A CACREP Accreditation Simulation

Career Intervention and Preparation for Doctoral Students

As the number of counselor preparation programs seeking accreditation or reaccreditation increases (CACREP, 2023), the likelihood that counselor education and supervision doctoral students will be involved in the accreditation process as new faculty becomes a stronger possibility. For many doctoral students, their first time engaging with CACREP accreditation will be as a faculty member tasked with participating in, and at times writing, a self-study. To better prepare doctoral students for their future involvement with accreditation, a CACREP accreditation simulation was developed. This experiential assignment infused throughout the doctoral curriculum, builds students' knowledge and efficacy with the CACREP accreditation process.

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Introduction

Counselor training and doctoral study in Counselor Education are frequently guided by the standards developed by the accrediting entity, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). CACREP standards encourage program excellence and allow for programs to participate in the process of self and peer evaluation of their curriculum, assessment, and training activities (CACREP, 2023). Although completing a masters degree from a CACREP accredited program does not guarantee licensure, it is often used by state licensure board members to evaluate an applicant for whether their education and training satisfy licensure requirements. CACREP accreditation is also required for counselors employed in various positions in the federal government (Galarite, 2023). Currently, CACREP lists 449 colleges and universities that have accredited programs on their campuses (CACREP, 2023). Additionally, a search of the accredited programs on the CACREP website yielded 93 programs as of August 2023 with doctoral training programs.

The 2024 CACREP doctoral standards in counselor education and supervision have new doctoral standards under leadership and advocacy specifically requiring programs to address "…accreditation standards and program accreditation processes, including self-studies and program reports" (CACREP, 2023, pg. 29). Additionally, many position descriptions of open counselor education faculty positions include some reference to obtaining or maintaining accreditation as a potential employment expectation. Therefore, it is likely that a doctoral graduate in counselor education will not only be responsible for CACREP curricular requirements in their course delivery, but also to contribute in substantial ways, to program reports or self-study documents and processes. There appears to be little guidance on specific teaching strategies to address this recently added standard and important aspect of career preparedness for counselor education doctoral graduates entering academia. As graduates likely will be expected to participate in accreditation activities, more focus on how to specifically address this component of doctoral training is necessary. While there are available training sessions for faculty members at professional conferences, either offered by CACREP specifically or by professional organizations, they do not specifically address curricular solutions for doctoral training. Essential to doctoral training in accreditation processes is the scaffolding of knowledge to support doctoral student development. In a 2019 article published by Strear, Murdock Bishop and Helm, a simulation process was outlined. This article builds on that simulation by expanding it and by delivering it across the doctoral curriculum. The simulation addresses the gap of specific curricular training in accreditation processes by providing specific and concrete curricular solutions for counselor educators to implement into their doctoral curriculum.

Description of Instructional Strategy

As the number of counselor preparation programs seeking CACREP accreditation continues to increase, knowledge about the CACREP standards and the process of seeking accreditation is an essential component for doctoral career preparedness. As a faculty member early in their tenure, new professionals will most likely be involved in the accreditation process in some form. This may include writing a self-study for re-accreditation, applying for accreditation for the first time, or adding an emphasis area to an already accredited program. New faculty members may feel unprepared or underprepared to manage this crucial task and likely need support around leadership development and career readiness in this portion of their training. The simulation assignment provides a unique opportunity to engage in and enhance a student's knowledge of the accreditation process throughout a student's doctoral program. This assignment can also support the development of doctoral students and increase self-efficacy by attending to individual aspects of career preparedness around assuming a new faculty member role.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers suggest a definition of career preparedness that includes eight career readiness competencies: (a) career and self-development, (b) communication, (c) critical thinking, (d) equity and inclusion, (e) leadership, (f) professionalism, (g) teamwork, and (h) technology (2021). Each competency can be connected to aspects of the simulation activity and assignments. This allows for students to experience this growth and development under the mentorship and support of their faculty while in their doctoral program and supports their likely success and confidence in a faculty role after graduation. Fox (2018) suggested that career readiness initiatives could be applied through a leadership development lens. There is support for this lens for increasing self-efficacy (Haber-Curran & Pierre, 2023) by developing a leadership identity through inclusive activities (Fuselier & Beatty, 2023, Johnson, Murphy & Riggio, 2023) and thoughtful curricular experiences. By providing deliberate opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment of their own strengths and competencies, and by viewing leadership as a process that is developed in collaboration with others through critical reflection (Odom & Dunn, 2023), self-efficacy and leadership competencies are likely to develop. This simulation assignment calls for doctoral students and faculty members to engage in a collaborative and reflective process surrounding further understanding of accreditation.

