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Using the Theory of Planned Behavior to Understand Dispositional Gatekeeping Behaviors Among Rehabilitation Counselor Educators

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Rehabilitation counselor educators (RCEs) in programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) are mandated to assess student professional dispositions as part of the gatekeeping process. This study utilized the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to explore the factors that influence RCE dispositional gatekeeping behaviors. The study includes a sample of 52 RCEs across the United States. Results obtained using a multiple linear regression model indicate that participants generally have positive attitudes toward their role as dispositional gatekeepers and their behaviors. As hypothesized by TPB, both beliefs and perceived norms relating to dispositional gatekeeping predicted dispositional gatekeeping behaviors, with the model accounting for approximately 57% of the variance. Lastly, implications and recommendations are included as they relate to gatekeeping in master's-level rehabilitation counseling programs.

Rehabilitation counselor educators (RCEs) are the central gatekeepers of the counseling profession. A gatekeeper has been conceptualized as a more senior or experienced member of a profession who oversees more junior members' academic or clinical development as they prepare to enter a given field (Homrich, 2009). The primary objective of gatekeeping is to protect the welfare of any current and future client served by that particular junior member. Gatekeeping is a process by which RCEs work together in academic units to implement processes and procedures designed to evaluate students and their appropriateness for the field. This evaluative process begins pre-admission and continues through to graduation, including remediating students as appropriate before their work with clients (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010).

Gatekeeping is a required element for accreditation by the Council on the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) and encompasses multiple ethical obligations for RCEs, making it a mandatory practice within training programs. These obligations include ensuring students are competent to enter the profession and protecting any future clients of those students (American Counseling Association, 2014; Brear et al., 2008; Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, 2016; Homrich, 2009; Levine et al., 2019). It is well-established that unethical and incompetent counselors have the potential to harm clients (Brear et al., 2008; Homrich

& Henderson, 2018). Traditional approaches to gatekeeping have focused on academic competence (i.e., grades and course assignments). However, the interpersonal nature of rehabilitation counseling requires that credentialed counselors embody characteristics that go beyond their academic performance.

Trainee Professional Dispositions

Rehabilitation counselors work with vulnerable clients. Therefore, rehabilitation counselors must have effective personal characteristics beyond academic competence (Kimball et al., 2019; Levine, 2020; Sabella et al., 2019). As a result, RCEs maintain a professional responsibility to evaluate and determine the "goodness of fit" between a counselor-in-training and the field of counseling (McCaughan & Hill, 2015, p. 28). These nonacademic characteristics have been labeled "professional dispositions," which are defined by the CACREP as "the commitments, characteristics, values, beliefs, interpersonal functioning, and behaviors that influence the counselor's professional growth and interactions with clients and colleagues" (CACREP, 2016, p. 43).

Recently, the professional dispositions of rehabilitation counseling students have increasingly become a focus of academic literature in rehabilitation counseling (e.g., Landon et al., 2021; Levine, 2020; Levine et al., 2019; Sabella

et al., 2019). Notably, there are few agreements on the definition of professional disposition, a fact that contributes to inconsistent research on the topic, as well as inconsistent conceptualization of them in academic programs (Brear et al., 2008; Christensen et al., 2018; Homrich, 2009; Miller et al., 2020; Rust et al., 2013). Notably, when acting as a gatekeeper, faculty have historically focused on academic competencies rather than professional disposition characteristics (Brear et al., 2008; Forrest et al., 1999; Homrich, 2009). For this study, the term dispositional gatekeeping will be used to describe the act of gatekeeping students for dispositional competencies such as personality, communication style, and demeanor. This contrasts with more traditional forms of gatekeeping that focus exclusively on academic achievement.

