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Overcoming Challenges in Online Group Counseling Course Practica

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Introduction

Masters and doctoral students enrolled in Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP] accredited programs must meet certain standards regardless of the environment in which they learn. In our case, we are doctoral students enrolled in an online counselor education and supervision (CES) program delivered through the Blackboard.comSM e-learning system. Members of our cohort live in various parts of the United States and beyond its borders. The standards by which our program seeks to offer quality education are the standards established by CACREP (2001).

CACREP (2001) standards address group counseling and practicums. Doctoral-level students must engage in expanded learning experiences in group work (DS II.C.1) and participate in a characteristically unique, supervised advanced practicum which helps to further refine students' counseling skills (DS III.A). The doctoral program in which we participate chose to meet these two standards through a core course entitled Advanced Practicum in Group Counseling. An experiential assessment component of this course requires students to complete a 10-week, qualitatively different, supervised group practicum. Various Ph.D. CES programs may address these CACREP standards in a similar fashion. Due to our own experiences and an increased awareness of the ongoing, rapid expansion of distance education (Lee & Nguyen, 2007), we realized the necessity to begin identifying and addressing challenges faced by online learners. Our purposes in writing this article are to acknowledge some of the erstwhile and contemporary challenges of practica requirements faced by online students and to provide tips and guidance to other online (and perhaps, on-campus) students, faculty, and institutional placement personnel as they approach these challenges.

Challenges

A quick review of the requirements for our group practicum assignment sets the stage for reviewing the challenges. For our assignment, students were responsible for facilitating or co-facilitating a qualitatively different therapeutic group for 10 weeks. Multiple tasks were necessary to establish the practicum: (a) secure a qualified on-site supervisor (preferably one who holds a Ph.D. in CES or related field, is licensed, and has a minimum of two years pertinent professional experience); (b) facilitate or co-facilitate a qualitatively different group; (c) secure a site location that would allow videotaping a minimum of two group sessions; and, (d) determine group parameters (number of participants, session duration, open or closed status, time and place, guidelines for accepting group members, etc.). These conditions led to various challenges for us.

A challenge shared by our traditional counterparts arose when we first received the group practicum assignment. The requirements associated with that assignment generated a heightened sense of anxiety in some of us. At what felt like warp speed, the assignment requirements spawned a swirling whirlwind of questions in our minds: "Where do I begin? How do I find a qualified supervisor? How will I form a group that will meet the requirements of the program and benefit the individuals who will attend the group? How can I put together a group that will allow me to tape a minimum of two sessions? Where should we meet? Will this cost anything, and if so, how much? A final question we needed to answer was "What resources do I have for putting together a group that will stay together for ten weeks?"

Some of the contemporary challenges we faced as online learners arose from geographical realities of a cyberspace campus experience. Other challenges relate to university staff and faculty support. Many on-campus programs that require practicums offer access to practicum placement personnel who can help assuage the storm of questions surrounding practicums. In our cases, we did not have access to practicum placement personnel. Also, our faculty and staff have little to no knowledge of local resources in the areas in which we live and could provide little support in finding and securing a supervisor and practicum site. Living in areas remotely removed from our university's campus presented more supervision-related challenges.

In addition, some of us were further challenged by having recently moved to different areas and having no professional contacts. Although our Ph.D. CES program is an online program, cyber-supervision was not an option because it remains an ethical dilemma as indicated by researchers (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006). This meant seeking other avenues for securing site supervision in the areas to which we moved. When approached, potential supervisors in the new areas indicated a reluctance to provide supervision because of unfamiliarity with the student and the student's work. Potential supervisors indicated they were not willing to accept the vicarious liability or "respondeat superior" (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004) associated with supervising an unknown individual.

Additional questions for potential supervisors rose around students' qualifications to lead groups. These questions may arise as a result of agency requirements. They may also be generated because of the differences in mental health licensing laws and statutes between states. It remained our responsibility to ensure that we met the state laws and statutes under which we are governed regarding supervision and the course assignment requirements.

Another challenge in gaining access to supervision deals with the cost of supervision. For graduate students living on a limited budget, this challenge may preclude online students from completing this critical aspect of a practicum requirement. The cost of paid supervision could easily match the expense of tuition for the course. Financial requirements proffer a sincere challenge to many students. We are aware that other challenges also exist. We wish, however, to focus on how to address the challenges presented here.

Tips for Securing Practica Supervisors and Sites

Tip #1 – Network! Network! Network!

Making connections with professionals in the community is vital. Existing employment or recent practicum or internship experience in the mental health field can ease the search for a qualified group practicum supervisor and a group practicum site. In our experience, volunteer work also kept a foot-in-the-door, lessening the anxiety associated with locating a qualified supervisor and a group practicum.

Tip #2 – Seek! Seek! Seek!

This process is akin to looking for a job. We typically would not expect a job to find us; we seek out employment. It is important to seek out practicum sites as well. Some resources we found helpful include (a) city or government agencies, (b) local hospitals, (c) local colleges and universities, (d) local K-12 school systems, (e) licensing boards' websites, (f) career centers, (g) yellow pages, (h) crisis centers, (i) private practices, (j) ACA and other professional organization websites, (j) churches or other non-profit organizations, and (k) local chamber of commerce. We found it easier to find a group than to locate a supervisor. We, therefore, suggest seeking a qualified site supervisor prior to seeking a group practicum site.

Tip #3 – Ask! Ask! Ask!

First, we need to be willing to step out of our comfort zones, go into the community and ask questions. We need to start by asking professionals involved in the community for suggestions about site supervisors and group practicum sites.

Once personnel at a site are contacted, another series of questions ensues. “Is a site supervisor available? What services are provided? What populations are served? What are the site’s expectations and requirements for practicum students? Will I be able to meet all group practicum requirements as outlined by my school? What are the limitations that may be faced in a group practicum at this location? What are the advantages of doing a practicum at this site with this particular supervisor?”

Tip #4 – Persist! Persist! Persist!

Don’t give up! This relates back to our first tip of job search. How often have we had a client in our office that can’t find a job? Now we are that client, and we must take our own advice—take time out of our schedules every week to network in the community—make it a priority. We are responsible for our own education. We must show initiative, press forward, and never give up. Eventually we will be satisfied with the results.

Tip #5 – Perspective! Perspective! Perspective!

Although it has similarities to looking for a job, this does not have to be a lifetime career. It’s a practicum! It’s an experience. And, it’s temporary. Entering into the experience with an open mind, we will gain a wealth of knowledge by trying out this new group counseling experience or specialty. Keeping this in mind may take away some pressure to find the “perfect” practicum.

Tip #6 – Advocate! Advocate! Advocate!

We need to be advocates who encourage our schools to have a cyberspace practicum placement coordinator. That position would oversee networking responsibilities across the nation and beyond its borders to develop relationships with potential supervisors and practicum sites. In addition, we can all join in the process of networking on behalf of our current peers and future colleagues.

Summary

Our personal challenges and suggestions are limited to the experiences of these four authors. This writing has inspired us to learn more ways for overcoming obstacles in the practicum search process. Along those lines, we recognize further research is needed. We could gain additional insight into the challenges and suggestions faced by a multitude of students. Although we are Ph.D. students, we are aware of numerous online Masters level programs where these principles can also be useful. Further research into challenges faced at the Masters level would be advantageous. These tips may also be beneficial to individuals who are in an on-campus program. We also see this information being applicable to practicum requirements for other courses..

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