

# Becoming a Gatekeeper: Recommendations for Preparing Doctoral Students in Counselor Education



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Marisa C. Rapp, Steven J. Moody, Leslie A. Stewart

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards call for doctoral preparation programs to graduate students who are competent in gatekeeping functions. Despite these standards, little is understood regarding the development and training of doctoral students in their roles as gatekeepers. We propose a call for further investigation into doctoral student gatekeeper development and training in gatekeeping practices. Additionally, we provide training and programmatic curriculum recommendations derived from current literature for counselor education programs. Finally, we discuss implications of gatekeeping training in counselor education along with future areas of research for the profession.

**Keywords:** gatekeeping, counselor education, doctoral students, programmatic curriculum, CACREP

Gatekeeping practices in counselor education are highly visible in current literature, as counselor impairment continues to be a significant concern for the mental health professions (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015; Homrich, DeLorenzi, Bloom, & Godbee, 2014; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Rapisarda & Britton, 2007; Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). V. A. Foster and McAdams (2009) found that counselor educators are frequently faced with counselors-in-training (CITs) whose professional performance fails to meet program standards. Although gatekeeping practices in counselor education have been cursorily examined over the past 40 years (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010), more recent literature indicates a need to further address this topic (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2016; Burkholder, Hall, & Burkholder, 2014).

In the past two decades, researchers have examined the following aspects of gatekeeping: student selection; retention; remediation; policies and procedures; and experiences of faculty members, counseling students, and clinical supervisors (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013, 2015, 2016; V. A. Foster & McAdams, 2009; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; Homrich et al., 2014; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Parker et al., 2014; Rapisarda & Britton, 2007; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Although the aforementioned areas of study are needed to address the complex facets of the gatekeeping process, there is a noticeable lack of research examining how counselor education programs are preparing and educating future faculty members to begin their role as gatekeepers.

Because doctoral degree programs in counselor education are intended to prepare graduates to work in a variety of roles (Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015), program faculty must train doctoral students in each of the roles and responsibilities expected of a future faculty member or supervisor. Authors of previous studies have examined constructs of identity, development, practice, and training in the various roles that doctoral students assume, including investigations into a doctoral student's researcher identity (Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011), supervisor identity (Nelson, Oliver, & Capps, 2006), doctoral professional identity transition (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Moss, 2013), and co-teaching experiences (Baltrinic, Jencius, & McGlothlin, 2016).

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Marisa C. Rapp, NCC, is an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin–Parkside. Steven J. Moody, NCC, is an associate professor at Idaho State University. Leslie A. Stewart is an assistant professor at Idaho State University. Correspondence can be addressed to Marisa Rapp, 264 Molinaro Hall, 900 Wood Rd., Kenosha, WI 53144-2000, [rapp@uwp.edu](mailto:rapp@uwp.edu).

Studies investigating the various elements of these roles are both timely and necessary (Fernando, 2013; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011; Nelson et al., 2006); yet, there is a dearth of research examining the complex development of emergent gatekeeper identity. In order to empower counseling programs in training the next generation of competent and ethical professional counselors, the development of doctoral students' gatekeeping skills and identity must be more fully understood.

## The Complexity of Gatekeeping in Counselor Education

Gatekeeping is defined as a process to determine suitability for entry into the counseling profession (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015). When assessing this professional suitability, academic training programs and clinical supervisors actively evaluate CITs during their training as a means to safeguard the integrity of the profession and protect client welfare (Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 2008; Homrich et al., 2014). Evaluators who question a CIT's clinical, academic, and dispositional fitness but fail to intervene with problematic behavior run the risk of endorsing a student who is not ready for the profession. This concept is referred to as *gateslipping* (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). Brown-Rice and Furr (2014) found that consequences of gateslipping can impact client care, other CITs, and the entire counseling profession.

