



Exploring the Downside of Standardized Counselor Education

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Abstract: Higher education institutions face increasing demands driven by rapid scientific and technological advancements. Despite limited resources, colleges and universities must manage rising enrollment pressures while improving efficiency, effectiveness, and educational quality, extending learning beyond traditional classroom boundaries. These challenges require institutions to leverage communication technologies to deliver curricula that are accessible, flexible, and responsive to diverse learner needs. Within counselor education, cultivating leadership skills, expanding access to resources, promoting creative pedagogy, and incorporating hands-on strategies are essential for fostering meaningful student engagement. Meeting these goals necessitates moving away from outdated instructional practices and embracing innovative approaches that align with the evolving expectations of both students and educators. Integrating multimedia tools and flexible learning structures empowers counselor educators to apply their expertise more effectively, reignite their professional passion, and build authentic connections with students. Ultimately, such transformation strengthens the preparation of future counselors and contributes to the advancement of the field.

Keywords: counselor education, engagement, institutional barriers, academic freedom, experiential learning, supportive structures

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Counselor educators encounter numerous challenges in their faculty roles, including emotional demands, institutional barriers, and faculty politics, all while shaping the next generation of counseling professionals (Hays, 2021). These limitations often stem from institutional constraints that restrict both faculty and student understanding of the counselor educator's role, ultimately hindering the broader impact of counselor education programs. Engaging students through innovative, creative, and experiential learning strategies enhances institutional professionalism and promotes stronger student outcomes.

Experiential learning offers a deeper and more dynamic educational experience than didactic methods because it immerses students in real-world situations that promote leadership, collaboration, and active learning, all of which are core competencies of counselor education (Kolb, 2015). Research supports that experiential learning enables faculty to provide students with hands-on opportunities that complement classroom instruction while improving competency, retention, collaboration, communication, creativity, and confidence (Brock, 2023). These qualities are not only vital for professional practice but also foundational to student success.

Enhancing counselor education programs requires institutional innovation, creativity, and commitment at both departmental and administrative levels. Institutional barriers within counselor education programs significantly affect faculty productivity, student development, and overall program quality. When these challenges go unaddressed, they can impede retention, compromise program implementation, and weaken educational outcomes.

Addressing the issues and institutional barriers requires higher-level leadership within the educational institution to provide adequate resources, support faculty, be receptive to criticism, and demonstrate an overall commitment to program development. By doing so, counselor educator programs are more effective and better prepare future students.

Historical Context of Counselor Education Challenges

Colleges and universities often struggle to provide doctoral students with learning environments that foster holistic support, satisfaction, and persistence (Brock, 2023). When counselor educators receive opportunities to strengthen their leadership skills, teaching resources, and professional environments, their capacity to engage students meaningfully increases. Such progress depends on eliminating current barriers, replacing outdated pedagogical patterns, understanding the evolving needs of faculty and students, and leveraging multimedia learning platforms to enhance engagement.

Peinovich (2008) argues that contemporary higher education is shaped by complex economic, social, and policy trends that influence institutional priorities and faculty roles. These systemic pressures highlight the need for institutions to actively support faculty development and foster environments where educators can thrive.

Despite limited resources, higher education institutions face growing pressure to expand access while improving efficiency, effectiveness, and quality, all beyond the traditional boundaries of classroom instruction. These competing demands highlight the need for adaptive, innovative strategies to promote sustainable counselor education programs.

Academic freedom and Institutional Barriers

As institutions respond to broader shifts in higher education, adjunct and part-time faculty often bear the brunt of policy and budgetary pressures. Historical trends in higher education have created structural challenges that limit faculty autonomy and engagement, reinforcing the importance of targeted professional development and supportive departmental cultures (Peinovich, 2008).

Academic freedom is essential to the integrity of counselor education. It allows faculty members to engage in open inquiry, contribute original ideas, and guide students toward independent thought without fear of censorship or institutional interference (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2022). Restrictions on academic freedom can stifle creativity and discourage both faculty and students from exploring new perspectives or questioning dominant paradigms.

