Strengthening Gatekeeping Practices in Counselor Education

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Abstract

Gatekeeping is fundamental in counselor education. The process ensures that only ethical, competent professionals enter the counseling field to help protect client welfare. Counselor educators frequently face emotional tension, institutional barriers, and ambiguous guidelines. This paper explores gatekeeping obstacles and offers evidence-based suggestions to improve gatekeeping practices, including clearer policies, stronger mentorship, and consistent implementation. Strengthening gatekeeping efforts supports counselor development and advocates for the integrity of the counseling profession and client care.

Keywords: counselor education, professional competence, educator challenges, advocacy

Strengthening Gatekeeping Practices in Counselor Education

This paper explores the vital role of gatekeeping within counselor education, focusing on protecting client welfare and upholding the integrity of the counseling profession. Gatekeeping is one of counselor education's most crucial yet inadequately studied responsibilities. in counselor education. The gatekeeping process safeguards that counselor educators evaluate counselor-in-training's (CITs) ethical, academic, and professional readiness (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013). Throughout CIT's training, dispositional and clinical competencies are assessed (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016). The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) outlines gatekeeping as an ongoing and proactive process, requiring continuous assessment and intervention when needed. However, gatekeeping is often perceived negatively, emphasizing the need for clearer definitions and structured frameworks to support ethical implementation (Landon et al., 2023).

In addition, this paper also explores counselor educators' challenges in implementing gatekeeping practices, such as emotional tension, legal concerns, and lack of institutional support. While the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015) sets standards for the counseling profession, many counselor educators report challenges in upholding the CACREP standards due to systemic challenges. These include emotional strain and role conflict for counselor educators, institutional resistance, and fears of legal liability if gatekeeping practices are upheld with a CIT (DeCino et al., 2020; Gizara & Forrest, 2004). If inconsistent gatekeeping processes are implemented, the likelihood of inadequately prepared counselors entering the field may be increased. Strengthening gatekeeping in the counseling field involves continual academic and ethical evaluation, emotional resilience, structured remediation processes, clear policies, and institutional support.

According to DeCino et al. (2020), emotional discomfort is a significant barrier to gatekeeping. Counselor educators often struggle with role conflict and the emotional toll of making complex remediation or dismissal decisions (Wissel, 2014). Developing self-awareness when these emotions arise, through self-reflection and supervision, can increase the counselor educators' support for effective decision making and personal well-being. Lastly, this paper advocates for mentorship, cultural sensitivity, and legal education to strengthen gatekeeping practices and ensure CITs are adequately prepared for professional practice. A culture of isolation in gatekeeping decisions can hinder collaboration and lead to a lack of consistency.

Inconsistencies emerge in gatekeeping when there is a lack of clear remediation procedures or institutional support (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016). Clear guidelines, structured remediation models, and assessment tools can increase gatekeeping consistency and fairness (Moore et al., 2022). According to Smarinsky et al. (2023), successful gatekeeping practices extend beyond individual programs and influence licensure standards, public trust, and the long-term credibility of the counseling field.

Gatekeeping is a multidimensional responsibility within counselor education, encompassing academic precision, ethical judgment, and institutional navigation. Despite increased awareness of CIT competency, there still remains inadequate support and standardized practice for those individuals tasked with enforcing gatekeeping (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016). Clear guidelines, practical strategies, and strong communication between supervisors and CIT are essential to ensure fairness and ethical oversight. Supervisor evaluations and CIT self-assessments can enrich the supervision process and reinforce clinical skill development (Moore et al., 2022).

Existing Gatekeeping Practices

Effective gatekeeping extends well beyond individual counseling programs. It influences licensure requirements, public trust, and the overall reputation of the mental health profession (Smarinsky et al., 2023). However, counselor educators face persistent challenges, including unclear institutional guidelines and fear of legal repercussions (Gizara & Forrest, 2004). Establishing transparent policies, offering standardized assessments, and ensuring ongoing faculty development is necessary to support accountability and maintain high professional standards (Kimball et al., 2019).