Gatekeeping for counselor educators and supervisors is understood as an especially demanding and complex responsibility (Brear & Dorrian, 2010). Potential complications include personal and professional confrontations (Kerl & Eichler, 2005), working through the emotional toll of dismissing a student (Gizara & Forrest, 2004), lack of preparation with facilitating difficult conversations (Jacobs et al., 2011), and fear of legal reprisal when assuming the role of gatekeeper (Homrich et al., 2014). Homrich (2009) found that although counselor educators feel comfortable in evaluating academic and clinical competencies, they often experience difficulty evaluating dispositional competencies that are nebulously and abstractly defined. To complicate the gatekeeping process further, counselor educators are often hesitant to engage in gatekeeping practices, as discerning developmentally appropriate CIT experiences from problematic behavior (Homrich et al., 2014) may be difficult at times. Thus, more clearly defined dispositional competencies and more thorough training in counselor development models may be necessary to assist counselor educators' self-efficacy in gatekeeping decisions. The proceeding section examines doctoral students in counselor education preparation programs and their involvement in gatekeeping responsibilities and practices.

### Doctoral Students' Role in Gatekeeping

Doctoral students pursuing counselor education and supervision degrees are frequently assigned the responsibility of supervisor and co-instructor of master's-level students. Consequently, doctoral students serve in an evaluative role (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Fernando, 2013) in which they often have specific power and authority (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015). Power and positional authority inherent in the role of supervisor (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014) and instructor permit doctoral students ample opportunity to appraise CITs' development and professional disposition during classroom and supervision interaction (Scarborough, Bernard, & Morse, 2006). Doctoral students frequently consult with faculty through the many tasks, roles, and responsibilities they are expected to carry out (Dollarhide et al., 2013). However, relying solely on consultation during gatekeeping responsibilities rather than acquiring formal training can present considerable risks and complications. The gatekeeping process is complex and leaves room for error in following appropriate protocol, understanding CIT behavior and development, supporting CITs, and potentially endorsing CITs with problematic behavior that may have been overlooked.

Despite the importance of doctoral student education in the counseling profession and a substantial body of research on gatekeeping over the past two decades (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013, 2015, 2016;

V. A. Foster & McAdams, 2009; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Parker et al., 2014; Rapisarda & Britton, 2007; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010), there is an absence in the professional discourse examining the identity, development, practice, and training of doctoral students for their role of gatekeeper. No counseling literature to date has explored how counselor education programs are supporting doctoral students' transition into the role of gatekeeper, despite the latest accreditation standards calling for doctoral preparation programs to graduate students who are competent in gatekeeping functions relevant to teaching and clinical supervision (CACREP, 2015, Standard 6.B). A lack of specific literature is particularly problematic, as the process of gatekeeping can be difficult for faculty members. It is reasonable to assume that if faculty members struggle to navigate the responsibilities of a gatekeeper, then less experienced doctoral students would struggle in this role as well. Furthermore, most incoming doctoral students have not had an opportunity to formally engage in gatekeeping practices in academic settings as an evaluator (DeDiego & Burgin, 2016).

Although doctoral students have been introduced to the concept of gatekeeping as master's-level students (e.g., gatekeeping policies), many counselors do not retain or understand gatekeeping information (V. A. Foster & McAdams, 2009; Parker et al., 2014; Rust et al., 2013). These research findings were further examined through an exploratory study in August of 2016. The first two authors of this article assessed beginning doctoral students' gatekeeping knowledge and self-efficacy prior to doctoral training or formal curricula. Areas of knowledge assessed included general information on the function of gatekeeping, standard practices, and program-specific policies and procedures. Preliminary findings of six participants indicated that incoming doctoral students lacked understanding for their role in gatekeeping. This supports existing research (V. A. Foster & McAdams, 2009; Parker et al., 2014; Rust et al., 2013) and aligns with DeDiego and Burgin's (2016) assertion that doctoral students are often unsure of what the role of gatekeeper "even means, let alone how to carry it out" (p. 182). Consequently, attention must be given to preparing doctoral students for their gatekeeping role to meet CACREP standards and, most importantly, prepare them to gatekeep effectively in an effort to prevent gateslippage.

