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Abstract

Gatekeeping is a responsibility for all counselor educators (CEs). Little is known about how CEs work with their colleagues to enact gatekeeping in counselor education programs. This grounded theory study explored 12 diverse CEs' gatekeeping experiences, creating an ecological model describing the Faculty Microsystem During Gatekeeping, which illuminates important conditions, processes, and interactions during gatekeeping in counselor education. Implications for counselor educators and doctoral students on the nature of collaboration during gatekeeping are described.

Significance to the Public

This study illuminates the gatekeeping experiences of 12 diverse counselor education faculty within master's-level counselor education programs in the United States. During gatekeeping, counselor educators interact significantly with their colleagues, sometimes effectively, and sometimes not. These findings may enhance counselor educators' awareness of the benefits and challenges of the interpersonal and systemic nature of gatekeeping and help them to collaborate with their colleagues more effectively during gatekeeping.

Keywords: gatekeeping, counselor educator, grounded theory, faculty microsystem, collaboration

Counseling clients require competent and ethical counselors. Thus, counselor education programs bear the well-recognized ethical responsibility to effectively gatekeep the profession (Homrich, 2009; Homrich & Henderson, 2018; McAdams & Foster, 2007). The duty of counselor educators (CEs) to be effective gatekeepers when encountering counseling students with problems of professional competence (PPC) is reinforced by the profession's code of ethics and educational training standards. PPC refers to counseling students' unethical behaviors, skill deficiencies, and personal and dispositional challenges that may impact their ability to function as counselors (Elman & Forrest, 2007). The American Counseling Association (ACA; 2014) code of ethics defines gatekeeping as "the initial and ongoing academic, skills, and dispositional assessment of students' competency for

professional practice, including remediation and termination as appropriate" (p. 20). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards require that CEs and CE programs monitor counseling student development, provide remediation if needed, and remove unfit students if remediation proves unsuccessful (CACREP, 2023, Section 1, Standard O).

Despite the ethical imperative and established practices (see Homrich & Henderson, 2018, for a more thorough review), effective gatekeeping remains challenging. Programs have continued to graduate students who exhibit PPC (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013; Homrich & Henderson, 2018). Gatekeeping challenges include its subjective nature, the humanistic perspective of many CEs, and the potential professional and legal liabilities

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for faculty and universities (Chang & Rubel, 2019; DeLorenzi, 2018; Homrich & Henderson, 2018; McAdams & Foster, 2007).

Gatekeeping includes the actions of individual CEs and actions taken as a program faculty (Baldwin, 2018). The benefits of faculty collaboration during gatekeeping include a stronger rationale for decision-making, a sense of enhanced protection (from legal liability) for faculty members, and clearer processes with better outcomes (Dufrene, 2018; Schuermann et al., 2018). Collaborative gatekeeping may mitigate some of the emotional and intrapersonal challenges of gatekeeping (Chang & Rubel, 2019; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015; DeCino et al., 2020; DeLorenzi, 2018; Kerl & Eichler, 2007). For these and other reasons, researchers have found that gatekeeping is best practiced as a CE program with strong and widely understood policies and procedures in place (Dufrene, 2018; Homrich, 2009; Homrich & Henderson, 2018; Jacobs et al., 2011; McAdams & Foster, 2007). Due to the serious consequences of gatekeeping (e.g., remediation, dismissal, impacts on students, clients, faculty, etc.), gatekeeping depends on effective faculty group decision-making and collaboration.

Faculty Collaboration and Decision-Making

Although faculty interactions are an important component of gatekeeping, little research exists on how group dynamics and the process of faculty decision-making may influence gatekeeping in CE. However, some research and scholarship does address interpersonal challenges to gatekeeping. Homrich (2009) noted that effective gatekeeping may be hindered by “interpersonal or political dynamics” or that consensus may be difficult due to differences in “values, training philosophy, and personal experiences” (p. 14). Jacobs et al. (2011) noted that gatekeeping potentially involves difficult conversations and interpersonal conflicts. Forrest et al. (2013) found that a culture of avoidance, individualistic attitudes, and concerns about multicultural competence hindered addressing PPC. Schuermann et al. (2018) described other

problematic dynamics, such as colleagues not taking gatekeeping seriously or faculty not experiencing support during gatekeeping. Similarly, well-intended CEs may experience colleagues who engage in “social loafing,” thereby shirking their gatekeeping responsibility (Dufrene, 2018, p. 140). These barriers to effective collaboration and decision-making during gatekeeping may stem from CEs who themselves demonstrate PPC (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015).

Recent scholarship on higher education faculty may also be helpful to understand CE collaboration and group decision-making during gatekeeping processes. Sachmpazidi et al. (2021) found that the process components of strategic leadership, egalitarian power dynamics, team member commitment, effective communication, and clear decision-making and the emergent conditions of shared vision, psychological safety, and team cohesion led to effective faculty collaboration for undergraduate STEM faculty instructional change teams. Additionally, Tindale and Winget (2019) provided the following recommendations for better outcomes of group decision-making: (a) diverse perspectives that are expressed and valued; (b) a high level of expertise; (c) high motivation to make an accurate decision; (d) not acting in biased or self-interested ways; and (e) engaging in an open and thorough exchange of information and ideas. It remains unclear if Tindale and Winget’s (2019) and Sachmpazidi et al.’s (2021) concepts have a presence in CE faculty experiences conducting gatekeeping for PPC. Further research into these elements of gatekeeping in CE programs is needed.