Academic freedom for adjunct instructors is severely limited by their lack of a stable and secure position, which hinders their ability to fully engage in teaching and inquiry (Jensen, 2018). Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are at risk. The independence of academic institutions from external control is a fundamental pillar of modern academic life. Research highlights several developments over recent decades that have influenced these core values (Russell, 1993).

Academic freedom is increasingly at risk, not only for tenured faculty but also for adjunct instructors who often face precarious employment conditions. Jensen (2018) argues that the unstable employment status of adjunct faculty significantly impinges upon their academic freedom. Without the security of a permanent position, adjuncts may encounter limitations in engaging in long-term pedagogical planning, pursuing scholarly research, or participating in institutional governance. This lack of stability affects both their professional development and the quality of education they provide to students.

In addition, Jensen, (2018) emphasizes belonging to a stable institutional community is central to both teaching effectiveness and professional identity. For adjunct faculty, the lack of consistent physical and institutional grounding limits their ability to fully engage in their work and develop a cohesive sense of professional identity.

Addressing these challenges requires establishing local teacher-scholar communities of practice. These communities provide adjunct faculty with opportunities for collaboration, mutual support, and shared inquiry. By participating in these networks, adjuncts can gain a sense of stability and belonging, enhance their professional development, and strengthen their collective voice in advocating for academic freedom.

Building on these theoretical insights, empirical research demonstrates that adjunct and part-time faculty satisfaction is directly influenced by institutional support. Hoyt et al. (2008) found that part-time faculty report higher job satisfaction when they receive recognition, equitable compensation, access to professional development, and ongoing support from their institutions. Similarly, Boyle and Hermanson (2020) emphasize the importance of developing and utilizing faculty effectively, highlighting how departmental culture, workload distribution, and structured professional development initiatives can enhance teaching effectiveness and faculty engagement.

Combined perspectives indicate that addressing adjunct faculty challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Institutions must prioritize professional development responsive to adjunct needs, implement systems that recognize and reward contributions, and foster inclusive

departmental cultures that encourage collaboration and participation. Providing adjunct faculty with stability, support, and recognition not only enhances their professional identity and satisfaction but also strengthens the quality of instruction, student engagement, and overall program outcomes (Jensen, 2018, 2021; Hoyt et al., 2008; Boyle & Hermanson, 2020).

These insights further illuminate institutional limitations by highlighting how employment structures, community support, and leadership engagement collectively influence whether faculty are empowered or constrained in their teaching and scholarly activities. Universities are increasingly responsive to external stakeholders, the professionalization of university leadership is expanding, internal decision-making processes are subject to broader oversight, and there is a growing emphasis on treating students as customers.

Research indicates that a comprehensive understanding of academic freedom must address both foundational theoretical concerns and contemporary policies and practices that place counselor education departments at risk (Ren, 2013). Although academic freedom is widely endorsed, many university leaders claim it is fully upheld in practice. However, persistent global challenges, including shifts in the academic landscape, political interference, commercialization, market-driven priorities, and legal constraints, continue to threaten the principle of academic freedom (Altbach, 2013).

Experiential Learning

The term *experiential learning* describes an approach in which students learn through direct experiences, often contrasted with traditional lecture-based instruction (Kolb, 2015). In this perspective, learning occurs primarily through concrete experience and in-context action, with reflection, analysis, and academic knowledge serving as complementary components.

Kolb (2014) details the stages of experiential learning, emphasizing that it extends beyond the classroom. Students bring prior experiences, engage with peers and faculty, and interact with situations outside traditional academic settings. A typical experiential learning cycle begins with a concrete experience, followed by reflective observation, where learners analyze and interpret their experiences. The next stage, abstract conceptualization, involves translating reflections into new insights and understandings, culminating in active experimentation, in which learners apply these insights through exploration or new ways of thinking. From a constructivist viewpoint, meaning-making is crucial, as learners actively construct knowledge through their experiences and reflections.

Providing hands-on training is highly effective in preparing competent counselor educators. Experiential learning immerses students in real-life situations, allowing them to apply knowledge in practice while receiving constructive feedback, all without compromising CACREP standards. Many students, however, enter higher education shaped by earlier experiences that encourage passive learning, perpetuating a cycle of limited engagement.