DeDiego and Burgin's (2016) recommended counselor education programs support doctoral students' development through specific programmatic training. Despite the established importance of specific training (Brear & Dorrian, 2010), no corresponding guidelines exist for content of material. To address this gap, we provide recommendations of content areas that may assist doctoral students in becoming acquainted with the complex role of gatekeeper. We derived our recommendations from a thorough review of professional literature. Recommendations compiled include current trends related to gatekeeping within the counseling profession, findings from various studies that state what information is deemed important in the realm of gatekeeping, and considerations for educational and professional standards that guide best practices as a counselor educator.

## Recommendations

Recommendations contain general areas of knowledge that should accompany program-specific material for introductory gatekeeping role information. Providing doctoral students with program-specific policies and procedures related to gatekeeping practices, such as remedial and dismissal procedures, is of utmost importance. This information can be dispersed in a variety of methods such as orientation, gatekeeping-specific training, coursework, and advising. We view these areas of content as foundational in acquainting doctoral students with the role of gatekeeper. We included four general content areas of knowledge pertaining to gatekeeping practices and the role of gatekeeper: current variation of language espoused by the counselor education community; ethics

related to gatekeeping; cultural considerations; and legal and due process considerations. Each of these recommended content areas will be briefly discussed with relevant literature supporting the importance of their inclusion.

### Adopted Language

Current terminology in the field of counselor education describing CITs who struggle to meet professional standards and expectations is broad and lacks a universal language that has been adopted by counselor educators (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015). Consequently, a plethora of terms and definitions exists in the literature describing CITs who are struggling to meet clinical, academic, and dispositional competencies. As described earlier, the lack of consensus regarding gatekeeping and remediation language may contribute to the lack of clarity, which many counselor educators perceive as a gatekeeping challenge. Terms appearing in gatekeeping literature that describe students of concern include: *deficient trainees* (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002), *problems of professional competence* (Elman & Forrest, 2007; Rust et al., 2013), *impaired*, *unsuitable*, *unqualified*, and *incompetent* (J. M. Foster, Leppma, & Hutchinson, 2014), with varying definitions describing these terms. Duba, Paez, and Kindsvatter (2010) defined *counselor impairment* as any “emotional, physical, or educational condition that interferes with the quality of one’s professional performance” (p. 155) and defined its counterpart, *counselor competency*, as an individual demonstrating both clinical skills and psychological health. It is important to emphasize potential complications and implications associated with the term *impairment*, which can have close association with disability services, rendering a much different meaning for the student, supervisee, or colleague (McAdams & Foster, 2007).

Introducing these terms to doctoral students not only familiarizes them with the definitions, history, and relevance of terms present in the counseling community, it also provides a foundation in which to begin to conceptualize the difference between clinical “impairment” versus emotional distress or developmentally appropriate academic struggle. In upholding responsibilities of gatekeeping, one must be aware of the differentiating aspects of emotional distress and impairment in order to be able to distinguish the two in professionals and students. In further support of this assertion, Rust et al. (2013) stated that counseling programs must be able to distinguish between problems of professional competence and problematic behavior related to normal CIT development. Including a review of relevant terms existing in the counseling literature in the program’s training will allow doctoral students to begin to understand and contextualize the language relevant to their new roles as gatekeepers.

Although it is essential to educate doctoral students on language common to the counseling community, familiarity with language adopted by the department and institution with which they are serving as gatekeepers is vital to training well-informed gatekeepers (Brear & Dorrian, 2010). Having a clear understanding of the terminology surrounding gatekeeping ensures that doctoral students and faculty are able to have an open and consistent dialogue when enforcing gatekeeping practices. Homrich (2009) described consistent implementation of gatekeeping protocol as a best practice for counseling programs and faculty. Additional best practices include the establishment of expectations and communicating them clearly and widely. In the recommendations offered by Homrich (2009), a common language is needed within the department in order to successfully implement these practices to improve and sustain gatekeeping procedures. After doctoral students are situated in the current climate of gatekeeping-related terms and language, an exploration of professional and educational ethics can ensue.