Authors have proposed adapting and applying counseling ethical decision-making models to gatekeeping for PPC (Cottone, 2001). Cottone (2001) noted that ethical decision-making should be conceived of as a relational practice that seeks levels of consensus as an “ongoing interactive process” (p. 42). Medeiros et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of minimizing a lack of responsibility that may lead to biases in faculty decision-making. Letourneau (2016) conceptualized a model for gatekeeping that incorporated ethical, feminist, culturally sensitive, social constructivist,

and systems perspectives that highlighted the relational and collaborative nature of working with colleagues. Similarly, Tyler et al. (2022) found evidence of the benefits and importance of high levels of collegiality for early-career CEs. While this scholarship and research is informative, the complexities of CE faculty dynamics, collaboration, and decision-making that may affect gatekeeping for PPC need further research.

Ecological/Systemic Approach

Researchers have used systemic models to increase their understanding of the complex dynamics involved in gatekeeping for PPC. Forrest et al. (2008) adapted Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (citing his 1979, 1989, and 1995 works) to understand the complexities of gatekeeping in psychology training programs. By using a systemic lens, they focused on how environmental factors affected both trainees and gatekeeping processes. Goodrich and Shin (2013) furthered this systemic approach by using group systems theory to explicate four levels of gatekeeping: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and supragroup. Lastly, DeCino et al. (2021) utilized Bronfenbrenner's 1979 bioecological model to conceptualize the systemic influences in gatekeeper identity development, with the CE at the center of the model. Multiple authors have recognized the utility of understanding gatekeeping as a complex *process-in-context*.

This study used Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model to frame its main focus by conceptualizing the complex and interactive nature of gatekeeping with the CE at the center of the system. The model assisted us in conceptualizing the CE's microsystem to include students, staff, faculty, adjunct instructors, and supervisors, and the participants' experiences with their CE faculty colleagues as a particularly salient yet understudied part of the microsystem affecting gatekeeping. We strongly considered this aspect of the faculty microsystem as originally conceived by Bronfenbrenner (1994):

A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit, engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. (p. 1645)

Although mesosystem and exosystem components and influences (such as university administrators and attorneys, internship sites and supervisors, accrediting bodies and licensing boards, etc.) can be conceptualized and further explicated, that was not the focus of this study.

Despite ongoing research on gatekeeping, significant gaps existed related to CEs' function as a group during gatekeeping. More research on the interpersonal and systemic aspects of gatekeeping is needed to understand the complex process of gatekeeping in CE programs. This study explored CEs' experiences of the interpersonal and group decision-making aspects of gatekeeping. It addressed a need to research the reality of CE behavior and experiences, including relational barriers and supports, while they fulfill their gatekeeping responsibilities. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to increase understanding of how CEs experience their colleagues during gatekeeping using the central research question of: *How do CEs experience microsystemic dynamics in the context of gatekeeping for PPC in counselor education programs?* Relevant subquestions included: *How do CEs work and interact with their faculty colleagues when a gatekeeping situation arises? What is the group decision-making process in a gatekeeping situation?*



Method

A qualitative approach that can accommodate context and interactions is necessary for gatekeeping process research. Grounded theory enables examination of complex psychosocial processes through data collection and analysis that

leads to theory grounded in participant lived experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Our choice of paradigm and specific approach needed to balance our reliance on a priori theory (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and the need for a structured, systematic, and detailed method of inquiry with our valuing of diverse participant experiences, process-in-context, flexibility, and knowledge as researcher construction. This balance was operationalized through the pragmatic balance between post-positivism and constructivism represented by Corbin and Strauss' (2015) grounded theory approach.

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

The first author is a cisgender male, Korean-American CE who, at the time of the study, was a doctoral student in counselor education, as well as a clinician, clinic director, clinical supervisor, and adjunct faculty in counselor education who had observed several gatekeeping processes. The second author is a cisgender female, biracial Japanese-American CE with more than 20 years of experience in counselor education who has been involved in several gatekeeping processes that ranged from frustrating and ineffective to efficient and effective. Our initial discussions yielded these prior assumptions: (a) gatekeeping is complicated and difficult for many reasons but CEs could be doing it better; (b) there may be intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that influence gatekeeping processes; and (c) with more understanding of those internal and interpersonal processes, counselor education programs may be able to strengthen their gatekeeping efforts. We continued to practice reflexivity throughout the data analysis and theory development as detailed in the next sections.

Participants

We used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants who were full-time, tenured, or tenure-track CEs who had been directly involved with multiple gatekeeping situations for counseling students with PPC within a CACREP-accredited program in the United States. We chose full-time

and tenured or tenure-track statuses as inclusion criteria to ensure that participants were core faculty within their respective programs. CACREP accreditation was an important inclusion criterion because CACREP standards and practices provide the benchmark in counselor education, including on issues related to gatekeeping. After institutional review board approval, we recruited participants through electronic outreach via CE listservs and direct emails. The participants were compensated with a \$25 gift card at the conclusion of the study.