Barriers to Dispositional Gatekeeping

In general, dispositional gatekeeping has been regarded as a less than desirable responsibility of faculty, although there is recognition of its importance and the ethical commitment tied to it (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002; Levine et al., 2019; Schuermann et al., 2018). Differing perspectives about student issues have been found as a prevailing issue with gatekeeping among faculty, alongside fears related to legal backlash and a lack of departmental and institutional support in the gatekeeping process (Levine et al., 2019; Schuermann et al., 2018). Counselor educators have noted the difficulty in balancing their identities as both an educator and a gatekeeper, describing the conflict of “meeting people [i.e., students] where they are,” but also having an ethical mandate to protect future clients (Chang & Rubel, 2019, p. 12). Schuermann and colleagues (2018) identified that assistant-level professors voiced concerns about a lack of support in the gatekeeping process, which aligns with Gaubatz and Vera’s (2002) study demonstrating that untenured faculty worried more about the consequences of gatekeeping when compared to their tenured peers. As such, faculty (especially junior and non-tenured faculty) may be unwilling to intervene with a dispositional gatekeeping issue due to structural or programmatic reasons (Chang & Rubel, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2019; Schuermann et al., 2018).

Concerns about being supported in gatekeeping practices may be magnified when considering a dispositional gatekeeping issue. Interpersonal skills and the “personhood” of a counselor have been repeatedly related to successful client outcomes or successes through the therapeutic or working alliance (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Lustig et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2000). Unfortunately, evaluating a student counselor’s professional dispositions, or “personhood,” most often occurs without formal definitions and is much more subjective than academic evaluations, leading many faculty to avoid it altogether (Brear et al., 2008; Forrest et al., 1999; Homrich, 2009). In addition, when recommending students for remediation or dismissal due to academic problems, there are clear university policies and procedures for unsatisfactory grades or plagiarism. However, when suggesting a student counselor for remediation or dismissal due to a dispositional concern, the same can-

not be said (Homrich et al., 2014; Teixeira, 2017). Persisting issues with defining professional dispositions, alongside vulnerabilities felt by faculty and a lack of clarity around processes for dispositional gatekeeping, may contribute to the *gateslipping* or graduation of students with dispositional deficiencies that may put future clients at risk (Gaubatz & Vera, 2006).

Theory of Planned Behavior

The current study seeks to examine the perceived control of counselor educators in the dispositional gatekeeping process. Therefore, the theory of planned behavior (TPB) offers an opportunity to explore the gatekeeping practices of RCEs. Ajzen (1985) postulated that behaviors are goal-directed. The TPB also “takes into account perceived and actual control over the behavior under consideration” (Ajzen, 1985, p. 12). Furthermore, the TPB states that human behavior is influenced by beliefs related to the behavior (i.e., outcomes), the normative expectations of others (i.e., expectations), and perceptions of control (i.e., control beliefs) (Bosnjak et al., 2020). In other words, “behavioral beliefs produce a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the behavior; normative beliefs result in perceived social pressure or subjective norm; and control beliefs give rise to perceived behavioral control or self-efficacy” (Bosnjak et al., 2020, p. 353).

The TPB is a commonly used framework to study human action (Ajzen, 2002). Research has been conducted on various social and health behaviors cross-culturally. Furthermore, meta-analyses suggest that the influential beliefs (i.e., the outcome of attitudes, norms, and control) discussed above predict intentions and vice versa (Kuhlman et al., 2017). Notably, “examinations of the TPB have revealed that actual control (as distinct from perceived behavioral control) over behavior and the context in which it occurs may operate directly or indirectly on behavioral intentions and enactment of behavior” (Kuhlman et al., 2017, p. 706). Findings from studies conducted by LaBarbera and Ajzen (2020) highlighted the moderating effect of perceived behavioral control as a predictive variable of intention.

In terms of gatekeeping, the application of TPB has been utilized to evaluate gatekeeper trainers’ intention to enact the act of gatekeeping for suicide prevention. Kuhlman et al. (2017) substantiated the significance of intentions and behavioral control in gatekeeping behaviors. Participants’ attitudes and perceived behavioral control accounted mainly for the gatekeepers’ intent and behavioral control variance. Moreover, utilizing TPB as a theoretical framework, Levine et al. (2019) examined RCEs gatekeeping attitudes. They found that, while they have favorable attitudes toward gatekeeping, participants noted concerns about implementing interventions (i.e., perceived behavioral control). Supervisor support for gatekeeping behaviors has also increased gatekeeping behaviors (Moore et al., 2011).

