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Students' Perceptions of Grades and Grade Inflation in Counselor Training

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Abstract

Previous scholars have suggested grade inflation has been in higher education for decades, may devalue high grade point averages, and blur important differences between qualified and unqualified job candidates. In counselor training programs, grade inflation may cause students to overestimate their abilities to handle challenging real-world situations, impede faculty evaluation practices, and promote unfavorable student learning environments. In this exploratory study, we surveyed 240 counseling students on their perceptions of their grades and their peers' grades before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results suggest that students perceived their peers succeeded academically despite inappropriate and unethical behaviors, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Counselor educators should consider how grade inflation might impact student learning and training, and program alignment with CACREP standards.

Significance to the Public

The current study suggests there is evidence of grade inflation in counselor education and supervision training programs by examining student perceptions of grades and grade inflation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study highlights that students' overall GPA's, perceptions of peers and unethical behaviors, and if they believed a peer should not have graduated but did because of grade inflation are present within counselor training.

Keywords: grade inflation, counselor training, instructional assessment, pedagogy, counselor education

According to Jewell and colleagues (2013), approximately 90% of all college and university instructors have engaged in some form of elevated grading practice. Evidence of grade inflation seems to exist across institutions, disciplines, levels of education (i.e., undergraduate and graduate), and countries (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015; Jephcote et al., 2020). Grade inflation may distort students' perceptions of academic achievement (Chowdhury, 2018; Elie, 2015; Miller, 2014), hinder faculty responsibilities (i.e., training practices), and negatively impact society (Finefter-Rosenbluh, & Levinson, 2015). The 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards (CACREP, 2015) highlight the importance of

educators using rigorous formative and summative assessments to measure students' academic and professional dispositions (4.F., 4.G., 4.H.). Grade inflation and non-rigorous evaluation practices may lead to underprepared and overconfident counselors who can negatively impact the counseling field by potentially harming vulnerable clients (Miller, 2014).

Perspectives on Grade Inflation in Higher Education

Grade inflation is typically defined as an increase in grade point average (GPA) without a parallel increase in student achievement (Herron & Markovich, 2017). Some scholars purport grade

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inflation may falsely convince students they have achieved academic mastery and are prepared to work with clients more than their actual competence and skills reflect (Chowdhury, 2018; Miller, 2014). This misperception is potentially problematic because students may lack the competence to accurately assess their actual abilities (Elie, 2015). Furthermore, some scholars contend higher education's recent shift to increasing enrollment rather than strengthening academics may contribute to grade inflation (Herron & Markovich, 2017). As a result, students in higher education today perceive themselves as *paying customers* rather than learners, thus higher grades are to be *expected* not *earned* (Boretz, 2004).

Other scholars contend that non-tenured faculty, as opposed to tenured faculty are more likely to engage in grade inflation to help increase scores on their teaching evaluations (Kezim et al., 2005). For example, Pressman (2007) and Sonner (2000) found adjunct instructors are more likely to give As and are less aware of program expectations and stringent grading practices despite having similar teaching abilities and training skills. Yet, over the last 40 years, higher education institutions have progressively relied on adjunct instructors (Kostal et al., 2016). In addition, Potter and colleagues (2001) found newer faculty working in programs with high faculty turnover might grade more generously and conform to program cultures that place little significance on stringent grading.

In contrast to those who assert grade inflation is damaging, others conceptualize that grade inflation may reflect current positive learning practices in higher education. Jephcote and colleagues (2020) found that curriculum and academic achievement standards have continuously increased and teaching practices have improved. Thus, students are better educated than they were decades ago and higher grades accurately reflect their advanced knowledge and skill attainment. Some researchers contend that grade inflation may reflect changes in academic programs placing more emphasis on students' meeting ongoing learning outcomes rather than grading students with formal assessments (Hernandez, 2012; Jephcote et al., 2020).