### Ethics Related to Gatekeeping

Professional and ethical mandates should be identified and discussed to familiarize doctoral

students with the corresponding ethical codes that they are expected to uphold. Three sources that guide ethical behavior and educational standards for counselor educators that must be integrated in curricula and training include the American Counseling Association *Code of Ethics* (2014), the 2016 CACREP *Standards* (2015), and the National Board for Certified Counselors *Code of Ethics* (2012). Doctoral preparation programs should draw specific attention to codes related to the function of gatekeeping. These ethical codes and professional standards can be introduced in an orientation and discussed in more depth during advising and formal courses.

Doctoral preparation programs have flexibility in introducing standards and ethical codes during doctoral students' academic journey. We recommend relevant standards and ethics be introduced early and mentioned often during doctoral training, specifically in terms of gatekeeping. Doctoral students should have prior knowledge of the ethical codes before engaging in gatekeeping or remedial functions with CITs. Moreover, if doctoral students have an understanding of the educational standards that are required of them, they can strive to meet specific standards in a personalized, meaningful manner during their training. Referencing CACREP standards addressed in a course syllabus is required for accreditation and helpful for students; yet, educational standards should be incorporated in training to foster deeper meaning and applicability of standards. As doctoral students are being trained to take leadership positions in the counselor education field, a more thorough understanding of educational principles and ethical codes is vital, particularly in the area of gatekeeping. Faculty members leading doctoral courses are encouraged to speak to standards related to gatekeeping throughout the duration of a course. Faculty intentionally dialoguing about how these standards are being met may allow for doctoral students to provide informal feedback to whether they believe they understand the multifaceted role of gatekeeper. During the review of codes and standards, focused attention should be given to "cultural and developmental sensitivity in interpreting and applying codes and standards" (p. 207) in gatekeeping-related situations (Letourneau, 2016). One option for attending to such sensitivity is the introduction of a case study in which doctoral students participate in open dialogue facilitated by a trainer. The inclusion of a case study aims to engage doctoral students in critical thinking surrounding cultural and diversity implications for gatekeeping practices. The following section will draw further attention to the importance of cultural awareness in gatekeeping practices and responsibilities.

### **Cultural Considerations**

It is vital for doctoral students to have an understanding and awareness of the cultural sensitivity that is required of them in making sound gatekeeping-related decisions. Not only do ethical codes and educational mandates expect counselor educators to possess a level of multicultural competency (American Counseling Association, 2014; CACREP, 2015), but recent literature draws attention to cultural considerations in the gatekeeping process (Goodrich & Shin, 2013; Letourneau, 2016). These cultural considerations provide doctoral students with valuable information on conceptualizing and interacting with gatekeeping practices in a more culturally sensitive manner.

Letourneau (2016) described the critical nature of taking into account students' cultural influences and differences when evaluating their assessment of fitness for the profession, while Goodrich and Shin (2013) called attention to "how cultural values and norms may intersect" (p. 43) with appraisal of CIT counseling competencies. For example, when assessing a CIT's behavior or performance to determine whether it may be defined as problematic, evaluators may have difficulty establishing if the identified behavior is truly problematic or rather deviating from the cultural norm (Letourneau, 2016). This consideration is essential as culture, diversity, and differing values and beliefs can influence and impact how perceived problematic behaviors emerge and consequently how observed deficiencies in performance are viewed (Goodrich & Shin, 2013; Letourneau, 2016). Examining the

cultural values of the counseling profession, counselor education programs, and the community in which the program is embedded can shed light on what behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs are valued and considered *norms*. This examination can prompt critical awareness of how CITs differing from cultural norms may be assessed and evaluated differently, and even unfairly.

Jacobs et al. (2011) described insufficient support for evaluators in how to facilitate difficult discussions in gatekeeping-related issues, specifically when the issues included attention to diversity components. Doctoral students must be given ample opportunity to identify cultural facets of case examples and talk through their course of action as a means to raise awareness and practice looking through a multicultural lens in gatekeeping-related decisions and processes. Of equal importance is familiarity with legal and due process considerations, which are addressed in the section below.