Facilitating active engagement fosters *self-authorship*, in which individuals construct their own understanding rather than passively absorbing information. This approach builds capacity for self-direction, a key educational goal. Some programs further promote self-direction through assessment and feedback on learning competencies, personalized learning plans aligned with career goals, and the development of metacognitive skills.

As students become more aware of how they learn most effectively, they take greater responsibility for their growth, even in challenging or unfamiliar areas. Experiential learning is therefore essential for deep and meaningful understanding (Farrell, 2021; Kolb, 2015).

Additionally, experiential learning emphasizes learning as an ongoing, iterative process. By integrating course content with student and educator perspectives, it fosters meaningful connections and developmental exercises. Applied learning opportunities allow students to actively shape knowledge, making learning a transformative experience rather than a static endpoint.

Eliminating Program Limitations

Institutional barriers often prevent faculty from effectively teaching and leading within counselor education programs. Research emphasizes the importance of listening to professionals in the field to identify gaps in training and preparation. Participants consistently reported that certain experiences would have better prepared them for future leadership roles (Hays, 2021).

Furthermore, faculty buy-in is essential for successfully executing a program's mission. Faculty involvement requires active participation, ownership, and commitment to shared goals. One participant noted that high-quality programs foster a culture in which "everyone feels like they have ownership in the doctoral program and that everyone has a voice." Programs that prioritize collective success, defined as providing the best training experience for students over individual advancement, create environments where collaboration and mutual support thrive. Strong faculty relationships and teamwork directly enhance student preparation and overall program quality, while administration buy-in ensures that faculty have the necessary resources to sustain these efforts (Preston, 2020 Pg.463).

In a study, counselor educators who were participants reported differences between institutions known to be high-quality programs compared to those that intentionally prepare counselor educators. Within this study, it was acknowledged that the CACREP (2016) accreditation standards should be viewed as the baseline, with students needing to engage in experiences that extend beyond these minimum requirements.

Counselor educators in high-quality programs recognize that the CACREP 2016 accreditation standards represent the baseline. Students benefit from experiences that extend beyond these minimum requirements, developing a counselor educator identity that prepares them for leadership roles. In an article, Preston, 2020, Pg. 462, One participant highlighted that top-tier programs offer experiences beyond "the cookie-cutter bare minimum that CACREP mandates," enabling students to cultivate unique contributions to the field. Another emphasized that going beyond coursework and standards truly makes a difference in professional development.

Leadership-Equipped Preparation

Expanding opportunities within a well-rounded program is associated with higher graduate student enrollment and lower dropout rates (Preston, 2020). Graduate assistantships are important and go beyond helping students gain practical and meaningful experience. Assistantships provide skill development and the opportunity for hands-on experience that further their knowledge. Areas such as counseling techniques, case management, and assessment are crucial for the development of a knowledgeable counselor educator.

Leadership failure is often rooted in a lack of trust across organizational levels. Managing responses to unpredictable circumstances is essential for professional growth and adaptability (Kraljevic, 2018). Although doctoral programs adhere to the CACREP 2016 standards that prepare

counselor educators to lead, gaps remain in leadership development and practical experiences. Limited access to resources can frustrate faculty and restrict student development.

Additionally, developing skills in research, supervision, and teaching, with an emphasis on gatekeeping and providing students with mentorship from their professor. Assessing student performance is a core responsibility of professors. Graduate assistantships are critical in bridging these gaps. They provide hands-on experiences in counseling techniques, case management, assessment, supervision, and teaching, all of which contribute to the development of leadership competencies. Experiential learning supports faculty in fulfilling core responsibilities, including gatekeeping, mentoring, and evaluating student performance. When faculty effectively implement experiential learning, students gain deeper professional skills, and programs cultivate leaders prepared to advance the counseling profession (Preston, 2020).

Enhancing Collaboration and Support Structures

Institutions play a central role in generating knowledge and preparing counselor educators for leadership roles. However, technological disruptions, gaps between industry expectations and students' skill sets, limited financial resources, and inadequate research infrastructure often create barriers to program effectiveness (Menon et al., 2022). Organizational agility, which carefully encompasses strategic thinking, innovation, and adaptability, is essential for institutions to respond to evolving educational demands. Top programs exemplify agility by fostering collaborative learning environments, supporting faculty innovation, and promoting interdisciplinary teamwork (Appelbaum, 2017; Menon et al., 2022).