Researchers have argued that unpredictable trends or events and other systemic changes in higher education can impact how teachers evaluate students (Oliveira et al., 2021). Recently, some researchers have found that COVID-19 has adversely impacted faculty, students, and learning formats in higher education (Guppy et al., 2022). However, there is currently no empirical evidence on how it may have affected grade inflation. Given the troublesome impact of COVID-19 on higher education and student learning (Oliveira et al., 2021), faculty may have temporarily relaxed or amended grading practices in ways that contribute to higher student grades.

Grade Inflation in Counselor Training Programs

Grade inflation and its effects on counselor educators, counselors-in-training, and training practices remain empirically unknown. A few authors (e.g., Bonner, 2016) have offered limited perspectives on grade inflation in counselor training and student learning. For example, Bonner (2016) suggested if counselor educators align their assessments, pedagogy, and grading practices with student learning outcomes, counselor educators may improve their grading rigor, but did not empirically explore grade inflation. Despite a lack of direct evidence that grade inflation impacts student training and achievement, researchers have suggested that problematic assessment practices may complicate counselor educators' evaluation responsibilities and negatively impact students' learning, behaviors, and environments (Rose & Persutte-Manning, 2020).

Student Learning Environments and Unethical Behaviors

Grade inflation may impact student learning environments in counseling programs. Rosenberg and colleagues (2005) discovered psychology students reported their peers were deficient in ways that negatively impacted student-learning environments. Building on this study, Brown-Rice and Furr (2013) found counseling students ($N =$

389) with problems of professional comportment (PPC) can exhibit a lack of clinical or academic mastery and an inability to regulate emotions. Seventy-four percent of preservice counseling students they surveyed had witnessed a peer with PPC. They grouped these reports into subcategories related to PPC behaviors and poor academic performance was the second highest reported subcategory (15%). Researchers like Brown-Rice and Furr (2013) and Rose and Persutte-Manning (2020), have argued students with PPC are most likely acting unethically. Students who cheat on exams or plagiarize written assignments may receive higher grades if they are not caught but are still violating the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014; F. 5. B). Potentially most problematic, Brown-Rice and Furr (2013) found peers report some students' PPC goes unnoticed by faculty and those students still graduate.

Challenges in Evaluation Practices

In counselor education, a lack of effective evaluation practices may also contribute to grade inflation. According to the CACREP (2015) national standards and *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014), faculty should systematically evaluate if students are meeting long-and short-term learning outcomes consistent with professional standards. Waalkes and DeCino (2020) suggested that some counselor educators might struggle to integrate their grading practice with their pedagogy. Developing evaluation practices that align with teaching theory can require reflexivity and critical thought for early career counselor educators who have reported that their doctoral teaching preparation did not prepare them adequately to developing evaluation practices (Waalkes et al., 2018). In a recent metastudy on publications in *Counselor Education and Supervision*, Johnsen and colleagues (2021) found that the number of articles on pedagogy between 2000 and 2019 have remained high but researchers infrequently investigate topics such as evaluation practices. Thus, a lack of research on grading and evaluation in the field may reflect a lack of intentional grading practice among counselor educators.

Purpose of the Study

With evidence suggesting how grade inflation can be harmful to students in other disciplines, more understanding is needed how grade inflation directly impacts counselor training. Given the critical importance of counselor education programs using grades to assess students' competencies to become effective counselors (Barrio Minton et al., 2016), we sought to understand how students' perceptions of grades might reveal evidence of grade inflation and its prevalence. More empirical evidence of grade inflation in counselor training could generate conversation among counselor educators and facilitate new ways of conceptualizing assessment and assigning student grades. Therefore, the purpose of our exploratory investigation was to understand students' perceptions of grades and to discover what factors they believe affected their grades, if the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their progress, and if their peers' academic performance and behaviors may be linked to grade inflation (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Guppy et al., 2022; Schneider & Prekel, 2017). We sought to answer the following research questions: (a) to what extent did the grade that a graduate student received in a course differ from what they anticipated earning as a function of taking the course prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic?; (b) to what extent is the prevalence of observing peers' unethical behaviors (e.g., plagiarism on written assignments) associated with students' perceptions about the grades their peers received?; and (c) to what extent do the number of completed CACREP-accredited courses and experience with coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic influence students' beliefs that unethical peers should not graduate from their training programs but do as result of inflated grades?



