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Verification- To Check or Not to Check: The Use of Criminal Background Checks in Counselor Training Programs


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There has been very little research conducted on the topic of the use of criminal background checks in counselor education. Erwin and Toomey (2005) addressed the issue of the use of background checks in counselor training programs and the perceptions of program coordinators. These researchers developed the Criminal Background Checks in Counselor Education Survey and then distributed the survey to a random sample of program coordinators of counseling programs that were accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The findings were that background checks were used for admission to counselor training programs and before and during practicum/internship and certification/licensure.

The perceptions of the program coordinators toward the use of criminal background checks reflected issues such as the “future clients’ welfare and safety, privacy for the applicant/student,” legal issues if background checks were omitted, and legal issues when background checks were instituted (Erwin and Toomey, 2005, p. 313).

A related study by Dansby-Giles, Hayes, Cox, Polk, Wells, and Carr (2005) addressed the use of criminal background checks by state Licensed Professional Counselor Boards. As state Licensed Professional Counselor Boards are enacting criminal background checks as a part of the licensure process, counselor training programs should inform applicants and students of this practice. Some of the state Licensed Professional Counselor Boards that have instituted criminal background checks for applicants for the Licensed Professional Counselor credential are Arkansas, Arizona, Maine, Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

According to Dansby-Giles et al. (2005), applicants may be submitting information to counselor licensure boards that may not be accurate. State Licensed Professional Counselor Boards may encounter legal barriers if they have not been provided the legal authority to perform criminal background checks. Without the legal
authority to perform criminal background checks, state Licensed Professional Counselor Boards will encounter difficulties in meeting their obligations to protect the public.

The ACA Code of Ethics (2005) does not specifically mention the use of background checks which obscures the clarity regarding the practice. It states in F.4.c Standards for Supervisees that “supervisors make their supervisees aware of professional and ethical standards and legal responsibilities. Supervisors of post-degree counselors encourage their counselors to adhere to professional standards of practice.”

In examining section F.6.d Teaching Ethics of the ACA Code of Ethics, 2005, the issue of the use of background checks is implied. The standard states that “counselor educators make students and supervisees aware of the ethical responsibilities and standards of the profession and the ethical responsibilities of students and the profession. Counselor educators infuse ethical considerations throughout the curriculum.”

In reviewing the ACES Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors (1993), the issue of background checks is implied. Section 2.03 states that “supervisors should make their supervisees aware of professional and ethical standards and legal responsibilities of the counseling profession.” Likewise Section 2.04 has an implied statement regarding the use of background checks. It states that “supervisors of post-degree counselors who are seeking state licensure should encourage these counselors to adhere to the standards for practice established by the state licensure board of the state in which they practice.”

The 2009 CACREP Standards were consulted with regard to the use of background checks. These standards also appear to imply the practice. Section II, 1. Professional Orientation and Ethical Practice stated “studies that provide an understanding of all of the following aspects of professional functioning: (g) professional credentialing, evaluating certification, licensure and accreditation practices and standards and the effects of public policy on these issues” (p. 9).

This research is significant in that it seeks to expand upon the issues raised by program coordinators about the use of background checks in counselor training. In addition, the perceptions of counselor educators who are members of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) regarding the use of criminal background checks in counselor training programs will be examined.

This study will seek answers to the following questions. What are the differences in perceptions between counselor educators who are licensed professional counselors and counselor educators who are certified school counselors? Is there a relationship between the number of counselor educators who are LPC’s and the number of times explanations are provided regarding background checks? Is there a relationship between the number of counselor educators who are certified school counselors and the number of times explanations are provided regarding background checks? Is there a relationship between counselor educators with multiple counseling licenses and certifications and the number of times explanations are provided regarding background checks?
Method

Participants

The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) is a division of the American Counseling Association. According to ACES Vision Statement, the organization is dedicated to:

- advance pedagogy related to education and training of counselors, supervisors and counselor educators;
- affirm and deliver education and supervision related to counseling in a culturally diverse society;
- promote a unified professional identity for counselors, supervisions and counselor educators and;
- provide and disseminate premier research and scholarship.

Participants for the study will come from the ACES members. All of the members of ACES will be invited to participate in the study through e-mail. Members who decide to participate will be allowed to place their names in a drawing for a $50 gas certificate.

Measure

The Survey of Criminal Background Checks in Counselor Education Programs designed by Erwin and Toomey (2005) will be revised to include some of the recommendations from the study as well as adjustments to relate the survey to counselor educators in general. Questions will be added to the survey regarding the types of licenses and certifications of counselor educators, the number of times explanations are provided regarding background checks and whether background checks are required by their respective state licensed professional counselor board. For counselor training programs requiring background checks, information will be sought on the number of students that passed and failed background checks, the effect on minority groups and their career opportunities and the usefulness of background checks in identifying inappropriate applicants applying to counseling programs. The revised Survey of Criminal Background Checks in Counselor Education Programs will be reviewed by two counselor educators.

Procedure

A letter explaining the study, an approved Institutional Review Board Form and information about a drawing for $50 gas certificate for participation in the study will be emailed to members of ACES. The Revised Survey of Criminal Background Checks in Counselor Education Programs will be placed on survey website.

Data regarding the findings will be provided at a later date since the study is ongoing at the present time.
References


