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Masters-Level Counseling Students' Awareness of Council of Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Accreditation

V. Paige Zeiger
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

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V. Paige Zeiger

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Masters-Level Counseling Students' Awareness of Council of Accreditation of

Counseling and Related Educational Programs Accreditation

by

V. Paige Zeiger

MS, Walden University, 2016

BA, Auburn University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

February 2020

Abstract

As the counseling profession continues to evolve and change, there is a growing need for more professional counselors who are appropriately trained. Research indicated that a high percentage of prospective and current counseling graduate students lacked awareness of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accreditation prior to and following enrollment in a counseling graduate program; therefore, these students were not making fully informed decisions when selecting an appropriate graduate program that would prove beneficial to their professional goals. In this descriptive phenomenological inquiry, 7 master's-level counseling students provided their lived experiences of searching for and selecting a graduate program, specifying how CACREP-awareness was influential. The collected data was analyzed using the 6 steps of the descriptive phenomenological psychological method. Five clear themes emerged, under which 2 presented additional sub-themes. The theme of chosen program factors, familiarity, and flexibility yielded 5 subthemes: format, location, finances, faculty, and program requirements. Theme 5, identification of CACREP-accreditation, was further divided into discovery of CACREP-accreditation and state licensure requirements. These results provided a foundation for use in future research on CACREP-awareness and how students learn about CACREP. In addition, the findings aid in the facilitation of outreach efforts to increase CACREP-dialogue across the profession and within undergraduate programs. This information can be used to inform counseling programs about the importance student's ascribe to accreditation resulting in increased advertisement and strengthened recruitment measures.

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Dedication

To My Late Husband, Steve – your support and belief in me and my professional abilities meant more than you will ever know. Your heart and love for me was undeniable. Your respect and admiration for me was something that I will always keep close to my heart. I thank you for always believing in me and pushing me to achieve more professionally.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Study

Introduction

The American Counseling Association (ACA) is a professional and educational organization devoted to the growth and enhancement of the counseling profession (2019). The ACA values diversity, equity, inclusion, integrity, proactive leadership, professional community, relationships, scientific practice and knowledge, social justice, and empowerment (ACA, 2019). Another counseling organization with a mission to promote the professional development and advancement of the field is The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). ACES is a professional counseling organization that strives to enhance quality education and supervision of counselors serving in a variety of settings (ACES, n.d.). The organization promotes counselor education and supervision, specifically in order to improve counseling professional practices through the “generation and dissemination of knowledge that is responsive and respectful of our increasingly diverse world” (ACES, n.d., para. 3). With the field of counseling and counselor education growing and evolving, future counselor educators and supervisors who are competent and appropriately trained are vital for the continued advancement of the counseling profession. The ACA and ACES highly values counseling graduate students with their commitment to furthering ethical, culturally-inclusive clinical practices, innovative research, service to others, teaching, and supervision within the counseling field (ACES, n.d.). Therefore, understanding the lived experiences of master’s-level counseling graduate students exploring counseling graduate

program opportunities was essential, as these students were at the beginning of their counseling professional journey.

When beginning the search and selection process for an appropriate graduate program, master's level students are beginning to rely more and more on technology, specifically institutional and program websites (Woo, Mulit, & Visalli, 2016). If students are using technology to learn more about their potential choices of schools and programs, then the present study informs programs about what type of information is needed on their websites to advertise for recruitment measures. The websites may also be built to inform students about the institutions' and programs' important attributes, characteristics, and formats offered, such as private or public, geographic location, graduate exam requirements, accredited or nonaccredited, and so forth. There are undoubtedly several experiences, factors, and characteristics at play during the search and selection process, as the process can be quite lengthy and very complex (Bersola et al, 2014). Ritchie and Bobby (2012) reported accreditation is known to be particularly relevant to prospective counseling graduate students, which was one of the reasons more counseling programs are obtaining their accreditation. Some of the other myriad factors pertinent to prospective counseling graduate students include areas of specialization (school, clinical, rehabilitation, addictions) and program delivery format (traditional brick and mortar, virtual/online, and hybrid programs; Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015).

The counseling profession's accreditation organization is the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Adkison-Bradley (2013) noted many students prefer accredited programs because they are

recognized as a quality program with improved content, education, and enhanced training that meets professional standards of the counseling profession. Ritchie and Bobby (2012) contended that CACREP accreditation also has implications for counseling graduate students' postgraduation opportunities, for example, gaining state licensure and national certification more easily. CACREP is a degree-specific accreditation for graduate programs providing counseling degrees, and CACREP-accredited programs are distinguishable from other programs by the fulfillment of certain standards and requirements, such as program mission and objectives, content, recruitment, advising, qualifications, and so forth. (CACREP, 2017). Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) discovered during their research study that an overwhelming number of counseling graduate students, including both master's and doctoral level students, admitted to lacking awareness of CACREP, what it is, and how it impacts their professional identity and futures, which demonstrated that students are making life-defining decisions about their professional futures without being fully informed of significant information that can affect their journey.

To explore and properly describe the phenomenon of counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP, I used a qualitative inquiry to delve deeper into students' lived experiences and provide a better understanding to me and to the counseling profession. Using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach provided an opportunity to illuminate master's level students' lived experiences as they relate to CACREP and their awareness of CACREP. Currently, there are no existing studies in the counselor education or CACREP literature

exploring this phenomenon of interest. However, there was relevant research that can help situate and provide insight into the phenomenon. By conducting a thorough, substantive literature review, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the topics related to the influence of CACREP on counseling graduate students during the search and selection processes, complete with relatable ideas and key issues (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

In this chapter, I present background information related to the need for more qualitative research into the lived experiences of current master's-level counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP during the pre-enrollment phase, such as the search and selection process. The current body of literature was lacking any information about the implications for students' education and professionalism of understanding CACREP in the counseling graduate student's search and selection of an appropriate counseling program. Also in this chapter I describe the problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, theoretical framework, and the nature of this qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, I define related key terms or concepts, emphasize assumptions connected to the phenomenon of interest, offer the scope and delimitations of the study, and provide limitations based on the research design and methodology. Finally, I postulate the substantial significance of how a research study on this phenomenon advances the profession of counseling and counselor education.

Background

The field of counseling continues to grow and evolve, meaning the need for future counselor educators, counselors, and supervisors is vital to the advancement of the

profession. With an identifiable need for more counseling professionals, it is important to identify how counseling graduate students make the complex decision of searching, selecting, and ultimately enrolling in an appropriate program. Recently, the CACREP standards underwent significant revisions regarding program requirements, which may influence the student considerations for program enrollment, retention, and graduation rates (CACREP, 2016; Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015; Woo et al., 2016). CACREP has degree-specific accreditation for graduate programs providing counseling degrees, and CACREP-accredited programs are distinguishable from other programs by the fulfillment of certain standards and requirements, such as program mission and objectives, content, recruitment, advising, qualifications, and so forth. (CACREP, 2017).

The counseling profession's accrediting organization, CACREP emerged more than 40 years ago to conceptualize and operationalize the principles and ideals of the counseling profession through core curriculum and training program standards (Even, 2012). CACREP is known as the primary accrediting organization in the counseling profession across the nation (Urofsky, 2013). CACREP standards, as in most professions, are regularly revised to account for changes that occur in the profession and in society (Merlin et al, 2017). These periodic modifications were integral to helping the counseling profession to stay current and address any training needs of current and future counselors. The most recent revisions occurred in 2009 and 2016 (Merlin et al., 2017). One of the major changes to the 2016 CACREP standards was the requirement for all master's level graduate counseling programs, regardless of specialty, to consist of 60 semester credit hours, or 90 quarter credits, by the year 2020, with an outlined core

curriculum to be included (Lu, 2018). Another change pertained to the core faculty members for all CACREP-accredited graduate counseling programs, requiring them to have obtained their counselor education doctoral degree from a CACREP-accredited institution (Lu, 2018). A final CACREP standard revision was increasing support of a more unified counseling profession and promoting a strong professional counselor identity across student and professional populations.

There was limited research exploring the impact of the CACREP revision on students or how the revisions have influenced the search and selection process of a proper counseling graduate program. There was a scarcity of research investigating the revision's influence on enrollment, retention, and graduation rates in counseling programs, especially a lack of any literature focusing on how CACREP standards influence the processes.

Research indicated that students graduating from CACREP-accredited institutions perform better on the National Counselor Exam, a professional licensing exam, than those graduating from non-CACREP-accredited institutions (Adams, 2000; Scott; 2000). Even and Robinson (2013) discovered that graduates from CACREP-accredited institutions engaged in ethical misconduct less often than those from non-CACREP-accredited schools. While there are apparent advantages for attending a CACREP-accredited counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral program, Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett's (2015) findings indicated that a large percentage of students who were becoming oriented with the various available counseling programs lacked awareness of CACREP accreditation. These findings revealed significant evidence for the benefits of

CACREP accreditation for graduate students, but it also highlighted where graduate students may be lacking in awareness when selecting a program. Therefore, incoming counseling graduate students were not making fully informed decisions when it came to selecting graduate programs.

When orienting with the various doctoral programs and institutions, students began to rely on technology, specifically institutional and program websites (Woo et al., 2016). Because students utilized technology to learn about potential choices, the present study illustrated for programs that they need to advertise and inform students of important program attributes such as accreditation through internet websites. There are undoubtedly many experiences, factors, and characteristics at play with the orientation and selection process, as the process is very lengthy and complex.

Wilkinson and McCarthy (2016) conducted a pilot study to examine economic factors associated with masters'-level students' decisions to enroll in graduate programs ($N = 101$). The decision-making process for enrolling in graduate school was shown to be complex as it involved personal and professional commitments, sacrifices, and financial costs. The study found that accreditation, tuition costs, and geographical location were the most important considerations for enrolling in a CACREP-accredited graduate program, each of which "have the most immediate and costly impact on their economic situation" (Wilkinson & McCarthy, 2016). The current study supported the idea that accreditation should be one of the top considerations for a graduate program.

Bersola et al. (2014) conducted a survey research inquiry using two sets of surveys concerning admission cycles and institutional choice process for doctoral-level

graduate students. The findings incorporated comparisons for underrepresented minority to majority graduate student views and student versus administrator/faculty views of financial support, the importance of various other consideration factors, the significance of faculty contact, and the knowledge of competing programs during the decision-making process. Again, the graduate school decision-making process was complicated with characteristics of the student's personality, the student's life experiences, and each program. Bersola et al.'s (2014) study found financial support, contact with faculty, understanding of competing institutions, financial support, faculty quality, quality of interactions, institutional reputation, academic ability, research opportunities, and program reputation to be the considerations associated with graduate program decision-making.

Wahl (2018) conducted a qualitative narrative inquiry into the motivations for single parents to seek higher education from which the following five themes were discovered: intrinsic and extrinsic factors, familial support, personal/professional goals, motivation to achieve those goals, and college assistance wish list. From the five major themes, subthemes emerged such as personal fulfillment, career preference, improved quality of life, increased income, positive reinforcement from family, increased happiness, financial security, graduation goals, and so forth. While Wahl's (2018) narrative study focused on single parents, the motivational themes derived from the study were in direct correlation with past research and supported this current study by providing background information concerning motivation for a graduate education.

Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) conducted a survey study investigating the factors that influence counseling students' enrollment decisions with a special emphasis on CACREP. While the study's aim explored factors that influence counseling graduate students' enrollment decisions ($N = 359$, both master's and doctoral level), the results exposed how CACREP accreditation was the second most influential factor for most of the participants (14%), with nearly half (46%) of the participants disclosing their lack of CACREP awareness prior to and after enrollment in a graduate program. Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett's (2015) study was the major impetus for this current study because CACREP plays an important role directly and indirectly with students, faculty, counseling professionals, and the profession as a whole. Furthermore, Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett's findings demonstrated that non-CACREP-attending participants wished after enrollment that CACREP had been their number one consideration. Overall, Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett's (2015) inquiry supported the rationale and justification for the current study's topic of interest. The illustration of counseling graduate students' lack of awareness of the necessary information about CACREP and its implications for the students' professional futures that was critical for them to make fully informed decisions about their education needed to be addressed.

D'Andrea and Liu (2009) presented a research study at a national conference on how much counseling students really know about CACREP. The researchers analyzed student application letters using a lexical search for CACREP language presence and frequency to gauge how much students know about CACREP. The search revealed that no applicants directly addressed CACREP in their letters, but some included language

that fit CACREP standards. The authors asserted that it would be reasonable to assume that prospective and current counseling graduate students lack familiarity with CACREP standards and the value of CACREP (D'Andrea & Liu, 2009). The research supported my topic of interest by validating that counseling graduate students' awareness of CACREP is disproportionately low, even though CACREP board members have worked to delineate CACREP competencies and accreditation.

Urofsky (2013) offered an overview of accreditation in the United States, CACREP accreditation, and major current social, educational, and political issues associated with accreditors. CACREP is promoted as the accrediting body for the counseling profession and is described as being essential to counseling graduate programs across the United States. Urofsky (2013) defined CACREP as influential in enhancing the counseling profession's recognition, and emphasized addressing primary issues confronting CACREP, counselor training programs, and higher education. This literature appropriately illustrated the importance of CACREP, accreditation, and CACREP's role in the ongoing development and maintenance of quality assurance in counseling preparation programs by identifying critical elements allowing for self-regulation of the composition of CACREP's board of directors.

Foster (2012) provided a historical review of professional counselor credentialing and program accreditation. The study supported this current study by highlighting the vital role that CACREP plays for counselor credentialing and strengthening counseling's professional identity. The article explained the origins of credentialing, development of

accreditation, and the importance of these elements to the counseling profession, helping to ground my study.

Arcuri (2016) examined the variance among counselor preparatory programs in how the CACREP standards are implemented and met. Arcuri (2016) discovered that CACREP standards allow programs flexibility in how standards are met, leaving some graduates feeling underprepared or lacking confidence to begin careers in the counseling profession. However, this article helped illustrate that while CACREP allows for a certain amount of flexibility in meeting all eight CACREP standards, permitting the students to experience educators' varying counseling approaches, philosophies, and creativity enhances the learning experience by making it more individualized.

Lu (2018) used a mixed methods design to examine the relevance and clarity of 2016 CACREP standards, while also aiming to examine the counseling profession and counselor education's future trends. The research study revealed that the most recent CACREP (2016) standards revision is clear and relevant to the counselor education field and counselor preparation programs. Lu's (2018) mixed methods study supported the need for more in-depth look at student support, student awareness of CACREP, and the overall dialogue about CACREP in the counseling profession and with the public, which helps strengthen the counseling profession's identity as well as counseling graduate students' professional identity.

Mascari and Webber (2013) provided historical context for the counseling profession's struggles since its inception and specified the benefits of CACREP accreditation for students, programs, practitioners, and licensing boards. Some of the

benefits defined for counseling graduate students and future counselors included distinct advantages for initial state licensure, guarantee of a quality program/training, increased job opportunities, acceptance to a doctoral program, and heightened faculty professional involvement, including scholarship work (Mascari & Webber, 2013). This study was significant to my exploratory, descriptive inquiry by helping establish historical context for CACREP with an addition of the importance of CACREP for students, counselors, programs, and licensing boards.

Problem Statement

When prospective graduate students searched and selected an appropriate academic program, researchers found students typically consider a wide variety of factors ranging from geographic location, improved quality of life, finances or funding concerns, and program flexibility to increased salary, faculty employed, program format, potential funding, and academic/program reputation (Arcuri, 2016; English & Umbach, 2016; Ivy & Naude, 2004; Lei & Chuang, 2009; Poock & Love, 2001). The ACA (2014) clarified that current and prospective counseling students should be fully informed prior to admission as well as while enrolled in graduate programs about the programs' processes and practices, specifically that the program meets the professional and national standards for counseling competencies, which accreditation status represents. CACREP (2016) is the counseling profession's accrediting body for graduate level counseling and educational programs. The CACREP status is considered distinctively relevant to counseling graduate students' search and selection decision-making process of potential graduate programs (Ritchie & Bobby, 2011). Bardo (2009) asserted that academic

institutions need greater transparency with the public around accreditation standards and procedures. The importance of CACREP, CACREP's function, and CACREP's impact is not only crucial for prospective and current counseling students, but also for faculty, other counseling professionals, and the profession itself (Woo et al., 2016).

Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) contended a counseling institution or program's CACREP accreditation status directly and indirectly impacts prospective students, current students, practitioners, counselor educators, and the profession-at-large. Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) discovered CACREP accreditation ranked as the second (14%) most influential factor for selecting a graduate program among their study's sample of current counseling graduate students, including both master's and doctoral level students, ($N = 328$) with geographic location ranking number one (33.6%). However, nearly half of the participants (45.1%) lacked familiarity or even awareness of CACREP accreditation prior to and post enrollment in a graduate-level counseling program (Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015). D'Andrea and Lu (2009) presented a research study at a national conference illustrating how a sample of prospective graduate students failed to include CACREP-language in their counseling graduate program applications. Based on the current literature, it seemed reasonable to assume that many students lack familiarity with CACREP or CACREP standards, much less how CACREP may directly or indirectly influence the students' future. This descriptive phenomenological study provided essential information about (a) the problems that exist within the counseling profession relating to CACREP; (b) master's-level students ability to make fully informed decisions about selecting a counseling graduate program; (c)

master's-level counseling graduate students' disproportionately low level of awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP; and (d) how the lack of CACREP awareness influences the students' education, professional identity, and potential career future, including occupational options.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological research study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of masters' level counseling graduate students' awareness, understanding, and knowledge of CACREP and the influence CACREP accreditation-status has on those students' program choices. By providing a rich in-depth description of master's-level counseling graduate students' awareness of CACREP, this research study provided important implications for the individuals (students, faculty, and other counseling professionals), programs, and broader professional concerns (Bersola et al., 2014; D'Andrea & Lu, 2009; Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015). The critical need for an ongoing dialogue about the importance of CACREP (2016) within the profession was evident. The findings indicated it was important for prospective and current graduate students to be fully informed when selecting an appropriate counseling graduate program due to how that decision impacts the students' professional journey.

Research Question

RQ: What are the lived experiences of master's-level counseling graduate students regarding awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP when selecting a graduate program and the influence that CACREP accreditation status had on those students' program choices?

Subquestion

SRQ: How does CACREP awareness, knowledge, and understanding fit into the search and selection process of an appropriate counseling graduate program?

Framework

The selection of a theoretical or conceptual framework for a qualitative research study is one of the most critical steps in determining the inquiry's design as it helps guide the research process (Grant & Osanloo, 2015; Imenda, 2014). When choosing a research design, the researcher is actively trying to create a link between the problem, purpose, and research question(s) and contemplating how to best answer the questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The selected framework for this qualitative inquiry was Giorgi's phenomenological psychological method, adapted from Husserl (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017). The research study used Giorgi's (2018) framework to help guide the development of the research and design the practices used for this study. Giorgi's (2018) phenomenological approach was influenced by an intersection of philosophy, science, and psychology, and it employs decontextualization and recontextualization for data analyses as inspired by Husserlian teachings and traditions (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005).

I aimed to explore the "particulars," or individual illustrations of the identified phenomena of interest. For example, I intended to discover the meaning or essence of obtaining awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP and how CACREP may influence graduate program decision-making. Next, I used inductive reasoning processes to focus on understanding the "universals" or "first principles" and to present them in a descriptive manner (see Creswell, 2014; Koivisto, Janhonen, & Vaisanen, 2002). While

assuming a scientific phenomenological reduction attitude and using two epochés, or “abstentions from influences that could short-circuit or bias description,” referred to as the epoché of natural sciences and the epoché of natural attitude (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005, p. 168), I completed the data analysis process. The epoché simply meant to intentionally set aside presuppositions to focus on the pure, authentic essence or awareness of the phenomena of interest. Because I genuinely bracketed all presuppositions, judgments, and biases and used phenomenological reduction, no other theories or frameworks can intentionally be used to interpret or analyze the data (Giorgi et al., 2017). This intentionality, bracketing, and epochés were the concepts that separated the phenomenology variations. Because I used Giorgi’s (2018) method to guide my research development, these concepts were vital.

