

# Current Practices in Online Counselor Education



The Professional Counselor  
Volume 8, Issue 2, Pages 131–145  
<http://tpcjournal.nbcc.org>  
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doi:10.15241/whs.8.2.131

William H. Snow, Margaret R. Lamar, J. Scott Hinkle, Megan Speciale

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) database of institutions revealed that as of March 2018 there were 36 CACREP-accredited institutions offering 64 online degree programs. As the number of online programs with CACREP accreditation continues to grow, there is an expanding body of research supporting best practices in digital remote instruction that refutes the ongoing perception that online or remote instruction is inherently inferior to residential programming. The purpose of this article is to explore the current literature, outline the features of current online programs and report the survey results of 31 online counselor educators describing their distance education experience to include the challenges they face and the methods they use to ensure student success.

**Keywords:** online, distance education, remote instruction, counselor education, CACREP

Counselor education programs are being increasingly offered via *distance education*, or what is commonly referred to as *distance learning* or *online education*. Growth in online counselor education has followed a similar trend to that in higher education in general (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Adult learners prefer varied methods of obtaining education, which is especially important in counselor education among students who work full-time, have families, and prefer the flexibility of distance learning (Renfro-Michel, O'Halloran, & Delaney, 2010). Students choose online counselor education programs for many reasons, including geographic isolation, student immobility, time-intensive work commitments, childcare responsibilities, and physical limitations (The College Atlas, 2017). Others may choose online learning simply because it fits their learning style (Renfro-Michel, O'Halloran, & Delaney, 2010). Additionally, education and training for underserved and marginalized populations may benefit from the flexibility and accessibility of online counselor education.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2015) accredits online programs and has determined that these programs meet the same standards as residential programs. Consequently, counselor education needs a greater awareness of how online programs deliver instruction and actually meet CACREP standards. Specifically, existing online programs will benefit from the experience of other online programs by learning how to exceed and surpass minimum accreditation expectations by utilizing the newest technologies and pedagogical approaches (Furlonger & Gencic, 2014). The current study provides information regarding the current state of online counselor education in the United States by exploring faculty's descriptions of their online programs, including their current technologies, student and program community building approaches, and challenges faced.

## Distance Education Defined

Despite its common usage throughout higher education, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) does not use the terms *distance learning*, *online learning*, or *online education*; rather, it has adopted the term *distance education* (DOE, 2012). However, in practice, the terms *distance education*,

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William H. Snow is an associate professor at Palo Alto University. Margaret R. Lamar is an assistant professor at Palo Alto University. J. Scott Hinkle, NCC, is Director of Professional Development at the National Board for Certified Counselors. Megan Speciale, NCC, is an assistant professor at Palo Alto University. Correspondence can be addressed to William Snow, 1791 Arastradero Road, Palo Alto, CA 94304, [wsnow@paloaltou.edu](mailto:wsnow@paloaltou.edu).

*distance learning*, *online learning*, and *online education* are used interchangeably. The DOE has defined distance education as the use of one or more technologies that deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and that supports “regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously” (2012, p. 5). The DOE has specified that technologies may include the internet, one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast and other communications devices, audioconferencing, videocassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs. Programs are considered distance education programs if at least 50% or more of their instruction is via distance learning technologies. Additionally, residential programs may contain distance education elements and still characterize themselves as residential if less than 50% of their instruction is via distance education. Traditional on-ground universities are incorporating online components at increasing rates; in fact, 67% of students in public universities took at least one distance education course in 2014, further reflecting the growth in this teaching modality (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Enrollment in online education continues to grow, with nearly 6 million students in the United States engaged in distance education courses (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Approximately 2.8 million students are taking online classes exclusively. In a conservative estimate, over 25% of students enrolled in CACREP programs are considered distance learning students. In a March 2018 review of the CACREP database of accredited institutions, there were 36 accredited institutions offering 64 degree programs. Although accurate numbers are not available from any official sources, it is a conservative estimate that over 12,000 students are enrolled in a CACREP-accredited online program. When comparing this estimate to the latest published 2016 CACREP enrollment figure of 45,820 (CACREP, 2017), online students now constitute over 25% of the total. This does not include many other residential counselor education students in hybrid programs who may take one or more classes through distance learning means.

At the time of this writing, an additional three institutions were currently listed as under CACREP review, and soon their students will likely be added to this growing online enrollment. As this trend continues, it is essential for counselor education programs to understand issues, trends, and best practices in online education in order to make informed choices regarding counselor education and training, as well as preparing graduates for employment. It also is important for hiring managers in mental health agencies to understand the nature and quality of the training graduates of these programs have received.

