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Building Community in Counseling Master's Programs: A Grounded Theory

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to create a theory explaining the process of community building in counseling education master's programs. Researchers utilized a grounded theory methodology to study the process of building a sense of community in counseling master's programs. The research team discovered how a sense of community or lack thereof develops over time as counseling master's students experience a series of certain positive or negative interactions with their peers and faculty. Relevant findings revealed themes of the process of developing community such as program supports, benefits and barriers of community, and lack of community outcomes. Recommendations to facilitate belonging are also explored for both faculty and students.

Significance to the Public

This study aims to support counseling program stakeholders in understanding the process of building a sense of community from orientation to graduation. This includes identifying the main barriers to community that arise during this process as well as the supports that help students overcome these barriers. With these results, students and faculty will be better equipped to make informed decisions regarding how to build community among master's counseling students.

Keywords: counselor education, graduate students, community

Graduate student attrition is a significant concern that affects a broad range of programs (O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascale, 2018). Blanchard and Haccoun (2020) found 25% of master's students and 50% of doctoral students do not complete their graduate education. Outside of graduate education simply not being a right academic fit for certain individuals, researchers found a lack of belonging and a sense of isolation increased attrition rates among graduate students (O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascale, 2018). Another study found that responsive support from peers reduced attrition rates while low levels of emotional support and unsupportive behaviors from peers facilitated student attrition (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020).

A lack of a sense of community contributes to physical and psychological distress (Blanchard &

Haccoun, 2020), and these states of distress put graduate students at greater risk for burnout, especially counseling graduate students (Basma et al., 2021). This is salient as several research teams found a decrease in student wellness due to isolation and a lack of belonging can significantly contribute to attrition in graduate school (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020; O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascale, 2018). Burnout can be caused by unique factors in the counseling field. Compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma can reduce student wellness, resulting in higher risk for depression, anxiety, and attrition (Basma et al., 2021). Overall, student retention is a critical issue for counseling programs to address given the expanding need for counselors in the workforce (Litherland et al., 2023).

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Building Community in Higher Education

A sense of community is defined as a feeling of belonging, a knowing that members matter to one another, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together (Reinhart, 2010). In the text *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003), bell hooks discussed how faculty are called to create a sense of community with their students in the classroom. Creating a learning community that fosters wholeness, curiosity, and respect is key for the engaged educator to create a culture of belonging (hooks, 2003). Devoted educators create a space where students can embrace a world of knowledge that is always subject to change and challenge. This allows students to bond over what they have in common and grow from understanding what makes them different, building mutual trust. hooks (2003) mentioned that the most important realization in creating greater awareness of the need for nonbiased ways of knowing has been establishing a genuine sense of community based on trust. This trust leads to hope that meaningful societies can be established outside the confines of the historical structures that oppress groups of individuals.

This is salient as students in graduate school can easily feel isolated in their experience; it is important to provide students with the opportunity to develop a sense of community, which positively correlates with lower levels of graduate student burnout (O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascale, 2018; Reinhart, 2010). Additionally, sense of community has been tied to increased educational outcomes such as self-efficacy, stronger professional identity development, intrinsic motivation, and persistence in graduate programs (Budge et al., 2020; Litherland et al., 2023; O'Meara et al., 2017). Overall, creating a sense of community is crucial if educational leaders seek to encourage graduate students to complete their degree (Pascale, 2018). Moreover, researchers have investigated how diverse cultures and identities impact a sense of community and belonging in graduate schools, identifying minority stress as a factor that can increase feelings of isolation and higher rates of burnout for minority students (Basma et al., 2021;

Budge et al., 2020; Iheduru-Anderson & Chollom, 2022). Social support and feeling they are part of a community in their graduate program reduced isolation and alienation, and increased academic achievement for students of color (Iheduru-Anderson & Chollom, 2022), and transgender, nonbinary, and gender expansive (TNGE) students (Budge et al., 2020).

Multiple research teams have found that having a sense of community with peers and faculty can produce positive outcomes for students such as persistence in curriculum and reduced burnout (Litherland et al., 2023; O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascale, 2018; Reinhart, 2010). Researchers have found positive student–faculty connections to be important aspects of academic success, course satisfaction, professional development, degree completion, and reduction of burnout (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020; Litherland et al., 2023). Student–faculty relationships differ from peer-to-peer relationships, given that a power dynamic exists with faculty who have more knowledge and expertise in counselor education, as well as an evaluative role in relation to the student. Positive student–faculty relationships are beneficial as faculty members can provide aid and support for a student's professional identity and development (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020; Litherland et al., 2023). Peer relationships are also beneficial as students can validate one another's experiences as they move through the program together (Iheduru-Anderson & Chollom, 2022).