Nature of the Study

Rigorous qualitative research designs are on the rise in social science and health-related research projects, with the goal of creating a more in-depth understanding of phenomena and contexts in naturalistic settings that can contribute to understanding complexity and inspiring social change (Sofaer, 2002). The nature of this study was qualitative, specifically guided by Giorgi’s (2018) descriptive phenomenological psychological approach. In this study, I used descriptive phenomenology to delve deep into the essence of counseling graduate students’ lived experiences with CACREP and the students’ awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The focus of my research was to elucidate how counseling graduate students become aware of CACREP and its implications so that I could illuminate and

understand the participants' perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes in a qualitative way (see Patton, 2015). I ruled out other phenomenological methods, specifically hermeneutic and heuristic because the purpose of this study was to describe participants' experiences rather than interpret or assign meaning to the findings (Giorgi, 2018).

Descriptive Phenomenology

Giorgi's (2018) descriptive psychological phenomenological design and methodology aligned with my inquiry's problem, purpose, research questions, and intent. With Giorgi's (2018) method in mind, it was important that I focus on a small sample of individuals who have shared similar experiences so as to describe the essence of those lived experiences of awareness of CACREP and how that awareness influenced the subjects' professional and academic decisions (see Christensen, Welch, & Barr, 2017). The philosophical and scientific method allowed for the intentional, in-depth exploration of the identified phenomena, as closely as possible to the participants' lived experiences or lifeworld through interview and observation (Giorgi, 2018). *Lifeworld*, according to Husserl, was the "common, everyday world into which we are born and live, . . . usually a world of ordinariness" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 10). Lifeworld and present life experiences were essentially the most critical factors to study. I aspired to generate phenomenological data from in-depth, qualitative interviews with a small sample of self-identified counseling graduate students. The descriptive phenomenological design allowed me to produce a general structural description of the lived experiences of those students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP as it appeared to those

participants, with my own preconceptions and biases bracketed in epoché (see Giorgi, 2012).

Definitions

Some of the unique terminology used to demonstrate the qualitative approach was employed for this study included: (a) lived experience, lifeworld, or essence; (b) presuppositions; (c) bracketing; (d) phenomenological reduction; (e) epochés; and (f) horizontalization. The fundamental concept of descriptive phenomenology is lived experience or lifeworld. Lived experience refers to an individual's natural life experience in their lifeworld are seen subjectively through human consciousness (Giorgi, 2019). Lifeworld, according to Husserl, was the everyday world that individuals live in and initially encounter (Giorgi, 2009). The goal of this descriptive phenomenological study was to describe how the phenomena presented itself to the participants' consciousness by deriving the essence, the appearance of all objects to the consciousness, through free imaginative variation (Giorgi, 2018). The focus was on what was perceived rather than how it was perceived.

Presuppositions are preconceived notions of an idea, concept, or experience. Bracketing or horizontalization, which are important components of Giorgi's method, are the withholding of presuppositions or the positing of existence of what is given in order for the given to be present to human consciousness (Giorgi, 2019). Phenomenological reduction, a process required during data analysis, is the task of analyzing a description of an individual's lifeworld perspective and approaching it from a psychological perspective. In this manner I sought meaning in the lifeworld descriptions that were

psychologically revealing. Epochés are related to bracketing but are essentially the method for which presuppositions are captured and set aside to not interfere with the data analysis process. There are two types of epoché: epoché of the natural attitude and epoché of the natural science. Reiners (2012) explained how Husserl sought to describe, rather than interpret, the lived, conscious experiences of subjects while bracketing preconceptions, or presuppositions into epochés, using phenomenological reduction to arrive at structural and textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). In the present research I strived to uncover through phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation the conscious lived experiences of master's-level counseling graduate students' awareness of CACREP and how CACREP may have influenced the search and selection decision-making process of an appropriate graduate program.

With the awareness of CACREP accreditation's perceived benefits on the student, faculty, and program levels, it was important to consider how CACREP can and should be involved in the search and selection decision-making process. Research indicated that the task of selecting an appropriate counselor graduate program was extremely complicated, as there are many factors, characteristics, and influences at play (Klien, 2006; Sackett, et al., 2015). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) delineated a three-stage college selection model that integrated economic, organizational, state and federal policy, and information-processing concerns of students. The stages moved from predisposition (precontemplation) to search and finally choice, or selection (Eidimtas & Juceviene, 2014). For the purposes of this research inquiry, I focused on the first two stages of precontemplation and searching. Other terms important to note were the various

acronyms used throughout the study, such as ACA, ACES, American Mental Health Counseling Association (AMHCA), and most importantly CACREP (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs). Finally, some last key concepts used throughout this research inquiry were the ideal of CACREP awareness, knowledge, and understanding prior to enrolling in a counseling graduate program (Kimbel & Levitt, 2017). As the college choice model described, students derived concentrated self-awareness by conducting a proper literature and program review as well as increasing personal awareness to make a fully informed decision about selecting an appropriate program.

Assumptions

There were several assumptions that helped guide the research development, design, and purpose of this research inquiry. First, I assumed that my background experiences with the phenomenon of interest and my current student status enabled me to develop rapport and a strong working alliance easily. This likelihood of this relationship aided in the participants' interest in this study, which resulted in an honest, open engagement between researcher and participant. My hope was the participants would be open and honest about their experiences with me, demonstrating a sense of trustworthiness and authenticity during the data collection process because I was a counseling student just like the target participant. Another assumption was my intention to locate and interview enough participants that will result in saturation in a reasonable amount of time. Due to the nature of this study, I assumed that not only will students be interested in the data, but faculty, other professionals, programs, institutions, and the

counseling profession as a whole be intrigued. Another assumption concerned the target population, which is first- and second-year clinical counseling or counselor education graduate students, as I believed that they will be able to provide the most in-depth, rich content about the phenomenon.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research study was to make sense of counseling graduate students' lived experiences of their level of awareness of CACREP and how that awareness helped inform future studies, students, faculty, and the counseling profession. In order to gain the type of data needed for this study, a qualitative methodology was selected that uses interviews and observations for collecting the data. The decision to employ descriptive phenomenology further restricted the study as there will not be any meaning or interpretations derived from the data findings. Another delimitation was the data collection methods of audio recorded interviews and observations via teleconferences. While technology can be quite useful in today's world, technology can sometimes be unreliable. A final delimitation was the small sample size that allowed for a rich, in-depth, concrete description of the lived experiences and essences captured relating to student CACREP awareness.

Limitations

With any research study, there was always potential limitations, challenges, and barriers that can arise. A critical challenge that may occur was the recruitment of participants through the Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserv (CESNET-L). Through reflection on this decision, I needed to include additional

recruitment methods through more listservs, such as ACA or ACES which can be costly. Other limitations involved methodological issues, such as reduced credibility and reliability due to the qualitative nature of the researcher; difficulties with the researcher's role and potential biases; labor intensive with identifying a reputable transcription service or data analysis procedures; time consuming nature of the design; access to the target population; and, the use of purposeful sampling. Finally, transferability in qualitative research can be complicated; however, I attempted to establish generalizability by using thick descriptions, specifically identifying my role as the researcher and the instrument, reflective journaling, and bracketing all my presuppositions.

Significance

This phenomenological study filled the gap in counseling literature pertaining to counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP and CACREP's influence on enrollment decision-making, occupational path, and the profession itself. The potential effects from this research inquiry influenced positive social change on the individual, counseling program, and broader profession levels. For example, on the individual level, comprehensive descriptions that present the source of a reflective structural analysis revealed the essence of the phenomena or experiences where counseling graduate students, faculty, and other counseling professionals gained an increased awareness, improved knowledge, and deeper understanding of CACREP, CACREP core standards, and CACREP implications (Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015).

On the counseling graduate program level, counseling graduate programs profited from this phenomenological inquiry's in-depth structural descriptions by potentially

leading to enhanced recruitment, enrollment, maturation, and retention strategies for United States based counseling programs and potentially lead to the encouragement and promotion of non-accredited counseling graduate programs to seek CACREP accreditation in the United States, thereby, offering graduate students, nationally and internationally, more options during their program search and selection process (Bersola et al., 2014). On the broader professional level, academics contended that a strengthened, unified counseling profession embracing CACREP and CACREP standards decreased ethical misconduct across the board, increased internship or job opportunities, raised academic quality, enhanced faculty involvement, enriched personal, professional, and profession identity, and improves professional growth and development (Woo, Lu, Henfield, & Choi, 2014). Overall, the descriptive findings aided in improvement of student familiarity with CACREP and CACREP standards, emphasized program commitment to high academic standards, increased student buy-in to quality education, and boosted public confidence in the counseling profession, a distinct profession.

Summary

In conclusion, a study investigating how CACREP was involved in the counseling graduate student decision-making process of graduate programs served not only as informational for future students enabling them to make fully informed decisions, but reach other professionals, programs, and the profession as a whole. This chapter provided the reader with an introduction to the phenomenon of interest, background, and review of the current literature building a case for why this study is important to conduct. The problem and purpose statements informed the reader of the rationale behind the

decision to approach this study from a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological perspective. While I provided a basic understanding of the background, scope of the study, delimitations, limitations, and significance, the next chapter delved deeper in the literature review. In chapter two, I provided a comprehensive review of the relevant literature concerning counseling graduate student's need for CACREP awareness, knowledge, and understanding prior to making enrollment decisions as well as how CACREP make impact the student's professional future in the counseling profession.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to Literature Review

Research has demonstrated that graduate students from all types of higher education programs choose to enroll in graduate school for a variety of reasons: to help improve employment opportunities, to fulfill personal/professional goals and aspirations, and to increase competency levels and abilities to contribute to their respective profession (Allum, 2014; Goto & Martin, 2009; Hinkle, Iarussi, Schermer, & Yensel, 2014; Perez, 2011; Wahl, 2018). The search, selection, and enrollment process for college, at all levels, is an exceedingly complicated undertaking, especially with the myriad of variables that must be considered when making these influential and vital decisions (Hilston, 2006; Ozturk, 2018; Trent, 2018). The factors considered during the decision-making process of higher education include personal, professional, and institutional characteristics and attributes, such as geographic location, academic reputation, job opportunities during and following graduation, financial aid/offers, program format (online, hybrid, traditional), work-school-life balance, work-related concerns, prestige, academic reputation, and accreditation-status (Sackett et al., 2015; Wilkinson & McCarthy, 2016).

Program accreditation status needed to be a high-ranking consideration when searching, selecting, and enrolling into a graduate program, especially counseling graduate programs. The counseling profession's accrediting organization was the CACREP, meaning CACREP accreditation represented that a program has reached a certain high caliber reputation with specific expectations and standards being met (Urofsky, 2013). Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) conducted a survey research study

investigating the factors influencing counseling students' enrollment decision making, with special emphasis on CACREP. In Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett's (2015) inquiry, the researchers found that an alarming percentage, almost 50%, of counseling graduate students, lacked awareness of CACREP before and after enrollment in counseling graduate programs ($N = 359$). These findings about the unfamiliarity of CACREP and program reputation indicated that uninformed counseling graduate students were making an important decision of which counselor education program was most appropriate for that student and for their future in the counseling profession. The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological research study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of counseling graduate students' awareness, understanding, and knowledge of CACREP and the influence CACREP accreditation status has on master's-level students' program choices.

In this chapter, I describe the literature search strategies that I employed to conduct a thorough review of the existing literature related to my topic of interest. Next, I explain Giorgi's (2018) descriptive phenomenological theoretical foundation that guided my study's methodology and research decisions. I provide the reader with a comprehensive review of the most current literature available related to graduate school search and selection decision-making practices, counseling graduate students decision-making practices, and factors impacting counseling graduate students' choices about graduate programs. I offer an overview of accreditation, CACREP accreditation, CACREP history, CACREP's implications in the decision-making process for current counseling graduate programs, and the need for greater awareness of CACREP

accreditation during counseling graduate students' search and selection process. Finally, I address how the increased CACREP awareness may lead to increased CACREP dialogue from individual (student, faculty, other professionals) to the broader public.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted an extensive review of the literature attempting to focus on counseling student awareness of CACREP to provide a thorough and comprehensive explanation of the issues pertinent to this study. However, I discovered the research illustrated a large gap specific to my phenomena of interest, so, I widened my search to include concerns surrounding counseling graduate students, their enrollment decision-making process, and CACREP. I used multiple databases and books to search for journal articles and other literature related to my phenomena of interest, such as: Academic Search Complete, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, PubMed, Education Source, ERIC, Primary Search, SocINDEX with Full Text, and Ebscohost. I included Google Scholar in my search to help identify any other information and scholarship that may not have appeared in my previous searches. During the database search process, I searched for terms related to the phenomenon of interest, such as *graduate school, higher education, motivations for higher education, motivations + counseling profession, counseling graduate school, decision-making about graduate school, CACREP + enrollment, CACREP benefits, CACREP history, and factors impacting or influencing graduate school or counseling graduate school*. Additionally, I used the following terms: *accreditation, accreditor benefits, CACREP, and CACREP advantages and limitations*. Finally, I narrowed the search to critical terms that were specifically relevant to my

research study: *counseling graduate school/program, current counseling graduate students, enrollment process, persistence, decision-making process, and decision-making factors*. I searched for current, peer-reviewed literature from the last 5 years. However, due to lack of relevant literature targeting CACREP 2016 standards' influence on counseling graduate students' lives and especially decision-making abilities concerning graduate school, it was important to extend my literature review to include research that dated back to the early 1990s. This exhaustive literature review allowed me to capture all relevant research on my topic of interest and ensured that my study was sound and grounded in the literature.

Theoretical Foundation

Phenomenology

Phenomenology has a long-standing tradition of being a philosophy-based inquiry of the “study of lived experience—the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we come to conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (van Manen, 2017, p. 2). Within the phenomenological realm of methodological approaches, several famous philosophers emerged including Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). Each of these philosophers conceived a unique version of phenomenology, but there are truly only two primary traditions: Husserl's framework aiming to describe the reality of an individual's lived experience of an identified phenomenon through a narrative process and Heidegger's hermeneutic procedure of understanding the mode of being through interpretation (Giorgi, 2018).

After careful review of both Husserl's (descriptive transcendental philosophy) and Heidegger's (interpretative) paradigms and conceptualizing how the design would influence my study, Giorgi's (2018) descriptive psychological phenomenological approach appeared to be the best fit for the study. Giorgi's (2009) approach was more scientific and psychological rather than philosophical like Husserl's tradition, but used several of the same features as Husserl. The chosen descriptive phenomenological design suggests that several factors remain constant throughout the entire research process: (a) establishing presence in the emerging fieldwork or naturalistic settings, (b) utilizing the researcher as the instrument, (c) providing fidelity to participants, (d) a focus on meaning and meaning-making, (e) using intentionality with the research process and researcher-participant relationship, (f) the noesis and noema, (g) horizon, and (h) implementing an inductive reasoning data analysis method moving from the particulars to structured themes and descriptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Descriptive phenomenology. A descriptive phenomenological approach aligned with the purpose of this study by allowing for the exploration and description of the lived experiences, or lifeworld, of counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP and how CACREP influences the counseling graduate students' future in the profession. Lifeworld was an important tenet to Husserlian teachings and refers to the way in which a lived experience is experienced in everyday life (Giorgi, 2018). Furthermore, while an individual's awareness is linked to these experiences, the person was hardly ever completely synchronized or fully conscious to what is actually being experienced.

Giorgi (2018) adapted his approach from Husserl's philosophical foundations and inspirations from Merleau-Ponty's insights, resulting in an infusion of existential flavor in the approach (Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Giorgi, 2012). Today, Giorgi is recognized as the founder of the descriptive phenomenological method who drew upon an intersection of three intellectual movements, which encompasses six data analysis steps, phenomenological philosophy, science, and psychology (Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). The primary task of descriptive phenomenology is to define carefully the description provided by a participant with the researcher's presuppositions being bracketed. The concrete description is used as a basis to methodologically discern the essence of the lifeworld, or lived experience (Giorgi, 2018). Giorgi (2018) studied phenomenological philosophy for years in order to realize that the descriptive phenomenology was based on psychology rather than empiricism and hermeneutics. Due to variations of phenomenology suggesting radically different perspectives for the data analysis method, Giorgi (2018) decided it was critical to establish a method for data analysis and description of psychological data using intentionality.

This exploratory, descriptive phenomenological research design allowed for my biases, beliefs, and assumptions to be bracketed during the research process into two epochés to avoid compromising the research findings (see Giorgi, 2018). The psychological phenomenological philosophy allowed me to explore and notate the immanent conscious processes that I have lived to ascertain the essential disciplinary meaning lived by the participant (Giorgi, 2018). Through my research inquiry, I intended to generate data through in-depth, qualitative interviews with a small sample of self-

identified counseling graduate students, which generated a general structural description of the lived experiences of the counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP as it appeared to their consciousness, while my preconceptions, presuppositions, and biases were bracketed into epoché (see Giorgi, 2012). There were two types of epoché: epoché of natural attitude and epoché of natural sciences, which aim to help the researcher abstain from presumptions that may bias the data descriptions (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi, 2018).

The descriptive phenomenological framework is one that respects the spirit of science, assumes a scientific phenomenological reduction attitude, and uses phenomenology philosophy to understand and describe a phenomenon that has been experienced in the way it is presented to the consciousness of the participant; therefore, an external theory or an additional lens is not required (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi, 2018). I genuinely implemented Giorgi's psychological phenomenology inquiry with intentionality, bracketing, epochés, and the scientific phenomenological reduction attitude, therefore the introduction of another theory or framework for study guidance would falsify and transform the research into something different (Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi, 2018; Giorgi et al., 2017). Psychological phenomenology accepts some features of the phenomenological philosophy (Husserl), but slightly alters the concepts of apriority, eideticism, intuition, intentionality, and transcendentality (Giorgi, 2018). Therefore, it was essential that Giorgi's philosophy of descriptive phenomenological psychological research was the only theory, or philosophy, applied throughout the research process.

Literature Review

In this section, I presented a comprehensive literature review that established the need for a broader exploration and description of current counseling graduate students' awareness of CACREP, CACREP history, and CACREP implications. To begin with, I explored the motivations and the decision-making practices of graduate-level academics, then concentrated on search and selection factors that influence counseling graduate students' decision to enroll in specific graduate programs. I followed with an explanation of accreditation, how accreditation plays a role in the higher education decision-making, and finally focus on CACREP accreditation, CACREP history, CACREP perceived benefits, CACREP observed challenges and its implications for current counseling graduate students. Finally, I wrapped up with a description of the apparent gap in the literature regarding CACREP awareness and the need for further study in the counseling profession.

Graduate Student Motivations and Decision-Making Practices

There was a plethora of research focusing on higher education practices of graduate students, graduate student motivations for a graduate-level degree, and a description of their decision-making practices (Allum, 2014; Burkholder, 2012; Hilston, 2006; Ozturk, 2018; Sackett, Hartig, Bodenhorn, Farmer, Ghoston, Graham, & Lile, 2015). The decision to enroll in higher education, especially beyond the undergraduate studies, was a complex, complicated process that typically involves an underlying motivation or goal (Knutsen, 2011; Lin & Wang, 2015; Wahl, 2018). Across the literature, there was a wide range of research concerning motivations for attaining a

higher education, from undergraduate to doctoral-level degrees. Hilston (2006) found that undergraduate students sought higher education for a better career outlook, program reputation, financial offerings, and academic reputation. While these were considerations for undergraduate students, it made sense that these considerations and motivations be similar to graduate programs. Allum (2014) discovered from a sample of non-field specific graduate students that the factors and motivators to seek higher education were the same as described above in addition to a variety of others. The motivations of Allum's (2014) sample included enhancing one's personal and professional contributions to their communities, personal fulfillment, increasing occupational options, and a desire to grow more competent in a specific area of study.