Partnering effectively with stakeholders, faculty, and other institutions ensures that programs can identify new opportunities and overcome existing limitations. Similarly, understanding and responding to the needs of faculty, students, alumni, and other stakeholders is critical for promoting growth and eliminating barriers.

Effective collaboration and relational engagement foster a sense of belonging, psychological safety, and motivation among faculty and students. In counselor education, shared decision-making and interdisciplinary teamwork enhance curriculum development, research, and mentorship opportunities (Kraiger et al., 2014). Counselor educators, trained in advocacy, are well-positioned to influence policies that affect student learning and professional development (Chang et al., 2021). Integrating advocacy into daily practice aligns with professional values and ensures that counselor educators can address institutional limitations effectively.

Leadership and advocacy are core elements in counselor training for both master's and doctoral students (CACREP, 2016). Educators often feel unprepared to teach effectively due to limited resources, fear of losing classroom control, or feeling unheard. These challenges perpetuate reliance on traditional instructional methods and constrain innovation (Hays, 2021).

Pedagogical Approaches

Counselor educators are often hesitant to adopt new strategies and technologies, resulting in stagnant learning environments. Reliance on traditional lecture-based methods can increase cognitive load for students, decrease engagement, and hinder the development of critical thinking skills (Koudsia, 2024). Constructivist approaches to pedagogy, which emphasize active learning, align well with counselor education, encouraging students to construct knowledge through engagement and reflection (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Flexibility is essential for professional educators. Universities that empower faculty to exercise judgment in curriculum design, teaching methods, and leadership opportunities create environments conducive to innovation and student engagement. Research demonstrates that empowering counselor educators enhances relational outcomes, improves collaboration among faculty, and strengthens departmental culture (Haynes et al., 2024).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) ensures that educators maintain competence and adapt to evolving practices throughout their careers (Dayagbil, 2024). CPD enhances teaching strategies, fosters innovation, and supports professional growth, ultimately improving student learning outcomes (Hammond, 2017). Strategic leadership, which extends beyond administrative oversight, involves shaping vision, fostering innovation, and guiding both faculty and students toward meaningful growth. Effective leadership is therefore essential for sustaining institutional success and adaptability in an evolving academic landscape (Hays, 2021).

Effective Learning Environments

As counselor educators' students complete their education and graduate, officially becoming a counselor educator, many are expected to be fully prepared to take on the multifaceted responsibilities of a counselor educator. To meet these expectations, doctoral-level programs must provide rigorous preparation and intentional challenges that develop both professional and personal competencies required in the field.

Research has consistently raised concerns about the sustainability of the profession and the ongoing need for well-qualified counselor educators. Graduating counselor educators are respected and held in high regard for training, educating, and leading many future counselor educator students (Fields, 2020).

During COVID, research indicated that professors and students faced self-imposed obstacles, as well as pedagogical, technical, and financial or organizational and leadership obstacles. This forced online learning environments to either examine professors' needs or continue the old pattern. These realities underscore the urgency of cultivating a highly trained and adaptable working environment capable of addressing complex issues within departments and institutions.

Challenges within departments and institutions can significantly impact the development of future counselor educators. Given the growing demands institutions carry, there is always a constant responsibility of preparing counselor educators to lead, teach, supervise, and gatekeep. However, this can only be done correctly if the institutional leaders themselves are equipped with the tools, support, and autonomy that is necessary to lead effectively. Strong and empowered leadership at the institutional level sets the tone for healthy departmental culture, positively influencing faculty and, ultimately, students.

Overall, healthy leadership and the inclusion of faculty voices significantly influence institutional culture and outcomes. When leadership is restricted, at the institutional or departmental level or both, it disrupts this cycle, preventing the establishment of a sustainable, growth-oriented environment that can be passed down through generations of educators. Having a positive environment sets the tone. Research shows that highly effective institutions go beyond the business level and instead move out towards their staff and validate those who spend time perfecting their skills as educators. This research also demonstrates to peers, administrators, and other stakeholders the importance of identifying, rewarding, and elevating effective educators (Haynes et al., 2024).