This descriptive, exploratory study aimed to examine how counselor educators’ beliefs, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control relate to their actual behavior in the dispositional gatekeeping process of counselors-in-training. The following research questions were addressed

Table 1. Example of Mirrored Items Across Gatekeeping Scales

Scale	Example item
Beliefs	Assessing student professional disposition development at multiple points before fieldwork is critical.
Control	Assessing student professional disposition development at multiple points during the program is something I feel empowered to do in my program.
Norms	Assessing student professional disposition development at multiple points during the program is reinforced in our program.
Behaviors	I assess student professional disposition development at multiple points during their time in the program.

in the exploration of rehabilitation counseling educators' perceptions of dispositional gatekeeping:

1. What are rehabilitation counseling educators' beliefs, perceived control, norms, and behaviors relating to dispositional gatekeeping?
2. Do program directors view dispositional gatekeeping differently than other faculty?
3. Does the theory of planned behavior help predict rehabilitation educators' dispositional gatekeeping behaviors?

Methods

Participants & Procedure

The sample consisted of 52 RCEs, including 21 assistant professors, 14 associate professors, and 17 full professors, 22 of whom reported being the program director for their related programs. The mean time working at participants' current institution was 8.84 years ($SD = 6.57$, range = 1 - 28), with 25 (48.1%) male, 25 (48.1%) female, and 2 (3.8%) reporting that they preferred not to say. A total of 38 (73.1%) identified as Caucasian and 13 (25.0%) as African American, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, or other; one additional participant did not report. Among participants, 29 (55.8%) taught entirely online before COVID, and the other 23 (44.2%) taught in person or hybrid. Regarding credentialing, 47 (90.4%) reported holding the Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) certification.

The university's Institutional Review Board granted human subject approval for this project. Participants were recruited by sending emails to the program directors of all master's level rehabilitation counseling programs throughout the United States. The email invited program directors to forward the study to their faculty for completion, in addition to completing it on their own. Participants completed the online survey via Qualtrics, with those who completed the survey having the option to share their information to be considered for one of three \$100.00 Amazon gift cards.

Measures

Following an extensive literature review, four of the authors created an initial list of quantitative (Likert-style items) and open-ended qualitative questions. The scale was vetted by a researcher known for their gatekeeping and professional disposition research. The measures used in this study are described below. A summary of the scales and their example items can be viewed in [Table 1](#).

Gatekeeping. Gatekeeping beliefs, control, norms, and behavior were measured using a newly created set of measures: *Gatekeeping Beliefs Scale*, *Gatekeeping Control Scale*, *Gatekeeping Norms Scale*, and *Gatekeeping Behavior Scale*. Each scale in this battery of gatekeeping measures consists of 7 items that mirror each other in content; but, in contrast, each was modified to emphasize beliefs, control to act autonomously, norms of the program, and gatekeeping behaviors the participant engages in. For an example of the items across scales, [Table 1](#) shows Item 3 across each of the four scales with their diverging emphases. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). A mean score is computed from all items, with higher scores indicating stronger gatekeeping perceptions or actions. The Cronbach's alphas for this study were .902 for the beliefs scale, .887 for the control scale, .907 for the norms scale, and .898 for the behavior scale.

Analysis

All data were collected through Qualtrics, a secure online data collection platform, with data analysis completed using SPSS v 26. This analysis included descriptive information (e.g., frequencies and measures of central tendency) to identify current beliefs, perceptions of control, norms, and behaviors among rehabilitation counseling educators. Factor and reliability analysis were used for scale development related to each scale used in this study. Multiple regression analysis was used to predict gatekeeping behaviors.

