

2019

# The Experiences of Counseling Graduate Students Who Participated in Professional Legislative Advocacy Training

Nakpangi Thomas  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

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Nakpangi Thomas

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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

The Experiences of Counseling Graduate Students Who Participated in Professional

Legislative Advocacy Training

by

Nakpangi Thomas

MS, University of Phoenix, 2011

BSW, Florida Atlantic University, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

January 2019

## Abstract

Legislative advocacy efforts are increasingly becoming part of a counselor's professional identity, yet there is a lack of empirical data available on the experiences of counseling students involved in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the meaning counseling students ascribe to their involvement in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession. Astin's student involvement theory was the conceptual framework utilized to explore the lived experiences of counseling graduate students and recent graduates who participated in a 4-day long American Counseling Association Institute for Leadership Training on legislative advocacy and leadership or in professional legislative advocacy at the state level. Convenient and snowball sampling yielded 8 participants who engaged in semistructured interviews. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the data were analyzed to identify essential themes. Thematic analysis was conducted by hand using literature-based codes and lean coding as well as NVivo software. Themes included awareness, faculty mentor, involvement, incorporating legislative advocacy into the curriculum, lack of confidence, student learning and personal development, legislative culture, motivation, student obstacles to professional legislative advocacy, and problems in working with other professions. Findings may be useful for counselor educators seeking to integrate professional legislative advocacy into the counseling curriculum. Implementing a professional legislative advocacy approach into the counseling curriculum might contribute to counselor students' developing a propensity for leadership, advocacy, and professional legislative advocacy beyond graduation.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my grandparents, Safee and Tauheedah Akbar, for instilling in me a hard work ethic and encouraging me to live my dreams. They taught me the meaning of integrity -- to be a person of my word. They taught me the meaning of compassion by showing me through their example of caring for others. The greatest lesson my grandparents taught me was to have a strong faith in God and that all things are possible as long as I walk in faith.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Advocacy has a long history in the counseling profession. The counseling profession was developed by individuals who wanted to make a change to the status quo as well as increase opportunities for the disadvantaged and oppressed (Grothaus, McAuliffe, & Craigen, 2012; Osborne et al., 1998). According to experts in the field, students in the profession of counseling should understand that counseling was established in part through self-advocacy by persons such as Sigmund Freud and Clifford Beers, and in part by social advocacy for the community (Gladding & Newsome, 2010; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). In the past, the primary focus of the advocacy movement primary has been on advocating for clients/students and school/community to reduce barriers stunting personal, academic, and career development (Grothaus et al., 2012; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009).

In recent years, however, there has been a shift to counselors directing their advocacy efforts toward the public arena. Lewis and colleagues (2003) described advocacy in the public arena as conveying awareness to the public pertaining to societal and systemic barriers that impact human development and advocating for policies that change the status quo. For example, counselors and counseling students are encouraged to advocate for the profession of counseling to help impact policy changes salient to the profession (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). Students entering the profession as well as current professional counselors should advocate for the profession at government levels to ensure the continuation of the counseling profession related to

reimbursement for their services from insurance companies, funding for school counselors, and increased access by the public to counselors for mental health care services (Nilsson, Schale, & Khamphakdy-Brown, 2011; Smith, Reynolds, & Rovak, 2009).

The counseling profession is relatively new and, when compared to the social work profession, is still in the infancy phase related to social justice and professional legislative advocacy (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). Webb (2015) said that both the psychology and counseling professions have been slow to move toward political action. In contrast, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), with its more than 132,000 members and 55 chapters, has been preparing social work students and social work professionals to be politically active for the past two decades (starting in the early 2000s) and has a commitment to advocating for social and economic justice (Beimers, 2015). NASW and its members' involvement in federal political action for both social workers and the population they serve are facilitated through using email listserv advocacy, policy position development, hosting Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) committee, which provides candidates who have shared political views with NASW with financial support and endorse (Beimers, 2015).