One important factor contributing to the increasing trends in online learning is the accessibility it can bring to diverse populations throughout the world (Sells, Tan, Brogan, Dahlen, & Stupart, 2012). For instance, populations without access to traditional residential, brick-and-mortar classroom experiences can benefit from the greater flexibility and ease of attendance that distance learning has to offer (Bennet-Levy, Cromarty, Hawkins, & Mills, 2012). Remote areas in the United States, including rural and frontier regions, often lack physical access to counselor education programs, which limits the numbers of service providers to remote and traditionally underserved areas of the country. Additionally, the online counselor education environment makes it possible for commuters to take some of their course work remotely, especially in winter when travel can become a safety issue, and in urban areas where travel is lengthy and stressful because of traffic.

### **The Online Counselor Education Environment**

The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) Technology Interest Network (2017) recently published guidelines for distance education within counselor education that offer useful suggestions to online counselor education programs or to those programs looking to establish online courses. Current research supports that successful distance education programs include active and engaged faculty–student collaboration, frequent communications, sound pedagogical

frameworks, and interactive and technically uncomplicated support and resources (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011; Murdock & Williams, 2011). Physical distance and the associated lack of student–faculty connection has been a concern in the development of online counselor education programs. In its infancy, videoconferencing was unreliable, unaffordable, and often a technological distraction to the learning process. The newest wave of technology—enhanced distance education—has improved interactions using email, e-learning platforms, and threaded discussion boards to make asynchronous messaging virtually instantaneous (Hall, Nielsen, Nelson, & Buchholz, 2010). Today, with the availability of affordable and reliable technical products such as GoToMeeting, Zoom, and Adobe Connect, online counselor educators are holding live, synchronous meetings with students on a regular basis. This includes individual advising, group supervision, and entire class sessions.

It is important to convey that online interactions are different than face-to-face, but they are not inferior to an in-person faculty–student learning relationship (Hickey, McAleer, & Khalili, 2015). Students and faculty prefer one method to the other, often contingent upon their personal belief in the effectiveness of the modality overall and their belief in their own personal fit for this style of teaching and learning (Watson, 2012). In the actual practice of distance education, professors and students are an email, phone call, or videoconference away; thus, communication with peers and instructors is readily accessible (Murdock & Williams, 2011; Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). When communicating online, students may feel more relaxed and less inhibited, which may facilitate more self-disclosure, reflexivity, and rapport via increased dialogue (Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013; Watson, 2012). Subsequently, faculty who are well-organized, technologically proficient, and more responsive to students’ requests may prefer online teaching opportunities and find their online student connections more engaging and satisfying (Meyer, 2015). Upon Institutional Research Board approval, an exploratory survey of online counselor educators was conducted in 2016 and 2017 to better understand the current state of distance counselor education in the United States.

## Method

### Participants

Recruitment of participants was conducted via the ACES Listserv (CESNET). No financial incentive or other reward was offered for participation. The 31 participants comprised a sample of convenience, a common first step in preliminary research efforts (Kerlinger & Lee, 1999). Participants of the study categorized themselves as full-time faculty members (55.6%), part-time faculty members (11.1%), academic chairs and department heads (22.2%), academic administrators (3.7%), and serving in other roles (7.4%).

### Study Design and Procedure

The survey was written and administered using Qualtrics, a commercial web-based product. The survey contained questions aimed at exploring online counselor education programs, including current technologies utilized, approaches to reducing social distance, development of community among students, major challenges in conducting online counselor education, and current practices in meeting these challenges. The survey was composed of one demographic question, 15 multiple-response questions, and two open-ended survey questions. The demographic question asked about the respondent’s role in the university. The 15 multiple-response questions included items such as: (a) How does online counselor education fit into your department’s educational mission? (b) Do you provide a residential program in which to compare your students? (c) How successful are your online graduates in gaining postgraduate clinical placements and licensure? (d) What is the average size of an online class with one instructor? and (e) How do online students engage with faculty and staff at

your university? Two open-ended questions were asked: “What are the top 3 to 5 *best practices* you believe are most important for the successful online education of counselors?” and “What are the top 3 to 5 *lessons learned* from your engagement in the online education of counselors?”

Additional questions focused on type of department and its organization, graduates’ acceptance to doctoral programs, amount of time required on the physical campus, e-learning platforms and technologies, online challenges, and best practices for online education and lessons learned. The 18 survey questions were designed for completion in no more than 20 minutes and the survey was active for 10 months, during which time there were three appeals for responses yielding 31 respondents.