Of the 12 participants, 7 identified as cisgender female and 5 as cisgender male. Half of the participants had between 0 – 11 years of experience as a CE while the other half had more than 12 years of experience. Notably, three of the most junior faculty were also faculty of color. Using the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision regional designations, the regional breakdown was: North Atlantic (3), Southern (2), North Central (1), and Western (6). Participants taught in clinical mental health counseling and school counseling programs and almost all participants taught in face-to-face programs ($n = 11$). See Table 1 for additional participant demographic and professional information.

Data Collection

After informed consent, the first author established contact and built rapport over time with participants in order to increase trust and generate a robust data collection, essential to data saturation and theory development (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Interview data informed both a study on CEs' internal experiences during gatekeeping (Chang & Rubel, 2019) and the current study and the opportunity to talk at length and in-depth about various gatekeeping occurrences over participants' careers contributed to the richness of the data.

Data collection included in-person, virtual, and phone interviews and an email survey collecting participant and program information over a span of 9 months. Participants were interviewed twice with interviews ranging from 45 minutes to 1.25 hours. The primary author used semi-structured

Table 1
Participant Demographic and Professional Information

Name	Gender	Race or Ethnicity	Academic Rank	Years of Experience as a CE	Tenured
Anna	Female	White	Associate	6–10	Yes
Jim	Male	White	Full	20+	Yes
Cindy	Female	White	Full	20+	Yes
Ellen	Female	White	Full	11–15	Yes
Rob	Male	Multiracial	Assistant	11–15	No
Cheryl	Female	White	Associate	6–10	No
Beth	Female	White	Full	20+	Yes
Seth	Male	White	Associate	20+	Yes
Joan	Female	White	Assistant	6–10	No
Liz	Female	Hispanic or Latino/a	Clinical	1–5	No
Derek	Male	Black or African American	Assistant	1–5	No
John	Male	Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	Assistant	1–5	No

Notes: All names are pseudonyms. All information taken verbatim from participant demographic questionnaires. Gender reflects that all participants identified as cisgender.

interviews with each participant. First-round interview questions included: “Tell me about your experiences implementing gatekeeping for students in your program?” and “How do you and your faculty colleagues work together during the gatekeeping process?” Second-round questions filled in gaps in the emerging concepts after we completed the first round of data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Some of the emerging concepts dealt with the various influences that colleagues had

on participants during gatekeeping and thus second-round questions included: “What do your colleagues do that helps or hinders you during challenging gatekeeping discussions and decision-making?” and “How do you perceive and experience issues of trust, communication styles, and approach or avoidance of conflict as an influence on you and your colleagues during gatekeeping discussions?” These and additional second-round questions served to further explicate emerging concepts by enhancing

the *thick descriptions* of participants' experiences and strengthening the emerging theory.

Data Analysis

We performed data collection and data analysis concurrently via open/axial/selective coding, memo writing, theoretical sampling, and continuous theory development to ensure that findings were grounded in participants' experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The first author, who also served as the main coder throughout, first conducted open coding on all transcripts to label and define codes and concepts. Initial memoing helped to clarify the emerging categories and concepts. We performed subsequent axial coding by analyzing the codes and concepts in order to organize the data into broader concepts and categories. We continually analyzed how the data fit the emerging concepts. We developed second-round interview questions to address gaps in the emerging concepts and conceptual structure. Second-round interviews were partially open coded and then selectively coded to fill in gaps and achieve theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation was reached when no new conceptual insights about the faculty microsystem were generated by the data. Theoretical memos articulated the connections between main categories and the emerging model of the faculty microsystem.

Collaboration during analysis occurred via a debriefing model, which improved depth of analysis and provided feedback to counteract undue bias. We met weekly during data analysis to discuss conceptualizations, identify bias, and continually reorient to the data. Additionally, the first author met regularly with a peer debriefer, a fellow doctoral student, to examine biases and gain alternative perspectives while maintaining a close connection to the data.

Trustworthiness

We used established strategies to promote researcher sensitivity, build trust with participants, and maximize the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Morrow, 2005). The authors dialogued throughout the study to discuss

our experiences, prior knowledge, and potential biases related to gatekeeping to ensure that these influences were not unduly biasing the data collection and analysis processes. The first author kept a research journal throughout the study to bracket their assumptions, enhance researcher reflexivity about the analytical process, and ensure that emerging theory was grounded in the data. Prolonged engagement with participants, including rapport-building during recruitment and before and after each interview, served to build trust with participants and to enhance our understanding of their particular work settings, which added to the richness of interview data. Extended peer debriefing with an objective colleague helped to ensure the quality and rigor of the research process. After the interviews, transcripts were shared with participants to check for accuracy and participants were given an opportunity to clarify their initial statements. None of the participants made any significant clarifications. Following theory construction, participants were able to provide feedback on the emerging theory via member checking. Of the 12 participants, 8 provided feedback and all of them strongly agreed with the resulting theory, which they thought accurately represented their experiences with gatekeeping. The intentional practices of maintaining reflexivity and awareness of subjectivity via prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, maintaining an audit trail, reflexive journaling, and member checking all served to strengthen trustworthiness (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Morrow, 2005).



