

## **Professional Therapeutic Relationships – Online or Traditional Education: A Literature Review**

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### **Abstract**

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*Online counseling education is becoming more prevalent and therefore, could eventually produce more professional counselors than traditional education programs. A wealth of literature exists that focuses on online education, due to its growth. However, limited information is available on the competencies of counselors educated from online programs. This article (a) explores literature written by Moorhead, Colburn, Edwards & Erwin, (2013) on online education, and (b) relates that literature to three opinions on counselors educated at online programs by experienced professionals in the counseling field. The evidence suggests that online counseling programs can be as effective as traditional counseling problems if certain hybrid techniques are created.*

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**Key Words:** Online Counseling Education, Traditional Counseling Education, Therapeutic Relationships, Themes, Interviews

### **1.0 Introduction**

The *Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs* (CACREP) accredits multiple master's degree programs in the counseling field (Best Colleges Degrees, n.d.). Some institutions on this list offer both school and mental health counseling programs, while others offer only one of those options. Some of these programs are taught online, while another offers a hybrid model. Students can also pursue counseling education in the United States through online master's programs that are non-CACREP. However, CACREP is the "gold" standard for counseling programs, and recognized by the *Council for Higher Education Accreditation*, as each program has engaged in a rigorous evaluation to monitor consistent standards. According to Best Value Schools (2018), CACREP accreditation is not vital, but it is an important step in achieving compliance. By itself, association with a CACREP program is an advantage to any counseling student's future.

According to Snyder (2013), the vitality of higher education lies with online learning. Dr. Sabri Bebawi (n.d) defines online education as the use of technology in the exchange of ideas to provide access to more people, thus creating a globalization of human concepts. To carry out the exchange of ideas, a multi-layered instructional delivery uses audio, video, computer, and networking technologies. Snyder (2013) noted that beyond getting a college degree, more and more students now find themselves with other obligations. Commitments to employment and family have equivalent strains on their time. Institutions of higher learning are recognizing this; for instance, the University of Edinburgh's (2018) justification of online learning is aimed at students who wish to study while working or pursuing other commitments. Further, Snyder (2013) states that alternatives such as taking online classes and studying independently are critical. Concurrently, many public institutions are having difficulties obliging students who want to take classes on campus, heightening the need for online learning. However, is this the best method of learning for future counselors who must develop skills in building human relationships? According to Sayette, Mayne, and Norcross (2010), online education might not be the best method, as they suggest these skills can only be learned through the interpersonal relationship with faculty and a traditional mode of teaching. Myers reported in *Counseling Today* (2014) the power of the relationship between the counselor and client was supremely the most significant part of the counseling from the client perspective. The human relationship in counseling is referred to as the therapeutic relationship.

Carl Rogers (1951) used the word client instead of patient to ensure that equal partnership was established in the therapeutic relationship. He believed in three core principles to achieve this relationship: congruent, meaning the counselor is authentic; unconditionally positive, meaning the counselor shows sincere caring for the client; and lastly, empathy, meaning the counselor understands the client's feelings. In the business community, human relationships are equally important to employers and have similar meanings. According to Tobak (2014), the best asset to a company is its human network of relationships, as opposed to a company's virtual network. To understand if these competencies in human relations are met through online education, the perspectives of employers in counseling field should be studied. This paper examines Moorhead, Colburn, Edwards, and Erwin, (2013), which supplies research to three personal communications from present or former employers in the counseling field to determine if there are any observable differences in establishing therapeutic relationships with clients from counselors educated from online institutions, as opposed to counselors educated in traditional settings.

## 2.0 Literature Review

This literature reviews personal communication among managers or individuals responsible for hiring and supervising professional counselors or counselors-in-training. Information gathered from a summary article written by Moorhead, Colburn, Edwards, & Erwin, (2013), supports their comments, with other added information on their views. The authors reveal how online education impacts the learning environment. Though this article is seemingly favorable for online education, it does address the challenges and therefore aligns fittingly with the different opinions of the three counseling professionals highlighted. These individuals are supervisors or managers in various counseling fields, from a progressive private practice to an institution of higher education. Each has held or is holding professional licenses in the counseling field. Together they all have mixed and interesting opinions about the differences of those counselors educated online oppose to those counselors educated in traditional settings.