Building Community in Counselor Education

Community is an important consideration in counselor education (CE) programs (Basma et al., 2021). Researchers identified that counseling students face distinct stressors related to their education, professional development, and fieldwork experiences. These stressors may result in increased anxiety, distress, and impairment, which declines the therapeutic effectiveness of counseling and may put students at risk for leaving the field (Basma et al., 2021).

Despite several studies on the need for positive relationships to prevent burnout and increase retention at the graduate level (Basma et al., 2021; Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020) there is a gap in research regarding the process of how a sense of community and belonging is developed in counselor programs. To be able to apply this information to improve students' experiences and outcomes, further research is needed to understand methods of building a sense of community in master's-level counseling programs.

This study's purpose was to develop a theory of the process of building community in CE master's programs. Findings of the study described the actions students are taking throughout their program experience to create community for themselves, and the actions students perceive faculty and administrative staff as taking to create community with and for students. The research question that was addressed in this study was: *How do master's-level counselor education programs, faculty, and students build community?*

Method

To address our research question, we utilized a grounded theory design. According to Charmaz and Thornburg (2020), the goal of a grounded theory is the development of a theory to describe a process. This study was conducted using a constructivist paradigm that prioritized seeing reality as an experience we generate together through our interactions with others (Mills et al., 2006). Both the processes of data collection via interviewing and data analysis via coding utilize this viewpoint by constructing meaning through relational interactions (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Mills et al., 2006). This method is appropriate for this study due to the process of community building in counselor education master's programs being a relational phenomenon and the lack of research on the topic (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). Throughout the interview process, the principal investigator and participants constructed meaningful data by

engaging with the research topic through question, answer, and clarification correspondence.

Participants and Procedures

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling methods, appropriate for a grounded theory due to the need to recruit participants who can contribute to a rich, thick, and purposeful description in the establishment of the proposed theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). To be included in the study, participants had to be currently enrolled as master's students in a CACREP-accredited CE program. Non-CACREP programs were excluded due to variability in program standards (CACREP, 2015). We reached saturation at 20 participants (see Table 1), wherein the codes became repetitive and no new codes were generated, meeting the minimum sample size for a grounded theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). No additional participants were interviewed.

The primary investigator began the sampling process by reaching out to program directors of each CACREP-accredited master's program ($N = 413$), requesting that they forward the recruitment email to their students. Interviews were conducted by the primary investigator in a private setting using Zoom video conferencing software. After the interview, the primary investigator invited participants to be a part of a focus group to provide feedback on the findings of the study, including the theory model that emerged from the data. This focus group was facilitated after all individual interviews were conducted and data were analyzed, to form an emergent model and theory.

Data Sources

Research data was accumulated via a demographic sheet and a semi-structured interview. Included on the demographic sheet (and presented below in Table 1) were the following items: participant pseudonym, age, gender, race/ethnicity, number of semesters completed, description of funding (e.g., assistantship or fellowship), self-reported social class, parental status, international student status,

Table 1*Participant Demographic Information (N = 20)*

Age Range	20–29 (n=10)	30–39 (n = 4)	40–49 (n = 3)	50–59 (n = 3)		
Gender	Men (n = 1)	Women (n = 17)	Non-Binary (n = 2)			
Race	Asian (n = 0)	Black (n = 1)	Biracial (n = 2)	White (n = 16)	Hispanic (n = 1)	
Social Class	Middle Class (n = 11)	Working Class (n = 4)	Upper Middle Class (n = 4)	Lower Class (n = 0)	Upper Class (n = 1)	
Parental Status	Parent (n = 7)	Not A Parent (n = 11)	Married (n = 2)			
Program Format	Face-to-Face (n = 12)	Hybrid (n = 7)	Online (n = 1)			
Full Time or Part Time	Full Time (n = 17)	Part-Time (n = 3)				
Receiving Program Funding	Yes (n = 11)	No (n = 9)				
Number of Semesters Enrolled	First Semester (n = 8)	Second Semester (n = 1)	Third Semester (n = 3)	Fourth Semester (n = 5)	Fifth Semester (n = 2)	Seventh Semester (n = 1)
International Student	Yes (n = 0)	No (n = 20)				
Region	Northeast (n = 1)	Northwest (n = 1)	Southeast (n = 2)	Southwest (n = 5)	Midwest (n = 11)	
In Practicum or Internship	Yes (n = 5)	No (n = 15)				

region, delivery of program (e.g., face to face, hybrid, or distance learning), full time or part-time student status, and whether students were in an internship or practicum.