Findings

A model of the Faculty Microsystem During Gatekeeping emerged from participants' experiences with their colleagues during gatekeeping. Participants experienced varying amounts of collaboration with their colleagues that we conceptualized into two microsystemic conditions and two microsystemic processes. The two microsystemic conditions were: *faculty cohesion* and *faculty capability*. The two microsystemic processes were: *engaging vs.*

avoiding gatekeeping, and *helping vs. hindering collaboration*. The relationships between the conditions and processes are illustrated in Figure 1.

Interactive Influences of Faculty Microsystem Conditions and Processes

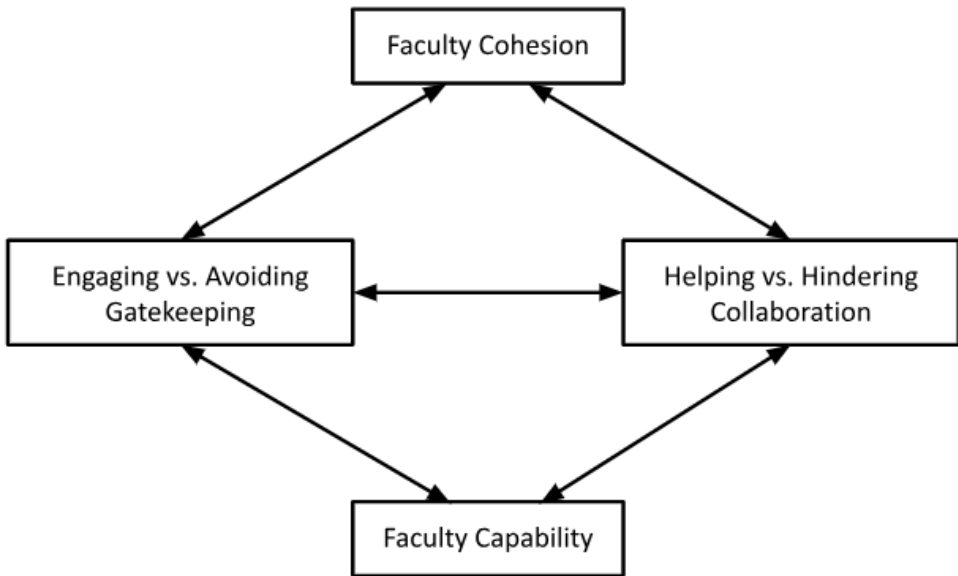
Multiple interactive influences emerged from the data which will be explored next. Overall, the strengths of the two positive processes — *engaging gatekeeping*, in engaging vs. avoiding gatekeeping, and *helping collaboration*, in helping vs. hindering collaboration — depended upon the sufficiency of the conditions of faculty cohesion and faculty capability. Of the many interactions between conditions and processes, the most prominent interactive influences occurred between faculty cohesion, engaging gatekeeping, and helping collaboration. Participants experienced faculty cohesion elements such as higher levels of mutual trust, support, and shared motivation with colleagues as strongly influencing helping collaboration. Additionally, faculty capability factors such as leadership and capacity enhanced

both engaging gatekeeping and helping collaboration. Faculty cohesion and faculty capability were both necessary at sufficient levels to positively impact engaging gatekeeping and helping collaboration during gatekeeping. These conditions within the microsystem had a strong influence on gatekeeping processes.

Faculty Microsystemic Condition: Faculty Cohesion

Faculty cohesion was a varied experience that emerged as a prominent contextual condition influencing gatekeeping collaboration. All participants described experiences with colleagues that embodied mutual trust, support, and respect and shared motivation for gatekeeping. We coded these interconnected experiences as faculty cohesion. Not surprisingly, these phenomena were often experienced together, that is, the colleagues that participants trusted the most were the most supportive or the colleagues that participants respected also shared similar motivations for gatekeeping.

Figure 1
Faculty Microsystem During Gatekeeping in Counselor Education Programs



Note. Arrows portray bidirectional influences between conditions and processes.

The importance of trust between colleagues, as a part of faculty cohesion, arose consistently across participants. Since gatekeeping involved collegial discussions where participants disclosed their subjective opinions, they noted how trust was crucial to the process. Joan noted how having trust enhanced the gatekeeping process:

The colleagues that I have professional and healthy relationships with, they listen, they are sounding boards, they help to brainstorm. They provide a *safe forum* [emphasis added] to talk about a situation and really kind of flesh it out, and make sure that there isn't personal bias and it is objective.

However, trust was not necessarily experienced for all colleagues as John noted, "I really find that there is [sic] only three of us who I can really trust, myself and two others. I can't say that the other three are bad people, but I count on them for different things." Low levels of trust with one's colleagues significantly inhibited participants from engaging in gatekeeping processes. Having sufficient trust was important for both faculty cohesion and related microsystemic processes.

Support between colleagues sustained participants through the challenges of gatekeeping. Seth noted how the emotional difficulties of gatekeeping are mediated by sharing the burden with colleagues:

So, the emotional part ... is I know that I'm not making someone feel good; I'm making them feel bad. It takes some guts to do ... that's why it's good that there's three of us ... because it's easy to fold sort of and [say] "well, it's not that bad" or something. But when we have three of us there, it goes better.

This mutual support seemed to have a positive effect on individual participants and the overall gatekeeping process. Conversely, participants noted that insufficient support from colleagues may adversely affect the gatekeeping process, as evidenced by Rob:

I don't always have the sense of ... complete support from them ... after ... we make a

decision ... for them to kind of circle back and say, "Hey, how did that go? Are you okay? Do you want to talk about this?"