While motivation and desire played a significant part in the decision-making process, there were also many other factors to be considered. Over time, individuals aged, and those young adults turned into middle-aged adults, and with that comes different needs, varied motivations, changes in interests, which supported the notion of transformative learning (Perez, 2011). Through transformative learning, adults' motivation to pursue graduate school changed or adjusted. There were motivations and challenges related to perceptions of higher education, such as tuition, college preparedness, pregnancy, and lack of support associated with going back to school (Perez, 2011). Some of the motivations included moral and financial support, personal responsibilities, ability to reach educational goals, self-improvement, survival, perceived job enhancements, higher income, self-advancement, educational background of family, salary increase (most reported), socioeconomic factors, exposure to others in higher

education, ability to apply new knowledge within chosen profession, and self-fulfillment (Bersola et al., 2014; Perez, 2011).

Bersola et al., (2014) conducted a study to understand admitted doctoral students' institutional choices with a highly selective research university (very high research activity). Two sets of surveys regarding the admissions cycle and institution choice process were used: one to admitted doctoral students and the other to departmental admissions leaders. The study confirmed past studies that prospective students consider many program and institutional factors during the decision-making process. While faculty believed that financial considerations were the most important factor for students, the data found that these considerations were not the primary driving force in doctoral choices (Bersola, et al., 2014). The findings demonstrated that faculty do not have a complete understanding of the prospective student decision-making practices. Data suggested that some students would consider other institutions if the financial offerings were stronger and interactions with faculty and staff were improved. Overall, Bersola, et al., (2014) discovered that the contact with faculty and staff had more of an influence on student college choices than the faculty originally realized.

Ozturk's (2018) binary logistical regression analysis supported the findings of these studies identifying major factors impacting graduate school pursuance as education status, marital status, age, whether or not there are entrance exams, years employed, and parent's education level. As the world continues to change, higher education had to adapt to the changes as well, which led to the various education platforms now available: entirely online, asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid, and traditional brick-and-mortar.

These additional graduate program choices made the decision-making process even more difficult and complicated. Additionally, self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of learner satisfaction, goal setting, and other psychological factors, such as influence from family, friends, mentors, etc., were discovered to impact an adult's motivation to pursue graduate school (Goto & Martin, 2009). While there was ample literature illustrating the variety of motivations and factors that influence an individual's decision-making process concerning higher education, some studies focus solely on specific populations of graduate students, for instance single parents or those seeking brick and mortar schools. Wahl's (2018) qualitative narrative study discerned the most important motivational factors for single-parents as familial support, personal/professional goals, motivation to achieve academic goals, and a college assistance wish list.

Chism et al. (2010) examined the factors that affect master's-level graduate students' decision-making practices to take on-campus courses that can impact recruitment of on-campus students. The research teams co-constructed an instrument consisting of 7 variables associated with graduate student choice (Chism et al., 2010). Chism et al., (2010) found the financial cost of the program was the only significant variable. The purposes of Chism et al.'s (2010) study was to expand the body of current literature to on-campus graduate student recruitment at rural universities and to help identify those recruitment factors which might be used to effectively recruit more graduate students to complete coursework on-campus at a rural campus. Based on their (Chism et al.) study, finances were the primary consideration of the students being recruited to on-campus counseling programs. Hertlein and Lambert-Shute (2007)

attempted to understand the factors and motivators of both master's and doctoral graduate students choosing Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) graduate programs and how programs met or did not meet the expectations of students over the course of graduate study using a mixed method design, based on online survey. The quantitative data derived the following factors that led graduate students to select MFT programs: personal fit; faculty; funding; research; clinical work; and, teaching. The qualitative data revealed descriptions of how they believed their chosen program was or was not meeting expectations and personal fit was identified as the most important factor.

Pavelko, Malani, Lieberman, and Hahs-Vaughn (2015) contended that understanding the factors that influence enrollment is particularly important for programs, academic fields, and institutions alike. Using a survey research method with a Likert-type electronic scale, students identified the following factors as most important: program choices, finances, tuition offerings, knowledgeable faculty, nature of training, marketing, accreditation, and opportunities to participate in research and conference presentations. Burkholder (2012) conducted a phenomenological study to explore the experiences of CES doctoral students that voluntarily left CES doctoral programs and successfully returned on a later date. The themes derived from his study provided insight into the importance of enrollment, maturation, and attrition rates, which appear to surround personal and academic factors, academic culture, and faculty-student interactions (Burkholder, 2012). Other research indicated the most critical factors to consider for graduate school were program flexibility, program platform, geographic location, spousal considerations, faculty friendliness, faculty-student fit, program-student

fit, home-work-school balance, program options, reputation, and accreditation (Ivy & Naude, 2004; Lei & Chuang, 2009; Poock & Love, 2001). Ivy and Naude (2004) determined that Master of Business Administration students named program choice, faculty, finances, and academic reputation as influential to the enrollment process. There were several repeating themes that arose from the literature review, such as enhanced competence, increased salary, financial considerations, program reputation, and accreditation-status. The literature made it evident that the decision-making process is highly complex.

Decision-making process. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) delineated a three-stage college selection model that integrates economic, organizational, state and federal policy, and information-processing concerns for students. While the model was originally developed for high school students, it appeared the process can be applied to graduate school decision-making as well (Henry, 2012). The widely popularized Model of College Choice stages are predisposition, search, and choice (Messer et al., 2016). The predisposition phase was developmental and dictated whether an individual would be likely to continue one's education beyond undergraduate education. The searching stage included considerations of institutional factors, attribute values, and the right characteristics for the student (Messer et al., 2016). Obviously, the choice stage occurred when the student ultimately decided on which institution and program for which they would apply. According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), current and prospective students were influenced by a variety of factors and characteristics, personal and institutional, like what more current research has indicated. Some of these factors were

geographic location, financial offerings, attitudes toward higher education, institutional costs, socioeconomic status, academic ability, significant others and peers, support systems, school and leadership experiences, extracurricular activities, interaction with prospective schools, and recruitment correspondence. The factors identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) resembled many of the same influences impacting enrollment decisions found in the existing literature.

Counseling Graduate Students' Experiences

Much of the discussion thus far was geared toward undergraduate and graduate academia in general, however this study specifically focused on master-level counseling students and how they experienced the search and selection process of counseling programs with an awareness of CACREP. While many of the factors above still influenced this particular population, it was imperative that counseling programs, faculty, counseling programs, and the profession as a whole are knowledgeable about which factors were most influential to their prospective and current students (Boes, Ullery, Miller, & Cobia, 1999; Foss-Kelly & Protivnak, 2017). The knowledge of how CACREP influenced or impacted the search and selection of counseling graduate students was very advantageous to counseling programs, program directors, recruiters, faculty, staff, students, and the profession. For example, programs learned that highlighting a counseling program's accreditation status to prospective students may recruit an increased number of applicants. Another instance concerned prospective students and their search for fit in an appropriate program and their professional futures. If students had the knowledge and understanding of how CACREP influenced their education,

training, and professional future, increased CACREP awareness enhanced the students' decision-making process about programs, counseling profession's identity, while also increased CACREP dialogue across the profession.

According to Hinkle et al. (2014) there were four key motivators for pursuing a counseling graduate degree: to be a professor, to engage in a self-guided journey while obtaining a respectable career with job security, to become a professional leader, and finally to compensate for one's family and community amid obstacles. Protivnak and Foss (2009) conducted a study concerning counselor education graduate students and reported that departmental culture, mentoring, academics, support systems from within and outside the program, and personal issues or concerns influenced their experiences in both positive and negative ways. Additional research inquiries revealed that accreditation, tuition costs, financial factors, and geographic proximity of the program were the most influential decision-making factors (Hertlein & Lambert-Shute, 2007; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Wilkinson & McCarthy, 2016). With academic reputation being one of the common factors identified as influential during the orientation and selection process, it was essential to discover what is meant by reputation. Academic or program reputation pertained to the faculty or staff members, the institution prestige, rank of program, or the program's accreditation status, which in the counseling profession was reflected by the Council of Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accreditation (Urofsky, 2013).

The knowledge, awareness, and understanding of CACREP accreditation was a vital factor and a professional standard with merit in the counseling profession when

initially searching for counseling graduate programs. In addition to the available literature, I asserted when students were seeking a valuable, quality, reputable counseling education that translated well into the real world, CACREP accreditation must be a consideration (Rapp, Moody, & Stewart, 2018). Woo, Lu, Henfield, and Bang (2017) concluded that many counseling graduate students enter graduate school with the intention of professorship with positive expectations from their program to aid them on the journey toward academia. With this in mind, students needed to ensure that they were enrolled in a CACREP-accredited program, as the CACREP (2016) standards dictate that the core counselor educator role was only attainable with a CACREP-graduate degree. There was a projected demand for counselor educators, professorship, in the coming years for the counseling profession. Therefore, the counseling graduate students needed to make fully informed decisions when searching and selecting a counseling graduate program (Woo et al., 2017). With the number of counseling programs growing across the United States, including the variety of program format, program websites were becoming increasingly used for searching for detailed program characteristics and facilitating the application process.

A prospective student might typically begin the search process by examining the following websites: CACREP's directory of accredited programs and state counseling licensing boards (Kimbel & Levitt, 2017). There were also a few other features that a prospective student may consider when searching for an appropriate counseling graduate program. Besides accreditation-status, a student may review the institution's location, finances, institution type, program delivery method, program demographics, faculty,

student involvement, and other opportunities, such as study-abroad programs, summer immersion programs, specialty areas available for elective study, and program culture (Kimbel & Levitt, 2017). The factors and considerations involved with searching and selecting a counseling graduate program that met a prospective students' standards and needs were immense, intricate, and incredibly complex.

Graduate program website content. Several researchers examined the content available on CACREP and non-accredited graduate program websites with the aim of identifying detailed information and content about counseling graduate programs (Lu, 2018; Woo et al., 2016). With today's technology, students were not only applying to graduate programs through the website, but also continuing their education through online or hybrid modalities. Counseling graduate students visiting these program websites were learning about counseling program's mission statements, vision, training standards, curriculum, faculty members, accreditation status, etc. Many times, when students were visiting program websites, it was their initial contact and orientation to that program, so the content and format of how the content was displayed on the program website matters (Woo et al., 2016).

Graduate programs ensured that the website is user-friendly, effective, and identifies its' accreditation, including a link to and from the accrediting website to demonstrate the program's uniqueness and value. Pace (2016) contended that it would be beneficial for the CACREP-accredited programs to make sure that it is linked with the CACREP-website. Ivan, Hased, Darden, Aston, and Guy (2017) discovered that genetic counseling graduate students were impacted by three major themes of a program's

website: easy navigation, website content, and website impression. Overall, the literature indicated how websites were playing a key role in the search and selection process; therefore, counseling programs needed to ensure that the websites are organized in a way that makes a good first impression and the website included and provided the most influential factors that attract prospective students, which academic reputation, accreditation, location, and financial concerns appeared to be the most appealing.

Accreditation and Graduate Student Decision-Making

A more recent study by Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) investigated factors influencing counseling graduate students, from both master's and doctoral-level study, enrollment decisions, with a particular focus on CACREP and discovered some alarming findings for the counseling profession. The inquiry found that only 24.7% of the sample were familiar or very familiar with the CACREP before enrollment meaning that 75.3% of the sample lacked awareness of CACREP altogether. These findings were a significant indicator that something in the counseling profession and counselor education is amiss. The study reported that even after enrollment, looking at the sample as a whole, CACREP awareness only increased by 48.4%. Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) contended that with program reputation, academic culture, and *accreditation*, all being detected as influential factors during the decision-making process for graduate students, counseling graduate students need to be more aware of CACREP accreditation, what it is, how it impacts the counseling profession, and especially how CACREP directly and indirectly impacts the prospective and current students.

When reviewing the status of accreditation within higher education literature, accreditation status ranked as a highly significant and valuable benchmark for graduate programs, especially in the nursing or medical fields, but CACREP accreditation awareness or dialogue within the counseling profession seems lacking. Bahr (2018) and Due, Thorsen, and Kousgaard (2019) reported that accreditation is one of the most valued and essential aspects of a professional field, like nursing, medicine, and healthcare. Accreditation of any kind for any field was far-reaching and reinforced an institution or program was making data-driven decisions supported by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Halstead (2020) provided validation for the need for accreditation awareness among all professions, professionals, and students, where DePalma (2018) described how accreditation (institutional) differed from certification (individual/person), but both are important and valuable and respected.

Valiga and Thorlow (2018) stated in their manuscript that “graduate education is designed to expand and challenge your thinking, push you to explore concepts in-depth, help you begin to develop an area of expertise, challenge you to become increasingly familiar with the literature and leaders in our own related fields, enhance public speaking skills, and reflect on your values and beliefs and how they impact your actions” (p. 11). The manuscript identified the increase in online and hybrid programs, requirements, and/or preference of those seeking a graduate education having flourished and diversified, accreditation was still defined as the number one factor for selecting a program (in the nursing profession), due to it providing prospective students the confirmation that the program met national standards of curriculum, hires faculty with

expertise, offered additional resources, as well as other advantageous components. Even though Valiga and Thorlow (2018) were looking at the nursing graduate student population, I believed that it certainly applied to the counseling profession as well because they are both helping professions, just in different ways.

Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett's (2015) inquiry played a very significant role in the foundation of my study because the startling findings related to counseling graduate students' level of awareness of CACREP. The researchers, furthermore, found that while some participants ranked accreditation as the second most influential factor for selecting a counseling graduate program, after enrollment the non-CACREP-attending participants wished that CACREP was their number one consideration. The demonstration that most counseling graduate students were often entirely unaware of CACREP accreditation, it was recommended that accreditation be one of the most salient factors to consider when searching and selecting a counseling graduate program. Whereas Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) illuminated that many counseling graduate students lack CACREP-awareness, Adkison-Bradley (2013) noted many students still prefer accredited programs because the programs were recognized as having a quality program with content, education, and training that meets professional standards.

D'Andrea and Liu (2009) presented a paper at a national conference aimed at answering the research question: If students do not know programs standards for ensuring the quality of their education, what role does CACREP play in drawing in students to programs that set quality standards? The researchers' lexical search for CACREP language in student-letters written by applicants revealed that no applicants mentioned

CACREP directly; however, there was some language that appeared to address specific CACREP-standards to a degree (D'Andrea & Liu, 2009). These authors noted that while the topic of student knowledge and awareness of CACREP had not been addressed before, "perhaps because the focus of accreditation has been on requiring programs, faculty, and institutions to create high standards rather than educating students about what to expect from professional counseling programs" (D'Andrea & Liu, 2009, p. 4).

D'Andrea and Liu (2009) presented the particular study at a national conference in 2009, then in 2015 Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett (2015) brought the attention back to CACREP-awareness or lack thereof, which illustrated there had been limited movement in increasing the dialogue, the education, the awareness, the knowledge, and the understanding of CACREP amongst current counseling graduate students. While both studies suffered from some limitations or challenges, the findings were the same. Future research needed to focus on first gaining a qualitative understanding of how counseling graduate students, within both accredited and non-accredited programs, learn about accrediting bodies and CACREP, specifically, as well as the ascribed importance of CACREP accreditation. Kimbel and Levitt (2017) contended that accreditation is imperative to the decision-making process for counseling graduate students' because it can and will have a tremendous impact on the students' future and professional career, "not just in terms of the quality of graduate school training, but also in your ability to obtain licensure, national certification, and even career opportunities" (p. 65). CACREP was the cornerstone from which the counseling profession was able to ensure students were obtaining a quality education and training by meeting a specific set of standards.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs History

The counseling profession evolved from a field of vocational guidance to one that addresses client mental health issues, advocacy, and social change, which occurred through the mental health movement during World War I, II, and the Great Depression (Foster, 2012). The first significant actions taken to legitimize the profession as unique, separate, and distinct were the creation of the CACREP organization in 1981, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) in 1982, and the Chi Sigma Iota honor society in 1985 (Bobby, 2015). The ACA, the American School Counselor Association, and the ACES, prominent professional counseling organizations, aspired to offer the counseling profession-specific standards for degree expectations, which resulted in the creation of comprehensive accreditation standards for the counseling profession in 1981, known as the CACREP standards (Merlin et al., 2017).

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) was founded over 40 years ago to conceptualize and operationalize the counseling profession's principles and ideals through regular review of the accreditation standards and development of a defined core curriculum and training program standards (Even, 2012; Merlin et al., 2017). CACREP was a degree-specific accreditation for graduate programs providing counseling degrees; and, CACREP-accredited programs are distinguishable from other programs by the fulfillment of specific standards and requirements, such as program mission and objectives, content, recruitment, advising, qualifications, etc. (CACREP, 2017). CACREP's goal maintained the advancement of the counseling profession by promoting and administering accreditation for graduate-

level counseling programs (Ritchie & Bobby, 2011). The accrediting organization was formed for three purposes: to develop expectation guidelines for the counseling profession, promote professionalism, and increase profession credibility (Merlin et al., 2017). In 1981, the counseling profession was emerging as a profession and was struggling to shape a separate and distinct identity from other helping professions, such as psychology, social work, and clinical psychology (Urofsky, 2013). Licensed professional counselors (LPCs), CACREP accreditation, and the counseling profession have come a long way in the past thirty years, but there was still much to do in unifying and strengthening the counseling profession.

When a counseling graduate program was CACREP-accredited, an individual knew and understood the particular program had reached a certain high reputation meeting certain expectations (Urofsky, 2013). CACREP standards, as in most professions, were regularly revised to account for changes that occur within the profession and in society (Merlin et al., 2017). These periodic modifications were integral to helping the counseling profession to stay current and address any training needs for current and future counselors. The most recent revisions occurred in 2009 and 2016 (Merlin et al., 2017). However, since the most recent CACREP revision, research exploring the impact of the revision on students had been limited, with no research investigating the revision's influence on current counseling graduate students. There were some significant revisions to the CACREP 2016 standards, which played an essential role in students' searching for and selection of CACREP- or non-accredited CES-doctoral programs if the students acquired the appropriate knowledge,

understanding, and awareness of CACREP (Adkinson-Bradley, 2013). These changes also impacted recruitment, enrollment, retention, persistence, and maturation practices and strategies within CES-programs across the U.S. Research on CACREP had proven that CACREP had a direct and indirect impact on students, faculty, counseling programs, and the profession.

Perceived Benefits of Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Accreditation

After an exhaustive and comprehensive review of CACREP-related literature, the fact remained that CACREP accreditation had been and continued to be inextricably linked to the individual, program, and broader levels of movement within the counseling profession. First, CACREP accreditation set precise standards that helped foster a uniformity across academic standards for universities and institutions, which aided programs seeking accreditation (Goodrich, Shin, & Smith, 2011). CACREP accreditation demonstrated to students and the profession that the program has undergone exhaustive self-study processes and external peer review that occurred on a regularly scheduled basis (Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015). CACREP accreditation not only established the credibility and importance of counseling graduate programs, but also assisted students on their educational and professional journey toward state licensure and national certification. While licensure requirements vary from state to state, there was a growing number of states that placed more emphasis on a trainee's CACREP-accredited education as evidence of meeting certain standards and requirement for license eligibility (Ritchie & Bobby, 2011). After reflecting over CACREP benefits for licensure, Johnson, Epp,

Culp, Williams, and McAllister (2013) mentioned how licensed counseling professionals would not be able to join the TRICARE insurance network without the CACREP-education. These facts demonstrated how CACREP accreditation influenced a counseling graduate students' training and competence as well as their ability to obtain licensure and even join certain insurance networks within the counseling profession, which was a notable component for post-graduation and post-licensure practice.