Method

Participants

Two hundred and forty graduate students enrolled in CACREP accredited counselor training programs participated in the study. Most identified as female

($n = 206$; 86.55%) with fewer identifying as male ($n = 28$; 11.76%), transgender ($n = 2$; 0.84%), and non-binary ($n = 2$; 0.84%). Most identified as White ($n = 169$; 75.11%), followed by Black or African American ($n = 22$; 9.78%), Latinx ($n = 20$; 8.89%), and Asian ($n = 6$; 2.67%). Less than 5% of the participants identified as any other racial group. The age of the participants was positively skewed with 37.66% indicating their age between 18 and 24 years ($n = 90$), 33.89% between 25 and 31 years ($n = 81$), 12.13% between 32 and 38 years ($n = 29$), 7.53% between 39 and 45 years ($n = 18$), 5.44% between 46 and 51 years ($n = 13$), and 3.35% over 52 years ($n = 8$).

Concerning their education, most participants indicated their program was either clinical counseling ($n = 166$; 71.86%) or school counseling ($n = 47$; 20.35%). Fewer indicated their program as rehabilitation ($n = 7$; 3.03%), couples and family ($n = 5$; 2.16%), addictions ($n = 3$; 1.30%), or career and college ($n = 3$; 1.30%). Ninety-three graduate students were in their first year of the program (38.75%), 108 in their second year (45.00%), 29 in their third year (12.08%), 5 in their fourth year (2.08%), and 3 in their fifth year (1.25%). The respondents indicated relatively high performance in their programs, with 75.32% indicating a GPA between 3.80 and 4.00 ($n = 177$), 17.02% indicating a GPA between 3.50 and 3.79 ($n = 40$), 4.68% indicating a GPA between 3.20 and 3.49 ($n = 11$), 2.13% indicating a GPA between 3.00 and 3.19 ($n = 5$), and less than 1% indicating a GPA below a 3.00 ($n = 2$).

Recruitment Procedures

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we recruited participants through an email posted on the COUNSGRADS electronic mailing listserv. To ensure coverage and visibility, we posted our study information once per week for three consecutive weeks. We also recruited participants by directly contacting program coordinators of counseling programs listed on CACREP's website. We emailed counseling program coordinators ($N = 407$) with details about our study and a request to pass along our

recruitment email to graduate students in their programs. A precise number of counseling students enrolled in CACREP accredited programs or as members of the COUNSGRADS listserv is not known, thus calculating an accurate response rate for this study was not possible. Given the exploratory nature of our study and analyses, we aimed to recruit enough participants to provide ample statistical power ($1 - \beta = 0.80$) for relatively simple statistical analyses (e.g., t-test, correlation) with the anticipation that we might uncover smaller effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.2$ to 0.5 ; Spearman's $r = 0.1$ to 0.3). With these conditions, we set a threshold for sample size at 200 participants. By the end of our data collection, we exceeded that number with a total of 240 participants. We incentivized participation by raffling four \$25 Amazon gift cards.

Data Collection

We used Qualtrics to host our instrument and collect data. We attempted to maintain valid and reliable responses by ensuring anonymity of responses and reducing the potential threats to self-image and esteem. During the development of items to measure the multi-dimensional nature of perceived grade inflation, we used Dunn and colleagues (2014) definition of reliability as being evidence of consistency in response patterns to items measuring a common underlying construct. Because perceived grade inflation can be a multidimensional and hierarchical construct, we aimed to provide evidence that accounted for these attributes. Additionally, we relied on a contemporary two-component model of establishing validity (Cook & Beckman, 2006; Hughes, 2008). Our goals were to determine if we were measuring what we intended to measure and if our measure was useful in the context of grade inflation from the perspective of graduate students in CACREP accredited programs. To address our first validity goal, we aimed to garner evidence of content accuracy (i.e., the items capture the breadth of constructs) and response process (i.e., individuals are accurately recalling experiences of differential treatment and grade inflation during coursework).