Participants then engaged in a 60-minute semi-structured interview with example questions and prompts that included the following: *What does community mean to you?*; *What has been your experience of community in your master's program?*; *How has your experience of community or lack thereof affected your wellness throughout the program?*; and, *Describe the process of community building in your master's program, from the first moment you noticed it happening up to*

today. Questions for the interview were grounded in extant literature and developed as a research team (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

Data Analysis

All participant interviews were de-identified before the research team began individual and consensus coding, to reduce researcher bias and safeguard participant confidentiality (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). Data analysis from participant interviews utilized grounded theory's method of coding, starting with open coding (Mills et al., 2006). Two members of the research team coded each transcript

separately before all researchers came together to consensus code each interview and create an updated iteration of the codebook during each meeting. All research team members agreed on a total of 96 codes during the open coding process. Next, the research team engaged in focused coding and axial coding, allowing initial codes to be subsumed under categories of broader codes through constant comparison so the constructed focused codes and subsequent axial codes fit tightly with their data (Mills et al., 2006). For example, the focused code *wellness benefits of community* had its roots in the initial codes of *social wellness gain*, *feeling validated*, and *sense of safety*, which then combined with other focused codes speaking to professional benefits to create the larger code *benefits of community*. Finally, the research team completed the process through theoretical coding to coordinate their overall findings into a central theory explained by a model (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). No additional codes were suggested by the focus group.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

Utilizing strategies for trustworthiness increased the prospect that the research findings are valid and have applicable implications (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). These strategies included several criteria such as credibility, confirmability, authenticity, transferability, substantive validation, and coherence. The research team implemented reflexive analysis, triangulation, member checking, and simultaneous data collection and analysis, as well as a focus group, to increase the levels of trustworthiness in this grounded theory study (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Implementing simultaneous data collection and analysis, which involves coding completed transcripts before returning to the field to collect more data and is an important aspect of the grounded theory method, increased the trustworthiness of the study. As for member checking, the primary investigator sent transcripts to all participants to read, review, and make changes if desired, before returning them to the research team for coding. All participants chose to review

and return their transcripts. Triangulation was implemented through consensus coding to enhance trustworthiness. Before all researchers convened to code the transcript together, two researchers were tasked to code each transcript separately. After comparing each transcript, the research team reached a consensus regarding specific codes. The research team chose an external auditor to review the trail of transcripts and each iteration of the codebooks.

A final strategy for increasing trustworthiness involved conducting a focus group. Although all were invited to attend, eight master's students chose to participate in the 30-minute focus group, providing room for multiple perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2000). During the focus group, the existing codes and working model were revealed to the focus group participants, who were asked to provide feedback regarding the extent to which they felt the codes accurately represented their experiences. The focus group responded unanimously in stating they felt the model and codes represented their experiences.

Reflexivity Statement

The research team was comprised of four individuals: the principal investigator, two secondary researchers, and an external auditor. The principal investigator was an assistant professor in a CE program who identifies as a white, cisgender American woman. They recruited and conducted the interviews as well as coding the interviews. The secondary researchers are both master's-level clinical mental health counseling students, one who identifies as an American, cisgender man and the other who identifies as a Nigerian, cisgender woman. Each of the researchers reported overall positive experiences of community in their master's program, which could indicate a potential bias when interpreting other individual's experiences. Furthermore, the members of the research team all shared the value that community in master's programs is important, which other faculty and students may not resonate with. All researchers expected to increase their knowledge of how to build a diverse, inclusive educational community