## Procedure

An initial recruiting email and three follow-ups were sent via CESNET. Potential participants were invited to visit a web page that first led to an introductory paragraph and informed consent page. An embedded skip logic system required consent before allowing access to the actual survey questions.

The results were exported from the Qualtrics web-based survey product, and the analysis of the 15 fixed-response questions produced descriptive statistics. Cross tabulations and chi square statistics further compared the perceptions of faculty and those identifying themselves as departmental chairs and administrators.

The two open-ended questions—“What are the top 3 to 5 *best practices* you believe are most important for the successful online education of counselors?” and “What are the top 3 to 5 *lessons learned* from your engagement in the online education of counselors?”—yielded 78 statements about lessons learned and 80 statements about best practices for a total of 158 statements. The analysis of the 158 narrative comments initially consisted of individually analyzing each response by identifying and extracting the common words and phrases. It is noted that many responses contained more than one suggestion or comment. Some responses were a paragraph in length and thus more than one key word or phrase could come from a single narrative response. This first step yielded a master list of 18 common words and phrases. The second step was to again review each comment, compare it to this master list, and place a check mark for each category. The third step was to look for similarities in the 18 common words and group them into a smaller number of meaningful categories. These steps were checked among the researchers for fidelity of reporting and trustworthiness.

## Results

Thirty-one distance learning counselor education faculty, department chairs, and administrators responded to the survey. They reported their maximum class sizes ranged from 10 to 40 with a mean of 20.6 (SD = 6.5), and the average class size was 15.5 (SD = 3.7). When asked how online students are organized within their university, 26% reported that students choose classes on an individual basis, 38% said students are individually assigned classes using an organized schedule, and 32% indicated that students take assigned classes together as a cohort.

Additionally, respondents were asked how online students engage with faculty and staff at their university. Email was the most popular, used by all (100%), and second was phone calls (94%). Synchronous live group discussions using videoconferencing technologies were used by 87%, while individual video calls were reported by 77%. Asynchronous electronic discussion boards were utilized by 87% of the counselor education programs.

Ninety percent of respondents indicated that remote or distance counseling students were required to attend the residential campus at least once during their program, with 13% requiring students to come to campus only once, 52% requiring students to attend twice, and 26% requiring students to come to a physical campus location four or more times during their program.

All participants indicated using some form of online learning platform with Blackboard (65%), Canvas (23%), Pearson E-College (6%), and Moodle (3%) among the ones most often listed. Respondents indicated the satisfaction levels of their current online learning platform as: very dissatisfied (6.5%), dissatisfied (3.2%), somewhat dissatisfied (6.5%), neutral (9.7%), somewhat satisfied (16.1%), satisfied (41.9%), and very satisfied (9.7%). There was no significant relationship between the platform used and the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction ( $X^2(18,30) = 11.036, p > .05$ ), with all platforms faring equally well. Ninety-seven percent of respondents indicated using videoconferencing for teaching and individual advising using such programs as Adobe Connect (45%), Zoom (26%), or GoToMeeting (11%), while 19% reported using an assortment of other related technologies.

Participants were asked about their university's greatest challenges in providing quality online counselor education. They were given five pre-defined options and a sixth option of "other" with a text box for further elaboration, and were allowed to choose more than one category. Responses included making online students feel a sense of connection to the university (62%), changing faculty teaching styles from traditional classroom models to those better suited for online coursework (52%), providing experiential clinical training to online students (48%), supporting quality practicum and internship experiences for online students residing at a distance from the physical campus (38%), convincing faculty that quality outcomes are possible with online programs (31%), and other (10%).

Each participant was asked what their institution did to ensure students could succeed in online counselor education. They were given three pre-defined options and a fourth option of "other" with a text box for further elaboration, and were allowed to choose more than one option. The responses included specific screening through the admissions process (58%), technology and learning platform support for online students (48%), and assessment for online learning aptitude (26%). Twenty-three percent chose the category of other and mentioned small classes, individual meetings with students, providing student feedback, offering tutorials, and ensuring accessibility to faculty and institutional resources.