Participants reported that respect among colleagues facilitated faculty cohesion and valuable consultation, as Anna stated:

We all really respect each other I count myself really lucky to be able to work with 3 other individuals whose opinion I really value.... It's nice to have conversations about it, "Yeah I don't see that, but help me understand where this is coming from for you."

Participants who experienced mutual respect reported seeking out those colleagues for support and consultation but absent that respect, participants did not seek consultation as readily. This reduced motivation for collegial consultation had important implications for the microsystemic process of engaging vs. avoiding gatekeeping.

Shared motivation for gatekeeping enhanced faculty cohesion as Jim stated, "So it becomes the whole clinical faculty. Then we feel strongly that the student needs to know that this isn't just one faculty member. That all faculty have these concerns. We present a united front." A sense of shared motivation contributed to feelings of camaraderie and unity which strengthened faculty cohesion during gatekeeping. Participants who lacked this shared motivation experienced lower faculty cohesion, which led to feelings of frustration felt by a few participants. Taken together, trust, support, respect, and shared motivation were key ingredients to the microsystemic condition of faculty cohesion that strongly influenced the microsystemic processes of engaging vs. avoiding gatekeeping and helping vs. hindering collaboration.

Faculty Microsystemic Condition: Faculty Capability

An important but less robustly reported microsystemic condition emerged from participants which was conceptualized as faculty capability. Faculty capability ebbed and flowed based on a

program (and individual CEs) having sufficient time, energy, and resources along with effective leadership and procedures to engage with gatekeeping effectively. Participants noted that CEs juggled many competing priorities. Some participants observed that gatekeeping was more difficult when programs prioritized other needs such as scholarship or revenue. A CE may have sufficient gatekeeping motivation but other priorities may diminish the faculty capability, as Jim noted: “We take a look at the resources available at any given time, by clinical faculty.... There may just not be the time, energy, support and resources to do [gatekeeping].”

Having effective leadership and procedures, as a part of faculty capability, was deemed important by all participants, as Cindy said, “The clearer we got about ... knowing what we were going to do, how we were going to do it, the process, who is going to do what, what’s the timeline, all of those things I think has really helped in the process.” The majority of participants reported that effective program leadership also enhanced faculty capability by helping to establish and maintain clear gatekeeping protocols and processes for CE faculty to follow.

Faculty Microsystemic Process: Engaging vs. Avoiding Gatekeeping

The faculty microsystemic process of engaging vs. avoiding gatekeeping centered on individual CE faculty gatekeeping behaviors. Engaging gatekeeping included: effectively monitoring and evaluating students and consistently following established gatekeeping practices. Thus, engaging gatekeeping often preceded the important next step of consulting with a colleague when CEs perceived a student’s potential PPC. CEs sought consultation to validate their perceptions of PPC, as Liz stated:

The first thing I would always do is ... consult with a trusted peer to say, “Hey, I have this student and this is my reaction, what do you think?” And sometimes it’s like, “yeah, I don’t see it,” and sometimes it’s like, “yeah, me too.”

By enacting this collegial aspect of gatekeeping, a greater sense of collaboration was developed.

Some participants observed colleagues avoiding gatekeeping by ignoring potential PPC, avoiding taking action, or refusing to perform gatekeeping. Avoiding gatekeeping by passing students along and rationalizing the decision was observed by John:

One of the professors told me, “You know what, I think the profession will weed the students out, so, let’s just get them out of our program, let’s graduate them and the profession will take care of it for us.”

Other instances of avoiding gatekeeping arose as a result of colleagues’ conflict avoidance or their lack of awareness of the need for gatekeeping, as Joan noted:

But the other folks that are in the program don’t ... understand gatekeeping.... They don’t have a solid understanding of what supervision is. They don’t know that there are supervision theories and models.

Engaging gatekeeping seemed to strengthen faculty cohesion and helping collaboration, while reciprocally, strong faculty cohesion promoted engaging gatekeeping and helping collaboration. Conversely, avoiding gatekeeping seemed to contribute to a diminished sense of faculty cohesion and led to instances of hindering collaboration.

Faculty Microsystemic Process: Helping vs. Hindering Collaboration

Helping vs. hindering collaboration emerged as the predominant microsystemic process of gatekeeping and encompassed many gatekeeping actions that CEs undertook with their colleagues. Helping vs. hindering collaboration included the collective CE actions of *inclusive group process*, *thoughtful decision-making*, and *sharing the workload*.

All participants reported a collective approach to gatekeeping that involved CEs meeting regularly to discuss gatekeeping issues. Joan described it as “a group process and place for collaboration that [is] really open to new ideas and suggestions and strategies.” The challenges inherent in the process were summed up by Ellen who noted, “Even if we

are all in agreement, it's not an easy process and it can be long, drawn-out, contentious — difficult in a lot of ways.”

A significant challenge was how the group handled differences of opinion among the faculty. Participants appreciated the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that gave rise to the differing perceptions and opinions among their colleagues. Some faculty groups handled these differences well by respecting and valuing the differing opinions, while other programs did not conduct themselves as collaboratively.