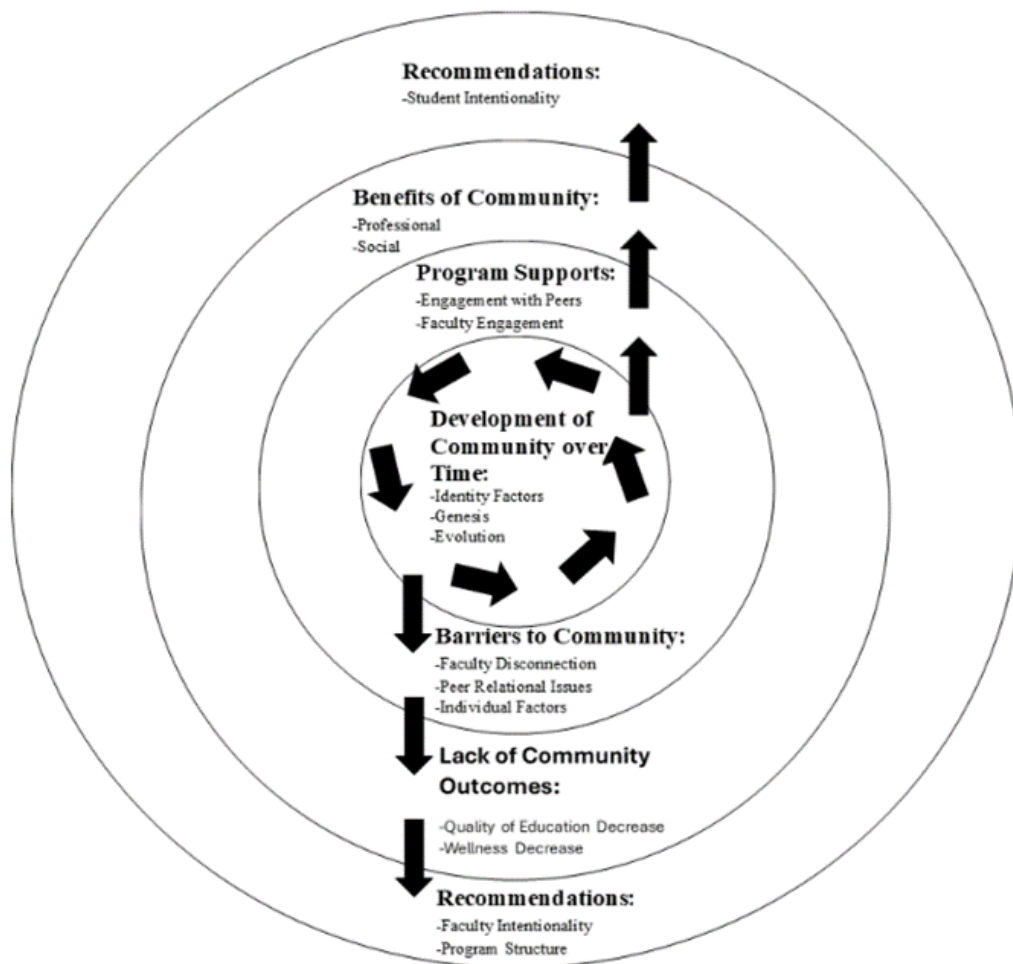
through conducting this study. The research team connected to this study through peer debriefing sessions. Through these sessions the team shared what surprised, challenged, or confirmed their own perspectives of building community in master's counseling programs. The secondary researchers facilitated the coding of the interviews. The external auditor was a counselor educator who is experienced in grounded theories. They appraised the audit trail including documentation of the coding process and strategies for trustworthiness.

Findings

Six themes, with subsequent corresponding subthemes, form the groundwork for the theoretical model based on student perspectives: (a) *barriers to community*, (b) *benefits of community*, (c) *development of community over time*, (d) *program support*, (e) *recommendations*, and (f) *lack of community outcomes*. Figure 1 shows the theoretical model generated based on the six major themes that emerged from the study to provide a foundation to better comprehend the process of building community in counseling master's programs.

Figure 1

Model of the Process of Building Community in Counselor Education Master's Programs



The process of building community begins with the theme *development of community over time* in the centermost point of the circle. As community develops, students experience the genesis of relationship formation with others in the program and experience that formation constantly evolving. This process continuously develops throughout their time in the program. As students are undergoing *development of community over time*, they are either experiencing *barriers to community* and/or they are receiving *program supports*. *Barriers to community* act as a deterrent stopping community from forming or continuing to form and/or creating severances in the program that weaken the sense of community for students. *Program supports* juxtaposes *barriers to community* in that they represent experiences or resources benefiting students in increasing their sense of community in their program as they are experiencing the *development of community over time*. In the third circle, the students report *benefits of community*, or positive experiences of community, such as increased professional and social well-being and engagement, or *lack of community outcomes*, such as a decreased sense of wellness and quality of education in their master's-level program, depending on their interaction and exposure to *program supports* and/or *barriers to community*.

The outermost circle encompasses the *recommendations* students provided in response to the *benefits of community* or *lack of community outcomes*. Students provided suggestions based on their experiences, such as faculty opportunities for intentionality and program structure changes to prevent *lack of community outcomes*, and student intentionality to facilitate *benefits of community*. The process of building community is not discrete, but continuously evolving throughout the student's experience in the program, with the *development of community over time* either further facilitating or disrupting a student's sense of community. The identified recommendations, once implemented, circle back to impact the development of community over time. The iterative nature of the process of building community is represented by the six arrows in the innermost circle. As a counseling master's student develops community over time,

paired with sufficient program support, they will receive many benefits of community that facilitate positive outcomes within their program. Each major theme and subsequent subtheme are explored further next. All participant anecdotes are presented with pseudonyms.

Barriers to Community

A high number of participants ($n = 16$) identified barriers to community, which refers to the factors that negatively influenced their process of forming or sustaining community within their counseling master's program. Three subthemes were identified: (a) peer relational issues, (b) faculty disconnection, and (c) individual factors.