Several models are available for counselor educators to use for gatekeeping (Letourneau, 2016; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016). While the American Counseling Association endorses no singular model, several structured frameworks, such as the four-phase model by Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen (2010), have gained wide use (Letourneau, 2016). Their model includes screenings before and after admission, a plan for remediation for the CIT if needed, and a follow-up description of the result of the remediation interventions (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Pre-admission screenings can include the completion of directed essays and interviews to better understand the character of prospective CITs (Schuerman et al., 2018). Annual assessments should be conducted after enrollment and consist of the student's attitudes and performance around ethical issues, client work, the ability to receive and implement feedback, and any personal behaviors that would hinder their competence as a professional counselor (Schuermann et al., 2018).

Gatekeeping Challenges and Gaps in Policy

Despite these gatekeeping frameworks, counselor educators still struggle with implementation. Emotional tension, fear of bias, and concerns about legal liability remain common (Homrich et al., 2014; Crawford & Gilroy, 2013). These factors increase counselor

educators' hesitancy to act, even when student behavior or performance warrants it. In addition, there are further gatekeeping complications when there is a lack of communication between faculty and field supervisors. Many site supervisors do not share their concerns and defer gatekeeping responsibilities to faculty, leading to missed opportunities for timely intervention (Freeman et al., 2016).

Communication Challenges in Gatekeeping

According to Freeman et al. (2016), nuances in communication present challenges between faculty and field site supervisors. Freeman et al. (2016) discovered in their study that over 70% of site supervisors believed that faculty were the primary holders of responsibility when acting around gatekeeping. They postulated that a lack of regular and consistent communication between site supervisors and faculty leads to deficiencies in gatekeeping activities. Furthermore, Freeman et al. (2016) found that site supervisors reported discussing their concerns about CITs' performance with other trusted colleagues but not with the CIT or the CITs' faculty.

According to Schuermann et al. (2018), several institutions have written procedures for gatekeeping. Still, a common challenge is that instructors often avoid taking responsibility for implementing these procedures. Instead, gatekeeping issues are frequently passed to other faculty members or departments. Primarily online institutional instruction presents an increased challenge, as problems are easier to go unaddressed once a student completes a course and no longer has face-to-face contact with their professor. Grunhaus and Lyons (2024) developed a model for retention and remediation to address these challenges, explicitly designed for counselor educators teaching online. One challenge they highlighted is that when CITs become less guarded in their written communications, such as on discussion boards or via email, it leads

to cyberincivility. This type of interaction often results in conflicts between faculty and students or between multiple CITs (Grunhaus & Lyons, 2024). Recommendations for improving communication practices to address these issues will be discussed further.

Institutional Barriers to Gatekeeping

A common issue in gatekeeping practices is the overarching culture established by department leaders or long-time faculty, which can influence whether gatekeeping practices are consistently applied (Schuermann et al., 2018). Schuermann et al. (2018) also found that junior faculty tended to be less confident in their gatekeeping approach than their more experienced colleagues. Interestingly, junior faculty were more unified in their belief in the importance of gatekeeping. This was attributed to their recent experience in doctoral programs, which were more focused on CACREP accreditation standards, unlike their senior counterparts, who may have completed their education over a decade ago (Schuermann et al., 2018).

Another challenge is the lack of standardized assessment criteria for evaluating counselor-in-training (CIT) dispositions. One key area of concern is evaluating cultural responsiveness and adaptability when working with diverse clients (Freeman et al., 2019). However, counselor educators' cultural backgrounds and biases may influence their perceptions of student competence, potentially leading to biased assessments (Letourneau, 2016). Additionally, many counseling programs fail to adequately address psychological concerns during admissions, which can affect students' success later in their training (DeDiego & Burgin, 2016). Supervisors in clinical settings may also experience hesitancy in evaluating student performance, further complicating the gatekeeping process (Haddock & Whitman, 2019)

Legal Implications as a Barrier for Gatekeeping

There are a variety of barriers to gatekeeping, but a unique one is the fear of legal ramifications (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013). Crawford and Gilroy's (2013) study revealed that 29% of counselor educators hesitated to initiate remediation for fear of legal consequences. If remediation had been initiated, then 46% were fearful for the same reasons to follow through with dismissing a CIT (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013). Freeman et al. (2016) hypothesized that the lack of communication between faculty and site supervisors may stem from concerns about legal ramifications and the fear that raising issues about a CIT's performance could negatively affect the site supervisor, potentially leading to fewer future approvals for CITs at their site. Due to these various gate-keeping challenges, new considerations for gatekeeping practices are warranted.