Two open-ended questions were asked and narrative comments were analyzed, sorted, and grouped into categories. The first open-ended question was: "What are the top 3 to 5 *best practices* that are the most important for the successful online education of counselors?" This yielded 78 narrative comments that fit into the categories of fostering student engagement ( $n = 19$ ), building community and facilitating dialogue ( $n = 14$ ), supporting clinical training and supervision ( $n = 11$ ), ensuring courses are well planned and organized ( $n = 10$ ), providing timely and robust feedback ( $n = 6$ ), ensuring excellent student screening and advising ( $n = 6$ ), investing in technology ( $n = 6$ ), ensuring expectations are clear and set at a high standard ( $n = 5$ ), investing in top-quality learning materials ( $n = 4$ ), believing that online counselor education works ( $n = 3$ ), and other miscellaneous comments ( $n = 4$ ). Some narrative responses contained more than one suggestion or comment that fit multiple categories.

The second open-ended question—"What are the top 3 to 5 lessons learned from the online education of counselors?"—yielded 80 narrative comments that fit into the categories of fostering student engagement ( $n = 11$ ), ensuring excellent student screening and advising ( $n = 11$ ), recognizing that online learning has its own unique workload challenges for students and faculty ( $n = 11$ ),

providing timely and robust feedback (n = 8), building community and facilitating dialogue (n = 7), ensuring courses are well planned and organized (n = 7), investing in technology (n = 6), believing that online counselor education works (n = 6), ensuring expectations are clear and set at a high standard (n = 5), investing in top-quality learning materials (n = 3), supporting clinical training and supervision (n = 2), and other miscellaneous comments (n = 8).

Each participant was asked how online counselor education fit into their department's educational mission and was given three categorical choices. Nineteen percent stated it was a minor focus of their department's educational mission, 48% stated it was a major focus, and 32% stated it was the primary focus of their department's educational mission.

The 55% of participants indicating they had both residential and online programs were asked to respond to three follow-up multiple-choice questions gauging the success rates of their online graduates (versus residential graduates) in attaining: (1) postgraduate clinical placements, (2) postgraduate clinical licensure, and (3) acceptance into doctoral programs. Ninety-three percent stated that online graduates were as successful as residential students in gaining postgraduate clinical placements. Ninety-three percent stated online graduates were equally successful in obtaining state licensure. Eighty-five percent stated online graduates were equally successful in getting acceptance into doctoral programs.

There were some small differences in perception that were further analyzed. Upon using a chi square analysis, there were no statistically significant differences in the positive perceptions of online graduates in gaining postgraduate clinical placements ( $X^2(2, 13) = .709, p > .05$ ), the positive perceptions regarding the relative success of online versus residential graduates in gaining postgraduate clinical licensure ( $X^2(2, 13) = .701, p > .05$ ), or perceptions of the relative success of online graduates in becoming accepted in doctoral programs ( $X^2(2, 12) = 1.33, p > .05$ ).

## Discussion

The respondents reported that their distance learning courses had a mean class size of 15.5. Students in these classes likely benefit from the small class sizes and the relatively low faculty-student ratio. These numbers are lower than many residential classes that can average 25 students or more. It is not clear what the optimal online class size should be, but there is evidence that the challenge of larger classes may introduce burdens difficult for some students to overcome (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010). Beattie and Thiele (2016) found first-generation students in larger classes were less likely to talk to their professor or teaching assistants about class-related ideas. In addition, Black and Latinx students in larger classes were less likely to talk with their professors about their careers and futures (Beattie & Thiele, 2016).

Programs appeared to have no consistent approach to organizing students and scheduling courses. The three dominant models present different balances of flexibility and predictability with advantages and disadvantages for both. Some counselor education programs provide students the utmost flexibility in selecting classes, others assign classes using a more controlled schedule, and others are more rigid and assign students to all classes.

The model for organizing students impacts the social connections students make with one another. In concept, models that provide students with more opportunities to engage each other in a consistent and effective pattern of positive interactions result in students more comfortable working with one another, and requesting and receiving constructive feedback from their peers and instructors.

Cohort models, in which students take all courses together over the life of a degree program, are the least flexible but most predictable and have the greatest potential for fostering strong connections. When effectively implemented, cohort models can foster a supportive learning environment and greater student collaboration and cohesion with higher rates of student retention and ultimately higher graduation rates (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Maher, 2005). Advising loads can decrease as cohort students support one another as informal peer mentors. However, cohorts are not without their disadvantages and can develop problematic interpersonal dynamics, splinter into sub-groups, and lead to students assuming negative roles (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). An alternative model in which students make their own schedules and choose their own classes provides greater flexibility but fewer opportunities to build social cohesion with others in their program. At the same time, these students may not demonstrate the negative dynamics regarding interpersonal engagement that can occur with close cohort groups.