Results

Before predicting gatekeeping behavior among rehabilitation counseling educators, we conducted a descriptive analysis to better understand their gatekeeping beliefs, perceived control, and norms. [Table 2](#) shows the means and standard deviations across the seven items for each of the scales, while [Table 3](#) shows the correlations between scales and their means and standard deviations. Perceptions and behaviors were generally reported positively, with mean gatekeeping perceptions and behaviors falling between *Somewhat Agree* and *Agree*. The lowest average item for beliefs, perceived control, and norms centered on professional dispositions affecting a student's eligibility for graduation ($M = 3.96$, 3.33 , and 3.35 , respectively). For behaviors, gatekeeping that might affect a student's eligibility for graduation ($M = 4.00$) was edged out by reports of whether participants gave the same emphasis to professional dispo-

Table 2. Item Mean and Standard Deviations for Rehabilitation Counselor Educators' Gatekeeping Perceptions and Behaviors

Item	Topic	Beliefs		Control		Norms		Behaviors	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	Evaluating student professional disposition development has equal importance to evaluating a student's content knowledge.	4.56	0.98	3.94	1.09	3.65	1.30	3.90	1.26
2.	Formalized mechanisms for evaluating student professional disposition development (e.g., procedures, rubrics, or measures)	4.60	0.82	3.71	1.24	4.04	1.05	4.42	0.84
3.	Assessing disposition development at multiple points prior to fieldwork	4.48	0.90	4.08	1.05	3.98	1.18	4.23	1.10
4.	Using a shared measure for evaluating student professional disposition development	4.46	0.92	4.17	0.96	3.96	1.17	4.08	1.15
5.	Failure to demonstrate adequate professional disposition development impeding graduation	3.96	1.12	3.33	1.42	3.35	1.28	4.00	1.30
6.	Addressing inadequate student professional disposition development at the first sign of concerns.	4.42	1.00	3.73	1.39	3.96	1.24	4.23	1.00
7.	Creating a remediation plan for student's inadequate professional disposition development	4.62	0.82	4.23	0.94	4.19	1.14	4.08	1.06

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Scales and Descriptive Data With Descriptives Broken Down by Program Director, General Faculty, and Total

Variables		Director	Faculty	Total				
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4
1	Beliefs	31.91 (4.01)	30.50 (5.96)	31.10 (5.23)	--			
2	Control	28.59 (5.78)	26.17 (6.59)	27.19 (6.32)	.309*	--		
3	Norms*	29.55 (4.94)	25.37 (7.33)	27.13 (6.70)	.383**	.683***	--	
4	Behavior	30.77 (5.61)	27.50 (6.39)	28.88 (6.23)	.571***	.538***	.670***	--

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

sitions as the acquisition of knowledge in their evaluation processes ($M = 3.90$). In contrast, the highest average item for beliefs, perceived control, and norms centered on creating a remediation plan for students' inadequate professional disposition development ($M = 4.62, 4.23$, and 4.19 , respectively). The most-reported behavior was the current or future use of formalized mechanisms to evaluate student professional dispositions ($M = 4.42$).

As shown in Table 3, RCEs' beliefs averaged notably higher than perceived control, norms, and behavior. All scales significantly correlated with each other, with the strongest relationships between norms and behavior ($r = .670$) and between perceived control and norms ($r = .683$). It can be seen in Table 3 that program directors had higher scale scores across all four components of academic gatekeeping. A series of independent sample *t*-tests suggested that program directors view academic gatekeeping differently than general faculty members. Given the small sam-

ple size and exploratory nature of the study, we used Benjamini & Yekutieli's (2001) method to control for the family-wise error rate. Using this approach, *p*-values below 0.02400 are considered statistically significant (Narum, 2006). Independent sample *t*-test analysis showed statistically significant differences for gatekeeping norms ($t(50) = 2.45, p = .018$, with equality of variance not assumed). On average, program directors perceived stronger norms for dispositional gatekeeping than other faculty members. Differences across beliefs ($t(50) = 0.96, p = .34$), perceived control ($t(50) = 1.38, p = .174$), and behaviors ($t(50) = 1.92, p = .06$) were not statistically significant.