## 2.1 Interviews

**Dr. Patrick Quirk.** The first professional is Dr. Patrick Quirk, a licensed psychologist at Longwood Psychological Center, and formerly a licensed professional counselor (LPC.) Dr. Quirk (personal communication, February 12, 2018) has been instrumental in hiring several counselors and supervising counselors-in-training from various universities. He expressed that counselors trained in traditional settings have more sophistication and confidence in their therapy skills. They are more natural and appear more in charge than online trained counselors, Dr. Quirk said, in establishing rapport and security in the therapy relationship. Dr. Quirk's opinion supports the notion, expressed by Moorhead et al, (2013), that faculty in online counseling education must serve as gatekeepers to ensure students are actively engaged in their online learning. One explanation for Dr. Quirk's experience with counselors from online programs is that certain individuals took advantage of the freedom of online learning by putting in minimal work, but successfully graduating. The authors stated students may "hide behind" their assignments, such as discussion posts and other written assignments. Therefore, online faculty cannot evaluate those students' honest abilities, biases, and personality traits. These are easier to detect during face-to-face interactions through the students' facial expressions and other forms of nonverbal communication. More problematic is students can have others to complete their online assignments. This raises many potential issues, especially the prospect of advancing improperly trained students to clinical settings (Moorhead et al, 2013) as Dr. Quirk has observed. The possibility of these circumstances marked "gatekeeping" a key function in the role of online faculty to ensure that counselors are trained appropriately. Gatekeeping, according to Horace (2009), starts before the application and remains in place throughout their training. The program's mission statement should clearly communicate that interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities are essential educational experiences that must be evaluated routinely. Carl Rogers (1965) in his text *Client Centered Therapy* implies that interpersonal and intra-personal skills are essential qualities needed to establish therapeutic relationships. Without gatekeeping, online counseling students might be unsuccessful in carrying out those qualities. Thus supporting Dr. Quirk's opinion in his observation that counselors trained in a traditional setting are more comfortable in establishing therapeutic relationships with clients.

**Dr. All'wyn Graham.** The second professional is Dr. All'wyn Graham (personal communication, February 12, 2018), supervising licensed professional counselor, adjunct professor and former Interim Director of Health and Counseling Services at Alabama A&M University. During his tenure as interim director, Dr. Graham reported that he was the only person with a counseling background from an online institution.

The counselors on staff received master's degrees from traditional institutions. It was important for Dr. Graham to have counselors on staff from traditional institutions, as his experience with his online education was not that favorable. Dr. Graham shared after completing his online master's degree in counseling, he entered the clinical field unable to carry out some basic counseling skills, such as building relationships with his clients. He described being uncomfortable carrying out his counseling skills, which coincides with Dr. Quirk's opinion that counselors from traditional settings are more natural and in charge in building relationships with clients. Dr. Graham decided not to give up on his career but felt compelled to strengthen his skills. He enrolled in a traditional CACREP counseling program at the University of North Alabama (UNA) and received a second master's degree in counseling. Dr. Graham believed that his face-to-face training, provided him with the skills necessary to connect with his clients, and to supervise counselors-in-training. Based on his experience, Dr. Graham inferred that online programs are valuable, but some courses must be taught face-to-face, specifically, counseling theories and techniques. Dr. Graham's opinion, based on his personal experience, is supported by Moorhead, et al (2013), that some online counseling programs are recognizing face-to-face interaction is essential. In response, they are incorporating alternative options to ensure graduates are fully trained. One option calls for in-person yearly residencies to gauge students' behaviors and provide live mentoring and oversight by faculty.

Another option is simulating face-to-face interaction through live synchronous class meetings for groups or the entire class. To further support Dr. Graham's opinion, the American Psychological Association (APA) will not fully accredit online psychology programs. Like CACREP, APA is the "gold" standard of approval for psychology programs on the doctoral level. APA-approved programs have taken part in a rigorous evaluation to prove that education consistency is edified. The *Council for Higher Education Accreditation* recognizes APA as the gold standard for doctoral psychology programs. Counseling education programs and psychology education programs share foundational similarities. Both help patients or clients clarify feelings, with support and guidance (All Psychology Schools, n.d.). Their similarities are achieved through establishing therapeutic relationships with clients or patients. Sayette et al (2010) suggests that certain therapeutic skills must be taught face-to-face. The authors reported that individuals who decide to pursue a psychology doctorate degree from a completely online institution that does not have the accreditation of APA will have difficulty securing employment and sometimes, are denied licensing by their state's licensing board. Although Dr. Graham is a licensed professional counselor from a CACREP program, his opinion about online education and its importance of face-to-face instructors to gain the skill set to establish therapeutic relationship is critical and aligned with APA. This is supported by Sayette, et.al (2010) claim that online programs cannot ensure that therapeutic skills are being met.