In addition to the aforementioned observed benefits, Adams (2000) and Scott (2000) found that students graduating from CACREP-accredited institutions typically performed better on the National Counselor Exam, one of the counseling profession licensing examination, than those graduating from non-CACREP-accredited institutions. Even and Robinson (2013) discovered that graduates from CACREP-accredited institutions engaged in ethical misconduct far less often than those from non-CACREP accreditation. Other benefits that had been attributed to CACREP accreditation included an increased opportunity for internships and job options, better-quality students, improved quality of education, enhanced faculty contact, involvement, and publishing, a more defined professional identity, higher ethical standards, preference from employers to be hired, and strengthened students' ability to be accepted into doctoral-level CES programs (D'Andrea & Liu, 2009; Mascari & Webber, 2013). Furthermore, with the recent CACREP standard changes, only doctoral students having trained and earned a degree from a CACREP-accredited institution qualified to serve as core faculty members in CACREP-accredited counseling programs for both master's and doctoral-level programs (CACREP, 2016).

Overall, CACREP worked toward promoting unity within the counseling profession by holding high standards across training and education and additionally acknowledged how experiences in a CACREP-accredited institution made it possible to develop the curricula that meet the ever-changing needs of students, future scholars, and clients (Minton, Gibson, & Morris, 2016). Milson and Akos (2005) asserted there appeared to be a statistically significant relationship between CACREP accreditation and professionalism as evidenced by contributions to the profession through leadership, publications, and the pursuit of counseling licensure and certification credentials. A final benefit of CACREP accreditation was it required regularly scheduled revisions to the CACREP standards in order to stay current and reflected practice considerations as well as educational and training needs in how counseling graduate students prepared as future scholars and leaders in the profession. These revisions assured students, faculty, programs, and the profession that CACREP standards stayed current to student and professional needs.

Perceived Challenges of Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Accreditation

While existing literature demonstrated that CACREP accreditation provided certain direct and indirect benefits, there were some perceived and observed challenges that needed highlighting as it may directly or indirectly impact students, programs, and the profession-at-large. Some of the benefits could even be considered a challenge or limitation to prospective and current counseling professionals. CACREP (2016) standards were unambiguous and concise in what manner programs must change or adapt

to meet accreditation standards; however, CACREP accreditation was very flexible in how those standards are met, which could make CACREP considered unreliable or askew (Adkison-Bradley, 2013). In addition to the flexibility of CACREP implementation, the new revision called for programs to identify and provide evidence for how students are meeting learning outcomes in an effort to increase accountability (Minton et al., 2016). Even though this requirement made sense when considering the CACREP standards' aim as a whole, it caused some programs to completely reorganize curriculum elements and possibly integrate an assessment software to provide this support for their program.

McGlothlin and Davis (2004) explained that counseling graduate “programs nationwide implement the CACREP standards in different ways,” which would vary counseling graduate students' experiences within the various counseling programs across the United States (p. 283). Paradise et al. (2011) conducted an online survey research study with counseling program coordinators to discover their reactions to the CACREP (2009) standard revisions. The findings revealed that over 40% of the program coordinators believed that standard revision implementation would be difficult and would require more resources, finances, as well as time; however surprisingly, nearly 50% of coordinators agreed that the changes would move toward all counseling programs being “essentially the same” (Paradise et al., 2011). When reflecting over the current counseling literature, the need to increase prospective and current student knowledge, awareness and understanding of CACREP was prevalent, but it was not addressed in the counseling literature yet (D'Andrea and Liu, 2009; Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015; Paradise et al., 2011). The counseling profession continued to evolve and called for

action to continue, regarding tasks such as promoting a strengthened counseling profession identity, license portability, common standards across state lines. Through this evolution, the counseling profession's accrediting body (CACREP) needed to come together with the profession's credentialing body, NBCC, and the profession's most significant membership organization, ACA, to encourage and open an enriched dialogue about the value of a national standard that comes from CACREP.

Need for Further Investigation Into Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Awareness

D'Andrea and Liu's (2009) presentation on how much do students know about CACREP and Honderich and Lloyd-Hazlett's (2015) inquiry into factors influencing counseling graduate students' decision-making practices, with a special focus on CACREP, both illustrated how little attention focuses on counseling graduate students' perspective of CACREP. While there appeared to be a gap in the current counseling literature about accreditation, other helping professions were conducting investigations about the importance of the professions' accrediting bodies. D'Andrea and Liu (2009) even identified how prospective students were acknowledging career aspirations of being counselors, but demonstrated little awareness on how to be an ethical, competent, qualified counseling professional. The dialogue about CACREP accreditation, high professional standards, CACREP importance, and the value of accreditation within the counseling profession must be heightened to include current and prospective students (D'Andrea and Liu, 2009; Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015). The increasingly obvious gap in the literature was not the only reason for this qualitative research study, but to help

prospective and current students make fully informed decisions when searching and selecting an appropriate graduate program that can, directly and indirectly, have an impact on that students' professional future.

Summary

College or program choice was a very personal and complex decision, where there was a multitude of variables considered, but accreditation status must be included as one of these variables. As the counseling profession continued to evolve, it was important that counseling community stay abreast to new topics and literature. The call for action within the counseling profession concerning licensure, accreditation, common core curricula and standards, illustrated how many factors play a role for a counseling professional's identity and career. As evidenced by other helping profession's literature, accreditation status was a vital component and consideration to one's professional identity, professional competence, and professional future. The research discussed how many factors and motivations are involved in the college choice decision-making process, but it went even further by demonstrating how prospective students at each degree level and even for a variety of programs seek specific factors or variables. In order to explore this phenomenon and answer the research question, a qualitative research design was needed. More specifically, a descriptive phenomenological inquiry allowed me to explore and describe this phenomenon, in great detail, and as close as possible to target populations' voice. In the next chapter, I described, in detail, my initial plan to use a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of counseling

graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP and how it influenced their decision-making practices with graduate school.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological research study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of counseling graduate students' awareness, understanding, and knowledge of CACREP and the influence that CACREP accreditation-status has on masters-level students' program choices. In this study, I highlighted the influence that accreditation had on counseling graduate students' program search and selection process as well as how CACREP may impact those students' counseling professional journey. Specifically, I described the counseling graduate students' level of CACREP awareness during their lived experiences of the search and selection process of counseling graduate programs. The descriptive findings of this inquiry provided a better understanding of counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP, before and following enrollment into counseling graduate programs. The results also described how CACREP may or may not influence the decision-making practices of current counseling graduate students because it was noted that CACREP, directly and indirectly, influences counseling graduate students' future in the profession (Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015). This descriptive study helped inform counseling students, both prospective and current, the academic community of counseling, and all other stakeholders about accreditation while illustrating the value of CACREP standards to the profession.

In this chapter, I present the study's research questions, central concepts, research design, and rationale. Further, I justify the research design choice by providing a

thorough rationalization for using Giorgi's (2018) descriptive phenomenology for my study. I provide a comprehensive description of the chosen methodology, selection of participants, target population, participant criteria (including inclusion and exclusion), sampling procedures, and the sample size. Then, I explore the role of the researcher in descriptive phenomenological research studies and address how I could manage researcher bias and positionality as it applied to this study. I conclude with an open plan for data collection and the data analysis process with attention to the trustworthiness of this study and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Questions

RQ: What are the lived experiences of master's-level counseling graduate students regarding awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP when selecting a graduate program and the influence that CACREP accreditation status had on those students' program choices?

SRQ: How does CACREP awareness, knowledge, and understanding fit into the search and selection process of an appropriate counseling graduate program?

Central Concepts

Although the literature provided information on the importance of accreditation for a profession, CACREP accreditation, advantages of attending a CACREP-accredited program for students and professionals, and factors considered when searching for and selecting an appropriate graduate program, there was little understanding of the role that CACREP accreditation awareness played during the searching, selecting, and decision-

making phase for a counseling graduate student. With limited research available on the topic of interest, this qualitative research study serves the profession as well as prospective and current graduate students in counseling by contextualizing the meaning students ascribe to lived experiences (see Patton, 2015). Some of the key concepts of this study included lived experience, accreditation, CACREP accreditation, counseling graduate students, students' search for and selection of an appropriate graduate program, both accredited and nonaccredited, CACREP benefits and challenges, and counseling graduate students' CACREP awareness.

The most central concept of this descriptive phenomenological inquiry was the counseling graduate students' lived experience of searching and selecting a graduate program and how CACREP accreditation influenced the decision-making process. The literature demonstrated how important CACREP accreditation was to the profession, those seeking professorship, and for students selecting an appropriate graduate program (Honderich & Hazlett, 2015). Kimbel and Levitt (2017) provided a comprehensive, reliable means to learn about entering the counseling profession for undergraduate students. After reviewing the counseling profession's history and current trends, Kimbel and Levitt (2017) described important considerations for prospective students during the search and selection process, including how CACREP accreditation plays a major role in the process.

As counselors commonly encourage their clients to delve deeper into themselves for meaning, prospective students needed to engage in self- and program-discovery in order to make fully-informed decisions (Kimbel & Levitt, 2017). The practical

considerations of graduate schools help students find the “perfect fit,” which could be referred to as student-program match, student-faculty match, or even student-profession match. According to English and Umbach (2016), there are thousands of students across the United States who make the decision to enter graduate school every year. Some researchers attributed this pursuit to an increased income, improved quality of life, enhanced health, and even the key to innovation from the discovery of new knowledge (English & Umbach, 2016). While prospective graduate students pursue higher education for a variety of reasons, the path to search, select, apply, get accepted, enroll, and graduate was generally the same. Finding the “perfect fit” was a complex, perplexing task (English & Umbach, 2016; Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015; Pigni & Staffolani, 2016), and it was this phenomenon that was central to this descriptive phenomenological inquiry.

Research Tradition

For the purposes of this study, I selected a qualitative design to explore and describe this study topic. Qualitative research is an iterative process that is reflexive, inductive, systematic, and recursive with an aim to view, understand, and engage with individuals who have shared similar experiences with an identified phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Because qualitative methods allow for details of social and cultural aspects of an individual’s life to be explored and understood (Agee, 2009), the qualitative method was determined to be the best fit for this research study. Rigorous qualitative research designs create a more in-depth understanding of phenomena and contexts in naturalistic settings that can contribute to understanding the complexity of inspiring

social change (Sofaer, 2002). The systemic, empirical method is an attempt to make sense of or interpret phenomena with respect to how individuals attribute meaning to it through consciousness (Ospina, 2004; Sofaer, 2002).

After reviewing various qualitative paradigms, phenomenology emerged as the method that best fit the study's purpose. Phenomenology is both a research methodology and a philosophy that researchers use to understand the reality of an individual's lived experiences and feelings to produce an in-depth, rich description of a phenomenon of interest (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). With phenomenology, there were two concrete approaches: descriptive or transcendental (founded by Husserl's philosophy) and interpretative, or hermeneutic (founded by Heidegger's philosophy; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Some major contributors to phenomenological research methods included Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty (Willis, Sullivan-Boylai, Knafl, & Cohen, 2016). Since its inception, Husserlian phenomenology has undergone many modifications and deviations, resulting in various interpretations of the approach (Wertz, 2005). Giorgi was one of those founders who furthered Husserl's original phenomenological approach to include some of Merleau-Ponty's insights, leading to Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological psychological approach to qualitative inquiry (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Giorgi (2009) combined philosophical phenomenology with a human scientific perspective and psychology, which resulted in descriptive phenomenology.

The descriptive phenomenological approach is "rigorously descriptive, uses phenomenological reduction, explores the intentional relationship between persons and

situations, and discloses essences, or structures, of meaning immanent in human experiences through the use of imaginative variation” (Finlay, 2009, p. 7), lending itself well to the goals of this research project. Using a descriptive approach, a researcher explores and describes the phenomenon of interest through rational and intuitive processes (Koivisto et al., 2002). Considering the purpose of this study, a descriptive approach was the best fit.

According to Giorgi (2018), “only when one uses the phenomenological psychological reduction, as opposed to the transcendental does one refer to human consciousness and subjectivity and thus to psychological reality” (p. 14). Giorgi’s (2018) philosophical phenomenological approach was heavily inspired by Husserl’s original method but introduced scientific and psychological modifications. The philosophy and scientific method allowed for the intentional, in-depth exploration of the identified phenomenon that would be described as closely as possible to the participants’ lived experience, or lifeworld, using the participants’ voices and through qualitative interviewing, observation, and free imaginative variation. An individual’s lifeworld is the world with which the individual encounters everyday experience (Giorgi, 2009).

In accordance with the descriptive phenomenology, I generated data from in-depth, qualitative interviews with a small sample of self-identified current counseling students. The descriptive phenomenological design allowed me to produce a general structural description of the counseling graduate students’ awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP as it appeared to the participants, while my own preconceptions and biases were bracketed in epochés. Bracketing through epochés had to

be maintained throughout the data collection and analysis processes (Giorgi et al., 2017). There are two kinds of epochés. The first is the epoché of natural sciences, which requires the researcher to bracket all natural science theories, attitudes, hypotheses, conceptualizations, and explanations of the phenomena. This epoché allows the collected data or intuitions to be viewed as they exist in or are presented to consciousness (Giorgi, et al., 2017). The second epoché, natural attitude, refers to methodological abstention, where presuppositions are bracketed into epoché in order to focus more directly on subjective performances, appearances, and givens (Wertz, 2005). The goal of this epoché was to shift from naïve encounters to a reflection of how the lived experiences were presented to consciousness based on subjective performances, constitutive meanings, and givenness. This scientific phenomenological reduction attitude and second epoché allows for the analysis process to occur accurately (Giorgi et al., 2017).

The descriptive phenomenological framework is one that respects the spirit of science, assumes a scientific phenomenological reduction attitude, and uses phenomenological philosophy to understand and describe a phenomenon that has been experienced by the way it is presented to the consciousness of a participant (Giorgi, 2018; Giorgi et al., 2017); therefore, an external theory or an additional lens was not required for my study. In fact, the introduction of another theory or framework for study guidance would falsify and transform the research (Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). Therefore, it was quintessential that Giorgi's philosophy of descriptive phenomenological psychological research be the only theory, or philosophy, implemented throughout the research process.

Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological psychological method was made up of six steps with Husserlian phenomenology serving as the philosophical foundation (Broome, 2011; Giorgi et al., 2017). First, I aimed to discover the pure essence of counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP by arranging in-depth qualitative interviews with self-identified master's-level counseling graduate students with intentionality. This first step was not just about how to conduct a phenomenological study, but it was the principal theme throughout the data analysis process. Second, the researcher had to assume the scientific phenomenological reduction attitude, while bracketing all presuppositions and prior knowledge related to the phenomena of interest within an epoché and maintain this bracket throughout the data collection and analysis processes (Giorgi et al., 2017).

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological research study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of counseling graduate students' awareness, understanding, and knowledge of CACREP and the influence that CACREP accreditation-status has on masters-level students' program choices, which are suggestive of the qualitative nature of the inquiry (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Since I did not intend on interpreting or explicating the data or findings, Heidegger's phenomenological approach was not an appropriate research methodology (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). When reflecting over the various phenomenological designs, the disciplinary roots, central research question focus, data sources, sampling issues, analysis guidelines, and the philosophical underpinnings, the descriptive phenomenology psychology research

design, specifically Giorgi's (2018) approach as adapted from Husserl, appeared to be the best fit for my qualitative inquiry.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher was the primary instrument, therefore careful consideration had to be given to the role of the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). When considering my positionality with participants, I recognized that I am a doctoral student and novice researcher who was seeking to explore other counseling students' experiences with the familiar phenomenon of the search and selection decision-making process. I was aware and mindful that I had been immersed in the phenomenon of interest a couple times, for my master's and doctoral studies. In concordance with descriptive phenomenology, when engaging with participants, I bracketed my presuppositions and knowledge in order to attentively and intentionally be present with the participant. The attention and intentionality allowed the researcher to discover pure, flowing consciousness from the participant rendering it more intuitive (Giorgi, 2018). The bracketing also helped the focus to remain on the phenomenon of interest, without allowing past experiences or knowledge account for what was presented by the participant.

I maintained a reflective journal where I recorded memos throughout the entire research process, as this offered an opportunity to self-assess, evaluate experiences, improve or clarify thinking, and document the researcher's role throughout the experience (Chorba, 2011). Additionally, I used mindfulness practices throughout the process as an added benefit when assuming the phenomenological attitude and managing

my role during the research process. Through regular check-ins with my dissertation chair, mindfulness practices, and reflective journaling, I maintained criticality, reflexivity, and positionality.

Positionality

The researcher's identity was central to the study's design, but positionality and social location were two components that were also essential to understanding the researcher's role in every stage of process. Positionality referred to the researcher's role and identity as it was associated with and relates to the context and setting of the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As with most qualitative researchers, I was an active participant in the process. Since I hold a personal connection to the research topic through curiosity and experience, it was of the utmost importance that I remained mindful of my own values, biases, and experiences as to avoid imposing them on participants and their lived experiences. Being a self-aware person and professional, I acknowledged that I am a current doctoral candidate in a CACREP-accredited CES program. I also maintained my Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) license in the state of Alabama along with several certifications, such as National Board Certified Counselor (NCC), Board Certified – Telemental Health provider (BC-TMH), Certified Compassion Fatigue Professional (CCFP), and Certified Clinical Trauma Professional (CCTP).

After reflecting over my own identity and my past decision-making processes, I knew that there were various significant factors and experiences, such as my professional identity, accreditation, fringe benefits, self-efficacy, geographic location, and values, that played a role in my decision to enter the field of counseling. From my awareness of the

lived experiences that influenced my decision-making, I noted that CACREP accreditation was at the top of my list. By identifying these factors and experiences, specifically my own CACREP awareness and how it was so important to my program selection, I was able to conduct this descriptive phenomenological study where the findings can provide significant contributions to entire counseling field. Some of the contributions included recruitment strategy improvement; integration of CACREP knowledge in areas of scholarship, teaching, and research within programs; increased mentorship opportunities; better understanding of the counseling profession and career outlook to students; and, assistance to students in making fully-informed program decisions (Busacca, Beebe, & Toman, 2010; Isaacs & Sabella, 2013).

Addressing Researcher Bias

By being aware of my own experiences, knowledge, and thoughts, I held myself accountable to prevent my views of the phenomenon being predisposed toward a particular point of view or opinion. The phenomenological perspective also helped me maintain positionality, introspection, and reflexivity throughout the research process as well as continue to engage in regular self-reflections related to the research process and myself as the researcher. I regularly checked-in with my dissertation chair, engaged in mindfulness practices and stretching exercises, and used a reflective research journal to aid in addressing any potential researcher biases or impartiality.

Methodology

Participant Logic

When developing a dissertation capstone, a researcher must consider the research design when identifying the target population, sampling procedures, and ethical issues (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The participant recruitment methods had to align with all of the other elements of the research design, especially the guiding research approach. Therefore, in accordance with descriptive phenomenology, the target population for this study was counseling students who are attending a CACREP-accredited counseling program within the United States (Giorgi et al., 2017). It was important to include students across educational platforms and formats as it would highlight student selection criteria. For this study, the population of interest was current master's level counseling students in CACREP-accredited master's or doctoral programs.

Sampling Strategy

In qualitative methods, and particularly phenomenological designs, researchers relied on purposive sampling strategies to recruit participants with shared or similar lived experiences of a specific phenomenon (Giorgi et al., 2017). Sigaroudi, Ghiyasvandian, and Nasabadi (2016) concurred that purposive sampling was useful for phenomenological studies because those participants were information-rich and able to provide a strong picture of the identified phenomenon. A purposeful sample allowed me to select participants deliberately because of their rich, unique lived experiences that can provide detailed accounts of the phenomenon of interest (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Snowball sampling was a purposeful sampling technique that may also be employed to help reach

participant saturation (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling was when a researcher began with a few information-rich participants and then requested other individuals who may meet the criteria from the initial participant, creating a chain-like effect (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Each participant met the identified inclusion criterion in order to participate.