### **Faculty–Student Engagement**

Remote students want to stay in touch with their faculty advisors, course instructors, and fellow students. Numerous social engagement opportunities exist through technological tools including email, cell phone texts, phone calls, and videoconference advising. These fast and efficient tools provide the same benefits of in-person meetings without the lag time and commute requirements. Faculty and staff obviously need to make this a priority to use these tools and respond to online students in a timely manner.

All technological tools referred to in the survey responses provide excellent connectivity and communication if used appropriately. Students want timely responses, but for a busy faculty or staff member it is easy to allow emails and voicemails to go unattended. Emails not responded to and unanswered voicemail messages can create anxiety for students whose only interaction is through electronic means. This also might reinforce a sense of isolation for students who are just “hanging out there” on their own and having to be resourceful to get their needs met. It is recommended that the term *timely* needs to be defined and communicated so faculty and students understand response expectations. It is less important that responses are expected in 24, 48, or even 72 hours; what students need to know is *when* to expect a response.

Survey responses indicated that remote counselor education students are dependent upon technology, including the internet and associated web-based e-learning platforms. When the internet is down, passwords do not work, or computers fail, the remote student’s learning is stalled. Counselor education programs offering online programming must provide administrative services, technology, and learning support for online students in order to quickly remediate technology issues when they occur. It is imperative that standard practice for institutions include the provision of robust technology support to reduce down-time and ensure continuity of operations and connection for remote students.

### **Fostering Program and Institutional Connections**

Faculty were asked how often online students were required to come to a physical campus location as part of their program. Programs often refer to short-term campus visits as *limited residencies* to clarify that students will need to come to the campus. Limited residencies are standard, with 90% responding that students were required to come to campus at least once. Short-term intensive residencies are excellent opportunities for online students to make connections with their faculty and fellow students (Kops, 2014). Residential intensives also provide opportunities for the university student life office, alumni department, business office, financial aid office, registrar, and other university personnel to connect with students and link a human face to an email address.

Distance learning students want to engage with their university, as well as fellow students and faculty. They want to feel a sense of connection in a similar manner as residential students (Murdock & Williams, 2011). Institutions should think creatively about opportunities to include online learners in activities beyond the classroom. An example of promoting inclusiveness is when one university moved the traditional weekday residential town halls to a Sunday evening teleconference webinar. This allowed for greater access, boosted attendance, and served to make online counselor education students feel like a part of the larger institution.

As brick-and-mortar institutions consider how to better engage distance learning students, they need to understand that a majority of students (53%) taking exclusively distance education courses reside in the same state as the university they are attending (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Given that most are within driving distance of the physical campus, students are more open to coming to campus for special events, feel their presence is valued, and know that they are not just part of an electronic platform (Murdock & Williams, 2011).

### **E-Learning Platforms as Critical Online Infrastructure**

All participants (100%) reported using an online learning platform. E-learning platforms are standard for sharing syllabi, course organization, schedules, announcements, assignments, discussion boards, homework submissions, tests, and grades. They are foundational in supporting faculty instruction and student success with numerous quality options available. Overall, online faculty were pleased with their technological platforms and there was no clear best platform.

Online learning platforms are rich in technological features. For example, threaded discussions allow for rich, thoughtful dialogue among students and faculty, and they are often valued by less verbally competitive students who might express reluctance to speak up in class but are willing to share their comments in writing. Course examinations and quizzes in a variety of formats can be produced and delivered online through e-learning platforms such as Blackboard, Canvas, and Moodle. Faculty have flexibility for when exams are offered and how much time students have to complete them. When used in conjunction with proctoring services such as Respondus, ProctorU, and B-Virtual, integrity in the examination process can be assured. Once students complete their exam, software can automatically score and grade objective questions, and provide immediate feedback to students.

### **Videoconferencing and Virtual Remote Classrooms**

Videoconferencing for teaching and individual advising through Adobe Connect, Zoom, GoToMeeting, and related technologies is now standard practice and changing the nature of remote learning. Distance learning can now employ virtual classroom models with synchronous audio and video communication that closely parallels what occurs in a residential classroom. Videoconferencing platforms provide tools to share PowerPoints, graphics, and videos as might occur in a residential class. Class participants can write on virtual whiteboards with color markers, annotating almost anything on their screen. Group and private chat functionality can provide faculty with real-time feedback during a class session. Newer videoconferencing features now allow faculty to break students into smaller, private discussion groups and move around to each group virtually, just like what often occurs in a residential classroom. With preparation, faculty can execute integrated survey polls during a video class session. Essentially, videoconferencing tools reduce the *distance* in distance education.