### **Legal and Due Process Considerations**

Three governing regulations that are often discussed in the literature, but left to the reader's imagination in how faculty members actually understand them, include the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 2000, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and a student's rights and due process policy within an institution. Presenting these three concepts and their implications to the gatekeeping process is warranted, as doctoral students are assumed only to have the understanding of these concepts from a student perspective. Although FERPA, the ADA, and the due process clause may be covered in new faculty orientation, how these regulations interface with gatekeeping and remediation are generally not reviewed during standard university orientations. It is recommended that training and curricula include general knowledge and institution-specific information related to the regulations. Institution-specific material can include university notification of rights; handbook material directly addressing student rights; remediation policy and procedures; and resources and specific location of campus services such as the disability office. Inclusion of general and program-specific information will help future faculty members in possessing a rounded and well-grounded understanding of how legal considerations will apply to students and inform their gatekeeping practices. Lastly, doctoral students should be informed that the regulations detailed below may limit their access of information due to master's-level student privacy. To begin, doctoral students should intimately understand FERPA and its application to the CITs they often supervise, teach, and evaluate.

**FERPA.** General information may consist of the history and evolution of FERPA in higher education and its purpose in protecting students' confidentiality in relation to educational records. Doctoral students must be introduced to the protocol for ensuring confidentiality in program files. Program files include communication about CIT performance and may be directly related to gatekeeping issues. Doctoral students must recognize that, as evaluators communicating CIT assessment of fitness, including dispositional competencies, they must abide by FERPA regulations, because dispositional competencies are considered educational records.

Educational programs often utilize off-site practicum and internship programs that are independent from the respective university (Gilfoyle, 2008), and this is indeed the case with many CACREP-accredited counselor training programs. Doctoral students must have an understanding of the protocols in place to communicate with site supervisors who are unaffiliated with the university, such as student written-consent forms that are a routine part of paperwork for off-site training placement (Gilfoyle, 2008). Although doctoral students may not be directly corresponding with off-site evaluators, their training should consist of familiarizing them with FERPA regulations that address the disclosure of student records in order to prepare them in serving CITs in a faculty capacity. Understanding how

to communicate with entities outside of the university is crucial in the event that they are acting as university supervisors and correspondence is necessary for gatekeeping-related concerns. An additional governmental regulation they are expected to be familiar and interact with is the ADA.

**The ADA.** Introducing doctoral students to the ADA serves multiple functions. First, similar to FERPA, it would be helpful for doctoral students to be grounded in the history of how the ADA developed and its purpose in protecting students' rights concerning discrimination. Second, general disability service information, such as physical location on their respective campus, contact information for disability representatives, and protocols for referring a student, provides doctoral students the necessary knowledge in the event that a CIT would inquire about accommodations. If a CIT were to inquire about ADA services during a class in which a doctoral student co-teaches or during a supervision session, it would be appropriate for the doctoral student to disseminate information rather than keeping the CIT waiting until after consultation with a faculty member. Lacking general information relevant to student services may place the doctoral student in a vulnerable position in which the supervisory alliance is undermined, as the doctoral student serving in an evaluative role is not equipped with the information or knowledge to assist the CIT. Finally, presentation of the ADA and its implications for gatekeeping will inform students of the protocols that are necessary when evaluating a CIT who has a record of impairment. For example, if a CIT has registered a disability through the university's ADA office, appropriate accommodations must be made and their disability must be considered during the gatekeeping process.

**Due Process.** The introduction of students' fundamental right to basic fairness is essential, as many doctoral students may not understand this concept outside of a student perspective because of a lack of experience in instructor and supervisor positions. Examples of such basic fairness can be illustrated for doctoral students through highlighting various components in a counselor training program that should be in place to honor students' right to fair procedures and protect against arbitrary decision-making. These include but are not limited to access to program requirements, expectations, policies, and practices; opportunity to respond and be heard in a meaningful time in a meaningful way; decisions by faculty members, advisors, or programs to be supported by substantial evidence; option to appeal a decision and to be notified of judicial proceedings; and realistic time to complete remediation (Gilfoyle, 2008; Homrich, 2009). McAdams and Foster (2007) developed a framework to address CIT due process and fundamental fairness considerations in remediation procedures to help guide counselor educators' implementation of remediation. It is recommended that these guidelines (McAdams & Foster, 2007) be introduced in doctoral student training to generate discussion and included as a resource for future reference. In educating doctoral students about considerations of due process through a faculty lens, formal procedures to address student complaints, concerns, and appeals also should be included in training.