Counselors are fighting to convince legislators and various boards (state, federal, insurance, etc.) to honor competent practice(s) and insurance parity (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts, 2010). According to Lating, Barnett, and Horowik (2010), counseling students should be introduced to advocacy and its core beliefs, purposes, and objectives during orientation. In addition, advocacy concepts should be systematically infused into the

counseling graduate program curriculum to create a positive mindset and attitude toward advocacy (Cooks, Hayden, Gracia, & Terrell, 2015; Ratts & Pederson, 2014; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). Most students are aware of the need to advocate on behalf of clients/students and school/community; however, the concept of advocating for the counseling profession is not as obvious to them (Toporek et al., 2009).

Program expectations are generally laid out prior the student enrolling into a counseling program or during student orientation. From their entrance into a graduate counseling program, students are encouraged to think critically and question all aspects of counseling theoretical tenets, applied concepts, and research outcomes (Bemak et al., 2011). From the beginning of their graduate programs, counseling students should be exposed to the basic tenets of advocacy that will help foster in them an attitude for service extending beyond clients/students and the school/community (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Toporek et al., 2009). Yet, in spite of the mounting evidence supporting the increased need for graduate students to be involved in advocacy, there remains a dearth of literature on the experiences of counseling students or practicing counselors who are involved in legislative advocacy.

In this chapter, I provide the background of this study, the problem statement, and the purpose statement. I also include the research question; the conceptual framework; the nature of the study; key definitions; and discussion of the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and ethical considerations of the study. To conclude the chapter, I discuss the significance of this study and its implications for social change and provide a summary of the chapter.

## **Background**

According to Ratts and Wayman (2014), numerous studies have focused on the subject of advocacy for the counseling profession. Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of empirical data available on the experiences of counseling students who are involved in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession (Briggs, Magnus, Lassiter, Patterson, & Smith, 2011; Remley & Herlihy, 2016). Most counseling students are not privy to professional legislative advocacy involvement at the academic level; thus, they may not develop a focus on professional legislative advocacy as a core aspect of their professional identity (Lating et al., 2010). However, understanding the importance of social change advocacy, more specifically professional legislative advocacy, as it relates to the counseling profession is necessary to promote leadership and to influence legislators, in the view of Calley and Hawley (2008). Collins and his colleagues (2015) agreed that participating in social change advocacy for the counseling profession as a counseling student has received little attention in the literature. Thus, there appears to be a gap in knowledge regarding certain aspects of advocacy in counseling education and practice.

Grothaus et al. (2012) discussed the need to integrate advocacy into strength-based counseling interventions. The authors also provided a definition of counseling advocacy and said that it is “the act of empowering individuals or groups through actions that increase self-efficacy, remove barriers to needed services, and promote systemic change” (p. 58). Myers, Sweeney, and White (2002) noted that although advocacy both for clients and for the profession are essential for the future of counseling and counselors, advocacy for the profession has received little systematic attention. In another study,

Nilsson and Schmidt (2005) conducted an initial exploration of social justice advocacy among counseling graduate students. According to these scholars, literature focused on college students and social justice advocacy dates back to the 1950s. However, none of the aforementioned studies focused on counseling students' engagement in professional legislative advocacy.

In this study, I explored the meaning counseling students place on advocating for the profession, factors that influence legislative advocacy, and methods of gaining entry to legislative advocacy. Singh (2010) provided clarity as to how educators can weave social justice advocacy into the curriculum as well as the personal meaning ascribed to social justice advocacy. Reiner, Dobmeier, and Hernández (2013) and Remley and Herlihy (2016) explored historical factors, professional identity, credentialing, and advocacy within the counseling profession. Reiner et al. also highlighted the significance of advocacy at the professional level. The above studies provided a starting place for my study.

### **Problem Statement**

Involvement in social change advocacy at the professional level allows counselors and counselor educators to obtain recognition from other professionals, pass legislation salient to the counseling profession, ensure funding for the counseling profession as a whole, and sustain a continued viable income for counseling professionals (Reiner et al., 2013). Ratts and Hutchins (2009) ascertained that political action and legislation, particularly advocacy efforts, are increasingly becoming a real part of the counselor's

existence. Thus, preparing counseling students for professional legislative advocacy engagement at the academic level may be crucial to advancing the counseling profession.