Accountability Gaps in Evaluating Counselor Trainees and Educators

Another significant barrier to consistent gatekeeping is the absence of standardized criteria for assessing CIT dispositions. While technical skills and academic knowledge are more easily measured, evaluating qualities such as professionalism, empathy, and self-awareness is far more nuanced. Freeman et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of assessing cultural responsiveness and adaptability, both critical traits when working with diverse client populations. Yet, counselor educators' cultural backgrounds, values, and implicit biases can shape how they interpret these traits, potentially leading to inconsistencies or inequities in evaluation (Letourneau, 2016).

Further complicating this issue is the lack of mental health screening during admissions. Many counseling programs overlook psychological readiness in their screening processes, which may contribute to later challenges in training and performance (Dediego & Burgin, 2016). In the clinical setting, supervisors—often on the front lines of performance evaluation—may feel

uncertain about when or how to raise concerns, especially without clear institutional guidelines (Haddock & Whitman, 2019). This hesitancy may delay the needed intervention and compromise student development and client care.

In addition to student-related challenges, counselor educators are not immune to issues of professional competency. Counselor educators were surveyed and found that 75% had observed Problems of Professional Competency (PPC) among their peers (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016). These included emotional dysregulation, boundary violations, and unprofessional behavior. Unlike the structured gatekeeping procedures used to evaluate and remediate CITs, there is no corresponding system of accountability for counselor educators. The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) lacks specific guidelines for addressing educator PPC, creating a gap in counselor education oversight. According to Brown-Rice & Furr (2016), many educators in their study voiced concerns about how the gaps in oversight could affect the counseling profession's future. This gap highlights an urgent need for additional research, policy development, and systems of accountability that ensure counselor educators are held to the same ethical and professional standards expected of the CIT they train.

Enhancing Gatekeeping through Mentorship

A vital strategy for improving the effectiveness and consistency of gatekeeping in counselor education is enhancing gatekeeping through mentorship. Research suggests that integrating structured mentorship practices into gatekeeping helps enhance counselor educators' confidence and consistency with gatekeeping decisions (Smarinsky et al., 2023; DeCino et al., 2020). Mentorship is particularly crucial at the doctoral level. During the doctoral level of education, formal gatekeeping training is often introduced, and students are first exposed to the responsibilities of CITs. Mentors can guide doctoral students in navigating the complexities of

gatekeeping, ensuring they are well-prepared to make sound, ethical decisions as they begin to supervise others (Smarinsky et al., 2023).

Despite mentorship being beneficial in gatekeeping, standardized gatekeeping curricula remain inadequate across several counselor education programs. Rapp et al. (2018) argue that, while counselor education programs place high expectations on CITs, there is a lack of formalized and systematic training in gatekeeping practices. This gap in formal curriculum development can lead to inconsistent gatekeeping implementation and processes, with some programs providing robust mentorship opportunities and others leaving faculty to navigate gatekeeping independently. To address these challenges, integrating structured mentorship into gatekeeping models can help counselor educators feel more prepared to evaluate competencies, offer guidance, feedback, and support in decision-making (DeCino et al., 2020). Ultimately, enhancing gatekeeping through mentorship strengthens counselor education programs and the ethical and professional standards of counselor education programs.