Participant criteria. All potential participants met the following criteria: current master's-level counseling graduate student; attendance to a CACREP-accredited institution; enrolled in clinical counseling or counselor education master's-level program; fluent in speaking English; first- and second-year student status; online, hybrid, or traditional brick and mortar program format; and, geographically located in the United States. There was a restriction based on the type of graduate program as the study is attempting to evaluate CACREP accreditation awareness and how it influenced program selection. The exclusion criteria was non-English speaking students; students attending institutions outside of the United States; and, graduate students enrolled in non-CACREP accredited programs.

Sample size. In one phenomenological study, Goodman-Scott, Carlisle, Clark, and Burgess (2016) contended that between five and 25 participants was an acceptable sample size. Descriptive phenomenological inquiries attempted to produce general structural descriptions of an identified phenomenon of interest using small samples (Broome, 2011). Giorgi (1997) argued that even a sample size of three participants can result in strong, rich descriptions of a lived experience. With descriptive phenomenological inquires only requiring a small sample size, I aimed to recruit between six and 10 total participants, which allowed me to reach saturation (Hoskins & Goldberg,

2005; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Sigaroudi, Ghiyasvandian, and Nasabadi (2016) used purposeful sampling in their descriptive phenomenology study where only eight participants were recruited to meet saturation in the data. Saturation referred to continued recruitment of participants until the data indicates replication or redundancy (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). When data began to be repetitive, there was no added benefits to continue recruitment (Onweugbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Participant Recruitment

In order to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria, I used purposeful sampling with participants, emphasizing the voluntary nature of the study. Hoskins & Goldberg (2005) conducted a study with similar participant criteria, sampling procedures, and recruitment methods; however, the study goal and purpose focused on student persistence in counseling graduate programs and the student-program match. The researchers recruited participants through mass e-mail requests and sending informational packets to 41 CACREP-accredited doctoral education programs (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). The plans for participant recruitment for this research inquiry were through an open invitation delivered by the CES network listserv (CESnet-L) as well as listservs of other counseling profession organizations, such as AMHCA and ACA.

According to the CESnet-L website, in order to create a new thread, I had to create an email addressed to CESNET-L@listserv.kent.edu with the topic in the subject field and send the email. The invitation e-mail included the criteria for participation as well as the purpose of the study to ensure that only appropriate participants respond. Those participants who responded to the invitational email were vetted to make sure that

they met criterion and proved to be information-rich cases. Before scheduling the interview, I provided participants with an emailed written informed consent indicating the Walden University IRB approval number 11-25-19-0429232 and requested the participants to respond to the email with “I consent.”

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews. In qualitative designs, the researcher was considered the instrument (Patton, 2015). I used a detailed semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) to answer the central research questions, which helped ensure consistency and uniformity across all of the interviews. The interview guide developed for this inquiry consisted of a script for the introduction to the study, the interview questions, and a script for closing remarks. Semi-structured, individual interviews sought in-depth, rich information pertaining to the phenomenon of interest and allowed for open-ended questions and probes to discover the essence of the lived experiences of participants. Further, semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility enabling the protocol to be personalized to best capture the participant’s lived experiences and the emergence of new concepts or topics (Turley, King, & Butt, 2011). The interview questions aligned with the descriptive approach and was grounded in the previous literature to help answer the study’s overarching research question. I designed the questions to enable participants to convey specific, concrete experiences of searching for and selecting a CACREP-accredited counseling graduate program. I used Roger’s core human conditions to help establish rapport and trust between the participant and myself.

As the primary researcher, I was the only person conducting the interviews to ensure consistency, validity, and credibility (Goodman-Scott, Carlisle, Clark, & Burgess, 2016). Probing questions helped clarify meaning of participant responses and encouraged in-depth descriptions, a common practice in phenomenological interviews (Penner, McClement, Lobchuk, & Daeninck, 2012). I asked each participant the same questions from the interview guide with personalized follow-up questions to elicit individualized lived experiences (Goodman-Scott, et al., 2016; Seidman, 2013; Turley, King, & Butt, 2011).

Data collection and procedures. Descriptive phenomenology research heavily relied on the linguistic ability of both the researcher and the participants (Giorgi, 2009). This approach took the participants' spoken language and attempts to make the expressions more precise. In order to obtain concrete, detailed expressions of the phenomenon, the researcher collected the data through in-depth, qualitative interviewing, which was recorded and later transcribed (Giorgi, 2009). More specifically, Giorgi (2009) stated "what one seeks from a research interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through" (p. 122). While I conducted either face-to-face or video-conference interviews, it was imperative that I maintain focus on the phenomenon via the participant's description (Englander, 2012). The video modality used is a user-friendly teleconference software program called Zoom.us.

After identifying potential participant candidates for this study, I provided them with an informed consent, in writing, via email that included the nature and purpose of

this descriptive phenomenological study, information pertaining to the voluntary nature of participation and the ability to discontinue at any time during the interview process, confidentiality and privacy, possible risks, sources for support if needed, and contact information. The participants needed to send via written email the words “I consent” after reviewing the informed consent before an interview was scheduled. The face-to-face or video interview format allowed for me to capture rich descriptions and nuances that I otherwise would not be privy to if I conducted the interview via a telephone or written interview format (Englander, 2012). The face-to-face and video-teleconferencing format afforded me with the ability to shift from a subject-subject presence to one of subject-phenomenon easily.

I used a digital recorder in addition to the video recording to capture the entire interview interaction to ensure that non-verbal behaviors are identified. Once the data was recorded and collected, I used Kristen Muller Transcription Services for each interview to be transcribed verbatim. Halcomb and Davidson (2006) contended that verbatim transcription with field, or observation, notes allowed researchers to view the entire interview interaction, complete with attention to details concerning the whole person. Giorgi’s (2009) approach valued the verbatim transcription for visual stabilization of the data, analysis, and sharing findings with others more easily. Verbatim transcription was critical for evoking some of the liveliness of the interaction, which was important with the descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi et al., 2017).

The interview was expected to last 60 minutes per participant. Data was collected for a period of 30 days. Each interview was immediately transcribed in order to assess

for data saturation. Following each interview, I assigned each participant with an assigned code word and record it in the reflective journal any additional information based on observations and experience with the interview. I used a Vansky digital audio recorder to record each interview, after which was uploaded and encrypted on a portable hard drive to maintain participant confidentiality and privacy. All participant identifying information was scrubbed prior to securing on the hard-drive. An encrypted external hard-drive was used to keep all audio-recordings, field notes, reflective journals, etc..

Data Management

I acknowledged that the following data will need to be managed and secured for continued privacy, confidentiality, and per ACA (2014) ethical guidelines: interview audio recordings, verbatim transcriptions, labeling spreadsheet, and reflective journaling. I assigned each participant with a code name to aid in protecting their anonymity (Patton, 2015). I created only one spreadsheet document that will link each participant to their individualized code in case I need to follow-up for additional information. I stored this spreadsheet in my Microsoft One Drive account and Dropbox account that required a password to unlock. All other information will be saved on a password protect encrypted portable hard drive and Google GSuite Documents that required multi-factor authentication for security. It was critical to store the spreadsheet and other information in different locations, to further ensure confidentiality. I also engaged in member checking to help increase trustworthiness of the study. At the completion of this study, I destroyed any and all physical copies of documents and preserved all electronic versions for five years or after publication (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

Data Analysis Plan

While the data analysis process began by assuming a scientific phenomenological reduction attitude with a psychological perspective and sensitivity toward the implications of the data as they relate to the phenomenon of interest, I intended on assuming this attitude and bracketing during the literature review and creation of the proposal and invitational email, interview guide, as well as all other aspects pertaining to the study (Broome, 2011; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). This attitude was important in helping the researcher bracket his or her presuppositions, knowledge, and biases, so that the data was reviewed from a fresh perspective (Broome, 2011). The idea of remaining present throughout the entire research design and experience with the inclusion of the data was to gain a sense of the description as a whole.

Qualitative data analysis, specifically with Giorgi's descriptive method, was the most fundamental aspect of research because it was the process where researchers attempted to discover a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of an identified phenomenon of interest (Basit, 2003). Using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological data analysis approach to guide this research inquiry, there were six steps described in the data analysis method, based on principles of phenomenological philosophy (Broome, 2011; Giorgi, 2018). Giorgi's (2018) descriptive phenomenology data analysis steps were as follows:

1. Obtain a description of the concrete experience from the participants and transform lifeworld natural attitude expressions into phenomenological psychological sensitive expression for the formation of the basis of the

psychological basis structural description (Basit, 2003; Broome, 2011; Giorgi, 2018).

2. Assumption of the scientific phenomenological reduction attitude, which allows for a true descriptive phenomenology attitude, as well as an attitude sensitive to phenomenon of interest (however, this attitude should be upheld from beginning to end of the research project) (Giorgi, 2018).
3. Review the description provided by the participant to gain a sense of the whole experience and entire naïve description to get a sense of the whole interview interaction (Broome, 2011; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). The idea is for the researcher to remain present when reviewing the data in order to gain a sense of the entire description of the experience (Giorgi, 2009). This requires the phenomenological attitude to remain intact and the participants' descriptions to be observed holistically with the aim of phenomenological analysis, the experience's meaning, while always maintaining the phenomenological attitude (Giorgi, 2018).
4. The researcher aims to assume the attitude of scientific phenomenological reduction from concrete descriptions of the participants in order to gain a sense of the whole experience. The researcher re-reads the descriptions in order to derive psychological sensitive descriptive expressions from the participant's lifeworld expressions and form a basis for the description (Giorgi et al., 2017), described as meaning units, or parts of the description that make relatively coherent sense, are marked with slashes (Giorgi et al., 2017).

Transformation of the meaning units into phenomenological psychological sensitive expressions is then conducted.

5. Step five is an integration of the data, where data is transformed from meaning units into phenomenological psychological sensitive expressions. These meaning units are determined with the goal of phenomenological analysis, the experience's meaning, in mind as well as maintaining the scientific phenomenological attitude (Giorgi, Giorgi & Morley, 2017). Broome (2011) described how these meaning units are determined by finding where there is a shift in meaning and marking them. The researcher usually places slashes where there is a transition in meaning or flow. The initial delineations can be modified as the researcher becomes more familiar with the data (Giorgi, 2009).
6. Finally, there is an integration of the meaning units, participants' lifeworld experiences, and phenomenological and psychological sensitive expressions, using free imaginative variation that aids in determining the psychological essence of the lived experience, with the experience of being eidetic, not universal (Giorgi, 2018)

The above steps three and four referred to the noesis (to think about or interpret) and the noema (what is being thought about) (Giorgi, 2018). The noesis was considered intentionally actualizing the phenomena as it is seen in the present. The noema was where "the sense of the perceptual act ... it is taken precisely as it inheres immanently in the mental process of perceiving" (Giorgi et al., 2017, p. 185) the phenomena as it is seen

lit up through consciousness. The final step was to continue repeating the above five steps until the participants' findings reach saturation (Giorgi, 2018). The entire process, pre- and post-interview, as well as all data analysis steps, were completed while maintaining the scientific phenomenological psychological reduction attitude, which is the most essential component of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological process (Giorgi 2018). The researcher maintained the scientific phenomenological reduction attitude during this step and used free imaginative variation to render the implicit, explicit (Giorgi, Giorgi & Morley, 2017). Basically, the meaning units were re-expressed in third person language, or the actual state-of-affairs of the researcher, that properly reflected the essence of the psychological structure of the experience (Broome, 2011). These transformations into third person allowed the researcher to express the essential psychological meaning of the data and bring the psychology to the forefront (Giorgi, 2009). Free imaginative variation required the researcher to imagine the data differently in order to achieve higher-order categories retaining the same psychological meaning. This process is tedious and time-consuming as the researcher dwelled on the data and meaning units until an expression was ascertained that is suitable, which may require several versions before finding an expression desired (Giorgi, 2009).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The idea of reliability and validity as it relates to qualitative research focused on trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Each of these constructs addressed and ensured an inquiry's rigor, validity, objectivity, and reliability (Anney, 2014). By addressing each of these

trustworthiness constructs, I ensured that the qualitative inquiry and participant selection process is rigorous, valid, objective, and reliable.

Credibility

Credibility referred to internal validity, which is sought to ensure that a study measures what is intended (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Some suggestions to promote qualitative research credibility included using well-established research methods, developing familiarity with target population's culture, random sampling, triangulation, frequent debriefing, iterative questioning, prolonged engagement with participants, participant checks, researcher reflexivity, etc. (Morrow, 2005; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014; Shenton, 2004). The purposeful sampling technique was unique to qualitative research in that researchers strived to recruit information-rich participants with emergent, in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Creswell (2014) described that qualitative researchers purposefully select participants, settings, documents, and other materials that will enable them to gain a more in-depth understanding of the problem, research question(s), and phenomenon.

As a qualitative researcher, I wanted to ensure that the selected participants can provide rich descriptions of their experiences with respect to the phenomenon, which demonstrated credibility and for the most part dependability (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014; Shenton, 2004). This ensured that I was obtaining the information that the study intended. In this study, regular debriefing, researcher reflexivity, and thick description were employed to help with inquiry trustworthiness. The primary aim of this study and the guiding framework was to obtain a rich description of the phenomenon. Thick

description was a means for achieving this goal and aligns with Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach. Regular check-ins and debriefing were another means by which trustworthiness can be upheld. Peer debriefing was a method by which biases can be uncovered and researcher perspectives and assumptions can be challenged (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014).

Transferability

Transferability concerned the external validity of a study, or demonstration of the findings being applied to a wider population (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Methods that help ensure transferability were thick description, which will be employed for this study. Included in this thick description will be details about the researcher's role, the researcher context, processes, participants, and relationships (Morrow, 2005). While qualitative inquiries were generally not considered generalizable due to the small sample sizes, by providing a thick description of all components of the research process helped establish some transferability. I also selected participants who provided an appropriate in-depth information that fits the purpose of the study for transferability (Morrow, 2005).

Dependability

Dependability deals with a study's reliability, which was a core issue for research studies (Morrow, 2005). This construct was accomplished through explicit tracking of the emerging research design and audit trails. This researcher described in as much detail as possible the research process from how data was collected, and categories were derived to how all decisions are made throughout the research process (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Shenton (2004) contended that by demonstrating credibility, a researcher

was ensuring dependability, as these constructs were achieved through similar methods. For the purposes of this study, I established dependability through thick description of the research process, audit trails, how decisions are made, participants selection criterion, and reflective journaling. (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014).

Confirmability

Confirmability referred to objectivity or the acknowledgement that research is not objective (Morrow, 2005). This construct asserted that steps must be taken to ensure findings were a result of the participant's lived experience and language, not interpretations or assumptions of the researcher (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014).

Confirmability was demonstrated through detailed audit trails, researcher reflexivity, and reflective journaling that depicted how participants were selected, which ultimately influenced how the description of the phenomenon was created (Morrow, 2005).

Ethical Considerations

The procedures employed for my research study included purposive and snowball sampling, which included an introduction to the study with assurances for privacy and confidentiality and a brief demographic questionnaire to determine whether participants meet inclusion criteria, similar to Goodman-Scott, et al.'s (2016) study. The ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* stated that researchers must be held responsible for conducting ethical, confidential research practices that adhere to institutional, state, or federal guidelines. According to the ethical standards, participants had the right to refuse or agree to participation, obligated to complete an informed consent, and assured that all information given was private and confidential, including demographics (ACA, 2014). In order to

participate in my research project, participants provided a written consent that emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and guaranteed assurances to privacy and confidentiality (Penner, McClement, Lobchuk, & Daeninck, 2012).

The ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* viewed research as such an important activity in the counseling profession that an entire section (G) has been devoted to addressing the ethical considerations regarding research procedures. Specifically, counselor researchers must “plan, design, conduct, and report research” in an ethical manner that was conducive with the principles that make up the counseling profession as well as state, federal, and institutional laws and regulations (ACA, 2014, p. 15). Research and publications maintained participant confidentiality and privacy as well as minimized and avoided risk of any kind. When reflecting upon this research topic, questions, and plan, I determined that some of the primary ethical considerations were researcher-participant boundaries and participant privacy and confidentiality.

The ACA (2014) standards that fall under G.3, “Managing and Maintaining Boundaries,” were pertinent for this study. Since I was CES doctoral student enrolled in a CACREP-institution when conducting this study for dissertation, it was a possibility that colleagues, or associates may choose to participate. With this in mind, it was essential that the researcher take all necessary precautions to avoid bias, ensure a clear understanding of the decision to participate as it is voluntary, and document any non-research interactions with a rationale and consequence within reflective journaling and using audit trails (ACA, 2014). It would also be beneficial to seek regular consultation regarding this experience to ensure that all safeguards are in place prior and post to any

interaction with colleagues or associate participants. It goes without saying that observing confidentiality of any information provided by participants and protecting participants identities was also essential. To protect participant anonymity and confidentiality, I assigned code names to each participant and maintained this list in a different secure drive than all other data collected.

Some of the assurances that participants were informed to prior to the interview and at the beginning of the interview included: if participants' names shall be used during data reporting, pseudonyms will replace their names and other identifying information to protect participant's privacy and identity; upon completion of data collection, all data will be sanitized of any remaining identifying information prior to data analysis. The goal of this research was to capture as close as possible the lived experiences of counseling graduate students' awareness of CACREP and its influence on program selection, which was what I want the participants to understand, as their identity is considered non-essential. The participants' unique lived experiences were most important, so all necessary assurances will be taken.

Other assurances that participants were informed of included: if the participant's name shall be used during data reporting, pseudonyms will replace their names and other identifying information to protect participant's privacy and identity; upon completion of data collection, all data will be sanitized of any remaining identifying information prior to data analysis. The goal of this research was to capture as close as possible the lived experiences that influence counseling graduate students in searching and selecting and ultimately enrolling in a CACREP-accredited counseling graduate program. The

participant's unique lived experiences were most important, so I will take all necessary assurances to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy as well as the trustworthiness of the study.

Summary

The credibility of qualitative research was established and maintained through rigorous and detailed processes throughout the inquiry. In order to allow researchers to build upon this work, the plan was organized in a manner consistent with a descriptive phenomenology approach, including provisions for the selection and treatment of participants. In this chapter, I described the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, instrumentation, data collection, data management, and issues of trustworthiness. This chapter included the rationale for the framework and the benefit to social change that is anticipated as a result of this inquiry. By following Giorgi's design precisely while also taking certain precautions and providing participants with defined assurances, I ascertained the essence of the master's-level counseling students' lived experiences of CACREP awareness, understanding, and knowledge and the influence CACREP accreditation-status had on those students' program choices. The next chapter contained a comprehensive analysis of each participant's interview and the findings from the data analysis process provided herein.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction to Research

In this study, I sought to describe master's level counseling students' lived experiences of CACREP awareness when selecting an appropriate counseling program. The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of master's-level counseling graduate students' awareness, understanding, and knowledge of CACREP and the influence accreditation has on their program choices. Lived experience, commonly used in phenomenological studies, refers to an individual's natural experience in their lifeworld and the subjective human consciousness (Giorgi, 2019). Lifeworld is the "common, everyday world into which we are born and live, . . . usually a world of ordinariness" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 10). Essence is the description of the mode of appearance of all objects to human consciousness derived from free imaginative variation. The students' experience as presented in this study was important because it provided a greater understanding of how CACREP accreditation influenced master's level counseling students' program choices. I collected and phenomenologically analyzed the data necessary to answer the research questions of this study.

The primary RQ was: What are the lived experiences of master's-level counseling graduate students regarding awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP when selecting a graduate program and the influence that CACREP accreditation status had on those students' program choices? In addition to this question, I aimed to answer: How does CACREP awareness, knowledge, and understanding fit into the search and selection process of an appropriate counseling graduate program? These questions served as the

foundation for establishing the research methodology and overall research design. I determined that descriptive phenomenology was best suited to guide this inquiry and provide the design framework from which to answer the research questions.

When executing this phenomenological study, I made some minor variations from the plan presented in Chapter 3 that required additional IRB approval. In this chapter, I review the differences as they concerned the data collection procedures, the data analysis processes, and the evidence of trustworthiness for this study. In addition, I describe the setting of the interviews, demographics of the participants, research study findings, and any discrepant data.