Multiple participants described practices of inclusive group process and thoughtful decision-making that occurred when, as Cindy stated, “if we have a difference that we can recognize that there must be some valid reason for those differences and really try and explore those.” Facilitating this inclusive group process required faculty cohesion, as Cheryl noted, “I think it's super important to challenge and be challenged by your colleagues when gatekeeping.” The importance of trust and respect in helping collaboration was noted by most participants and represented well by Ellen:

When we do our initial gatekeeping, we have enough professional respect for one another that if a faculty member has a really strong negative reaction to a student and persists with that even if others didn't have the same reaction, we'll honor that person's perception, does that make sense?

Alternately, participants observed colleagues who minimized the perspective of another colleague which led to instances of hindering collaboration, as Jim observed:

It would go like this, Professor X, is saying that they are having a problem with the student. Okay, if Professor Y, or Professor Z weren't having a problem with the student, then they would say, “Well, I am not having a problem with that student,” and that would be the end of the story.

Multiple participants reported similar experiences that had the effect of shutting down

discussion and thus hindering collaboration. Trusting colleagues, being respected, and engaging in constructive dialogue contributed to helping collaboration, whereas the absence of these conditions and behaviors inhibited the group process, thereby hindering collaboration.

Thoughtful decision-making took into account how power differences and consensus-seeking affected the decision-making process. Many participants perceived seniority as both an asset and a challenge during gatekeeping, as Cindy noted:

So, if a faculty member had more power ... they would have more influence on decisions about a person ... continuing on in the program.... Those of us who had less power, kind of went along ... it was very hard to stand up and to challenge a more senior or more powerful faculty member.

Interrupting this power imbalance seemed difficult, requiring intentional actions and high levels of faculty cohesion and faculty capability. Especially for junior faculty, the potential for these power differences was salient as noted by Derek, a BIPOC assistant professor:

So, in terms of faculty dynamics, it's supervision and seniority in terms of who is leading the decision-making. Am I agreeing with you totally or am I agreeing with you because you are a senior faculty, those are ... questions like in the back of my head.

The existence of power issues in gatekeeping decision-making also affected the perception of the value of consensus as either a validating measure or a way to circumvent thoughtful decision-making. Reaching for group consensus was also related to thoughtful decision-making.

Many participants reported striving for consensus in decision-making as Seth observed, “all of us see it the same way.” Others, like Liz, noted difficulties with seeking consensus, stating, “We strive for consensus in almost everything we do.... I think that almost gets in our way.” Participants noted that CEs moved forward without consensus, if faculty capability and faculty cohesion allowed, which Cindy described as “the faculty were able to

work out compromises and to articulate things that we all agreed with.” Multiple participants noted the importance of faculty consensus, especially as the consequences were so high, as Liz further elucidated: “it depends on the gravity of the student’s behavior and performance because that would really be the telling sign of how much consensus is needed.”

Consensus-seeking may also have promoted less than thoughtful decision-making, as Cindy also observed, “It’s easier just to go along for the sake of group cohesion rather than to have open conflict.” Other participants pointed out the risks of having open conflict with more senior colleagues. Perhaps the least thoughtful decision-making occurred when false or rushed consensus was reached as a result of unchecked power dynamics, as Seth illustrated:

Sadly, I think a lot of gatekeeping can be vindictive ... it’s their own ego ... especially when you got a bad faculty member and ... then that faculty member is out to get that student. That’s a mess, that’s not gatekeeping, that’s something else.

When significant faculty cohesion was lacking, actions that constituted hindering collaboration were more likely to occur.

Sharing the workload, in a way that fit the resources and expectations of CEs, was an important aspect of helping vs. hindering collaboration. The gatekeeping workload varied among programs from those that shared it equitably to those who did not share it at all. In many programs, the program or clinical coordinator did a large share of the gatekeeping, which led to some shirking of responsibility, as Anna was told by a colleague, who said, “Well, you’re the program director, so it’s really on you to deal with it.”

About half of participants, like Ellen, perceived sharing the workload of gatekeeping as inequitable because “people who are super-invested do the lion’s share of the work and other people do what’s needed to be done and pass off the rest or they just don’t do it.” Sharing the workload of gatekeeping was compared to the sharing of other responsibilities, as John noted:

It is no different than any other program responsibility, in the sense, the people who are working hard at gatekeeping are the same people who are working hard on program development, curriculum development, attending outside meetings.

Experiencing this inequity in workload seemed to diminish the sense of shared motivation, which was a key factor in faculty cohesion. Obviously, sharing the workload was related to the condition of faculty capability, but more importantly, if participants perceived a shared motivation for gatekeeping with their colleagues, inequitable workloads were better tolerated.



Discussion

The model of the Faculty Microsystem During Gatekeeping answers the central research question of: *How do CEs experience microsystemic dynamics in the context of gatekeeping for PPC in counselor education programs?* The emergent theory provides detailed understanding of the interpersonal complexities of gatekeeping and highlights how faculty interactions influence gatekeeping. This grounded theory study led to substantial theory that supports an ecological approach to understanding gatekeeping in counselor education programs.

The secondary question was: *How do these group/microsystem processes interact with their related contexts to affect the gatekeeping process?* The Faculty Microsystem During Gatekeeping model proposes that the contextual microsystemic conditions of faculty cohesion and faculty capability interact with the microsystemic processes of engaging vs. avoiding gatekeeping and helping vs. hindering collaboration, to significantly influence the gatekeeping process.