To address the second validity goal, we aimed to garner evidence from testing the theory that differential grading practices will be the highest amongst graduate students who have readily observed academic misconduct, those who have experience with higher education prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and those who may be made aware of a demographic status within their learning environments (e.g., gender, race, etc).

As this was the first study of its kind, we iteratively developed items and scales used to measure the relevant constructs across multiple rounds. During the initial development of this instrument, all members of our research team met after reading extant literature on grade inflation (e.g., Chowdhury, 2018; Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015) and used key concepts from the literature to create items that explored potential reasons for grade inflation (e.g., if students receive higher grades from a grading curve or extra credit). Next, we conducted two pilot studies. Participants ($N = 18$) in these pilot studies were recent graduates from our counseling programs. For the first pilot, students completed the online questionnaire and answered operational questions about clarity and response anchors. Based on student feedback, we amended the instructions and items for better flow and smoother transitions between sections. For example, a couple of students suggested we add more options for the sexual identity demographic question to be more inclusive. A few other students suggested the slider option for each response was *clunky* and hard to move, and they would like to be able to move back and forth between survey pages. For the second pilot, another group of students were selected and provided the same instructions. After the second pilot, students indicated the survey questions were clear and response anchors were appropriate to begin data collection. For example, one student that completed both pilot studies commented, “the survey doesn’t feel as intrusive as before. Good change on the demographic page.” Throughout this iterative development of items, examining responses, and receiving feedback from individuals within the target population, we garnered sufficient support for our first validity goal

suggesting that we captured the facets of perceived grade inflation and what we intended to measure.

Perceived Grade Inflation in Core Coursework

Core coursework was operationalized around CACREP’s (2015) eight domains for training and evaluation along with anticipated practicum and fieldwork experiences. These domains included courses on (a) multicultural and social foundations, (b) human growth and development, (c) group counseling and theory, (d) career counseling and theory, (e) appraisal and assessment, (f) research and program evaluation, (g) ethics and professional orientation, (h) a pre- and post- program practicum experiences, and (i) internship. For each of these domains, participants indicated if they had completed the course, were currently taking the course, or if they had not yet taken the course. Those who were currently taking the course or who had recently completed the course were asked for a semester and a year. These dates were used to indicate if participants had completed the course prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., fall 2019 or before) or after the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., spring 2020 or later).

For each of the domains, participants were asked connected questions if they had identified either currently taking the course or previously completing the course. For each course, they were asked to rate their opinion of the grade they received along a continuum from -5 to +5, representing different extremes of grade inflation. The scale was centered on 0 (“The grade I was given matched what I deserved”), with -5 representing “The grade I was given was lower than the grade I deserved” and +5 representing “The grade I was given was higher than the grade I deserved.” Participants were allowed to select any whole number between -5 and +5 for each domain. The dates recorded were used to identify if the participant had taken the course prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As responses to perceived grade inflation items were dependent upon the participants’ responses to having *completed* the course (i.e., skip-logic

questions), a traditional metric of internal consistency (e.g., Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega) was not appropriate. Instead, we examined the Spearman correlations between pairs of items with overlapping responses from the same participants. The average interitem correlation was acceptable at 0.51 (Clark & Watson, 2019). Graduate students indicated consistent levels of perceived grade inflation across completed courses in their respective programs.