Videoconference platforms allow faculty to teach clinical skills in nearly the same manner as in residential programs. Counselor education faculty can model skills such as active listening in real time to their online class. Faculty can then have students individually demonstrate those skills while being

observed. Embedded features allow faculty to record the video and audio features of any conversation for playback and analysis. Videoconference platforms now offer “breakout” rooms to place students in sub-groups for skills practice and debriefing, similar to working in small groups in residential classrooms. Faculty members and teaching assistants can visit each breakout room to ensure students are on task and properly demonstrating counseling skills. Just as in a residential class, students can reconvene and share the challenges and lessons learned from their small group experience.

### **Challenges in Providing Remote Counselor Education**

Participants were asked to select one or more of their top challenges in providing quality online counselor education. In order of frequency, they reported the greatest challenges as making online students feel a sense of connection to the university (62%), changing faculty teaching styles from brick-and-mortar classroom models to those better suited for online coursework (52%), providing experiential clinical training to online students (48%), supporting quality practicum and internship experiences for online students residing at a distance from the physical campus (38%), and convincing faculty members that quality outcomes are possible with online programs (31%).

**Creating a sense of university connection.** Counselor education faculty did not report having major concerns with faculty–student engagement. Faculty seemed confident with student learning outcomes using e-learning platforms and videoconferencing tools that serve to reduce social distance between faculty and students and facilitate quality learning experiences. This confidence could be the result of counselor educators’ focus on fostering relationships as a foundational counseling skill (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014).

However, faculty felt challenged to foster a student’s sense of connection with the larger university. For example, remote students not receiving emails and announcements about opportunities available only to residential students can feel left out. Remote students might find it difficult to navigate the university student life office, business department, financial aid office, registration system, and other university systems initially designed for residential students. Highly dependent on their smartphone and computer, remote students can feel neglected as they anxiously wait for responses to email and voicemail inquiries (Milman, Posey, Pintz, Wright, & Zhou, 2015).

In the online environment, there are extracurricular options for participating in town halls, special webinars, and open discussion forums with departmental and university leaders. Ninety percent of the programs require students to come to their physical campus one or more times. These short-term residencies are opportunities for students to meet the faculty, departmental chairs, and university leaders face-to-face and further build a sense of connection.

A majority of online students (53%) reside in the same state as the university they are attending (Allen & Seaman, 2016), with many within commuting distance of their brick-and-mortar campus. These students will appreciate hearing about the same opportunities afforded to residential students, and under the right circumstances and scheduling they will participate.

**Changing faculty teaching styles.** Not all residential teaching styles and methods, such as authority-based lecture formats, work well with all students (Donche, Maeyer, Coertjens, Van Daal, & Van Petegem, 2013). Distance learning students present their own challenges and preferences. Successful distance education programs require active and engaged faculty who frequently communicate with their students, use sound pedagogical frameworks, and maintain a collaborative and interactive style (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011; Murdock & Williams, 2011). Discovery orientation, discussion, debriefing,

action research, and flipped classrooms where content is delivered outside the classroom and the classroom is used to discuss the material are good examples of more collaborative styles (Brewer & Movahedazarhouli, 2018; Donche et al., 2013).

Organization is critical for all students, but more so for remote students who often are working adults with busy schedules. They want to integrate their coursework into other life commitments and want a clear, well-organized, and thoughtfully planned course with all the requirements published in advance, including specific assignment due dates. Distance counselor education faculty will find their syllabi growing longer with more detail as they work to integrate traditional assignments with the e-learning and videoconferencing tools in order to create engaging, predictable, and enjoyable interactive learning experiences.

**Providing experiential clinical training.** Counselor educators ideally provide multimodal learning opportunities for counseling students to understand, internalize, and demonstrate clinical skills for a diverse clientele. In residential classrooms, the knowledge component is usually imparted through textbooks, supplemental readings, course assignments, video demonstration, and instructor-led lecture and discussions. All remote programs provide similar opportunities for students and replicate residential teaching models with their use of asynchronous e-learning platforms and synchronous videoconferencing technologies.

Asynchronous methods are not well suited for modeling, teaching, and assessing interpersonal skills. However, synchronous videoconferencing technologies provide the same opportunity as residential settings to conduct “fishbowl” class exercises, break students into groups to practice clinical skills, conduct role plays, apply procedural learning, and give students immediate, meaningful feedback about their skills development.