**Mr. James Wagner.** The final professional is James Wagner (personal communication, February 21, 2018) a licensed professional counselor at Children's of Alabama who has served in many competencies at the hospital's behavioral unit for children and adolescents. Mr. Wagner has served on committees to hire new therapists, full-time, and part-time, and has served as an interim lead counselor. In addition, he reports that he and another counselor have seen many counselors come and go as well as witnessed the new trends in counseling, such as online education. Mr. Wagner is a graduate of the University of Montevallo counseling program, which is a CACREP program and is a traditional face-to-face counseling education program. Despite his education from a traditional background, Mr. Wagner reportedly has not seen any significant differences among counselors from online and traditional programs regarding their therapeutic relationships with clients at Children's. In fact, Mr. Wagner reported there have been occasions that therapists from traditional well-established counseling programs were unable to fit within their psychiatric milieu at Children's. He feels that all novice therapists lack some part of the whole skill set and pursuing additional licensure and certification is an asset for a counselor to develop fully. Mr. Wagner reported that all therapists at Children's must be licensed. Mr. Wagner's justifies his opinion by further stating that therapists pursuing licensure will likely receive at least 2 or more years of supervisory training, after graduation from a master's program, and as such will likely acquire additional skills sets that they failed to master during their internships and courses. Therefore, if a person pursues a counseling degree online and chooses to pursue licensure thereafter, that person will likely receive weekly face-to-face counseling supervision that last as long as it took the person to pursue his or her master's degree. According the Alabama Board of Examiners in Counseling website (the state where Mr. Wagner is licensed) licensing requires 3,000 counseling work experience hours, beyond the master's degree, and 100 hours of yearly supervision from a supervising licensed professional counseling.

Licensees must also receive a passing score from the National Counseling Examiners, and three letters of recommendations -- two being from counseling professionals -- along with other supplemental paperwork and yearly trainings that are certified by the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC), in order to become a licensed professional counselor in the state of Alabama. Once licensure is secured, an individual must renew every two years by paying a renewal fee and participating in NBCC approved trainings, in which the majority of the trainings must be face-to-face. This solidifies Mr. Wagner's claims that the added supervision and trainings involved in the licensing process can be the link in developing counselors-in-training into fully skilled counselors. As the licensing process can be as rigorous as actually pursuing the master's degree in counseling. In addition, Mr. Wagner who incorporates technology within his therapy, feels that the counseling field must embrace technology and change.

According to Moorhead et al (2013), online education is here to stay. Wellstone Behavioral Services, a 45-year-old non-profit institution certified by the Alabama Department of Mental Health with two locations, recognizes the education modality of their counselors-in-training is increasingly changing. According to Rita Limbaugh (personal communication, February 12, 2018), director of training at Wellstone Behavioral Services, Wellstone is placing more online counselors-in-training in internships. The growth is occurring despite having an institution nearby that offers a traditional master's counseling program.

### **3.0 Discussion**

Moorhead et al (2013) suggest education will likely not return exclusively face-to-face classroom instructions. And based on Mr. Wagner's interview, counseling education is changing, and there are no differences between counselors educated online or in traditional settings when carrying out counseling skills, specifically in developing therapeutic relationships with clients. Among the three interviews, one professional clearly gives greater weight to traditional education in equipping counselors in building therapeutic relationships with their clients. As Dr. Quirk noted, counselors from traditional settings carry out their therapeutic relationships skills with confidence. On the other hand, Mr. Wagner observed counselors from traditional institutions unable to carry out therapeutic relationships with their clients. Dr. Graham felt that online counseling can be productive, but some face-to-face instruction must be implemented to ensure that counselors have the interpersonal skills to establish therapeutic relationships with their clients.