Our findings support existing research while filling gaps in the growing gatekeeping literature. Jacobs et al. (2011) identified systemic barriers in addressing PPC in doctoral psychology programs that overlap with the concepts of avoiding gatekeeping and hindering collaboration. Their call

for “communication and self-examination” as “keys to effectively managing a program’s culture to influence the quality of difficult conversations” is consistent with our findings on the importance of faculty cohesion and helping vs. hindering collaboration (Jacobs et al., 2011, p. 179). Participants observed avoiding gatekeeping in colleagues who lacked awareness or were conflict avoidant or those colleagues who were hindering collaboration due to unchecked power dynamics (bullying), all of which may arise from CEs’ own personal experiences of PPC, such as an inability to regulate emotions, and unprofessional or unethical behavior, which have been found to negatively impact CEs’ work, including gatekeeping in CE programs (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015).

Participants reported individual and collective CE gatekeeping actions that are consistent with recent guidelines (Baldwin, 2018). Our findings corroborate and add details to existing research on the importance of collaboration during gatekeeping (Crawford & Gilroy, 2013; Dufrene, 2018; McAdams & Foster, 2007). Many of our findings on hindering vs. helping collaboration and the condition of faculty cohesion underscore the multiple interactive elements of effective collaboration in gatekeeping, such as the importance of a systemic approach, effective leadership, clear procedures, and effective responsibility taking and decision-making during gatekeeping (Dufrene, 2018). Our model provides insights into faculty dynamics and processes underlying faculty decision-making during gatekeeping and aligns with the Collaborative and Multiperspectival Decision-Making Model Process, as proposed by Letourneau (2016). Letourneau’s (2016) model combined an ethical decision-making process with feminist, multicultural, and social constructivist approaches, which also highlighted operationalizing collaboration via consensualization, interactive reflection, and negotiation during gatekeeping.

In providing data and theory that illuminate interpersonal and systemic gatekeeping challenges, the challenges within the Faculty Microsystem During Gatekeeping model are better understood

(Forrest et al., 2013; Homrich, 2009; Jacobs et al., 2011). Specific aspects of hindering collaboration such as avoiding gatekeeping or allowing unchecked power dynamics correspond with similar findings by Forrest et al. (2013) in their study of training director faculty in doctoral psychology programs. They found aspects of ineffective program strategies represented by confusion or uncertainty in gatekeeping to include subthemes of a culture of avoidance, holding onto individualistic attitudes or behaviors, and ignoring cultural issues (Forrest et al., 2013). Our findings about power dynamics and positionality between faculty align with earlier findings about low faculty cohesion and faculty capacity, and seem to mirror pretenure CEs’ experiences of “time constraints for multiple demands” and “lack of collegial support” (Hill, 2009, p. 58). Importantly, faculty cohesion and helping collaboration were found to ameliorate the emotional toll of gatekeeping on CEs, consistent with research on the importance of trusted and supportive colleagues during gatekeeping (Chang & Rubel, 2019; DeCino et al., 2020; Forrest et al., 2013; Schuermann et al., 2018).

Many of our findings replicate other research on effective teams and decision-making in higher education. In their study of effective STEM faculty teams, Sachmpazidi et al. (2021) identified five team processes: strategic leadership, egalitarian power dynamics, team member commitment, effective communication, and clear decision-making processes. They also found three emergent states — shared vision, psychological safety, and team cohesion. The processes and states they describe correspond with many aspects of an effective faculty microsystem in gatekeeping such as the conditions of faculty cohesion (trust, support, and shared motivation) and faculty capability (having time and effective leadership and clear policies and procedures) as well as the microsystemic processes of engaging gatekeeping and helping collaboration (inclusive group process, thoughtful decision-making, and sharing the workload). Similarly, our findings align with the importance of “social sharedness” and shared motivation in group decision-making (Tindale & Winget, 2019, p. 7). Our findings on how CEs

experienced the pros and cons of seeking consensus in gatekeeping decision-making matches the research on consensus vs. majority/plurality group decision-making models. Lastly, differences in how CE faculty perceive themselves as gatekeepers and how motivated they are as gatekeepers resembles a model of “motivated information processing in groups,” which argues that groups that combine high epistemic motivation (to be accurate in their decision) with high prosocial motivations will produce the most thorough processing and the most unbiased results (Tindale & Winget, 2019, p. 14). This model resembles the conditions and processes that best lead to significant collaboration in gatekeeping as experienced by our participants.

Our findings on avoiding gatekeeping provide further clarity and understanding on this phenomenon in CE programs, and supports DeLorenzi’s (2018) reasons for gatekeeper avoidance and gateslipping, and Schuermann et al.’s (2018) reports of colleagues for whom “gatekeeping is not taken seriously” (p. 61). Lastly, avoiding gatekeeping is consistent with the following barriers to ethical faculty decision-making: “(1) refusing to take responsibility, (2) relinquishing responsibility, and (3) a lack of awareness of responsibility” (Medeiros et al., 2014, p. 236). These ethical pitfalls parallel CEs who shirk their responsibility for gatekeeping, refuse to engage in gatekeeping, or lack competence in gatekeeping, lending further support to Letourneau’s (2016) model of gatekeeping as a group ethical decision-making process.