Prevalence of Observed Unethical Peer Behaviors and Response to Their Received Grades

We measured the prevalence of unethical behaviors by asking participants how frequently they observed one or more of their peers in their program engaging in academic and ethical misconduct. More specifically, we focused on (a) plagiarism and cheating on assignments and tests, (b) failing to share the workload of a group project, (c) violating ethical codes and rules during practicum or internship, and (d) failing to regulate emotions and behaviors in practicum and internship settings to encompass a variety of training experiences across experiential and didactic learning formats. We chose these areas based on a review of the literature and consultation with counselor education colleagues about unethical student behaviors they encountered most frequently. Participants indicated how frequently they observed these behaviors in one or more of their peers on a 5-point ordinal rating scale, ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (5). Responses to these items measuring different unethical behaviors exhibited acceptable levels of internal consistency with a categorical omega estimate of 0.74 (95% CI [0.64; 0.81]) and an average interitem correlation of 0.39 (Clark & Watson, 2019; Flora, 2020). Graduate students that observed unethical behavior in one area tended to observe unethical behavior in other areas as well, representing either their awareness of these events or the nature of the educational contexts within which they learned.

Participants who indicated having observed any amount of unethical behavior were then asked how they perceived these behaviors influencing their peers' grades. Participants responded on a 6-point ordinal rating scale, with response anchors ranging from "they received the grade they deserved" (0) to "they received higher grades than they deserved" (5). For example, one item asked participants if "they knew of peer who didn't do their part on a group assignment but still received a higher grade than they deserved." Another item asked participants if "they knew of a peer who in practicum or internship who violated ethical rules or codes but still received a higher grade than they deserved." Responses to perceived peer grade inflation items were dependent upon the participants' responses to having observed the unethical behavior (i.e., skip-logic questions) thus, a traditional metric of internal consistency (e.g., Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega) was not appropriate. Instead, we examined the Spearman correlations between pairs of items with overlapping responses from the same participants. The average interitem correlation was acceptable at 0.34 (Clark & Watson, 2019). Graduate students that had observed peers engage in multiple unethical behaviors (e.g., plagiarism, violating ethical codes), consistently indicated that these individuals received higher grades than they deserved.

Perceptions about Peer Graduation

Finally, students' perceptions about their peers' graduations were measured by asking participants if they had encountered a peer who they believed should not graduate but did because they were given passing grades prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants responded with 0 for "no" and 1 for "yes."

Data Analysis

To address the first research question, focusing on the extent graduate students believed the grades they received differed from the grades they had earned prior to and during the COVID-19

pandemic, we conducted a Mann-Whitney U analysis for each of the course domains. Given the ordinal scale of measurement of the outcome variables and the different degrees of skew in the responses, the non-parametric alternative to the independent samples t-test was the best analytic choice (Nachar, 2008). We compared the responses of those who had taken the courses prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to the responses of those who had taken the courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Effect sizes for each Mann-Whitney U (r) were calculated with $r = z/\sqrt{N}$ and compared against Cohen's (1988) standards for the effect size r ($r = .1$, small; $r = .3$, moderate; $r = .5$, large).

To address the second research question, focusing on the extent that peers' unethical behaviors influenced the grades they received in their courses, we estimated Spearman's rho (ρ) correlations between the prevalence of the peers' unethical behaviors and the perceived extent that those behaviors influenced peers' grades. We used the *psych* (Revelle, 2020) and *RVAideMemoire* (Hervé, 2021) packages in R to calculate the Spearman ρ and confidence intervals. Given the ordinal nature of the variables and the different degrees of skew in the responses, the non-parametric alternative to the Pearson correlation was the best analytic choice (de Winter et al., 2016). Effect sizes of the correlations were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) standards ($\rho = .1$, small; $\rho = .3$, moderate; $\rho = .5$, large).

To address the third research question, focusing on the perceptions that peers graduated from their programs when they should not have due to receiving unearned passing grades, we conducted a binary logistic regression in which experiences with all coursework and coursework prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were predictors of respondents indicating "yes" (1). The first predictor in the logistic regression was calculated based on the total number of CACREP domains that the participants indicated having completed. The second predictor in the logistic regression was the percentage of courses that each participant had completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Model accuracy was examined using a Nagelkerke pseudo- R^2 from the

rms package (Harrell, 2021; v. 6.2-0) and a predicted-by-observed binary matrix from the qwraps2 package (DeWitt, 2021; v. 0.5.2), from which overall accuracy of model predictions was calculated.