#### **3.1 Three Themes**

The Moorhead et al, (2013) article and the three interviews offered three themes that suggest that counselors from online programs can be equally competent in their counseling skills when establishing therapeutic relationships with clients. The three themes are gatekeeping, integration of some face-to-face instructions, and professional development after graduation. If proper gatekeeping is carried out, students are challenged to engage fully with their studies and therefore, gain the necessary competencies to perform effectively in clinical settings. Presumably, online faculty are providing evaluation tools, a gatekeeping measure, ensuring each student is actively learning, and being fully honest throughout their education. Second, online institutions are recognizing certain courses need to be taught face-to-face. They are incorporating face-to-face opportunities, by simulating face-to-face instructions or face-to-face residencies through technology. Walden University, an online institution, offers a CACREP approved master's degree program in mental health counseling. Data retrieved from *OnlineDegreeReviews.com* on March 15, 2018 identified 290 reviews by individuals educated at Walden University. Of those 290 reviews, 19 specifically addressed the Master of Science in Mental Health Counseling ranging from 2010 to 2015. Roughly 9 of the 19 reviews identified face-to-face residencies as highly beneficial in their overall success at Walden. Based on the reviews, it appears that Walden's students must complete two face-to-face residencies. Reviewer 16 was considering transferring to a traditional bricks and mortar university. However, after completing the first residency, reviewer 16, decided to remain at Walden. During residency, reviewer 16 found the professors and instructors to be approachable as so did reviewer 19. Professors and instructors being approachable at the residencies, also made reviewer 10 comfortable with addressing concerns in this open forum. In fact, reviewer 10 stated that questions were encouraged by the instructors and professors. Also, friendships developed because of residencies. Reviewer 8 reports connection made with fellow students during residencies remained intact through social media. Reviewer 14 connects with fellow students through a student support group on *Facebook* started by students. Lastly, reviewer 17 seemingly acknowledged with pride the program's rigor by stating the last residency is an intense 10 hours group counseling process. This data suggest that the residency component enhances students' interpersonal skills, potentially through group work.

Group work is beneficial through various means, such as carrying out best practices regarding techniques and theories in building theoretical frameworks. Samuel Gladding (2008) a leading educator and researcher in group counseling reports that group counseling techniques involves active listening, reflecting, questioning, summarizing and linking, among many others. Person-centered theory, a humanistic approach developed by Carl Rogers, is one of the many theories that Gladding reports as instrumental in group counseling work. This supports Dr. Graham's belief that some courses must be taught face-to-face – in particular, counseling theories and techniques. Third, professional development is the last important issue, as defined by Mr. Wagner regarding licenses or certifications. Mr. Wagner believes this ensures that counselors from online and traditional programs are receiving supplemented education. This is carried out through supervision interactions and by attending workshops and classes, thus making counseling a continuing learning process beyond the master's degree. Mr. Wagner noted that all counselors, whether trained online or in traditional settings, have not necessarily mastered all skills without experience. As a result, Mr. Wagner felt that a licensure calling for more supervision will bridge the gap from novice counselors to skilled professionals.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

The evidence suggests that online counseling programs can be as effective as traditional counseling problems if certain hybrid techniques are created. According to WorldWideLearn (2010), hybrid techniques are carefully blending traditional instruction and online education. This ensures that face-to-face interactions are set in place, so students can connect with faculty and peers, while not attending classes on campus often.

There are many flaws in the online education, as suggested by Dr. Graham and Dr. Quirk. However, the literature suggests online programs are the most effective way to meet those changing needs of students – namely, family and work. However, online alone must be combined with face-to-face interaction. That face-to-face interaction does not necessarily have to be in the traditional classroom – as Mr. Wagner points out. It can be done via the licensure process. Therefore, hybrid programs would likely be the best option to ensure that the counselors in training are acquiring the critical skills required – namely, interpersonal interactions with faculty to clients.

It must be pointed out that this article was primarily based on the personal communications of three reliable professionals; therefore, this research has limitations. A more comprehensive method of gathering information is required to truly receive an answer to the following question: Are there any observable differences in establishing therapeutic relationships with clients from counselors educated from online programs, as opposed to those counselors educated in traditional settings? The most effective method would be surveying managers and employers in the counseling field so that a larger population of these individuals could be reached to address the research question and thus, produce important empirical research in this area.

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