Lastly, the model of the Faculty Microsystem During Gatekeeping contributes to the evolution of our understanding of CEs, experiences during gatekeeping. Using an ecological approach to contextualize the processes within the CE gatekeeping environment mirrors the use of the ecological model to conceptualize the student trainee environment (Forrest et al., 2008; Goodrich & Shin, 2013). Whether the student/trainee or the CE is at the center of the ecological model, a systemic lens on the influences and processes surrounding the person(s), especially within their microsystem, has proven helpful in understanding

these complex relationships and processes. Furthermore, the model aligns with findings that explain CE gatekeeper identity development within a CE ecosystem using an ecological model (DeCino et al., 2021).

Implications for Counselor Education

This study’s contributions to understanding the complexities of gatekeeping has implications for CEs and program coordinators/departments chairs. CEs and program leaders should continually address issues related to faculty cohesion and faculty capability within their programs by working more intentionally to foster mutual support, trust, and overall collegiality. Although CEs are busy, program leaders should spend time attending to the quality and depth of faculty relationships. Reflexivity and intentionality on how decisions are made as a faculty would enhance not only gatekeeping collaboration but also overall CE well-being, longevity, and job satisfaction. Additionally, an increased focus on issues of power, privilege, and communication within programs would be helpful toward increasing program collaboration. Who is speaking or not speaking in faculty meetings? How can the process ensure that all voices are heard, paying attention to power dynamics especially those related to personal identities (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity) or positionality (e.g., rank and seniority)? Program leaders should ensure that junior and new faculty feel part of the decision-making and that their voices are sought, heard, and valued. New CEs would benefit from gatekeeping-specific training and collegial support. This could take the form of reading and discussing the literature, mentorship, attending relevant workshops, and participating in regular faculty discussions on gatekeeping, which can also be embedded into larger program evaluation and quality improvement efforts. Lastly, some CEs seem overly tasked with gatekeeping responsibilities, which may contribute to burnout. Programs should examine how gatekeeping responsibilities are delegated, especially in programs where an outsized portion of the work falls to a few, whether by design or by default.

Programs should have a shared understanding and agreement on how gatekeeping responsibilities are delegated and shared among the faculty. Following these recommendations would strengthen gatekeeping collaboration by enhancing the faculty microsystem for gatekeeping in CE programs.

Implications for CEs in doctoral programs include preparing students for the ethical, interpersonal, multicultural, and systemic nature of gatekeeping (Rapp et al., 2018). Doctoral programs should host dialogues with early-career CEs to learn about their first-hand experiences of gatekeeping, particularly exploring issues of power/positionality, collaboration, and decision-making with future colleagues. Such experiences might better prepare doctoral students for the realities of the field. Doctoral students should know that their future colleagues may differ in their personal and professional capacities and level of motivation for gatekeeping, and recognize that gatekeeping is challenging for multiple reasons, including systemic challenges that hinder CEs from always “doing the right thing” when it comes to gatekeeping

Limitations

Limitations may have arisen in this study from participant selection or researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2017). CEs who were reluctant or unable to participate were not included in this study and these nonrespondents might have had different gatekeeping experiences than our participants. Also, although the participants were diverse in many ways (gender, race/ethnicity, geographic region, and tenure status), they may not represent all CEs. We did not include CEs who are not on the tenure-track, an increasingly common population, and their experiences may have differed significantly. Eight of the 12 participants held past or present leadership positions within their counselor education program, which may have a bearing on our findings.

Other limitations may have arisen from how the research was conducted. Despite seeking to maximize trustworthiness, a lack of researcher reflexivity might have biased the findings. This study used a single data collection, which also

provided data for a related study on the internal experiences of CEs during gatekeeping. As such, the initial coding and subsequent concepts and categories influenced one another across the two studies. However, this interaction of data and theorizing between the studies may have strengthened both studies by enhancing the comprehensiveness of each, which could be advantageous due to the complex nature of gatekeeping.

Future Research

This study has furthered understanding about the conditions and processes of the Faculty Microsystem During Gatekeeping model. Further research is necessary to fill gaps in the proposed model, such as the role of adjunct faculty and site supervisors, the role of seniority and tenure, and differing professional backgrounds of CEs. An aspect of faculty cohesion that urgently requires more research is how the identities of marginalized and privileged counseling students and CEs interact to influence the complex and subjective nature of gatekeeping. Lastly, more research on the actual decision-making processes of CEs and their associated outcomes would be valuable.

Participants shared data that likely fit within other parts of an ecological model, such as the mesosystem (e.g., the effects of university administrators and legal counsel on student dismissal decisions and processes), exosystem (e.g., CACREP and state licensing bodies and their role in maintaining standards for counselors), and chronosystem (e.g., changing norms, values, and expectations of CEs and counseling students over time). However, the data seemed disparate and not robust enough to warrant contextualizing them in more macrosystemic levels of a more fully developed ecological gatekeeping model. Future research could illuminate a more comprehensive ecological model of gatekeeping in counselor education. Lastly, this research did not explore the relationship between gatekeeping processes and gatekeeping outcomes, nor does it consider the voice of the counseling student, the person in this

complex counselor education ecosystem who is at the heart of CE's gatekeeping efforts.

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