Results

Grade Inflation Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic

We used a Mann-Whitney U, to examine the difference in perceived grade bias between those who took courses prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The perceived differences between timeframes were only statistically significant for the human growth and development course domain ($U = 529.50$, $p < .05$, $r = -.26$). There was a moderate negative effect size according to Cohen's (1988) standards, suggesting that those taking the course during the COVID-19 pandemic believed the grade they received was closer to the grade they had earned.

Grade Inflation and Unethical Peer Behaviors

Spearman's ρ analyses were used to examine the association between observed prevalence of unethical behaviors and their perceived influence on peers' grades. Graduate students most frequently observed peers not sharing the workload in a group project ($n = 124$), followed by failing to regulate emotions and behaviors in a practicum or internship ($n = 60$), plagiarizing and cheating on assignments ($n = 54$), and violating ethical codes and rules during practicum and internship ($n = 28$). Results suggest a strong positive correlation between the frequency of observing a failure to share the workload on a project and a perceived improvement in the grade that a peer received ($\rho = .46$, $p < .001$). Likewise, there was a strong positive correlation between the frequency of observing unregulated emotions and behaviors in practicum and internship settings and a perceived improvement in the grade that a peer received ($\rho = .47$, $p < .001$).

Table 1*Differences in Perceived Grades Earned Prior to and During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Course / Domain	Pre COVID-19		During COVID-19		Test of Differences		
	<i>n</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
Multi / Social Foundations	22	0.00	55	0.00	681.50	.37	.10
Human Growth / Development	33	1.00	46	0.00	529.50	.02	-.26
Pre-Practicum	22	0.00	44	0.00	467.00	.81	-.03
Practicum	2	2.50	33	0.00	24.00	.51	-.11
Internship	2	2.50	17	0.00	14.50	.77	-.08
Group Counseling / Theory	9	1.00	55	0.00	198.50	.32	-.12
Career Counseling / Theory	14	0.00	54	0.50	409.50	.63	.06
Research and Program Eval	22	0.50	40	0.00	432.00	.91	-.02
Ethics and Prof Orientation	14	0.50	50	0.00	289.50	.31	-.12

Note: *U* = Mann-Whitney *U*; *r* = effect size of *U*; due to small pre-COVID-19 sample size, practicum and internship should not be interpreted.

Grade Inflation and Peer Graduation

A binary logistic regression model was used to examine the likelihood of a graduate student perceiving that a peer graduated from their program when they should not have due to receiving an unearned passing grade. Results from this model explained approximately 16.1% of the variance in the binary outcome. Although participants who had completed more core courses were more likely to indicate having seen a peer graduate whom they believe should not have graduated, it was not a statistically significant predictor in the model ($b = 0.166$, $SE = 0.090$, $p = .067$, odds ratio = 1.180). The percentage of core courses completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was a statistically significant, positive predictor of a participant indicating they had seen a peer graduate that they

believe should not ($b = 0.020$, $SE = 0.009$, $p = .021$, odds ratio = 1.020). Given that these percentages ranged from 0% to 100%, this OR of 1.02 means that for every percent increase in coursework taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a 2% increased likelihood of indicating that someone had graduated when they should not have.



Discussion

We examined graduate counseling students' perceptions of their grades and grade inflation, the observed unethical behaviors of peers, and the impact of COVID-19 on grades. Participants perceived a difference in grading bias before and

Table 2*Spearman Correlations Between Peers' Unethical Behaviors and Grade Bias*

Unethical Behavior	Freq Observed	ρ	95% CI	<i>p</i> - value
Plagiarize or Cheat on Assignment / Test	54	.20	-.09; .49	.16
Not Share Workload in Group Project	124	.46	.30; .61	< .001
Violate Ethical Codes in Practicum / Intern	28	.15	-.29; .63	.54
Fail to Regulate Emotions or Behaviors	60	.47	.20; .68	< .001

during the COVID-19 pandemic in only one domain, *human growth and development*. Although researchers have found that the pandemic has dramatically impacted higher education (Guppy et al., 2022), students' perceptions of their grades seem to have remained largely unaffected. One potential explanation for this finding may be that over 91% of our participants reported GPAs of 3.5 or higher. If participants earned high GPAs before the pandemic, there seems to be little room for grade inflation. The widespread prevalence of GPAs above 3.5 may also suggest that counseling faculty place little value on differentiating students based on GPAs, but rather on other factors such as students' abilities to demonstrate counseling competency skills or satisfying learning outcomes (CACREP, 2015).