Practical Implementation

A practical solution for implementing gatekeeping includes adding mentorship to the four-phase model. Mentorship within the four-phase model helps to reinforce expectations while supporting identity development. This process can begin at the admissions phase, using tools like the PDCA-RA to ensure consistency across the evaluation process for applicants (Garner et al., 2020). Establishing mentor relationships early in CES training programs allows for simultaneous feedback, clearer expectations, and stronger professional identity formation. However, mentorship implementation requires institutional investment and addressing barriers, including high faculty-to-student ratios, limited budgets, and resistance to change. Without the proper institutional resources, mentorship, and training programs, a university cannot thrive. Because of

this, it is recommended that the professional development of CIT and counselor educators is prioritized to ensure the ethical protection of clients and the profession's integrity.

Implications for the Practice of Gatekeeping through Mentorship

Effective gatekeeping requires intentional professional and personal reflection, robust mentorship, and a clear legal and developmental understanding. Early exposure to gatekeeping responsibilities, such as mentorship and training on legal and ethical complexities, is crucial for doctoral students (DeCino et al., 2020). Similarly, counselor educators must promote supervisory relationships grounded in transparency and empathy (DePue et al., 2020). In addition to mentorship, structured remediation plans enhance trainee competencies and improve client outcomes (Schwartz-Mette, 2023).

A generational, cultural, and technological shift is also influencing gatekeeping practices. Henry and Timm-Davis (2023) explored the challenges of supervising Gen Z CIT. These CITs often prefer self-paced learning, rely heavily on technology, and expect frequent feedback. Counselor educators and universities must adapt their gatekeeping approaches to support these learners while maintaining professional gatekeeping expectations.

Clarifying Expectations for Counselors-in-Training

Successful gatekeeping, including providing clear expectations for CITs, is a critical element of successful gatekeeping, as it establishes a foundation for developing professional competencies and ethical behavior (Smarinsky et al., 2023). Setting clear expectations early in a counseling program ensures that CITs understand the standards they will be held to, which ultimately guides their professional growth and preparedness for the field. Brown-Rice and Furr (2016) emphasize that from the beginning, CITs must be aware of the behavioral, ethical, and academic standards they are expected to meet throughout their training. This transparency helps

CITs foster accountability and self-awareness, identify areas of improvement, and work toward meeting program expectations (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016).

Using formative and summative assessment tools frequently helps to reinforce gatekeeping and professional expectations. Formative assessments, such as regular feedback and mid-term evaluations, provide ongoing opportunities for CITs to reflect and make professional adjustments (Schuermann et al., 2018). On the other hand, summative assessments are used at the end of a course or training phase, offering a more reflective and comprehensive evaluation of a CIT's overall development. These assessments allow counselor educators to monitor CITs' progress and serve as a tool to help identify potential issues that may require intervention before escalation (Schuermann et al., 2018). Brown-Rice and Furr (2016) state that counselor educators can more effectively track performance and provide timely feedback by implementing these assessments into coursework, field placements, and supervision. These measures can help ensure that CIT concerns are addressed before they compromise the CIT's development or the safety of future clients.

Incorporating the formative and summative assessments throughout CIT training also allows counselor educators to model leadership and professionalism (Schuermann et al., 2018). Counselor educators provide a framework for CITs to follow when they communicate clearly and consistently reinforce program expectations. Furthermore, the assessment process emphasizes the importance of continuous CIT self-assessment and reflection, encouraging them to take ownership of their development while also benefiting from the guidance of their educators. Ultimately, clarifying clear expectations through structured assessments and supervision ensures that CITs are equipped to meet the demands and responsibilities of the counseling profession.

Preparing Future Counselor Educators for Gatekeeping Responsibilities

The evolving nature of the counseling profession demands a strong foundation in counselor education. Fickling and Northern Illinois University (2022) noted that counselor educators take on multifaceted roles, including teaching, supervision, research, leadership, and advocacy. A core function of this role is protecting client welfare by ensuring that future counselors are ethically and clinically prepared (McKnight et al., 2023; CACREP, 2016). Educators must also engage CITs with diverse learning styles through creative and inclusive teaching methods, which promote a richer learning experience and support professional identity development (Isawi et al., 2024). One of those creative teaching methods is play therapy, where children and adults can express themselves, and two others are sand play for healing and gameplay to build confidence (Isawi et al., 2024).