Peer Relational Issues

Half of the participants ($n = 10$) identified peer relational issues as a barrier to community in their counseling master's program. These issues were related to relational factors between peers that inhibited their progress in forming or maintaining community. Several issues participants discussed included differences in values, exclusive subgroups or cliques, and differing levels of need for connection. Mica described how factors related to lack of trust influenced dynamics with their peers, stating, "There are some folks, they sit by themselves ... the vibe, the energy they give off, is very competitive, like I'm in it for myself. You tell me information and I'll use it to further my own ends."

Faculty Disconnection

A few of the participants ($n = 6$) identified faculty disconnection as a barrier to creating community within their master's program. Participants discussed faculty turnover, lack of communication, highly negative feedback, poor mediation, lack of cultural humility (particularly, not owning and apologizing when classroom norms around inclusivity are breached), and lack of involvement with students as being barriers to building community within the counseling master's program.

Celena shared how limited faculty openness within the classroom limited their process of forming community, stating: "I will say in the classes where my professors are more personable, the community in the class does tend to build quicker than classes where my professors are, like, extremely professional."

Individual Factors

About half of the participants ($n = 11$) identified individual factors that were obstacles to forming community within their counseling master's program. Some of these factors included lack of intentionality, geographical distance, lack of reciprocity, and fear of rejection. Aelin discussed the role that fear of rejection played in her process of building community:

I feel anxious about putting myself out there and that's stopped me from creating a deeper sense of community.... I want to hang out with people more outside of class ... sometimes the barriers that I have are just fear of nobody wanting to hang out with me, I guess.

Benefits of Community

Almost all of the participants ($n = 19$) identified benefits of community within their master's counseling program, identifying the ways their community has impacted them positively within and outside the program. Two subthemes were identified: (a) *professional* and (b) *social*.

Professional

A lot of the participants ($n = 16$) identified professional benefits of community, referring to ways the community within their master's program positively impacted their academic experience and outlook on their professional journey. Participants identified benefits such as academic accountability, resource sharing, learning from diverse perspectives, sense of persistence and competence, enjoyment of learning, and building social capital. Mitch described how community has benefited him professionally:

With the diversity of students who are different ages and their own experiences and relation to the community itself, it broadens my horizons to learn from everyone.... I think it really helps with, like, impostor syndrome, and like, reducing that and even just, like, the motivation to stay in the program, like, if I didn't have the community that I do have, I think it would be significantly harder.

Social

Many of the participants ($n = 17$) described social benefits of community within their master's counseling program. Some of the identified benefits included validation, social wellness, sense of safety, and sense of belonging. Bryce described how community impacted their wellness and validated their experience in the master's counseling program:

I have a bunch of school people I can turn to.... It's a stress relief to know that this is not all on my shoulders. Like, in skills class, I was so worked up at first because I wasn't getting it, but seeing other people going through this too meant a lot and made me realize that it's okay, everyone else is learning, too, and so that really, really improved my wellness, because I'm not putting as much, like, pressure on myself to exceed expectations.

Lack of Community Outcomes

Almost half of the participants ($n = 8$) shared negative outcomes that come from a lack of community in their master's program experience. This lack of community in master's-level programs is identified in two subthemes: (a) *quality decrease* and (b) *wellness decrease*.

Quality Decrease

A quarter of the participants ($n = 5$) reported a lack in the quality of experience in their master's-level counseling programs. The decreased sense of belonging in the community resulted in participants comparing themselves negatively to peers, further

decreasing their sense of community. LaNia mentioned the mental toll it took on her when comparing themselves to peers regarding completing assignments:

Some people start their assignments like two weeks beforehand, and that's not how my brain works. I've found myself comparing, like I'm not being a good grad student, because I am waiting to the week it's due ... it was kind of difficult mentally.

Participants also reported excluding themselves in group discussions as a result of feeling a lack of community, in Arwen's case due to her age:

I want to make sure that I'm not sharing too much because going through a counseling program at the age of 52, I've acquired a lot of experience that I could add, but I must be careful, I need to make sure everybody's having their own experience. I really hold back, and always checking myself requires emotional labor ... which feels separating.

Wellness Decrease

About a quarter of the participants ($n = 4$) determined that their wellness was negatively impacted by their current sense of belonging within the community. Emotions such as anxiety and frustration were associated with decreased wellness in participants in master's-level counseling programs. Jerome expressed how despite considering themselves a well-adapted individual, their lack of sense of community facilitates undue feelings of insecurity:

It's ironic because, in other areas of my life, I consider myself very confident and sure of myself ... but experiences negatively influencing my belonging in my program have knocked me for a loop. I do not feel confident. I feel very insecure in that environment.

Development of Community Over Time

All of the participants ($N = 20$) discussed development of community over time, addressing some of the pivotal moments and factors that played

into how they built and maintained community within the program. Three subthemes were identified: (a) *identity factors*, (b) *genesis*, and (c) *evolution*.