Infusion of the simulation across the doctoral curriculum allows for multiple opportunities, across multiple developmental points, to build on foundational understanding of the accreditation process. As outlined further below, students are first introduced to the CACREP accreditation simulation in their professional seminar course, which is offered during the second semester of their first year in the program. Students then revisit the assignment during their advanced seminar in counselor education and supervision (CES) course, which is offered during the second semester of their second year. The culmination of the assignment occurs during their final semester of internship in counselor education and supervision. Through the intentional

infusion of this simulation throughout the curriculum, doctoral students are able to combine their knowledge of CACREP accreditation and their simultaneous experiences of progressing through a CACREP accredited doctoral program, to gain a richer understanding of the purpose and effort that goes into the accreditation process. At the end of their doctoral program, students will have this assignment as a part of their portfolio to support their competitiveness in the job seeking process.

Designed by the second and third author to fill a gap they noted in the curriculum around preparing doctoral students to engage in the accreditation process, this activity is grounded in transformative learning as a pedagogical approach. The CACREP accreditation simulation engages students in reflective practice, collaborative inquiry and experiential learning to create transformative educational experiences (Strear, Murdock Bishop & Helm, 2019). The goals of this instructional activity are to: a) introduce and increase doctoral student's knowledge of CACREP accreditation, b) engage in reflective practice regarding personal and professional values associated with program accreditation, and c) enhance career preparedness of counselor education and supervision doctoral students. A key component of this instructional activity is the instructor's knowledge of CACREP standards and the self-study process (Strear, Murdock Bishop & Helm, 2019). To be most effective, instructors should have first-hand experience with participating in the accreditation process. This allows the instructor to share their own personal experience, as well as have a strong foundational knowledge of standards and accreditation.

INTRODUCTION OF ASSIGNMENT - PROFESSIONAL SEMINAR COURSE

As previously noted, CES Doctoral students are first introduced to the CACREP accreditation simulation in their professional seminar course. This seminar course is offered in the second semester of their first year and focuses on professional issues within counselor education and supervision. To foster an inclusive learning environment, the instructor emphasizes the student-led focus of this assignment. A discussion focusing on how the students and instructor can co-create a classroom environment of safety occurs on the first day of class. The student and faculty also discuss how to navigate differing ideas or disagreements which are likely to occur throughout the simulation. The instructor will share their own experience with accreditation, either as a student, faculty member, or site visit team member, to model how one's biases may influence their interaction with this assignment/process. A collaborative, power sharing approach is foundational to the level of engagement students have with this assignment.

The first task doctoral students complete is the creation of a faculty bio. This assignment focuses on career preparation and requires doctoral students to envision their future as a member of the academy as CES faculty. Prompts for the faculty bio include who you are (e.g., name, credentials, etc.), what you do (e.g., research agenda, courses taught, professional membership, etc.), and any other personal information they want to share. With their faculty bio created, students in the class take on the role of faculty members at a fictional university. The background of the university and the counselor training program, along with an outline of the assignment, is given to students to provide a foundation for the simulation. Important

university information such as location, Carnegie Classification, current program size, emphasis areas, and current courses offered are included to help students identify the strengths and limitations of their fictional program. The Carnegie Classification was added to the description of the fictitious university to expose students to this classification to support their understanding of this for future job searches. More specifically, the Carnegie Classification provides some awareness of the research activity of the institution and may provide some insight into expectations for research productivity for promotion and tenure.

The second task in this simulation is to have the student faculty create a memorandum to send to the fictional university provost. The memorandum includes a rationale for seeking accreditation, the cost of accreditation, and the steps necessary to obtain accreditation. The memorandum includes requests such as potential funding needs, requests for additional faculty lines if needed to satisfy ratios (including justification), and requests for any other necessary resources (e.g., administrative support, graduate assistant support, etc.). The student faculty will also provide a detailed timeline of the accreditation process, culminating in obtaining program accreditation. The "provost" for this simulation is the instructor of the professional seminar course. The provost's role is to provide feedback to the student faculty members and to be available for consultation.

Once the memorandum and request for resources is approved, the student faculty members create a comprehensive proposal as their final task in this portion of the simulation. This proposal will include strengths and deficits of their current program, resources required for program accreditation, specialty areas to be offered by the program (clinical mental health, school counseling, etc.), whether a doctoral program will be offered, and any changes to current faculty size, including adding faculty members or termination of faculty members. All aspects of this proposal must be grounded in the CACREP standards and demonstrate understanding of CACREP policies and standards. One of the decisions the student faculty make at the start of the process is the location of their fictional university. Thus, this task also requires doctoral students to have a clear understanding of job outlook, state licensure requirements, and knowledge of other counselor training programs in their area. Students are actively engaged in discussion and take a self-directed learning approach to each task. The course instructor, as provost, provides alternative perspectives, shares any potential barriers to changes in the fictional university program, and processes the experience with students at the end of every class.