Finally, we used hierarchical regression analysis to determine whether the theory of planned behavior constructs would predict gatekeeping behaviors. Results can be seen in Table 4. The three variables, in order of entry, were academic gatekeeping, (a) beliefs, (b) perceived control, and (c) norms. The change in R^2 (ΔR^2) suggested that each set of

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Prediction of Academic Gatekeeping Behavior ($n = 50$)

Variable	R^2	ΔR^2	At entry into model			Final model		
			B	$SE B$	β	B	$SE B$	β
Step 1	.326	.326***						
Beliefs			.68	.14	.57***	.43	.12	.36***
Step 2	.471	.144***						
Perceived control			.39	.11	.40***	.12	.13	.12
Step 3	.572	.101***						
Norms			.42	.12	.45***	.42	.12	.45***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

predictors added significantly to the model at entry. Entry of gatekeeping beliefs accounted for approximately a third of the variance in gatekeeping behavior, $R^2 = .326$, $F(1, 50) = 24.34$, $p < .001$. The inclusion of perceived control in Step 2 accounted for an additional 14.4% of the variance, $R^2 = .471$, $F(2, 49) = 21.80$, $p = .001$. The addition of gatekeeping norms in Step 3 predicted 10.1% more of the variance in gatekeeping behaviors, $R^2 = .472$, $F(3, 48) = 21.41$, $p < .001$. The final model predicted 57.2% (54.6% using *Adj. R*²) of the total variance in academic gatekeeping behavior, with each set of factors significantly contributing to the model upon entry. All but perceived control significantly predicted behaviors in the final model. The significant variables in the final model (from greatest standardized coefficient beta to smallest) were norms ($\beta = .45$, $p = .001$), followed by beliefs ($\beta = .36$, $p = .001$).

Discussion

This research study aimed to examine the perceptions of rehabilitation counselor educators regarding their beliefs and behaviors surrounding dispositional gatekeeping practices. Participants had positive beliefs about the role and importance of gatekeeping consistent with existing research (Levine et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2020). The study results partially support the TPB (Ajzen, 1985; Bosnjak et al., 2020) in understanding RCE gatekeeping beliefs, control, norms, and behaviors. Both participant norms and beliefs were correlated to higher predicted behaviors related to gatekeeping. However, there was no relationship between perceived control in the gatekeeping process and gatekeeping behaviors when controlling for beliefs and norms. This is not entirely surprising, as previous research has indicated the complexity of interpreting the moderating effects of each element of the TPB (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2008; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020).

Non-Academic Professional Disposition Assessment

Results indicate that programs have built formalized mechanisms for evaluating student professional dispositions, addressing inadequacies of student professional disposition when concerns are first noted, and assessing professional disposition at multiple points across the students' academic journey using a shared assessment tool (see Table

2). Programs also appear to use the information gained in these processes to create remediation plans for students with identified non-academic professional disposition deficiencies. In essence, the paperwork side of professional disposition assessment is occurring. Perceived norms in the program had the most significant influence on dispositional gatekeeping behaviors. Yet, program directors perceived the norms related to dispositional assessment significantly higher than other faculty.

Acknowledging the gap between directors and other faculty may help program directors adopt practices to increase perceived norms in their respective programs. While participants recognize the importance of assessing students beyond academics, reported norms for allowing dispositions to impede graduation suggest that faculty are not confident this would be supported in their respective programs or universities (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Chang & Rubel, 2019).

University-Level Impact on Norms and Behaviors

As previously mentioned, professional standards from both the ACA (2010 Standard F.b.6) and CRCC (2017, Standard H.4.b.) codes of professional ethics address the need for gatekeeping as part of the ethical expectations of supervisors and educators. Professional-level expectations regarding the importance of gatekeeping measures are quite clear. However, some difficulties may arise when colleagues and university administrators are not fully supportive of program-level remediation plans or decisions. Such a lack of support has been identified as a dispositional gatekeeping barrier (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Chang & Rubel, 2019).

