etc.) compared to content-based courses (e.g., theories, research, etc.)?
20. How do you think your experience in taking online counseling courses impacted you as a student and/or counselor?
21. What do you think would be helpful for other students and/or instructors to know about online learning in counselor education?
22. Would you recommend a friend to take an online counseling course? Please explain.
23. Thank you for your participation in the questionnaire section of this study. The second component of this study will involve a 45-60 minute interview with the

primary investigator (Karli Iceman) via Zoom. Please note that the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for data collection purposes. You will have the opportunity to view your transcript and my analysis to determine if I have represented your experience accurately and honestly. Would you be willing to participate in the interview?

a. Yes. If so, please provide your name, email, and phone number so I can reach you to schedule a day and time for the interview:

a. No, I would not like to participate in the interview.

Appendix E. Email to Participants Regarding Interview

Email to Participants Regarding Interview

Exploring Master-Level Counseling Students' Experiences in Taking Online Counselor Education Courses

Hello, my name is Karli Iceman and I am from the Department of Counseling at Oakland University. I am reaching out to you to thank you for your participation in the questionnaire portion of my study. I also wanted to follow up on your interest in participating in an interview where we can further discuss your experiences regarding taking online counseling courses, such as what other roles and responsibilities you had while taking online classes (e.g., going to work, maintaining relationships, raising children, taking care of pets, etc.), what you found helpful or challenging in your learning experience, and what advice you would give to future students and instructors regarding online counselor education classes.

The interview will take place online via Zoom and will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes. All identifying information will be removed prior to the data analysis process. Once we are able to confirm a day and time that works, I will send you a secure Zoom link that only you and I will have access to. I will ask you to change your name on your Zoom account to a pseudonym of your choosing as a form of privacy and confidentiality. You can change these settings through your Zoom account. The interview is anticipated to take between 45-60 minutes.

If you are still interested in meeting with me for an interview, do you have days or times that work best for you?

Thank you again for your time and interest in my study. If you have any further questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at kniceman@oakland.edu.

Karli Iceman, MA, LPC, NCC
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counseling
Oakland University

Appendix F. Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Exploring Master-Level Counseling Students' Experiences in Taking Online Counselor Education Courses

Thank you for your interest in the study. I appreciate that you are able to meet with me today so I can learn more about your experiences with online counselor education courses. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the informed consent? Can you provide confirmation that you are willing to participate in this portion of the study? As a reminder, I want to let you know that you are able to end your participation in this study at any point in time with no penalization. I would also like to remind you that there is a list of mental health resources available at the end of the information sheet should you need them.

As you read in the information sheet and learned about when answering the questions on the questionnaire, this study will explore master students' experiences related to taking online courses during their counseling programs. We will be talking about your overall experiences in your counseling program, some of the reasons as to why you took online classes, some of the barriers or benefits you may have had as a result of taking online classes, and how you were able to adjust to learning in an online format. I would also like to hear your perspective on what you would want current students and instructors to know about what it is like to learn about the counseling profession in an online environment.

1. What are your general experiences in your counseling program?
 - a. How far along are you in the counseling program? How long has it been since you graduated from your counseling program?
 - b. What counseling course(s) have you/did you take in an online format?
 - i. Were they hybrid, fully online, or (if multiple classes) a combination of both, interpersonal skills-based, content-based?
2. Did you take online counseling classes voluntarily or were you required to take online classes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How would you describe your experiences with taking online courses within your counseling program?
 - a. What does a typical day look like when you take your classes online?
 - b. Have you taken any online courses and/or attended an online university prior to starting your master's program in counseling?
4. What other roles have you/did you have going on while taking online counseling courses? (e.g., work, life transitions, relationships, etc.)
 - a. Have you worked in a helping profession before? If so, what role?
5. What was the extent of priority you placed on taking online classes?
 - a. How did you decide to take online learning instead of other learning modalities?

- b. If you were required to take online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, what was it like to transition from a primarily in-person/hybrid learning environment to a fully online learning environment?
- 6. What are/were some of the challenges or obstacles you faced as a result of taking your counseling classes online?
 - a. What about the course(s) did you find challenging?
 - b. What in your personal life made your experiences with taking online counseling classes challenging?
- 7. What are/were some things that you found helpful or beneficial for learning in an online format?
 - a. What did you feel your role was as a student?
 - b. What did you feel your instructor's/instructors' roles were?
- 8. What are/were some of the things that you find/found helpful in taking counseling courses in an online format?
 - a. What did you specifically do to help ensure your attendance and/or completion of your course(s)?
 - b. What did your instructors do to help ensure your attendance and/or completion of their course(s)?
- 9. What piece of advice or information would you like to give to current and/or future students who may be taking online counselor education courses online?
- 10. What piece of feedback would you like to give current and/or future instructors who may be teaching an online counseling course?
- 11. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences with taking online counseling courses?

Thank you for your time today. I will transcribe the interview recording and review what was discussed and contact you to double check that I have an accurate understanding of your experience.

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