Identity Factors

Almost all of the participants ($n = 19$) identified how salient identity factors influenced their process of finding community within the counseling master's program. Some identity factors discussed included social class, parental status, religion/spirituality, race and ethnicity, sexual and affectional identity, nationality, and life stage. About half of the participants ($n = 11$) identified age as an identity factor that influenced how they developed relationships and built community within the program. Bryce shared their view regarding how age influenced both their access to community and that of individuals in a different age group or life stage:

What I've heard from my peers who are considered older than the majority, that my being 24, I may be at an advantage because of my age. I have time and energy to make those connections and reach out and say, hey, I can meet at 1 p.m. in the middle of the day for a coffee and read over notes together, which to me, that builds community, and not a lot of people can do that, depending on work and age and family structure and things like that.

In contrast, Lidia shared how age had a negative influence on her experience:

I am one of the two oldest.... I felt like a fish out of water; I had to really work hard to catch up with the technology aspect of school because [of] when I started. And, I just feel different in age; it's been a challenge for me to feel like my perspective is valued.

Less than half of the participants ($n = 8$) identified gender as an influencing factor in how their community was developed within their counseling master's program. Mica discussed how having peers who also use non-binary pronouns

helped them feel validated and improved their comfort level in their counseling master's program:

So, I identify as non-binary, I use they/them pronouns, and the first meeting we had in the semester, I felt heard, from hearing someone going by he/they and another person going by she/they. I already was like, all right, I do feel a little bit seen here, that feels good.

Genesis

Almost all of the participants ($n = 19$) identified pivotal events that marked the beginning of their formation of community within their counseling master's program. Many key events included first semester examples like orientation, first classes with their cohort, and social gatherings, yet some participants report noticing a sense of community forming later in their academic experience.

Lysandra described the process of how their community emerged within their first 2 months:

Within the first month or so of classes, we started to build the academic community in class.... By 6 weeks, we started talking outside of class. We got a group chat together and we would be like, hey, don't forget, this is due for this class, or, like, I have this campus event I'm hosting, if anybody wants to come, and gradually, people would invite others to do things, like, hey, does anybody want to go get a drink on this night after class.

Evolution

More than half of the participants ($n = 14$) described how their sense of community progressed as they moved forward in their program journey. Participants identified various factors that contributed to how their community progressed, including cohort models, differing study plans and tracks, and fieldwork experiences. Bryce described how the nature of their sense of community progressed as they moved forward in their program and shared some of the benefits and challenges that moving into fieldwork presented for their sense of community:

Most people don't have shared experience of fieldwork, being at all sorts of different sites, and that's a shift from when we were all in classes together.... We do have opportunity in internship class to share, and at the same time, you can't share everything, so what we do end up sharing are, like, either extreme things, or required things. I think there's a sense, because there's a little less community in the later part of the program, there's a reticence to show vulnerability, to say, I need help to say, "Oh, I screwed something up." And so, it just feels a lot more closed off now ... as opposed to when I felt like I had that opportunity to connect, commiserate, collaborate, I felt more supported, I felt not alone in my struggles, like I can get through, we can do it together.

Program Support

All participants ($N = 20$) identified program supports, which are logistical and emotional behaviors that facilitate the sense of community. Two subthemes form the theme of outcomes: (a) *engagement with peers* and (b) *faculty engagement*.

Engagement With Peers

Nearly all participants ($n = 19$) distinguished engagement with peers as a beneficial support that enhanced their sense of community within their master's counseling program. Engagement with peers includes experiences of peer support through individual stressful situations and shared group challenges in the program. Participants reported that these shared experiences encouraged increased levels of wellness and belonging within their community and program. Cassian explained how grateful he is that his peers support him through struggles: "We all understand that life is hard.... I just know that if I were to reach out to anyone in my cohort that they would just ask me where I am and help me out with whatever I needed."

Faculty Engagement

A strong majority of participants ($n = 15$) made it clear how faculty engagement facilitated their sense of community in their master's counseling program. Engagement from faculty members included creating positive teaching environments, modeling and encouraging the growth of community, and aiding students in the process of creating a sense of professional identity. Celena described her positive experience with a faculty member modeling community: "There's this level of professionalism, but also human connectedness to where I feel it's obvious the professors are communicating both with each other and with us, in a healthy, supportive way."

Recommendations

All participants ($N = 20$) identified recommendations for increasing the sense of community among master's-level counseling programs. Three subthemes emerged as recommendations: (a) *faculty intentionality*, (b) *student intentionality*, and (c) *program structure*.

Faculty Intentionality

Almost all participants ($n = 15$) recommended faculty intentionality as a method to increase a sense of community in master's-level counseling programs. Examples of faculty intentionality involved faculty planning social events, modeling norms of community, and checking in on student well-being. Mica described how faculty could get involved to improve the overall levels of community within their program: "I feel like check-ins with students would help ... maybe including questions to students like, What's happened to you this week that made you feel included, or that maybe didn't?"