Results from the current study indicate that while faculty recognize the value of dispositional gatekeeping practices, their actual behavior is impacted by the perceived norms and behaviors of the external environment, including the larger university. For example, a program could potentially find itself in the unenviable position of recommending a student's expulsion from a counseling program due to poor professional dispositions, but unable to follow through with the intended course of action given a lack of support from university counsel/administrators. Student academic success may preclude remediation based solely on professional disposition deficiencies due to the poor conceptualization of professional dispositions in general (Christensen et al., 2018; Teixeira, 2017). Fear of litigation may also create further confusion between the university

and program-level decision makers (Foster & McAdams, 2009).

Understanding the unique intersection of gatekeeping behaviors and processes related to the university-level policy may fall more heavily on the program director. The current study found that program directors' perceptions of gatekeeping were higher than general program faculty across all four scales (beliefs, perceived control, norms, and behaviors), with norms being the most significant difference (director $M = 29.55$ vs. faculty $M = 25.37$). This may be because program directors are often tasked with taking the lead on dealing with students having dispositional concerns and may therefore generalize their experience in dealing with gatekeeping tasks on a more frequent basis as the norm for all program faculty.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we offer suggestions to counselor educators and program directors who are working to strengthen their program's dispositional gatekeeping practices. First, we recommend that all program faculty meet to discuss their understanding of the program's gatekeeping evaluation processes and expectations to align better the perceptions and experiences of program directors and program faculty. Specific support structures for pre-tenured/non-tenured faculty should be discussed and built to alleviate potential concerns regarding the reporting of professional disposition issues and validate their observations. This will help foster an environment of identification and development related to professional disposition of counselors-in-training. Next, the university itself must support program-level dispositional gatekeeping practices. This may require the program director to discuss professional disposition concepts with their department chair and beyond (likely university-level legal counsel) to determine the level of institutional support that can be reasonably expected. Adjustments to program assessment policies and procedures may be necessary to align with institutional expectations.

Future Research

As the current study used TPB to explore the gatekeeping process, only one item on the scale included institutional impact. Therefore, additional research is needed to examine the levels of gatekeeping control at the program, departmental, and university levels. Research focusing on university-level support of the freedom of individual academic programs to dismiss students based on the largely sub-

jective measures of professional dispositions is fundamental given the potential incongruence between professional standards codified in codes of ethics and accreditation standards, and the actual reality of programs' ability to institute gatekeeping measures specific to non-academic professional dispositions. Additionally, research evaluating the formal written professional disposition assessment plans of RCE programs could be beneficial in understanding the current state of gatekeeping policy in the field of rehabilitation counselor education.

Limitations

The small sample size in this study left our study underpowered and limits the generalizability of its findings to all rehabilitation counseling programs. It is possible that non-significant differences between directors and other faculty may become significant with a larger sample. Despite this limitation, findings provide a glimpse of the current gatekeeping practices, beliefs, and norms in the field. As with any self-reported data, the potential for participants to provide responses deemed socially appropriate exists. Confidentiality measures included in the study design worked to mitigate this concern, but cannot remove the possibility of participant perception management altogether. During data collection for this study, no in-person classes were held due to COVID-19. This could impact the participants' recent experiences with gatekeeping or the priority their programs were putting on gatekeeping at data collection. Additionally, the sample size in this study produced insufficient numbers to test the structural model using path analysis.

Conclusion

While gatekeeping behaviors among rehabilitation counselor educators have increased (i.e., evaluation at multiple points in the program, remediation plans, looking at more than only academic outcomes), a disparity remains in educators' attitudes/beliefs and program norms. Likely, this is due to the lack of a standardized gatekeeping evaluation instrument and the recency of CACREP requirements for assessment and evaluation of student professional disposition application for rehabilitation counseling programs. Rehabilitation counseling educators should work together within their respective programs to find a suitable PD assessment plan that aligns with accreditation and university standards to communicate transparent programmatic evaluation methods and expectations to students.

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