Although advocacy in the counseling profession has a long history, there remains a dearth of empirical data available on the experiences of counseling students involved in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession as an act of social change advocacy (Briggs et al., 2011; Remley & Herlihy, 2016). The significance of social change advocacy as a counseling student is lacking from the current body of literature (Collins et al., 2015). Calley and Hawley (2008) postulated that counseling students need to understand the importance of social change advocacy, more specifically, legislative advocacy as it relates to the counseling profession, in order to promote leadership and to influence legislators. Hence, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the meaning counseling students ascribe to their involvement in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession.

I explored the lived experiences of counseling graduate students and recent graduates who participated in a 4-day long American Counseling Association (ACA) Institute for Leadership Training on legislative advocacy and leadership or participated in professional legislative advocacy at the state level. The Institute for Leadership Training was established during Dr. Mark Pope's 2003-2004 ACA Presidency (M. Pope, personal communication, December 19, 2016). Pope explained that the institute was designed to train counselors at a national level on how to advocate for the counseling profession. Participants learn legislative terminology that is most useful when addressing legislators. Detailed descriptions of the current bills that participants will advocate for are provided

during large sessions by experts in the field (M. Pope, personal communication, December 19, 2016). Small group sessions allow participants to learn how to justify their support of bills, define leadership roles, and explain fiduciary responsibilities. According to Pope, they then apply the knowledge they have garnered through face-to-face meetings with legislators on Capitol Hill. By the end of the institute, participants are able to distinguish the difference between lobbying and professional advocacy, define legislative terms, advocate for the profession, identify which legislators are in favor of the bills, provide a summary of their experience, and discuss follow up procedures with legislators (M. Pope, personal communication, December 19, 2016). Hopefully, the results of this study will provide an understanding of the meaning counseling students ascribe to their involvement in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession. By learning about their experiences, counselor educators may be in a better position to encourage future counselors to be more involved in professional legislative advocacy.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Little is known about the experiences of counseling students who are involved in professional legislative advocacy or their motivation for professional advocacy involvement. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate students and recent graduates who have been involved in professional legislative advocacy.

### **Research Question**

In order to find out the meaning counseling students place on advocating for the profession, I explored the factors that influence legislative advocacy and methods of



gaining entry to legislative advocacy. There was one central and 13 subquestions (see Chapter 3) that comprised the interview protocol (see Appendix A) for this study. The central research question for this study was the following: What meaning do counseling graduate students and recent graduates ascribe to their experiences of involvement in professional legislative advocacy?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework I used to guide this inquiry was Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. The theory is based on the physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience. According to Astin (1999), a student's growth and development is dependent on the amount of time spent involved in campus activities and time shared with faculty. Astin's student involvement theory has been widely utilized in higher education to better understand and explore student involvement (Astin, 1993; Astin & Astin, 2000; Foreman & Retallick, 2013; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, & Kinzie, 2008). Astin's (1999) theory was useful for this study because it provided a lens for exploring the experiences of counseling graduate students who are involved in legislative advocacy activities.

According to Astin (1984), students who spend time studying, participating in campus activities and organizations, as well as interacting with faculty are more invested in the learning experience. Moreover, a student's degree of involvement will develop over time; a student's involvement is determined based on his or her level of motivation. Astin (1999) asserted that involvement can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. For instance, the amount of hours a student spends meeting with legislators

can be measured quantitatively while interviewing students to understand their motivation for involvement in legislative advocacy provides a qualitative measure. Student involvement theory further assumes that a student's involvement enhances student learning and personal development (Astin, 1984). Astin's theory is the best fit for my study.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was qualitative. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research focuses on the lived experiences of an individual or group. Phenomenological design and semistructured interviews will be utilized to uncover themes associated with professional legislative advocacy involvement of master's and doctoral level students or recent professionals who had graduated within the last two years (Bryman, 2015). The most appropriate design for this study was Hermeneutic phenomenological because of the need for increased understanding of counseling students' motivation and attitudes regarding legislative advocacy.