Setting

The setting for this phenomenological inquiry included the natural environments of the participants for their side of the interview and my home office. Most of the participants joined the Zoom videoconference from their homes, except for one participant who joined from his work office. I collected the data by using the videoconference platform, Zoom.us, through which the participants joined the unstructured interview from the comfort of their homes or offices. By using the Zoom.us platform, I was able to recruit participants from a large geographical area allowing for diversity. I maintained and encouraged anonymity across all interviews. I modeled upholding privacy practices during the interview by being alone in an environment where participants were provided an opportunity to speak freely about their experiences and decision-making process for graduate school. All participants indicated that they were comfortable with using the Zoom technology for the interview prior to the interview.

There were minimal setting nuances affecting the quality of the interviews. Over the course of the videoconferences, no direct interruptions were evident; however, the participant who completed the interview from his work office experienced some auditory interference or feedback, which could have impacted the overall quality and process of the interview. This participant reported no problems with understanding the questions or providing answers, but the feedback issues made it difficult at times for me to understand him. Due to this interference, I had to repeat some questions and reiterate some of his answers to confirm his statements. Overall, none of the auditory interference or connection issues appeared to create a major problem, concern, or lack of continuity in the data collection process or the data collected.

Demographics

The established parameters for participation in this study included residing in the United States, fluent in speaking English, and first- or second-year enrollment in a CACREP-accredited clinical mental health counseling program. I interviewed seven participants in total and obtained the following additional demographic information: age, location, school, school type, and year in program. Before the interviews, each participant was assigned with a code name created from their first initial, sex, and number of interview (e.g., PF1 for Paige Zeiger). A brief description of each participant follows in the subsections, using the assigned code names in the order in which the interview took place.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Code names	School	Year	USA region
BF1 (F)	Online	2nd year	West-Mountain
RM2 (M)	Online	2nd year	South-Atlantic
MM3 (M)	Traditional	1st year	West-South Central
MF4 (F)	Online/Hybrid	1st year	Middle-Atlantic
PM5 (M)	Traditional	1st year	South-Atlantic
CF6 (F)	Online	1st year	West-Pacific
DF7 (F)	Online	1st year	East-North Central

Participant BF1

BF1 is a 60-year-old female who resides in the West-Mountain region of the United States. She is enrolled in the second year of an online clinical mental health counseling master's program. She was a corporate professional for the first 25-years of her adulthood and then decided that she wanted a career that was more meaningful. At that time, she became a yoga therapist for the last 10 years. BF1 identified that a counseling degree would expand her yoga therapy practice and better serve her clients by including the wellness, resiliency, and prevention perspectives.

Participant RM2

RM2 is a 32-year-old male who resides in the South-Atlantic region of the United States. He is enrolled in the second year of an online clinical mental health counseling master's program. He is an Air Force veteran with bachelor's degree in Psychology who worked as a pilot flying reconnaissance missions but decided that he wanted to get out of the military and help people in a meaningful way.

Participant MM3

MM3 is a 43-year-old male who resides in the West-South Central region of the United States. He is enrolled in the first year of a clinical mental health counseling master's program at a traditional, brick and mortar institution. He previously worked in human resources for 20 years after obtaining a bachelor's degree in sociology and communication.

Participant MF4

MF4 is a 43-year-old female who resides in the Middle-Atlantic region of the United States. She is enrolled in the first year of an online, hybrid clinical mental health counseling master's program. MF4 has previous experience as a meeting planner, a leader in women's biblical studies, a leader of a confirmation group for ninth-grade girls, and a volunteer for a variety of charities.

Participant PM5

PM5 is a 38-year-old male who resides in the South-Atlantic region of the United States. He is enrolled in the first year of a clinical mental health counseling master's program at a traditional, brick and mortar university. He is a former Marine and has an occupational history of working in the school system as a behavioral specialist.

Participant CF6

CF6 is a 56-year-old female who resides in West-Pacific region of the United States of America. She is enrolled in the first year of an online clinical mental health counseling master's program. She refers to herself as a lifelong learner, a nine-time award winning writer and best-selling author. After obtaining her doctorate in research

and evaluation psychology in 2013 and not being able to become licensed or find a teaching position near her residence, she decided to do go back to school to do something more meaningful.

Participant DF7

DF7 is a 60-year-old female who resides in East-North Central region of the United States. She is enrolled in the first year of an online clinical mental health counseling master's program. Previously, she has served in an administrative role in the healthcare industry, both on the insurance claims side and as an administrator for an inpatient, residential substance use disorder treatment facility. She also worked in case management after earning a bachelor's degree in psychology.

Data Collection

There were some minor variations in the data collection stage from the description provided in Chapter 3 that required additional IRB approval. I sent the invitational e-mail posting three times on the CESnet-L listserv (2 weeks apart), but I also posted it on the following forums three times each (2 weeks apart): ACA Connect Call for Participants Community Forum, the AMHCA Graduate Student Community Forum, and the AMHCA Open Forum. I used purposive sampling to reach saturation. The first invitational CESnet-L e-mail was sent out on December 2, 2019, and the first invitational forum posting occurred on December 9, 2019. Participants responded to the e-mail and/or forum posting with an interest in participating. At this time, I responded by e-mail and sent each participant the informed consent document. After the participants voluntarily submitted an "I consent" e-mail, the participants were assigned a code name

and only referred to as the code name thereafter. The first semistructured Zoom interview took place on January 3, 2020, and the final interview on January 19, 2020.

Prior to each interview, I engaged in mindfulness practice for approximately 10-15 minutes as suggested by Giorgi (2009). In addition, I recorded my reflective thoughts as memos in a dissertation journal to ensure trustworthiness, as recommended as best practices (Ponterotto, 2013). I conducted all interviews using the Zoom.us video-conferencing technology and audio-recorded using a Vansky digital audio recorder for verbatim transcription, recommended as best practice by Giorgi's (2009) data analysis process. I collected data from a total of seven participants in the form of semistructured interviews. All participants expressed being comfortable and competent with using the Zoom.us technology, but one participant opted out of the video option. While the Zoom.us technology offers the ability to record the video, I only used the Vansky digital recorder for audio recording, which was successful.

I followed the semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix A) for each interview, but after the first interview I decided to modify the interview guide (see Appendix B) to sharpen the data that I collected. The semistructured interview protocol proved to be successful in capturing the essence of each participant's lived experiences as it allowed me to ask follow-up questions when answers were broad and to clarify impressions that I noticed in the third and fourth interviews.

The seven participants were able to express themselves freely and without discomfort, resulting in no interview ending prematurely. Overall, the interviews resulted in the collection of rich, meaningful data, while there were few memos taken during the

interviews. Follow-up memos were taken after each interview to help identify any initial thoughts derived from the interaction. The remainder of the data collection process was executed precisely as described in Chapter three. After each interview, I submitted the audio recording to Kristen Muller transcription services for verbatim transcription via the website. Kristen Muller then transcribed each recording verbatim and sent it back to me. No identifying information was shared with Kristen Muller. Finally, I secured and encrypted all collected data, including audio files, written memos, and computer files, as notated in Chapter three.

Participants were assigned a code name immediately after informed consent was returned using an Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet is the only link to participant email, name, code name, school, school type, geographical area, and gender. The spreadsheet was stored on a password-protected Microsoft One Drive account. All other electronic data, audio recordings, and verbatim interview transcriptions were saved and stored on a password-protected, encrypted portable hard drive for security. Handwritten memos were kept in a dissertation journal that was stored in a locked safe at the researcher's home. Only the researcher had access to the safe. It was vital to store the spreadsheet and all other data in different locations in order to further ensure privacy and confidentiality are maintained at all times.

Data Analysis

I used Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenology data analysis steps to inductively move from the larger representations of data to a more specific description. The data analysis proceeded as described in Chapter three with minor variation regarding

the identification of “meaning units” (Giorgi et al., 2017). The first step in the data analysis process required a written verbatim transcription. After completing each interview, I submitted the audio recording to Kristen Muller for verbatim transcription services. After receiving the verbatim transcriptions, the descriptive phenomenological data analysis process began. The second step of data analysis required the assumption of the scientific phenomenological reduction attitude, as it allowed for sensitivity toward the phenomenon of interest; however, I upheld this attitude throughout the research process. To assume the phenomenological attitude, one must “regard everything from the perspective of consciousness, that is, to look at all objects from the perspective of how they are experienced regardless of whether or not they actually are the way they are being experienced” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 87-88). The attitude was a synthesis of the phenomenological reduction, a psychological perspective, and mindfulness of the phenomenon of interest, the search and selection decision-making process with respect to CACREP-accreditation.

The third step of Giorgi’s data analysis process proceeded as follows: after receiving the transcription and assuming the phenomenological attitude, I listened to the recordings and read through the transcriptions in their entirety, as well as any memos, to gain a sense of the whole interview experience. I repeated this process for each separate transcription. This step required that I read through the transcription from beginning to end to capture the entire lived experience following the initial review of the data. During this process, I intentionally engaged in the process of bracketing and made the mental shift to assume the scientific phenomenological reduction attitude, which required the

researcher to be in a place to experience the transcribed descriptions as phenomena instead of interpretations of events, which is indicated for step three of Giorgi's data analysis process (Giorgi, et al., 2017). The goal during this step was to merely gain a general sense of the whole description of the experience. The focus of the reading changed once a sense of the whole was gained to a focus on sensitively discriminating the intentional objects of the participants lived experiences (Giorgi, 2009). These objects were not noted yet, only observed allowing for them to become part of the whole overall sense.

While assuming the scientific phenomenology reduction attitude and moving into step four of the data analysis process, I re-read each transcription one at a time and began to slowly place slash marks at each transition in the language meaning, as suggested by Giorgi, Giorgi, and Morley (2017), to identify "meaning units" and begin the formation of the basis of the general description. Then, I revisited the meaning units with the intent to develop them more and transform them into phenomenological psychological sensitive expressions. To do this, I created meaning categories where I assigned portions of narrative from each transcription to various categories of meaning (Giorgi, 2018).

In Step 5, I began the integration of the data into phenomenologically, psychologically informed expression for easier transition into themes (Giorgi, 2009). In this step, I reflected upon the identified meaning categories and began identifying emerging themes with respect to the research questions to derive a deeper meaning relevant to the study's purpose (Giorgi, 2018; Peoples, 2021). For the final step, I integrated and organized the meaning units, the participants' lifeworld experiences, and

the phenomenological, psychological sensitive expressions by using free imaginative variation. Free imaginative variation helped me determine the psychological essence of the lived experience with the experience of being eidetic, not universal. I, then, re-expressed the integration into a third person language that reflected the essence of the general psychological structure of the experience (Giorgi et al., 2017).

There were clear themes that scientifically and psychologically emerged from the data concerning the research topic of master's level students' CACREP awareness when selecting a counseling program. Based on the integrated meaning units, lifeworld experiences, and phenomenological sensitive expressions, five distinct constituent meanings and the relationship among the meanings emerged forming the general structural description of the lived experience of the phenomenon of interest. Among these five major themes, two of the themes are comprised of between two and five subthemes. The overarching themes of the lived experiences included: (1) finding meaningfulness in program choice; (2) career goals for chosen program; (3) influential people involved in choosing a program; (4) chosen program factors, familiarity, and flexibility; and, (5) identification of CACREP accreditation. Theme 4, chosen program factors, familiarity, and flexibility, had subthemes of (a) format; (b) location; (c) finances; (d) faculty; and (e) program requirements. Theme 5, identification of CACREP accreditation, contained two subthemes relating to (a) the discovery of CACREP accreditation, and (b) state licensure requirements for counseling professionals.

As a final step in the data analysis process, data organization, I organized supporting statements from each of the participants under each theme, where I was able

to distinguish additional subthemes and recognized that there was significant overlap among the themes presented above. Four participants had noteworthy experiences that were not represented in the overarching themes, these were singular experiences that would be better described as individual nuances instead of the general lived experiences of participants. It is important to mention that all identifiable overarching themes had between four and six supportive participant experiences indicating to me that I had effectively reached saturation of the data (Patton, 2015). At this point, I was confident in the effectiveness of the seven participant sample size and saw no reason in continuing participant recruitment to collect additional data. As evidenced by various phenomenological researchers, small sample sizes are quite common for these types of inquiries to produce a general description of an identified phenomenon of interest (Broome, 2011; Giorgi et al., 2017; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Giorgi (1997) even argued small sample size of three participants can provide a strong, rich description of a phenomenon of interest's lived experience.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Descriptive phenomenological inquiries based on the Husserlian approach, and advocated by Giorgi, produce general structural descriptions of an identified phenomenon. For this study, the identified phenomenon is the lived experiences of master's level counseling graduate students' awareness of CACREP accreditation when selecting an appropriate master's program. To provide further foundation for this study, I offered a clear, concise description of the study's methodology if future researchers decide to expand on the topic of interest. In this section, I will provide evidence of this

study's trustworthiness, including its' attributes of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the internal validity of a study, which is sought to ensure that a study measures what is intended (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). I employed a variety of well-established strategies to authenticate credibility in this inquiry including paying particular attention to the triangulation of data sources, informed consent, thick descriptions, iterative questioning, bracketing, memos, and reflective journaling. Participants in this study represented master's level students ranging in age from 32 to 60, ethnicity (White, African-American), sex, year in program, and various geographic locations across the United States. By recruiting participants from multiple geographical locations with rich experiences, I was able to capture deep descriptions of their lived experiences (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014; Shenton, 2004).

Before the interviews took place, I provided each participant with a detailed informed consent document outlining confidentiality, the study's parameters, and the participant's right to opt out of the study at any time during the experience. During the interviews, I used empathy, unconditional positive regard, and warmth to establish rapport where each participant felt heard, supported, and safe to ensure that the participants shared the most honest and accurate responses. I used semi-structured interview data collection methods with iterative questioning and audio-recorded each interview interaction to portray the most accurate language of the participant's lived experience as well as memos to document details from the interview.

In addition, I intentionally bracketed my own biases by carefully answering the interview questions prior to the first data collection experience and reflecting over my responses. Then, I made descriptive memos about my specific experiences that triggered personal perspectives throughout each interview to remain aware of my own biases. Through reflective journaling, memos, and thick descriptions, I was able to obtain rich descriptions from the participants about the phenomenon, while bracketing my own biases and maintaining alignment with Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2018). Finally, I arrived at the resulting themes by analyzing only the participants' language with nothing added or taken away (Giorgi, 2012).

Transferability

Transferability is a study's ability to demonstrate the findings can be applied to a wider population (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Morrow (2005) described that qualitative studies demonstrate transferability from participant selection and the use of thick descriptions, specifically descriptions of the researcher's role, context, processes, participants, data collection, and data analysis process. While the results from this study are not readily transferable to all populations, first- and second-year master's level Clinical Mental Health Counseling students attending a CACREP-accredited university located within the United States may find it useful when determining the generalizability of certain aspects of this research unique to his or her own settings.

Dependability

A qualitative study's dependability refers to the reliability of a research inquiry, which Shenton (2004) contended that a researcher who demonstrates credibility,

typically, ensures dependability using the same or similar strategies. Thick descriptions of the research process, participant selection criteria, the use of memos, and reflective journaling were used to help create dependability. For example, the diverse demographic of the seven participants who represented various ages, year in counseling program, and geographical location provides support for study dependability. As a target population, the participants offered rich, saturated, thick descriptions of the lived experiences of CACREP-accreditation awareness when selecting an appropriate master's program.

Confirmability

Finally, confirmability is the objectivity, or the acknowledgement, of a study not being objective (Morrow, 2005). When conducting a qualitative inquiry, confirmability is usually established through explicit tracking of the research design, methodology, researcher reflexivity, and reflective journaling. To achieve this construct, all of the findings were taken directly from the participant language allowing no room for any personal interpretation. The findings rich descriptions and verbatim quotes of participant experiences were supported. Finally, I engaged in the continual process of reflexivity and reflection throughout the research design, data collection, and data analysis stages with the utilization of reflective journaling, thick descriptions, and memos. This process allowed me to continuously construct and shift my understanding, attitude, assumptions, biases, perspective, and role during each stage, interaction, and experience (Finlay, 2009). Overall, by focusing on the verbatim participant language, bracketing my own presuppositions, engaging in reflexivity, and utilizing rich, thick descriptions, I was able to ensure the greatest objectivity, dependability, transferability, and credibility.

Results

The main research question I developed for this qualitative study explored the lived experiences of master's-level counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP when selecting a graduate program and the influence that CACREP accreditation-status has on those students' program choices. In addition to the main research question, I considered how CACREP awareness, knowledge, and understanding fit into the search and selection process of a counseling graduate program. From the data analysis process, I generated five discernable, primary themes with clear supportive experiences. Within the themes that emerged, I derived additional subthemes under two of the primary themes.

Theme 1: Finding Meaningfulness in Program Choice

There are a variety of reasons and motivations for students to continue their higher education beyond the undergraduate program. During the participant interviews, I inquired about what lead them to their decision to pursue a career in the counseling field. Allum (2014) found that many graduate students entered graduate school to enhance their personal and professional contributions, personal fulfillment, and a desire to grow more competent in a specific area of study. Most participants indicated seeking a career that would provide more meaningfulness to one's life. For example, participant BF1 stated, "I was looking for a job that would give me – provide me meaningfulness and I decided that counseling would be a good fit for me." This demonstrates that entering the counseling profession is not just about a career choice, but also a personal choice. RM2 shared "Coming into counseling, it was like a lightbulb going off and this is the way to

continue doing service, continue helping others, and give me meaning in my career.”

CF6 offered “I was like, look, I just want to do something meaningful, and doing some that’s purposeful.” When a person makes the decision to enter a career field for professional and personal reasons, it goes to reason that they have or will do their due diligence in researching the proper steps to reach their overall goal (Kimbel & Levitt, 2017). Counseling graduate students may enter the counseling field for passion, meaningfulness, and purpose, but it is essential for individuals to engage in self- and program-discovery to make a fully informed decision about which program will be the best fit.

Theme 2: Career Goals for Chosen Program

English and Umbach (2016) noted that thousands of students enter graduate school each year across the United States for a variety of reasons. While participants indicated that they ultimately decided to enter the counseling field for meaningfulness, identifying the right or “perfect” program to fit each participant’s life was necessary. I found the participants to be clear in identifying that the program selected to apply and enroll in was significant to achieving their overall career and professional goals. For example, RM2 stated “I felt mental health counseling was the more general route to go that would help me reach that population...” While MM3 described her experience as “I see it as something that will allow me to work a passion, but only to the degree that I want to or need to.” DF7’s goal for entering the counseling field was “I want to see people grow.”

Theme 3: Influential People involved in Choosing a Program

With self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and personal and professional goals being a major influence on the decision to pursue higher education, Goto and Martin (2009) indicated that there are also other psychological factors involved in the decision, such as family, friends, mentors, etc. Each participant indicated that certain people in their life played an important role in deciding to continue their education and even, the specific program selected. For example, RM2 shared “My wife informed me about the mental health counseling option. I spoke with at least three friends . . . about their opinions of the different fields and what is required of everything.” MM3 stated “I think the probably most influential factor was the connections (students, alumni, and faculty) that I already had to the school.” Finally, MF4 revealed “knowing some people who have gone or worked there definitely could validate the program.” While certain people involved in each participant’s life influenced their decision to enroll in higher education as well as guided their decision-making process regarding the specific program chosen, other factors related to the program, familiarity, and flexibility were also determinants.