Navigating Legal and Ethical Complexities

Gatekeeping also involves navigating legal and ethical risks. While CACREP (2015) emphasizes the preparation of students for diverse professional roles, doctoral programs need to provide more direct training on ethical gatekeeping practices. Rapp et al. (2018) suggest training is necessary to better equip doctoral students for these responsibilities. Collaboration between faculty and legal professionals is also crucial to ensure educators understand ethical standards and the legal implications of gatekeeping, particularly when remediation intersects with university policies (Hutchens et al., 2013; Salpietro et al., 2022b). The fear of legal consequences can discourage counselor educators from fully engaging in gatekeeping, highlighting the need for clear institutional policies and legal education (Crawford, 2013).

Ward v. Wilbanks (2009) is a well-known legal case example where ethics and legal action intersect. In this case, Julea Ward, a practicum student at Eastern Michigan University

(EMU), referred a client to another student based on her religious beliefs regarding sexual orientation (Kaplan, 2014). EMU informed Ward that her refusal to work with the client violated the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), offering remediation, which she declined due to her religious stance. Similarly, *Bruff v. North Mississippi Health Services Inc.* (2001) involved a counselor, Kaye Bruff, who was fired for refusing to provide therapy to a lesbian client based on her religious beliefs (Herlihy et al., 2014). Both Bruff and Ward filed lawsuits against their employers and educators, raising vital questions about the intersection of religious beliefs, ethics, and legal considerations within counseling. Given the legal ramifications of gatekeeping decisions, field supervisors, not just counselor educators, play a critical role in the remediation process. Field supervisors' proximity to CITs in clinical settings allows them to identify deficiencies early and collaborate with faculty to implement gatekeeping interventions (Freeman et al., 2016; Dean et al., 2018b).

Influence on Diverse Populations

Cultural sensitivity is essential in gatekeeping practices. Cultural factors, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and disability, can influence how behaviors are interpreted and assessed (Ziomek‐Daigle & Christensen, 2010; Goodrich & Shin, 2013). These influences may lead to biased evaluations or inequitable remediation decisions without intentional reflection and training. Incorporating the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies framework into supervision and assessment can help create more equitable and culturally responsive training environments (Ratts et al., 2016). For example, attitudes and beliefs have been added to the competencies of knowledge and skills, and with that, action should be taken. Some of those attitudes and beliefs are that counselors should be curious and want to learn about marginalized clients' worldview and experiences (Ratts et al., 2016).

Improving Communication Between Faculty and Field Supervisors

Effective gatekeeping is enhanced by clear and consistent communication between counselor education faculty and site supervisors. Fieldwork is crucial in collaboratively monitoring student competencies (Dean et al., 2018). Regular meetings, site visits, and open communication channels between faculty and site supervisors help align expectations and allow for the early identification of concerns. When this collaboration is strong, remediation can be more proactive, reducing the need for more severe interventions later in training. Verbal and written communication is encouraged between CITs, faculty, and field supervisors and has been shown to improve the effectiveness of overall CIT education (Salpietro et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, gatekeeping is a multidimensional and essential responsibility in counselor education. Gatekeeping is critical in maintaining the counseling profession's integrity and ensuring clients' welfare. This paper has highlighted counselor educators' challenges and barriers, including emotional tensions, legal concerns, and institutional barriers, which can hinder effective gatekeeping practices. However, gatekeeping effectiveness can be significantly improved by setting clear expectations, offering structured mentorship, and promoting strong and transparent communication among faculty and field supervisors. Furthermore, addressing legal and ethical intricacies inherent in gatekeeping and fostering relationships, cultural sensitivity, and inclusivity is crucial in strengthening gatekeeping practices.

Incorporating transparent and structured remediation processes, regular assessments, and mentorship frameworks can help prepare CITs to meet counseling standards. Collaboration between faculty, site supervisors, and legal professionals, emphasis on professional development, and ethical decision-making allow counselor educators to equip future counselors to navigate the

profession's challenges. Continuing to refine and enhance gatekeeping practices can ensure that counselor education programs have ongoing ethical preparation and provide competent, compassionate care to diverse populations.

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