SECOND INTERACTION WITH ASSIGNMENT - ADVANCED SEMINAR COURSE

Students revisit this assignment in their advanced seminar course, which is offered during the second semester of their second year. This developmental approach allows students to have time away from the assignment while they continue to advance their professional identity. Relationships between students may have also fluctuated in the year since they last engaged with this assignment. On the first day of class, it is important to review and reestablish aspects and commitments to an inclusive learning environment; specifically, an environment where all

students feel supported, heard, and valued. An inclusive learning environment supports the educational needs of all students and in this simulation models inclusion for future educators.

A review of the proposal created during their professional seminar class is required, and any adjustments that need to be made will be finalized by the third class meeting. A review and adjustment period is intentional to incorporate new knowledge and experience that may have been gained in the previous year. For example, one student in a cohort who engaged in this process during the professional seminar course was adamant that a doctoral program was not needed. After completing their first supervision sequence and witnessing the supervisory relationship between doctoral students and masters level students, they shared how impactful this experience had been and how beneficial a doctoral program can be to a masters program. This type of shift in perspective is enhanced through learning that is experienced outside of the classroom.

Once the proposal is finalized, students are given three tasks to complete: (a) develop responses to specific standards, as determined by the instructor, (b) create a course offering guide with faculty assignments, and (c) design a plan to address program and student assessment. This challenges students to critically think about course sequencing and progression, and simulates the beginnings of a self-study. When designing the beginnings of an assessment plan, students must familiarize themselves with assessment standards and outline points in the program where student assessment occurs and identify which student dispositional aspects they would assess. Key takeaways from this task are career preparation for when they engage in the accreditation process, understanding CACREP standards and student-to-faculty ratios, assessment requirements and processes, and the overall value of accreditation. Often, student's own biases related to course offerings emerge during these discussions. Feedback is provided by the "provost" during these discussions and reflective questioning is offered throughout. Prompts such as, "How does this course sequence uphold systemic inequities that take place in higher education?" attend to current social justice and equity issues. Through these tasks, collaborative learning is fostered and students work together to provide an agreed upon outcome. The task is completed once the student faculty have created a course offering guide with assigned faculty for each specialty area, have developed a narrative addressing the assigned standards, and have named the student dispositions and key performance indicators as defined by CACREP (2023) they wish to assess.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT - DOCTORAL INTERNSHIP

To conclude the CACREP accreditation simulation, students write a reflection paper focused on their experiences with the simulation throughout their doctoral program. While doctoral students are often enrolled in a counselor education and supervision internship course across their program, this last assignment will occur during the doctoral student's final semester in internship. In other semesters, students' previous engagement in the simulation was collaborative and student-led. This final assignment focuses on individual reflection and one-on-one dialogue between the instructor and the student. Prior to completing their written

reflection paper, students meet with their instructor to engage in conversation and reflection on the assignment and their personal growth through engaging in the simulation process. In this approach, the student can give thought to the sum of their experience. Students are also required to address how this simulation contributed to their understanding of the accreditation process and how it prepared them for their career in counselor education and supervision.

Evaluation of Effectiveness of Teaching Strategy

The primary mechanism for feedback and evaluation of the CACREP accreditation simulation has been through discussion, course evaluations, qualitative feedback on the learning objectives, and reflections included in both the verbal and written aspects of the final reflection. In the authors' experience, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Students often express initial trepidation about the assignment and feelings of being overwhelmed. Often being overwhelmed by the assignment is reported to be from perceived limitations in their understanding of accreditation and accreditation processes, but also limited efficacy in engaging in challenging discussions and reaching consensus. One student, in their final reflection, shared that they initially did not recognize the value of engaging in this process, but at the end of having completed the assignment was able to recognize how the learning objectives connected to their future career readiness and to their confidence in navigating challenging conversations. Another student noted that one of the unanticipated outcomes of the simulation was increased confidence in their ability to complete their dissertation. More specifically, they noted that they knew they could do something they had no direct familiarity with how to do previously because they had been a part of the CACREP accreditation simulation.

Qualitative comments on course evaluations and program exit interviews consistently include comments about the CACREP simulation. As noted throughout this document, these comments frequently center around increased efficacy, professional identity development, and understanding of the direct application of leadership theory to accreditation processes and faculty collaboration. This feedback is in addition to consistent assessment of learning outcomes through assignment rubrics and grading.

Related specifically to future research and on-going evaluation of the simulation process and impact, the authors are in the process of conducting a qualitative study examining professional identity development and self-efficacy with students at the end of their doctoral programs and as they engage in the job seeking process. Additionally, the authors plan to complete a quantitative examination of leadership identity development and self-efficacy at each stage of the simulation process.