Student Intentionality

Almost all participants ($n = 16$) recommended student intentionality as a key contributing factor in increasing levels of community in master's counseling programs. Students reported

implementing intentionality by creating groups, planning social opportunities, and connecting as a whole group. Danika makes it clear that community starts with intentional conversations: "It all has to start with, like, making that meaning together, which requires the willingness to reach out, because you know, a conversation takes more than one person."

Program Structure

Almost all participants ($n = 16$) recommended structural changes in their master's counseling programs to increase levels of community. The program structure subtheme included adopting a cohort model, creating meaningful orientation experiences, and setting up structural avenues for peer bonding. LaNia expressed her desire for a cohort model: "Almost everyone that I speak to in our program wishes that we were cohorted ... when we walk into a classroom and we know almost everyone, it's easier to ask for help and to transition to maybe doing something outside the classroom."



Discussion

We identified six themes with corresponding subthemes from the interviews, discussed next: (a) barriers to community, (b) benefits of community, (c) development of community over time, (d) program support, (e) recommendations, and (f) lack of community outcomes.

Barriers to Community

Participants in this study recognized various barriers to community that were present in their counseling master's programs. We identified trends regarding student relationships with peers and faculty acting as deterrents to building community within the counseling master's program. These findings aligned with previous studies that identified perceived lack of support from faculty and peers as factors that impair the learning of students in their graduate program (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020; Litherland et al., 2023; O'Meara et al., 2017). A

new finding from our study is highlighted in the third subtheme, individual factors, which addressed personal factors such as a level of social anxiety that hindered participants in building community.

Benefits of Community

Participants identified the benefits of the community that they had established within their counseling master's program. Both subthemes were directly related to the satisfaction of the graduate student experience within the counseling master's program, which aligned with the existing studies that identified connections with faculty and peers as instrumental in promoting a sense of belonging and academic satisfaction in graduate students (O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascale, 2018). In terms of professional benefits of community, participants identified ways that the community they established within their counseling master's program contributed to their sense of competence, resilience, and accountability through sharing of resources, improvement of perspective taking abilities, and connection to professional opportunities. This finding aligned with existing literature that discussed how establishing meaningful professional connections through various avenues, including involvement in program related activities, positively influenced academic experience by improving their sense of belonging within their program (Litherland et al., 2023; O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascale, 2018). A new finding from our study specifically underscored the role of professional connection to peers more prominently than to faculty.

In terms of social benefits of community, participants identified ways in which their community within their counseling program improved their sense of wellness, support, safety, and belonging, which added detail to existing literature that described the positive impact of having a sense of community on graduate students in general (Litherland et al., 2023; O'Meara et al., 2017; Reinhart, 2010).

Lack of Community Outcomes

Participants identified negative outcomes associated with a lack of community in their experiences in their counselor education master's program. Outcomes of a lack of community include participants comparing themselves negatively to peers, isolating themselves in their graduate education, and experiencing a decrease in their wellness. Examples participants reported included comparing academic achievement and feeling isolated from peers in cliques, resulting in lower feelings of self-worth. This point is supported by literature demonstrating how feelings of isolation due to experiences of social exclusion by peers affects student psychological well-being (Basma et al., 2021; Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson & Chollom, 2022). However, our study went beyond previous findings: When counseling students compared themselves to their peers with grades, completion of assignments, and overall achievement, they experienced a perceived decrease in their quality of learning in their program.

Findings in this study also indicated lack of community decreases student wellness in the program, due to increased feelings of anxiety and/or frustration. This is salient as current literature mentioned examples of individuals who struggle to maintain their wellness being at risk for signs of burnout in graduate-level programs (Basma et al., 2021; Iheduru-Anderson & Chollom, 2022). A new finding regarding student wellness pertained to the participants that experienced decreased wellness due to lack of community in their program.

Development of Community Over Time

In addressing the development of community over time, participants identified pivotal moments and factors that influenced their process of building and maintaining a community within their program. For example, we found examples of gender affirming experiences improving participants' sense of belonging within their counseling master's program, which aligns with existing research that identified the negative impacts of nonaffirming spaces on gender minority students (Budge et al., 2020;

O'Meara et al., 2017). Participants discussed the perceived impact of their age on the process of building community within their program, with some participants reporting positive experiences of learning across generations, while others reported feeling disconnected due to the age gap. This aligns with literature that discussed differing identity factors as limitations for belonging, although no other studies specifically report age or life stage as a barrier to connection in counselor education (O'Meara et al., 2017).