The majority of surveyed programs required remote students to come to campus at least once to assess students for clinical potential, impart critical skills, and monitor student progress in achieving prerequisite clinical competencies required to start practicum. Courses that teach and assess clinical interviewing skills are well suited for these intensive experiences and provide an important gatekeeping function. Faculty not only have the opportunity to see and hear students engage in role plays, but also to see them interact with other students.

**Supporting quality practicum and internship experiences.** Remote counselor educators report that their programs are challenged in supporting quality practicum and internship experiences. Residential students benefit from the relationships universities develop over time with local public and nonprofit mental health agencies in which practicum and internship students may cluster at one or more sites. Although online students living close enough to the residential campus may benefit from the same opportunities, remote students living at a distance typically do not experience this benefit. They often have to seek out, interview, and compete for a clinical position at a site unfamiliar to their academic program’s field placement coordinator. Thus, online counselor education students will need field placement coordination that can help with unique practicum and internship requirements. The placement coordinator will need to know how to review and approve distance sites without a physical assessment. Relationships with placement sites will need to rely upon email, phone, and teleconference meetings. Furthermore, online students can live in a state other than where the university is located, requiring the field placement coordinator to be aware of various state laws and regulations.

**Convincing faculty that quality outcomes are possible.** Approximately one-third of the surveyed counselor education faculty reported the need to convince other faculty that quality outcomes are

possible with remote counselor education. Changing the minds of skeptical colleagues is challenging but naturally subject to improvement over time as online learning increases, matures, and becomes integrated into the fabric of counselor education. In the interim, programs would be wise to invest in assisting faculty skeptics to understand that online counselor education can be managed effectively (Sibley & Whitaker, 2015). First, rather than just telling faculty that online counselor education works, programs should demonstrate high levels of interactivity that are comparable to face-to-face engagement by using state-of-the-art videoconferencing platforms. Second, it is worth sharing positive research outcomes related to remote education. Third, it is best to start small by encouraging residential faculty to first try a hybrid course by holding only one or two of their total class sessions online. Fourth, it is important to provide robust support for reluctant but willing faculty who agree to integrate at least one or two online sessions into their residential coursework. Finally, institutions will find more willing faculty if they offer incentives for those who give online counselor education a chance.

### **Ensuring Online Student Success**

Student success is defined by the DOE as related to student retention, graduation rates, time to completion, academic success, and gainful employment (Bailey et al., 2011). Counselor education programs would likely add clinical success in practicum and internship and post-master's licensure to these critical success outcomes.

The survey respondents reported that student success begins with making sure that the students they accept have the aptitude to learn via online distance education. Students may have unrealistic perceptions that remote distance education is somehow less academically strenuous. Programs need to ensure students are prepared for the unique aspects of online versus residential learning. Fifty-eight percent of the programs engaged in student screening beginning with the admissions process. A quarter of the respondents used a formal assessment tool to assess students for success factors such as motivation, learning style, study habits, access to technology, and technological skills. A commonly used instrument was the *Online Readiness Assessment* developed by Williams (2017).

### **Lessons Learned and Best Practices**

The 158 statements regarding best practices and lessons learned were further refined to yield the top six imperatives for success in online counselor education, namely: (1) fostering student–faculty–community engagement (57.4%); (2) providing high expectations, excellent screening, advising, and feedback (36%); (3) investing in quality instructional materials, course development, and technology support (30.5%); (4) providing excellent support for online clinical training and supervision (14.6%); (5) recognizing the workload requirements and time constraints of online students; (6) working to instill the belief in others that quality outcomes are possible with online counselor education programs (10.1%); and (7) other assorted responses (13.5%).

An indicator of success for many counselor education programs is the rate at which students graduate, obtain clinical placement, and become licensed. There is also an interest in how successful graduates are in becoming admitted into doctoral programs. For online programs, a further benchmark test is to compare online student graduation, licensure, and doctoral admissions rates to those in residential programs. Fifty-five percent of the respondents served in programs with residential as well as online students. These respondents were able to compare their online student outcomes to residential student outcomes. Their perception was that online graduates were as successful as residential students in gaining postgraduate clinical placements (93%), obtaining state licensure (93%), and acceptance into doctoral programs (85%). They generally believed online graduates were competitive with residential graduates.

## **Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusion**

### **Limitations of the Study**

When this study began in 2016, there were 11 CACREP-accredited institutions offering online counselor education programs, and by March 2018, there were 36. This study represents a single snapshot of the online counselor education experience during a time of tremendous growth.