ASSESSMENT METHODS USED IN TEACHING INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY TO ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING

As an inclusive instructional strategy, traditional forms of formal assessment are reexamined and efforts to make assessments more inclusive are prioritized. Specifically, a key component of this assignment is its infusion throughout the curriculum to allow for summative assessment of knowledge. Summative assessment is more inclusive as it focuses on the process of learning rather than simply to obtain a grade. An additional method for achieving this goal is to elevate student involvement in the assessment process. As a part of their final grade, doctoral students are asked to assess the value of the assignments to their learning and development in each course. This helps evaluate knowledge acquisition of the student as well as provide critical feedback to the effectiveness of the assignment for the instructor.

Collaboration and problem solving are necessary actions to complete this assignment. To assess both, self and peer assessment strategies are implemented. At the conclusion of each course, students are tasked with writing a two-to-three-page assessment paper. The purpose of this paper is to engage in self-reflection, as well as reflection of peer contributions. By offering self and peer assessment, students have more agency in the assessment process and can share an in-depth perspective of strengths and areas of growth for themselves and their peers.

Lastly, due to the discussion-based format of this simulation, group discussions are used as a method of assessing student learning. Students must have an understanding of content to be able to fully engage in group discussions. Critical thinking is fostered through group discussion and students improve each other's learning by asking thought provoking questions and engaging in problem solving dialogue. These discussions provide rich evidence to assess whether student learning outcomes have been met and demonstrate an increase in career readiness.

Implications

The accreditation process is a challenging and at times a complicated process. Accreditation in counseling programs is inextricably tied to professional identity, state licensure, and program competitiveness and rigor. Programs across the nation are doing the hard work of maintaining accreditation, earning initial accreditation, or working toward equivalency. And, as noted previously, new faculty are often tasked with considerable responsibility for these accreditation efforts. The initial development of the CACREP accreditation simulation was grounded in the assumption of the second and third authors of this brief, that specific training on the accreditation process is not often incorporated in doctoral training in counselor education and supervision. And, based on a program commitment to continuously assess how best to prepare doctoral students to enter the profession, and the understanding that many of them would be involved in accreditation in some capacity, specific learning objectives were developed to this end. As this expectation now exists for all CACREP-accredited doctoral

programs in the curricular standards, this accreditation simulation assignment offers clear guidance on meeting this standard.

The benefits of the CACREP accreditation simulation assignment for students are numerous. Some of the implications were anticipated, while others were unexpected, but beneficial. One of the expected implications of participation in this process was an increased understanding of the CACREP standards specifically, but also their application and relationship to program objectives, student learning outcomes, professional identity, and career readiness. Students involved in the simulation reported that prior to engaging in the simulation, their understanding of accreditation was cursory. They reported understanding the importance of accreditation when searching for doctoral training, but admitted to not fully understanding how accreditation was tied to other aspects noted above. Students reported that while engaging in the simulation they found that many of their initial assumptions about accreditation were being challenged. For example, one student reported an initial assumption that the standards were directive and that they limited program creativity or flexibility. In their reflection on this assignment, they noted having a changed perspective on accreditation and appreciation that programs can be unique and creative and maintain accreditation. Additionally, many students note in their reflections an appreciation for the opportunity for advocacy with academic leadership, that the accreditation process can provide.

An important objective of the simulation was to provide doctoral students with at least some understanding of working within university systems. Through this process, students gain some understanding of the priorities of different university leaders and ways in which to communicate program priorities within the context of the larger university system. Additionally, this led to conversations and insights about how to navigate conversations when the priorities of the program differ from the priorities of leadership at the college and/or university levels. Most importantly, the simulation engaged students in thinking about how their training programs fit in the context of larger systems outside of the university systems (e.g., community, state, and region) and to assess the needs and priorities of these interacting systems, related to counselor training and preparation.

As mentioned previously, there were several unexpected implications and benefits experienced by students through engaging in the simulation. One such unexpected outcome was students self-report of gaining valuable experience with navigating difficult conversations with colleagues, learning about compromise, and navigating conflicts with colleagues in ways that preserve the relationship. While doctoral cohorts provide opportunities for conflict resolution and compromise, this simulation provides direct experience with conversations about professional identity, assessment around needs of the program, faculty teaching assignments, and consensus building about curricular progression and student learning objectives. Finally, students gain an increased sense of confidence and leadership development having direct experience with engaging in the accreditation standards and the accreditation process. Students have reported increased self-efficacy specifically around career preparedness when discussing accreditation during interviews for faculty positions.

In conclusion, doctoral students engaging in the CACREP accreditation simulation gain valuable experience, in a collaborative and supportive environment, in the complexities of earning and maintaining accreditation, and in navigating the roles, responsibilities and relational aspects of membership in the academy.

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