Recent trends show a growing investment in counselor education doctoral programs nationwide, with significant increases in both enrollment and graduation rates. This expansion underscores the importance of conducting focused research to better understand and shape doctoral education experience. The preparation of future counselor educators is a crucial undertaking, as these individuals serve as the standard-bearers and gatekeepers of the counseling profession (Litherland & Schulthes, 2020).

To accomplish this task, a mindset that allows institutional leaders to understand their faculty at the department level is critical for creating change. Leaders go beyond the titles of only the higher leaders at the institutional level. Acknowledging the presence of multiple participants in leadership dynamics is a great quality amongst top rated colleges. Haynes (2024) notes that when this leadership dynamic is embedded within counselor education programs, it moves beyond individual influence to shape the broader culture and direction of the profession.

In research findings, there are commonalities within the professional experience of working as a professor. The theme was educators feel as if they are not as important or have a voice because they are only professors, fostering an imposter syndrome mentality (Hays, 2021). Also, creating a fixed mindset for the higher leaders in the institution leaves no room for quality feedback from the very individuals who have hands-on experience in their working environment.

Effective leadership begins with acknowledging the presence of multiple participants in leadership dynamics. Rosari (2019) described leadership as a relationship of influence between leaders and followers aimed at creating meaningful change aligned with their shared goals. Leaders who support faculty as change agents might begin by reframing leadership, challenging the personal and positional views in favor of process-oriented leadership (Haynes et al., 2024). Creating an effective environment starts at the top and encourages faculty to view leadership as an extension of teaching and teaching as one form of leadership. Providing faculty to have a voice and provide feedback, offering a path towards embracing their role as agents of change. This perspective is particularly relevant for individuals aiming to contribute to meaningful institutional transformation to provide learning and growth (Kotter, 2014).

Research has shown that online learners are at a higher risk of psychological isolation (Budhai & Skipwith 2021). Counselors are trained in how to teach but often receive limited preparation in constructivist approaches and creative instructional design.

Addressing the evolving needs of students and faculty requires innovative leadership strategies and institutional agility. Proactively investing in faculty development, mentoring, and collaborative networks ensures that educators can adapt to these shifts while maintaining academic freedom and high-quality instruction (Peinovich, 2008).

Examining Educational Development: Pedagogy

Innovative, integrative, and student-centered learning environments are critical for counselor education. Persistent reliance on traditional teaching methods not only limits educator creativity but also reduces student engagement and critical thinking opportunities. Programs that prioritize academic freedom enable faculty to implement active learning strategies, enhancing problem-solving, reflective thinking, and knowledge construction (Schende et al. 2020, Trinidad, 2019). When faculty have autonomy to experiment with pedagogy and integrate experiential learning, they can adapt instruction to meet diverse student needs while fostering professional growth.

Faculty development programs that emphasize student-centered teaching, experiential learning, and technological integration further strengthen these outcomes. Hands-on application of coursework cultivates clinical skills, professional intuition, and meaningful knowledge construction, while also promoting faculty confidence and competence. Incorporating multimedia tools, adaptive learning strategies, and attention to both faculty and student roles in learning environments reduces psychological isolation, enhances satisfaction, and fosters a collaborative educational culture (Le Cunff et al., Mayer, 2014).

By linking faculty development with experiential and student-centered learning, counselor education programs can create dynamic environments in which both educators and students thrive, leading to stronger professional preparation and more transformative learning experiences.

Final Thoughts

This work highlights the complexities and challenges inherent in counselor education, emphasizing the importance of academic freedom, institutional support, and innovative pedagogy. Programs must meet accreditation and policy standards (e.g., CACREP) while empowering educators to advocate for best practices and remove unnecessary barriers to student success. Creating hands-on, experiential learning opportunities strengthens counselor educator departments, promotes deeper student understanding, and prepares future leaders in the field (Farrell et al., 2020). Providing resources, support, and opportunities for faculty input breaks institutional barriers, fostering environments in which educators and students thrive. Continued research into these barriers will inform more effective strategies, ensuring experiential learning and professional development align with the evolving needs of counselor education programs.

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