Novel findings from our study included the other two subthemes that address various events and timelines that served as turning points in community building within the participants' program experiences. Some participants identified their process of building community beginning at program orientation. Participants also identified pivotal development moments, such as when their first class began, when they were added to a group chat, and/or the first group "hangout" with colleagues during the semester. As it developed over time for participants, the evolution of a sense of community influenced the pace that students experienced increased social wellness and other benefits of community.

Program Supports

Participants identified different kinds of program supports that facilitated their overall sense of community within their programs as they experienced the development of community over time. We found that program supports indicated engagement across domains such as peer support, faculty modeling, and encouraging the growth of community, and maintaining an inclusive, open, and authentic perspective when interacting with others in the community. Participants reported how program support led to overall benefits among their community. This is consistent with current literature that reported students' peer and faculty relationships produce positive outcomes in the program (Litherland et al., 2023; O'Meara et al., 2017; Reinhart, 2010). Our findings provide considerable and new specificity to the literature regarding the variety of experiences that promote peer

relationships, such as experiences of peer support through individual stressful situations and shared group challenges in the program.

Participants reported increased levels of wellness and motivation to persist in their studies stemming from community support to address shared challenges. The stress of these shared challenges such as paper deadlines, group projects, and examinations, were mitigated thanks to the support from peers. This adds further support to the literature showing an important distinction regarding how positive peer relationships impact attrition in counselor education programs (Basma et al., 2021).

Recommendations for Counselor Education Programs

Participants suggested recommendations for increasing community building in master's level counseling programs. We found that participants desired deliberate involvement by faculty in the process of building community. Involvement of faculty included planning events for students, checking in with students, and modeling community. This is relevant as this notion corresponds to current literature regarding connections with faculty as a crucial factor that allows graduate students to persist in their programs (Budge et al., 2020; O'Meara et al., 2017; Pascale, 2018). Furthermore, participants recommended students intentionally build community themselves within their counselor education programs, a new finding in this study. Students can be intentional in building community by joining organizations such as Chi Sigma Iota, creating group chats with members of their cohort, and/or creating opportunities outside of class to meet up. This relates to the current research base, which illustrates how creating trust through peer bonding further contributes to establishing meaningful community in graduate programs (Budge et al., 2020; hooks, 2003; Iheduru-Anderson & Chollom, 2022; Litherland et al., 2023). Setting up structural avenues for peer bonding, such as student events, to create a sense of community in master's level counseling programs may be helpful.

Implications for Counselor Education Masters Students and Faculty

Counselor education master's students should strive to create community with peers, such as group chats, formal events like Chi Sigma Iota socials, and impromptu get-togethers during their first semester, to set the tone for the program, demonstrate openness toward their cohort, and practice cultural humility to honor differing peer identity factors. Participants reported that sharing moments of imposter syndrome with peers helped alleviate stress, as they realized they were not going through it alone. We also encourage students to collaborate with peers by sharing support and resources rather than competing, an attitude that participants shared decreased their anxiety. The model developed applies to participants in in-person and online programs. Participants in both program designs suggested creating opportunities to connect, such as conferences and online modes of connections like group chats or other online platforms, to facilitate community in their master's counseling programs.

Regarding counselor educators, we suggest faculty members act in a conscious, intentional manner to proactively build community from the genesis of a student's exposure to the program, starting with orientation. Students reported the importance of orientation as one of the first moments they encountered a sense of community in their program among their peers and faculty. If possible, we recommend implementing a cohort model in the program. Moreover, we recommend faculty commit to measures for checking in with students about their well-being, whether in class or through email. We encourage faculty to create interactive teaching environments that promote student connections through class discussion and activities, while also demonstrating cultural humility and engaging in appropriate self-disclosure. Faculty should also strive to model community for their students through their relationships with other faculty members, as students reported that seeing a sense of community among faculty facilitates a positive and safe environment and provides the basis and motivation to build community among peers. Finally,

participants revealed a desire for educators to broach topics of diversity in a classroom setting and act accountable in moments when classroom norms are breached, such as when instructors publicly own when they make mistakes related to diversity and inclusion and show a commitment to repair and further their learning.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include the following: (a) the sample does not account for unaccredited master's programs, (b) a lack of diversity in certain participant characteristics, (c) potential self-selection bias, and (d) possible researcher bias. Additionally, the sample pool only obtained perspectives of students, not faculty viewpoints, making the model reflective of student perspectives of community within their counseling master's programs. Future research could include faculty viewpoints of building community in CE as well as use quantitative methods to test a wider sample of participants.



Conclusion

Throughout this study, researchers were able to identify and develop a model regarding the process of building community in CACREP-accredited counseling master's programs. This model demonstrates the development of community over time and provides implications for what students and faculty can do to promote a positive sense community in their own programs.



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