This study focused on the reported experience of faculty, departmental chairs, and administrators who have some commitment and investment in online learning. Some would point out the bias of those who advocate for remote counselor education in relaying their own experiences, anecdotal evidence, and personal comparisons of online and residential teaching.

The exploratory nature of this study was clearly not comprehensive in its inclusion of all the factors associated with online counselor education. Specific details of online counselor education programs were not emphasized and could have offered more information about university and departmental resources for remote education, faculty training for online educational formats, and student evaluations of online courses. The numerous technologies used were identified, but this says nothing about their differential effectiveness. Future studies should include these variables as well as other factors that will provide further information about the successes and challenges of online counselor education.

This survey assessed the informed opinions of counselor education faculty and administrators who responded that they were generally satisfied with the various aspects of their programs, including student outcomes. What was not assessed was the actual quality of the education itself. In order to change the mind of skeptics, more than opinions and testimonies will be needed. Future studies need to objectively compare learning outcomes, demonstrate quality, and delineate how remote counselor education programs are meeting the challenges of training counselors within distance learning modalities.

### **Recommendations**

The dynamic nature of the field of online counselor education requires ongoing study. As more programs offer courses and full programs through distance learning modalities, they can contribute their own unique expertise and lessons learned to inform and enrich the broader field.

The challenge of faculty skepticism and possible mixed motives regarding online learning will continue to be problematic. There is a lingering perception by some faculty that online counselor education programs are not equivalent to residential training. An inherent faculty bias might exist in which residential means higher quality and online means lower quality. Some faculty may teach online courses only for additional compensation while privately having reservations. In contrast, departmental chairs and academic administrators might want the same high levels of quality, but may find themselves more driven by the responsibility for meeting enrollment numbers and budgets. In times of scarcity, these individuals may see online counselor education as the answer for new revenue sources (Jones, 2015). For others, online education may present concerns while providing an appeal for its innovative qualities or providing social justice through increasing access to higher education by underserved populations. The best way to clarify the issues and better inform the minds of skeptics is to present them with objective data regarding the nature and positive contributions of remote counselor education learning outcomes.

Aside from the modality of their instructional platform, it is important to understand if effective remote counselor educators are different from equally effective residential course instructors. Remote teaching effectiveness might be associated with some combination of attributes, interests, and motivations, and thus self-selection to teach remote students. Further studies will need to tease out what works, what does not work, and what type of faculty and faculty training make someone best suited for participation in remote counselor education.

Technology is critical to the advances in remote counselor education. Email, smartphones, texting, and e-learning platforms have helped faculty create engaging courses with extensive faculty–student interactions. Videoconferencing in particular has served to reduce the social distance between faculty and remote students. As aforementioned, innovative programs are taking the *distance* out of distance counselor education, where the virtual remote classroom modality provides similar experiences to those of residential classes. The nature of these technologically facilitated online relationships deserves further study to determine which technologies and related protocols enhance learning and which impede it.

A logical next step is to build on the work that has been accomplished and conduct more head-to-head comparisons of student outcomes among remote and residential programs. This is very feasible, as 34 of the 36 institutions currently offering online counselor education programs also have a residential program with which to make comparisons. These within-institution comparisons will be inherently quasi-experimental. Effective program comparisons of delivery models will require systematically implemented reliable and valid measures of student learning outcomes at strategic points in the counselor training program. The Counselor Competency Scale (Lambie, Mullen, Swank, & Blount, 2018) is a commonly used standardized assessment for graduate students engaged in clinical practicum and internship. The National Counseling Exam scores of current students and recent graduates can provide standardized measures to compare outcomes of graduates across programs.

Finally, although we can learn from institutional best practices and student success stories, we also could benefit from understanding why some programs, faculty, and students struggle. Challenges are certainly faced in remote counselor education and training, but it is likely that one or more programs have developed innovative concepts to surmount these obstacles. The 31 respondents were able to articulate many best practices to manage challenges and believed they were achieving the same learning objectives achieved by residential counseling students. Many faculty members, departmental chairs, and administrators believed that remote counselor education graduates are as successful as those attending residential programs, but this opinion is not universally shared. What is clear is that despite some reservations, a growing number of counselors are trained via a remote modality. It is time to embrace distance counselor education; learn from best practices, successes, and struggles; and continue to improve outcomes for the benefit of programs, the profession of counseling, and the consumers of the services our graduates provide.

#### ***Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure***

The authors reported no conflict of interest or funding contributions for the development of this manuscript.

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