Theme 4: Chosen Program Factors, Familiarity, and Flexibility

Pavelko et al. (2015) described the understanding of factors that influence graduate school enrollment as particularly important for students, faculty, programs, academic fields, and institutions alike. Format of training, geographic location, finances, tuition offerings, competent faculty, program admission requirements, accreditation status, flexibility, and professional opportunities were among the factors identified as

being crucial for the decision-making process, with “program fit” being noted as a top consideration (Ivy & Naude, 2004; Hertlein & Lambert-Shute, 2007; Lei & Chuang, 2009; Pavelko et al., Vaughn, 2015 Pooch & Love, 2001). The literature demonstrates the decision-making process is highly complex and quite complicated. While the theme of program factors, familiarity, and flexibility seemed to emerge, there were several subthemes that were relevant to this overarching theme. Below I discuss the subthemes in more detail: format, location, finances, faculty, and admission requirements. These five subthemes directly relate to counseling program factors. There was a significant amount of overlapping between these factors, familiarity, and flexibility with the concept of CACREP.

Subtheme: Format (4a). Program format can refer to a variety of meanings, such as whether the program is online, hybrid, or traditional or it can relate to the type of online platform used to disseminate the education, like Blackboard or Canvas. For example, RM2 stated “Flexibility was a huge thing, so I’m choosing a program that no matter where I moved, I wouldn’t have to worry about transferring credits and the degree would be usable after I got it.” RM2 believed that an online program was the best option for him as it would not require him to transfer his education if he moved with family to another geographical location. MF4 said “Being online was definitely top ... Well, definitely the timing of the classes, it being online, the flexibility with the professors, they are very accommodating ... It seemed like a good fit.” CF6 also found the online format to be most appealing: “I like the flexibility of being able to sign on after work ... there is within the program also a rigidity that works too.” However, for DF7, the format

consideration included more than just the program being online, she was familiar with the online platform used, as she indicated “I knew that I wanted an online program and then, considered the actual online platform being used.”

Subtheme: Location (4b). Program format and location are closely aligned with the concept of flexibility as students sought an education at an institution close in geographical distance or available through online or hybrid options. BF1 shared “I decided that in order for it to fit into my life at this point, it had to be an online program . . . Flexibility was really important to me.” RM2 stated “Flexibility of going to classes on my own schedule . . . That flexibility was really important to me.” MM3 said “I get the flexibility in doing the online program . . . If I’ve got that flexibility to go somewhere else and get licensed, then that’s great.” MF4 emphasized “Location, definitely was important . . . Being online was definitely top, but also the location of the physical school because you have to go to residencies.”

Subtheme: Finances (4c). As with anything in today’s world, financial costs must be consideration and it has been identified as the only significant factor to consider (Chism et al., 2010). In addition, Bersola, et al. (2014) suggested that some students would consider certain institutions if the financial offerings were stronger. Like prior research, the participants appeared to share some of the same beliefs. For example, BF1 stated “If I can pay less, get the flexibility I need, and still be learning the standard of acceptance in the field.” For RM2, it was his third top consideration during the decision-making process, “The biggest things I was looking for was a college that ended up being

CACREP-accredited, flexible if I moved, and fit the GI Bill stuff.” MF4 noted that “Cost was definitely a factor.”

Subtheme: Faculty (4d). Bersola, et al., (2014) discovered that the contact with faculty and staff had more of an influence on student college choices than originally theorized. Empirical findings note some students admitted that other institutions would be considered if the interactions with faculty and staff were improved. Similar to how family, friends, and mentors play an influential role in the decision-making process, faculty contact prior to enrollment was a big contributor. BF1 shared “I was able to have a 30-minute phone call with a faculty member and I had a few questions for them ... that really helped me feel better.” MM3 noted “I got to speak to two of the professors ... and current students ... and was really impressed with that.” MF4 described “... the flexibility with the professors, they are very accommodating.”

Subtheme: Program requirements. As one can derive, there are many factors involved in the graduate school decision-making process with whether or not entrance exams were required, accreditation, interviews requests , date for the first term to begin, pre-requisites for the program or institution, and any other admission requirements (Ozturk, 2018). MM3 indicated “I did look at the pre-req requirements, testing standards, the GPA, things like that.” PM5 notated “I looked at everything.” CF6 stated “I think number two would be my existing familiarity with the program requirements, format, and demands.” Program pre-requisites proved to be a notable consideration during the program decision-making process as well as faculty, intrinsic and extrinsic factors,

important people, finances, format, and location; however, accreditation and CACRAP-accreditation awareness proved to significant to the decision-making process as well.

Theme 5: Identification of Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Accreditation

According to Hinkle et al. (2014), many students decide to pursue a graduate degree to become a professor and professional leader. When looking more closely at the counseling profession. Woo et al. (2017) found many counseling graduate students enter graduate school with the intention of professorship. According to CACREP (2016) standards, a CACREP-accredited counseling degree is a requirement for attaining a core counselor educator position, which illustrates the significance of the program that one decides to enroll. In addition to tuition costs and financial considerations, intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and program format, program accreditation status is also one of the most influential decision-making factors (Hertlein & Lambert-Shute, 2007; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Wilkinson & McCarthy, 2016). When interviewing the participants, many shared a similar belief about accreditation. BF1 stated “Once I knew of its (CACREP) existence, there was no question in my mind that that was top priority for me.” RM2 reported:

Once I decided to do some more research on the different fields, I reached out to her (college friend) and we had a phone conversation about what she had done and licensure process and everything and things to look for when selecting schools. She gave me firsthand information about stuff and mentioned CACREP.

Had I not had those connections (friends and wife), I wouldn't have known anything about CACREP.

MM3 said, "Before applying, I know that it was an esteemed accreditation (CACREP) to have . . . I had learned that before I applied at school (from friends and website)." MF4 shared:

I wouldn't have known unless they told me directly that it wasn't a CACREP school because I don't know any difference . . . It was during one of my interviews with the school and they wanted to make sure I knew that it wasn't a CACREP- school and I had no idea what he was talking about . . . That was the first time I'd ever heard of it.

CF6 noted, "They command a lot of respect because every school that has CACREP as an accreditation touted on their website . . . It's a big deal." DF7 explained, "I would have to say CACREP, that's number one because it's tied directly to my ability to get licensed."

Subtheme: Discovery of CACREP accreditation (5a). Counseling students' knowledge, awareness, and understanding of CACREP accreditation is a vital factor to the decision-making process and a professional standard of distinguishing merit in the counseling profession. In addition to the data provided by participants and existing literature, those seeking a valuable, reputable counseling education can be assured that a CACREP-accredited counseling program can provide this (Rapp, Moody, & Stewart, 2018). I felt it was important to note how the participants learned about CACREP

accreditation prior to enrollment in a counseling graduate program. For example, BF1 revealed:

I did learn that there was something called CACREP accreditation [from the interview process] . . . I have an appreciation for credentialing and where it fits in fields in terms of maturation of a field . . . I actually went to the CACREP website and I listed all of those who were CACREP-accredited and that's what I was choosing from . . . CACREP was key.

RM2 explained:

Flexibility of the CACREP accreditation, the flexibility of time, and the flexibility of location wherever I move, I can continue classes—those were the biggest things . . . I talked to them (friends) about their opinions of the different fields and what was required . . . That's where I initially heard of CACREP.

MM3 indicated:

I saw them [the program] mention some stuff about CACREP on their website . . . I asked my friend about it in further conversation and he was like “You really want to go to CACREP school because it's of the highest level of accreditation for counseling programs.” . . . It's going to make reciprocity in other states easier for licensure and that kind of stuff.

MF4 reported:

It was during one of my interviews with the school and they wanted to make sure I knew that it wasn't a CACREP school and I had no idea what he was talking about . . . That was the first time I'd ever heard of it.

PM5 notated, “CACREP was a must . . . the top priority . . . I won’t even talk to a school that doesn’t have that accreditation.” DF7 emphasized, “Now, the first time I think I probably heard about CACREP was when I looked into what the state of Michigan requires for licensure.”

Subtheme: State licensure requirements for counseling professionals (5b).

For a counseling professional to become a state licensed professional counselor, there are certain standards and steps that must be met (Willis & Templeton, 2009). Each of the 50 states have established their own set of requirements and standards, which has proven to be problematic for those professionals who relocate to a different state after becoming licensed. Currently, many researchers as well as professional counseling organizations and associations are cultivating the notion that counselor licensing and certification should be linked to graduation from a CACREP-accredited program (Olson, Brown-Rice, & Gerodias, 2018). Furthermore, the NBCC (2018) will begin requiring individuals to possess a master’s degree or higher from a CACREP-accredited institution to obtain the National Certified Counselor (NCC) credential, beginning January 1, 2022. With licensure requirements changing among state licensure boards and the NBCC, it is essential for students to take these requirements into consideration when selecting an appropriate higher education in counseling. As evidenced by researchers, associations, and licensure boards, CACREP accreditation is becoming more of a fundamental requirement for an individual seeking state and national counselor credentials. The participants in this study conveyed that licensure requirements were of high significance

during the program decision-making process, with some participants reaching out to their state boards multiple times before enrolling in a program. RM2 recounted:

I was looking at licensure stuff for Georgia and there's an ad (for chosen program) . . . I guess once I felt confident that a degree from (chosen program), a CACREP-accredited university would be sellable, would be marketable in whatever location I ended up being in . . . then I felt confident applying.

MF4 reported:

In Maryland, you have to have a master's in order to get a licensed . . . My school helps people, they meet the standards for Virginia because they are a Virginia school, which are beyond what is required for Maryland . . . I'm fine.

PM5 stated, "All I know is that my state requires it and that it's really well thought of . . . When I looked into it, I was surprised to learn how well thought of it is in every state."

CF6 emphasized:

The biggest thing was just knowing that Washington state requires it (CACREP) . . . I think I called my state licensure board three times, just double, triple checked . . . because the state has required to maintain a CACREP-accredited degree program because of what CACREP requires as far as hours on specific topics.

DF7 notated:

Now, the first time I think I probably heard about CACREP was when I looked into what the state of Michigan requires for licensure . . . That was my thing, making sure that I needed to meet or exceed the requirements for the state which the program does . . . [My program] exceeds the CACREP standards . . . The state

of Michigan recently changed their requirements for CACREP . . . They [state licensing board] are requiring that if you did not get your degree through a CACREP-accredited program that you have to get X number of hours and these and that other programs fell short . . . I think if you are really going to do your due diligence when looking for a graduate program is you do need to understand what does the state require of me.

Overall, licensure standards and requirements proved to be significant elements of the decision-making process regarding the appropriate counseling master's program. As the counseling profession continues to advance and professional counselor licensure portability becomes more of a reality, CACREP accreditation status grows increasingly important, especially during the program decision-making process. While most participants narrated similar experiences with their program decision-making process and awareness of CACREP accreditation, there was some discrepant data that emerged.

Discrepant Data

Although the participants in this study reported many similar experiences, there was the occasional experience that was unique to one participant. For example, MF4 was the only participant who did not attend a CACREP-accredited institutional program; therefore, her experiences differed a bit from the other participants' experiences. MF4 reported that CACREP accreditation was not significant in her decision-making process because her state does not require it for licensure. Another participant, RM2, noted that a primary influence for choosing an appropriate program involved whether the school accepted the military Post 9/11 GI Bill for financial aid. RM2 also only considered

online programs, as he was aware of the possibility of having to relocate during his higher education study. While most participants shared comparable lived experiences, some discrepant data arose; however, it was deemed insignificant to the overall findings.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a detailed description of the descriptive phenomenological study research and analysis process. I included details pertaining to the setting of the interviews, the participants, the procedures for data collection and data analysis, the evidence of trustworthiness, and the data results. I delineated the emerging themes of the lived experiences from seven master's level counseling graduate students completing their first or second year of their program. While each student has unique perspectives and lived experiences, five major themes emerged as common to the master's level counseling graduate student with two of these themes being further divided into subthemes. The results of this study have offered some insight into the experience of orienting and selecting an appropriate counseling graduate program. The data revealed understanding of contributing barriers, support, and how students can make informed decisions regarding enrollment. In the final chapter, chapter five, I will delve deeper into the findings of this study, consider the limitations, offer recommendations for further research, and describe implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Research Findings

Introduction to Findings

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological research study was to describe and understand the lived experiences of master's level counseling students' awareness, understanding, and knowledge of CACREP and the influence that accreditation has on their program choices. By describing their lived experiences, this study offers essential implications on the individual (students, faculty, professionals, etc.), the program, and the broader professional levels of the counseling profession (see Bersola, et al., 2014; D'Andrea & Lu, 2009; Honderich & Lloyd, 2015). The knowledge gained from this study highlights the significant factors considered during the search and selection process of a master's level graduate program, specifying how accreditation status was involved. Research has demonstrated the need for an ongoing dialogue about the importance of CACREP (2016) to the counseling profession, including the relevance for CACREP-accredited graduate training for prospective and current counseling students (Honderich & Lloyd, 2015; Woo et al., 2017; Woo et al., 2016).

The qualitative nature of this study allowed for an in-depth, rich review of students' awareness, understanding, and knowledge of CACREP before and after enrolling in a graduate program. Giorgi's (2018) descriptive phenomenology guided the development, planning, and execution of this research study. In this chapter, I provide a review of the findings, limitations of this study, recommendations for further research, and implications for positive social change in the counseling profession.

Description of the Findings

I used Giorgi's (2018) descriptive phenomenology to explore and describe the lived experiences of master's level graduate students' search and selection process of a counseling graduate program to apply to with a special focus on CACREP accreditation and how it specifically played a role in the process. This methodology presupposes that the knowledge and descriptions emerge directly from the participant's lifeworld and current perceptions obtained from their immediate awareness and dominant expressions, while bracketing all researcher preconceptions (Giorgi, 2018). I focused specifically on the language spoken by the participants and patterns began to emerge, culminating in the essence of the search and selection experiences of master's level counseling graduate students: (1) finding meaningfulness in program choice; (2) career goals for chosen program; (3) influential people involved in choosing a program; (4) chosen program factors, familiarity, and flexibility; and (5) identification of CACREP accreditation. Two of these themes provided additional subtheme patterns that were discerned: (4a) format; (4b) location; (4c) finances; (4d) faculty; (4e) program requirements; and (5a) discovery of CACREP accreditation; and (5b) state licensure requirements for counseling professionals. I discuss the patterns of connection between the themes, research questions, and previous literature, thereby validating the methodology and the results of this qualitative study.

Theme 1: Finding Meaningfulness in Program Choice

With thousands of students considering graduate school each year from across the United States, it would make sense that there are numerous motivations for fulfilling this

pursuit (English & Umbach, 2016). When exploring a person's lived experiences of searching for and selecting an appropriate graduate program, it was necessary to first discover what led the participants to consider entering into graduate school in the first place. Perez (2011) identified that self-fulfillment was one of the many motivations for individuals to enroll in higher education. Each participant was asked about what led to searching for a graduate program, which led to the theme of meaningfulness. The participants viewed the counseling profession as a profession with great meaning and purpose where they would be helping others emotionally and mentally. Ultimately, entering the counseling profession seemed to be a good fit for the participants of this study, which is consistent with previous literature.

Theme 2: Career Goals for Chosen Program

The participants in this study identified that they sought higher education in a master's level counseling program to reach a particular career occupation. Each of the participants were asked about how they chose the program that they enrolled in. Participants replied with a resounding answer of wanting to be a mental health counselor. These findings were congruent with previous research, indicating that students seek higher education to reach personal and professional goals as well as increasing their occupational options (Allum, 2014; Wahl, 2018). In this study, the participants sought to do something more meaningful or purposeful with an expressed need to help others in their community through counseling. Many of the participants revealed that the counseling profession had always been considered as a career choice and due to where they were currently in life, it was a good time to work toward this goal.

Theme 3: Influential People Involved in Choosing a Program

In addition to seeking a higher education in a counseling program to achieve professional goals and find meaningfulness and purposefulness in life, the participants identified that there were key people in their lives who also contributed to this decision, which corresponds to past research. Goto and Martin (2009) determined that while there are many ameliorating considerations for students entering higher education, influence from family, friends, and mentors weighs heavily on an adult's motivation. Wahl (2018) discovered that familial support, personal and professional goals, and motivation to achieve academic goals were also indicative of motivational factors for entering higher education. Many of the participants identified spouses, parents, family, friends, children, and mentors as being critical to their decision to seek further higher education and enter the counseling profession. While meaningfulness, career or professional goals, and influential people all played a big role in the participants decision on entering graduate school, there were additional factors and characteristics that influenced their program decision.

Theme 4: Chosen Program Factors, Familiarity, and Flexibility

Existing literature reported that there are a variety of factors and variables involved in making the decision to enroll in higher education. Participants from this study were no different. The participants indicated that they each reflected upon a multitude of influences and considerations when deciding which program was the best fit. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) noted that college students' decision-making processes regarding higher education are shaped by geographic location, financial offerings and

tuition costs, significant others and peers, interactions with prospective programs or faculty, and recruitment correspondence. Due to the participants indicating a variety of these factors along with familiarity and flexibility, this theme was further divided into five additional subthemes. These subthemes ranged from program format (online, hybrid, vs. face-to-face), geographical location, and finances to program faculty and program requirements, similar to previous literature.

Subtheme: Format (4a). With all the technological advances in the United States, obtaining a graduate degree from an online program is much more feasible today, which adds an additional consideration for students seeking higher education. The participants in this study identified that program format and geographic location were a top consideration, depending on their circumstances. Those students who attended an online counseling graduate program, reported that having the flexibility to relocate, if needed, and the timing of the classes were important, deeming a virtual program to best meet their needs. Accommodation was a term identified by over half of the participants as a necessity, meaning individuals sought a program that was accommodating in meeting their timing and location needs, like an online program.

Subtheme: Location (4b). Two participants reported desiring a program that was geographically located near their home; however, one participant noted, she wanted an online program close geographically to her during residency requirements. While most participants wanted an online program for its flexibility and accommodation qualities, geographic location was also a consideration, which has been noted in little previous literature (Hertlein & Lambert-Shute, 2007; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005;

Wilkinson & McCarthy, 2016). Many studies revealed that geographic proximity, accreditation, tuition costs, and financial factors were among the top influences when selecting an appropriate graduate program.

Subtheme: Finances (4c). Obtaining a higher education can come at great cost to an individual, whether it is financial, emotional, or mental. Financial concerns are a natural consideration when making any type of change in life, and seeking a higher education is no different. Chism et al. (2010) noted that financial cost is quite significant when selecting an appropriate program. As evidenced by the data collected from the participants, financial considerations were made by most of the participants; however, it was not identified as the top factor of consideration. While it was not the number one factor for selecting a certain graduate program, one participant noted the salience of the institution accepting the post-9/11 GI Bill for financial compensation. This participant reported this financial compensation was going to be paying for the participant's advanced education; therefore, whether the institution accommodated military veterans was key. In addition to finances, program faculty, nature of training, marketing, accreditation, and research opportunities have been identified as important influences when selecting a program in which to enroll (Pavelko et al., 2015).

Subtheme: Faculty (4d). Bersola, et al. (2014) found that contact with faculty and staff of a chosen program had more of an influence on the decision-making process than originally thought. While all participants did not have close interactions with key faculty members of their chosen program, the participants who did communicate or interact with current faculty, staff, and even students identified engagement was also an

important consideration in their decision-making process. Departmental culture, faculty, staff, and support systems in the graduate programs have been noted to play a critical role in graduate students' experiences in higher education as well as their decision about a program itself (Ivey & Naude, 2004; Protivnak & Foss, 2009), which is consistent with the findings from the participants. One participant who interviewed for multiple programs at various institutions decided to accept the offer to enroll in the program where they felt the most comfortable. These faculty-prospective student interactions were key in assisting this participant in making the decision about which graduate program was the best fit (see Burkholder, 2012).

Subtheme: Program requirements (4e). In addition to the program faculty, many participants reviewed the program requirements and prerequisites before deciding on the right program for them. This supports much of the previous literature illustrating various factors and considerations involved in influencing the decision-making process regarding college or program choice. Identifying a program that meets the participants' academic ability and academic success so far was important to the decision-making process.