## **Implications for Counselor Education**

Doctoral preparation programs are charged with graduating students who will be prepared and competent for the various roles they will assume as a counselor educator and clinical supervisor. The lack of professional literature exploring the development and training of gatekeepers indicates a clear call to the counseling profession to investigate the emergence of counselor educators into their role of gatekeepers. This call is fueled by the need to understand how doctoral preparation programs can support students and ensure competency upon graduation. Generating dialogue related to doctoral student gatekeeper development may consequently continue the conversation of standardization in gatekeeping protocol. Accordingly, this sustained dialogue also would keep the need for more

universal gatekeeping nomenclature in the forefront. Continued emphasis on a common gatekeeping language will only strengthen gatekeeping protocol and practices and in return provide an opportunity for training developments that have the potential to be standardized across programs.

The recommended content areas we have offered are intended to prepare doctoral students for their role of gatekeeper and aim to enhance the transition into faculty positions. These recommendations may be limited in their generalizability because gatekeeping practices vary across programs and department cultures, indicating that information and trainings will need to be tailored individually to fit the expectations of each counseling department. These differences hinder the ability to create a standardized training that could be utilized by all departments. As gatekeeping practices continue to receive research attention and the call for more universal language and standardization is answered, standardization of training can be revisited. Nonetheless, general recommendations in training content can serve as groundwork for programs to ensure that students are receiving a foundation of basic knowledge that will allow doctoral students to feel more confident in their role of gatekeeper. The recommended content areas also serve to help incoming doctoral students begin to conceptualize and see through an academic—rather than only a clinical—lens.

Implementation and delivery of recommended content areas may be applied in a flexible manner that meets doctoral preparation programs' specific needs. The recommendations offered in this article can be applied to enhance existing curricula, infused throughout coursework, or disseminated in a gatekeeping training or general orientation. Faculty creating doctoral curricula should be cognizant of when doctoral students are receiving foundational gatekeeping information. If doctoral students are expected to have interaction with and evaluative power over master's-level students, recommended gatekeeping content areas should be introduced prior to this interaction.

There are several avenues for future research, as the proposed recommendations for content areas are rich in potential for future scholarly pursuit. The first is the call to the profession for investigations examining training efforts and their effectiveness in preparing future faculty members for the multifaceted role of gatekeeper. The complexity and import of gatekeeping responsibilities and identity development may be a possible reason for the lack of studies to date on this role. Nevertheless, both qualitative and quantitative inquiry could lend insight to gaps in training that lead to potential gateslippage. Quantitative research would be helpful in examining how many programs are currently utilizing trainings and the content of such trainings. In consideration of the number of CACREP-accredited doctoral programs within the United States, a large sample size is feasible to explore trends and capture a full picture. Conducting qualitative analysis would expand and deepen the understanding of how faculty and doctoral students have been trained and their processes and experience in becoming gatekeepers.

In conclusion, doctoral preparation programs can be cognizant to infuse the aforementioned recommended content areas into doctoral curricula to meet CACREP standards and prepare doctoral students for the complex role of gatekeeper. Counselor education and supervision literature indicates that more focused attention on training could be beneficial in improving gatekeeping knowledge for doctoral students. Training recommendations derived from existing literature can be utilized as guidelines to enhance program curriculum and be investigated in future research endeavors. With a scarcity of empirical studies examining gatekeeping training and gatekeeper development, both quantitative and qualitative studies would be beneficial to better understand the role of gatekeeper and strengthen the overall professional identity of counselor educators and clinical supervisors.



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