We also found a correlation between students' opinions of peers earning higher grades on group assignments and unethical behaviors. This finding suggests students who do not contribute adequately to group work may be unfairly benefiting from higher grades. Brown-Rice and Furr (2013) proposed that students underperforming on academic activities are most likely experiencing competence deficiencies. Yet, instructors who are not aware of their students' ways of sharing responsibilities in group work may miss this underperformance as other group members cover for them (Fincher, 2006).

Finally, using a binary logistic regression model, it is also concerning that 38.61% of students who took courses before COVID-19 believed at least one peer would graduate from their training program who should not, while only 7.06% of students who took classes after COVID-19 believed one peer would graduate from their training who should not. One possible explanation for this finding may be that students are interacting with each other less frequently since the COVID-19 pandemic pushed most training programs and classes into online or hybrid formats. With less frequent in-person interactions, students may not see the problematic behaviors of their peers as often as before the

pandemic. Ultimately, this finding suggests that participants seem to notice problematic or unethical peer behaviors that counselor educators might miss (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Rose & Persuitte-Manning, 2020). Counselor educators may consider ways of soliciting student feedback on problematic behaviors of their peers to help address their obligation to monitor and prevent students with competence deficiencies from joining the profession as counselors and supervisors (ACA, 2014; CACREP 2015; Homrich & Henderson, 2018).

Implications for Counselor Training

The results of this study offer several implications for counselor educators and counseling programs. Given that many participants believed some of their peers received higher grades than they earned, we suggest counselor educators reflect more on their grading practices (Waalkes & DeCino, 2020). Since grades are intertwined with gatekeeping (ACA, 2014; Homrich & Henderson, 2018), counselor educators have an obligation to unpack what grade inflation might mean to counseling and how it could impact students' representation of counseling as a profession and interactions with future clients. In line with CACREP standards (2015), counselor educators may have a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes exemplary versus average versus unacceptable work that is communicated to students through rubrics or other standardized methods (Barrio Minton et al., 2016).

Next, given that unequal amounts of effort on group work were significantly related to participants' peer receiving higher grades, counselor educators may utilize more effective ways to evaluate students' individual effort on group assignments (CACREP, 2015; Fincher, 2006 Forsell et al., 2020). Soliciting peer evaluations of students' efforts on group projects may be difficult and students may feel challenged to offer honest assessments of their peers for fear of retaliation. Instructors can teach students how to evaluate their peers' work based on effort and final product, rather

than judging them as people, which may help alleviate adversarial feelings. For example, an instructor can model giving evidence-based feedback for students to give peers like:

I've reviewed your part of the final product. Based on the rubric provided by the instructor, I think you deserve a "B" for the reasons listed below. I know you have worked hard on this project and I believe there are minor gaps in meeting some of the criteria for an "A". I hope that this feedback helps you to build a more in-depth project and I am open to discussing my feedback with you further.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, instructors should check in with students before and during group projects to ensure students are sharing workload responsibilities equally (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Fincher, 2006; Forsell et al., 2020).

Third, given training courses can provoke anxiety for students, counselor educators may offer support to students as part of their assessment and grading practices. Effective and supportive remediation efforts require intentional grading-related interventions from both counselor educators and counselor education programs. These efforts might include setting clear expectations of student performance and remediation procedures related to grades, informing students at regular intervals about their progress in courses and programs of study, and creating grading policies that are fair and adaptable to individual differences in students (Barrio Minton et al., 2016; CACREP, 2015). Additionally, counselor educators may seek feedback from students regarding peers' emotional regulation in ways that are not punitive, but rather to process how disruptive behaviors may impact their counselor development and learning environments (Rose & Persuitte-Manning, 2020; Rosenberg et al., 2005).