Theme 5: Identification of Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Accreditation

After learning about the diverse, assortment of considerations involved in the graduate program decision-making process, participants were asked about CACREP and how accreditation was involved in this process. All participants, but one, indicated that CACREP accreditation was a must when searching for an appropriate master's level

counseling graduate program; however, all of the participants revealed that they were not even aware of CACREP accreditation prior to the search process beginning. This is similar to what previous literature had indicated about how many prospective and current graduate students lacked awareness of CACREP accreditation prior to enrolling into a program (Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015). D'Andrea and Liu (2009) remarked that student awareness of CACREP may be lacking “because the focus of accreditation has been on requiring programs, faculty, and institutions to create high standards rather than educating students...” (p. 4).

Subtheme: Discovery of CACREP accreditation (5a). Determining how the participants learned about CACREP accreditation was a significant concept when exploring this topic. Most of the participants specified learning about CACREP accreditation from friends, colleagues, mentors during the search process; while one participant stated discovery of CACREP and the significance of this accreditation when interviewing with the program. Accreditation status signifies that a program is highly significant and has reached a valuable benchmark for the professional field (Bahr, 2018). Furthermore, a program that is accredited demonstrates to its prospective students that it not only meets the national standards for that profession’s curriculum, but it hires expert faculty in that field, offers additional resources, and possesses other advantageous components, like research and publication opportunities or mentorship qualities (Valiga & Thorlow, 2018).

Even though the participants only discovered CACREP during the search process from friends or mentors/connections to the counseling profession, it is important to note

that they were not aware of that accreditation prior to engaging in the search process. Another participant who learned about the CACREP accreditation from a mentor also has a background in doctoral-level psychology studies and was unable to become a licensed psychologist from attending an un-accredited program. Based on previous experiences, the participant learned they needed to be more thorough when searching, selecting, and applying for a graduate program that would meet their career aspiration goals. Another participant recounted the process of searching for graduate programs by going on the CACREP accreditation website and identified programs that met her needs.

Due to the career goals of becoming licensed mental health counselors and professional counselors, these participants should also be aware of the state licensure requirements for this goal. This study found only one graduate program brought attention to CACREP accreditation during the application process. This program was from the institution that was not CACREP-accredited and the participant who selected this program reported that following this communication, she researched her state's licensure requirements to find out if this accreditation was necessary, which it was not.

Subtheme: State licensure requirements for counseling professionals (5b).

While one participant found that her state does not require her to obtain a CACREP-accredited higher education to become a licensed mental health counselor, the other participants revealed that the CACREP accreditation provided them with other advantages in addition to their state license eligibility. The participants shared that licensure requirements were a part of their program decision-making process, but the option for securing a license in a different state, receiving the highest quality counseling

education available, and meeting the national counseling profession standards were also vital when selecting a program. State licensure requirements for mental health counselors vary from state to state, but according to recent literature, many states require a CACREP-accredited education as it meets the national standards for counseling professionals (Adkinson-Bradley, 2013; Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015). Overall, the participants took a plethora of variables and influences into consideration, with accreditation-status and licensure requirements being among the top contemplations.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations are an expectation when conducting a research study and this study was no different as there were several. As a qualitative study, the methodological and trustworthiness challenges that arose during this study including reliability concerns attributable to the qualitative framework; the reduced credibility of the qualitative research tradition used; the researcher role nuisances and potential biases; gaining access to target population; the rigorous and laborious nature of the data analysis procedures; and, the use of purposeful sampling. The first major limitation of this study concerns the participant recruitment plan using only the CESNET listserv. After a couple of weeks, I realized that it was not recruiting enough participants to reach saturation. After careful thought, I decided to include three additional listserv communities found on the ACA and AMHCA websites, resulting in reaching saturation quickly. However, because I modified the study's participant recruitment method, I had to obtain an additional IRB approval.

Next, I relied on the narratives provided by seven first- and second-year master's level counseling students who experienced an awareness and understanding of CACREP during their search and selection process of a graduate program. The participants' recollections of these experiences were subjective with these memories possibly differing from the actual events. In addition, the participants may have deliberately left out or distorted some of the experiences that they did provide so that they could be viewed in a more favorable light. Therefore, there is a possibility that the experiences shared by participants included errors or misrepresentations because of the limitation to collecting self-reported data.

Additionally, due to the use of a small sample size, transferability and generalizability come into question. Transferability and generalizability are not mutually exclusive. Transferability is quite complicated to achieve in qualitative research, due to the relatively small sample sizes used for data collection (Richards, Dykeman, & Bender, 2018). I made an effort to address transferability by obtaining a diverse sample of participants from across the United States by using purposeful sampling and targeted recruitments methods; however, this study was still limited by the overall small sample size and lack of assurances that further data collection from students with similar experiences would not lead to the emergence of new or unique themes. While participants offered rich, thick descriptions that reached saturation, there was not broad variation in ethnicity among participants who responded to the study invitation. Participants were not asked to self-identify race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or other cultural considerations which might have introduced other moderating

considerations during the decision-making process. This study would benefit from greater diversity among the participants and the intentional collection of additional demographic information from participants, such as ethnicity, culture, etc.

The purpose of this study was to provide a description of the lived experiences, or essence, of a target population and not generalizability of the findings to a large, broad population sample. Although, I established a level of generalizability by taking thick descriptions on varying levels of the study processes, such as in-depth descriptions of my role as a researcher and instrument, all research process components, and the participants selected for the study. By setting specific parameters for the participant criteria, intentionally taking memos, and engaging in reflective journaling throughout the research procedures, I was able to bracket presuppositions and capture lived experiences of the participants suitable for this research study by using their own language.

There were also challenges associated with researcher bias and using the researcher as the instrument. I am a counseling doctoral student in an online CACREP-accredited CES program. I also completed my master's program at an online CACREP-accredited program. My views regarding the importance of accreditation and how it may influence a student's search and selection process could manipulate my interpretation of findings, inevitably putting the study at risk. To address researcher bias potential, I intentionally employed the descriptive phenomenological perspective when gathering and analyzing the data by focusing specifically on the language spoken by participants (Giorgi, 2018). I also took memos and reflected throughout the interview and data analysis processes to ensure that I was zealously aware of personal thoughts, perspective,

and presuppositions. By following these guidelines, I was able to intentionally limit the influence on the overall experience and bracket personal biases in the purest manner (Giorgi, 2009).

Additionally, by serving as the research instrument and data analyzer, I may have misinterpreted or misrepresented participants' experiences at times. While completing the data analysis, I subjectively coded and categorized the data leading to not always using the participants' exact language during these procedures. Hence, there is potential that I may not have captured the participants' own words when labeling the basic codes and themes from the transcripts. Consequently, there is a probability that I added to or took away from participants' lived experiences during the analysis process of this study.

Recommendations

The primary purpose of this research study was to describe and understand the lived experiences of master's level counseling graduate students' awareness, understanding, and knowledge of CACREP and the influence that CACREP accreditation status has on student decision-making regarding program choice. When embarking on the significant endeavor of selecting, enrolling, maturing, matriculating, and graduating from master's level program, it is quintessential for students to be fully informed when selecting that graduate program because it will be important for next steps in professional development and career goals. With this study being of exploratory nature, I aimed to connect the awareness gained from participant lived experiences with earlier literature to increase the dialogue and research about CACREP accreditation, its implications on graduate students, counseling professionals, and the counseling profession. To begin the

dialogue, I will publish and present these findings in professional counseling journals and at conferences.

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that CACREP awareness among counseling graduate students does warrant further study. Honderich and Lloyd (2015) found 46% of their participants lack all awareness of CACREP demonstrating that there is a need for our profession to increase dialogue and publicity concerning CACREP accreditation. While most of the participants in this study were aware of CACREP, it was clear, their familiarity primarily came from friends and family connected to the counseling profession. If the participants did not have these initial connections, the participants would not have made fully informed decisions about their program of choice. Since this study only aimed at opening the door for further dialogue and exploration, it did not provide an in-depth look at the students' discovery or knowledge of CACREP. Therefore, it would be beneficial for further research into how students learn about CACREP, student understanding and the ascribed importance of CACREP, if any, and the specific educative methods available through which students learn about CACREP accreditation prior to and following graduate program enrollment.

This research will help inform outreach efforts and increase CACREP dialogue across the profession, including appealing to undergraduate students considering a career in the counseling profession. It might also be prudent to investigate how counseling programs advertise for their available counseling programs and how this translates through their program websites. Furthermore, qualitative examination of student lived experiences within, and outside CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs is

suggested. This would be helpful in illuminating the key differences in the quality of the training provided by each of the program types.

Implications

Positive social change is the intentional process of designing and utilizing ideas, strategies, and actions to facilitate growth and development of individuals, communities, cultures, societies, etc. resulting in improved conditions (Walden University, 2020). The aim of this study was to describe master's level counseling students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP and how awareness may play a role in prospective students' graduate program decision-making. The findings are expected to help fill the gap in the counseling literature on this phenomenon and influence positive social change in the counseling profession (Honderich & Lloyd, 2015).

This research will promote change across varying levels: individual, program, and the larger profession. On the individual level, the themes derived describe how counseling graduate students consider and ultimately select an appropriate counseling graduate program. The comprehensive description of considerations that graduate students make when deciding on an appropriate counseling program can ensure that future students are making informed decisions when selecting a program (Honderich & Lloyd, 2015). In addition, the findings emphasize a need for increased student familiarity with CACREP accreditation, which will result in an enhanced student buy-in to the quality education provided by CACREP-accredited training. Prospective counseling students will view CACREP-accredited programs as programs committed to enriching

graduate students with a high-quality education, complete with high standards (Bersola, et al., 2014; Honderich & Lloyd, 2015).

The data further illustrates how CACREP accreditation status should be among the primary considerations for prospective counseling graduate students, displaying the importance attributed to accreditation status of graduate programs is high (Wilkinson & McCarthy, 2016). Counseling professionals' and faculty members' deepened awareness of how graduate students go about making a choice about graduate programs can be used to help students during this significant decision-making process. By developing this awareness, counseling professionals and faculty are more competent in ensuring that students are making fully informed decisions when selecting an appropriate graduate program and taking into consideration factors important to their professional futures (D'Andrea & Liu, 2009).

On the counseling graduate program level, programs benefit from this qualitative study's findings by learning about counseling graduate students' considerations when selecting an appropriate graduate program which can in turn enhance recruitment, enrollment, and retention strategies used within counseling programs across the United States. The findings of this study support Bardo's (2009) contention that graduate programs should share responsibility for educating students about the rationale of CACREP and its benefits and challenges, which can be integrated into program websites, campus visits, and prospective student communications. Furthermore, while the participants indicated using technology for the search, selection, and sometimes the application process, it is imperative for counseling graduate programs to properly

promote themselves on their program websites by stressing accreditation status (Wu, et al., 2016). The increased awareness of CACREP accreditation and dialogue among students and professionals may lead to non-accredited programs seeking CACREP accreditation to help recruitment, enrollment, and graduation rates. With more CACREP-accredited counseling graduate programs available in the U.S, prospective students would have more options to consider during their search and selection decision-making process (Bersola, et. al., 2014).

Overall, the findings from this study indicated that CACREP accreditation was a significant consideration for most participants when deciding on an appropriate counseling graduate program. Urofsky (2013) described CACREP accreditation as being a key influence in enhancing the identity of the counseling profession, developing and maintaining ongoing quality assurance in counseling programs, and playing a vital role in the future of license portability. CACREP accreditation status appears to not only be quite an important element to a counseling student's future ability for licensure, essential foundation to a counseling student's professional identity, regulating the quality of a student's training and education, but also significant to the graduate program decision-making process of counseling students.

Finally, on the broader professional level, this research clarifies prospective counseling graduate students' considerations demonstrating to the profession the essential role that CACREP accreditation plays when a student selects a program. It also emphasizes the critical need for ongoing dialogue about CACREP accreditation and the important role it plays for student education, counselor development, program growth,

and state licensing boards across the profession (Mascari & Webber, 2013). The counseling profession's identity can be enhanced and strengthened leading to increased public recognition with heightened CACREP-dialogue across the profession.

Conclusion

CACREP accreditation has been and continues to be a significant and vital component in the counseling profession. When prospective students are considering paying for and spending considerable time to train and earn a higher education in the field of counseling, it is crucial that they are considering all important factors and influences when selecting a graduate program. These students must be fully informed when making such a life-changing decision. Based on previous literature, many students lacked awareness of CACREP accreditation leading to students making program decisions without all facts (D'Andrea & Liu, 2009; Honderich & Lloyd-Hazlett, 2015). While the findings of this study demonstrated that there was not a lack of CACREP-awareness among these participants, the manner for which individuals discovered CACREP does present itself in a way that needs further study. Increased CACREP-awareness is needed for ongoing dialogue among individual, program, and broader professional levels to achieve transparency and enable fully informed decisions regarding appropriate graduate programs.

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Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Guide

Interview Guide Script

Background and Introduction

Hello, my name is Paige Zeiger and I am the primary researcher for this qualitative research project. I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University in the counselor education and supervision program. As you know, this interview is a requirement for me to successfully complete my advanced qualitative research course and gain the valuable experience of developing and conducting in-depth interviewing and qualitative analysis. I want to thank you for taking the time to meet (talk) with me today and discuss your lived experiences that influenced your enrollment into a CACREP-accredited counselor education and supervision doctoral program.

My qualitative research project seeks to understand and explore the experiences that influence enrollment in CACREP-accredited counselor education and supervision doctoral programs in the United States. The interview process will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. It consists of five overarching questions with some sub-questions. I want to inform you that while your responses during this interview may be used in my written qualitative research project, your name, any identifying information, and your responses will be kept confidential and separate. This means that only your interview responses may be shared with my course Instructor. I would also like to address how this interview is being audio-recorded. I am recording this interview in order for me to be able to accurately record and convey your responses. If I take any notes during the interview, they will be kept to a minimum. Do you consent to this interview being audio-recorded?

Before we begin, let's review the written informed consent for participating in this interview. Participation in this qualitative interview is completely voluntary in nature and if at any time during this interview, a question or issue arises that you do not feel comfortable with or do not want to talk about, you have the option to end the interview without consequence. If you need to take a break or stop at any time, please feel free to let me know. In the event that you choose to end the interview, all information that you have provided, including this recording, will be destroyed and omitted from my final project. I want to assure you that all of your responses, transcriptions, notes, and recordings will be secured to maintain confidentiality and privacy. We have both signed and dated two copies of the informed consent, illustrating that we agree to participate in this interview. One copy is for your records, while the other copy will be kept separate and secure for the duration of this course, as per Walden requirements.

Do you have any questions about what I just explained?
Are you still willing to participate in this interview? Thank you.

If you do not have any further questions, we will begin the interview.

Main Questions

- ✚ Let's begin the interview with you telling me about how you learned about and oriented yourself with potential doctoral programs.
 - What was the search process like, when you decided to pursue your doctoral degree?
 - How much time did you spend with the search process?
- ✚ What do you perceive as influencing your decision to pursue higher education?
 - What areas influenced your decisions about program choice?
 - Were there any individuals involved in influencing your decision or program choice?
 - If so, who were they?
 - Reflecting on these influences, how did they influence your decisions?
- ✚ Existing literature explains that there are a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic variables impacting one's decision to pursue higher education, such as geographic location, salary, family, fringe benefits, etc., How did personal and institutional characteristics, such as family, accreditation, departmental culture, support, mentorship, etc., influence your program choice?
 - Describe the influences that you deem most important in your program decision.
 - What makes those influences more important than others?
- ✚ How did accreditation play a role, if any, in your searching and selection process?
 - What does accreditation status say or mean to you?
- ✚ Thinking about your previous answers, what kind of experiences and factors would you identify as the most influential when selecting and applying to a doctoral program and why?

Wrap Up:

- ✚ As we are coming to an end, is there anything else that you would like to share with me about your experiences with searching and selecting a doctoral program or CACREP accreditation?
- ✚ As I mentioned before, I will be transcribing and analyzing your responses over the next couple of weeks. I will be happy to provide you with a copy for your review, if you are interested. Would you like me to send you a copy of the transcript?
- ✚ Thank you for your time and participation in this qualitative interview. If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Appendix B: Modified Interview Guide

Dissertation Interview Guide

Background and Introduction

Hello, my name is Paige Zeiger and I am the primary researcher for this research project that will help fulfill the requirements for my doctoral dissertation. I am currently a doctoral candidate at Walden University in the counselor education and supervision program. As you may know, this interview is a requirement for me to successfully complete my doctoral dissertation and gain the valuable experience of designing and conducting advanced qualitative studies. I want to thank you for taking the time to meet (talk) with me today and discuss your lived experiences that influenced your enrollment into a CACREP-accredited master's level counseling program.

The primary and secondary research questions for my study are as follows:

Primary Research Question

What are the lived experiences of master's level counseling graduate students' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of CACREP when selecting a graduate program?

Sub Question

How does CACREP awareness, knowledge, and understanding fit into the search and selection process of an appropriate counseling graduate program?

My qualitative research project seeks to understand and explore the experiences that influence enrollment in CACREP-accredited master's level counseling programs in the United States. The interview process will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. I want to inform you that while your responses during this interview may be used in my written qualitative research study, your name, any identifying information, and your responses will be kept confidential and separate. This means that only your interview responses may be shared within my dissertation capstone. I would also like to address how this interview is being audio-recorded. I am recording this interview in order for me to be able to accurately record and convey your responses using a digital audio recorder. If I take any notes during the interview, they will be kept to a minimum. Do you consent to this interview being audio-recorded?

Before we begin, let's review the written informed consent for participating in this interview. Participation in this qualitative interview is completely voluntary and if at any time during this interview, a question or issue arises that you do not feel comfortable with or do not want to talk about, you have the option to skip the question or end the interview without consequence. If you need to take a break or stop at any time, please feel free to let me know. In the event that you choose to end the interview, all information that you have provided, including this recording, will be destroyed and omitted from my final project. I want to assure you that all of your responses,

transcriptions, notes, and recordings will be secured to maintain confidentiality and privacy. You have responded to the informed consent email with the words “I consent” indicating that you accept the condition and agree to participate in this interview. I might suggest that you maintain One printed copy is for your records.

At this time,

Do you have any questions about what I just explained?

Are you still willing to participate in this interview? Thank you.

If you do not have any further questions, we will begin the interview.

Age _____

City, State _____

School _____

Year in Program _____

- ✚ Let’s begin the interview with you telling me about What you perceive as influencing your decision to pursue a higher education.

- ✚ Tell me about how you searched for and selected your counseling graduate program.
 - What was the search process like, when you decided to pursue your counseling degree?
 - How much time did you spend with the search process?
 - What do you perceive as influencing your decision to pursue higher education?

- ✚ What factors or characteristics influenced your program choice?
 - Reflecting on these influences, how did they influence your decisions?
 - Were there any individuals involved in influencing your decision or program choice?
 - If so, who were they and how did they influence your choice

- ✚ Existing literature explains that there are a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic variables impacting one’s decision to pursue higher education, such as geographic location, salary, family, fringe benefits, etc., How did personal and institutional characteristics, such as family, accreditation, departmental culture, support, mentorship, etc., influence your program choice?
 - Describe the influences that you deem most important in your program decision.
 - What makes those influences more important than others?

- ✦ Tell me about your knowledge of the counseling's profession accrediting organization, coined Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP).
 - How did program accreditation play a role, if any, in your searching and selection process?
 - What does accreditation status say or mean to you?

- ✦ Thinking about your previous answers, what kind of experiences and factors would you identify as the most influential when selecting and applying to a doctoral program and why?

Wrap Up:

As we are coming to an end, is there anything else that you would like to share with me about your experiences with searching and selecting a master's counseling program or CACREP accreditation?

As I mentioned before, I will be having this interview transcribed verbatim by Kristen Muller Transcription Services before engaging in the analysis process over the next couple of weeks. I will be happy to provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review, if you are interested. If you are interested, please send me a separate email following this interview.

Again, I want to Thank you for your time and participation in this qualitative interview. If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me.