Finally, instead of lower student grades to prevent grade inflation, counselor educators may consider shifting current perspectives and approaches to grading in student-centered ways (Sackstein, 2020). Researcher Blum (2020) suggested educators frame their grading practices to be more inclusive, portfolio based, and reflective of

student learning. Instructors can alter their language with grading to be more collaborative (e.g., "*Let's develop an assessment plan to determine what you will have learned*") and eliminate perceived threats (i.e., "*Missing points automatically lowers your grade*") that can compel students to persevere on grades (e.g., actual scores), rather than on how their acquired knowledge applies to their future work (Fuentes, et al., 2021). By moving towards a more student-centered and strengths-based approach, educators can reduce student-instructor power differentials and other dynamics that may contribute to grade inflation (Sackstein, 2015).

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

There are a few limitations to the current investigation. First, social desirability may have influenced some participants' responses. Survey research on potentially sensitive subjects in counseling like grades may have compelled counseling students to answer survey items in ways that made them appear more favorable. Second, our sample consisted of participants that identified mostly as *white* and *female*. A more diverse sample of students may have reflected different perceptions of grade inflation, peers' work, and other nuances not discovered in this study. Third, participants' opinions of their peers' unethical behaviors may have been based on limited information. Participants may not have known the reasons behind their peers' behaviors or the remediation and growth their peers had experienced in supervision since those behaviors. Furthermore, this study only gathered student perceptions of grades and grade inflation and leaves instructor perceptions, as well as other factors like grading practices at specific institutions, or students' use of rubrics to grade peers' work unexplored. Fourth, the sample was obtained from master's level counseling students enrolled in CACREP-accredited counseling programs and invitations to participate were sent through email. Although the sample included counseling students from across the USA, it was a convenience sample and indicative of only students who wanted to share their opinions of their grades.

Selection bias may have been a factor and students with lower GPAs and unfavorable perceptions of grades in counselor training programs may have been less likely to participate. Additionally, without knowing how many potential students were enrolled at CACREP accredited institutions and belong to the COUNSGRADS listserve, calculating a response rate was not possible for this study. Fifth, this study used non-parametric testing (e.g., Spearman's rank-order and Wilcoxon) to determine perceived grade inflation with students before and during COVID-19, thus the results may be considered less powerful than using a parametric approach. The final limitation is the utilization of the researcher created survey instrument, which does not have established evidence of validity and reliability beyond pilot study phases. Given the urgent and unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, we sought to publish our results in a timely manner. Prolonged development of our survey instrument and its psychometrics is ongoing.

Granted this study is the first to empirically explore grade inflation in counselor training in higher education, there are several areas for future research. Currently there is no research on grade inflation in counseling or counselor training from the perspectives of counselor educators. Gathering counselor educators' perspectives on grade inflation could illuminate strategies and philosophies counselor educators utilize in student assessment and how those strategies might impact grade inflation. Additionally, a qualitative study examining perspectives on assessment and grading from students of color, students with disabilities, and students with other diverse backgrounds would help deepen counselor educators' understanding of how personal characteristics and elements of privilege might influence students' perceptions of grades. Next, more research is needed to identify how grade inflation intersects with faculty gatekeeping practices. Given that gatekeeping occurs more frequently for academic reasons than for behavioral reasons (Homrich & Henderson, 2018), more research could determine how grade inflation impacts assessment and gatekeeping practices in different types of training courses (e.g.,

live training courses like practicum versus content heavy courses like career theory).

Conclusion

Based on the current study and student perceptions, grade inflation seems to exist in counselor training programs. It is incumbent on counseling faculty to continue meaningful dialogue and consider additional actions to further address grade inflation through more intentional grading practices. More effort from counselor educators, supervisors, and the field may help ensure our training programs are fair, optimal, and aimed towards helping prepare students and protecting future clients.

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