### **Definitions**

The following definitions provide an understanding of words and phrases as they are understood in this particular study:

*Advocacy:* A plea or social cause that challenges barriers which impede academic, personal, or career development (Lee, 1998).

*Bill:* Proposed legislation under consideration by a legislature (NCSL, 2017). A bill does not become law until it is passed by the legislature and, in most cases, approved

by the executive. Once a bill has been enacted into law, it is called an *act of the legislature*, or a *statute*.

*Change agent*: Individuals who work to affect social systems in ways that will ultimately benefit society as a whole (Grothaus et al., 2012).

*Direct lobbying*: An attempt to influence legislation by stating a position on that specific legislation to legislators or other government employees who participate in the formulation of legislation (Drutman, 2010).

*Grassroots lobbying*: An activity that occurs when an organization urges its members and nonmembers to become involved in direct lobbying (Drutman, 2010).

*Legislative advocacy*: A reliance on legislative processes (local, state, or federal) as a strategy to bring about change (Drutman, 2010).

*Social justice*: A “multifaceted approach to counseling in which practitioners strive to simultaneously promote human development and the common good through addressing challenges related to both individual and distributive justice regulations” (ACA Division Counselors for Social Justice, 2017).

*Social justice advocacy*: Within the professional counseling literature, a phrase that distinguishes advocacy related to issues of power and privilege, allocation of resources, and discrimination (Grothaus et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2009; Toporek et al., 2009).

*Sponsor*: The person (usually a legislator) who presents a bill or resolution for consideration. A *sponsor* can be joined by others, who are known as *cosponsors* (NCSL, 2017).

*White paper*: A government or other authorized report giving information or proposal on an issue (Rouse, 2015).

### **Assumptions**

In this study, I assumed that all participants would take the time to reflect and answer all questions honestly. Participants were asked to recall thoughts and feelings from experiences of professional legislative advocacy involvement. I further assumed that all participants who were involved in professional legislative advocacy as a social change agent through ACA's Institute for Leadership Training or similar training at the state level had an understanding of the distinction between client and professional advocacy. Participants carry their own biases, and because this study relied on the individuals' perceptions, biases may be reflected in the participants' views of professional legislative advocacy involvement.

In addition, I carried my own biases into this research project that came from my personal experiences as a professional legislative advocate and my direct participation in three of the ACA Institutes for Leadership Training. I bracketed my biases and did my best to keep them from influencing my collection or analysis of the data.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

I interviewed masters and doctoral level students who were involved in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession. I interviewed new professionals who had graduated within the last two years who were students at the time of their involvement in professional legislative advocacy. The various motivations and attitudes from the participants disclosed patterns and themes (Creswell, 2013). By identifying emerging

themes produced by these motivations and attitudes, I was able to identify the essential elements that appeared across the sources and provided a description of how the experiences appeared (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Furthermore, multiple participants serve as a kind of triangulation of the experience, locating its core meaning by approaching it through various accounts. Triangulation does not serve to verify a particular account, but instead allows the researcher to move beyond a single view of the experience. The utilization of multiple participants deepens the understanding of the investigated experience or phenomena (Polkinghorne, 2005). I remained flexible as a student researcher to allow participants to provide detailed accounts of their shared lived experiences as well as to address emerging themes produced by the data (Creswell, 2013).

### **Limitations**

This study was limited to only counseling students and recent graduates who had participated in professional legislative advocacy. Due to the subjective experiences of the participants, it may be difficult to replicate this study (Patton, 2015). Creswell (2013) asserted that one contributing factor to consider as a limitation is that participants may drop out of the study before completion. Participants may have a preconceived meaning of the operational definitions that may affect their input. As a professional legislative advocate for the past four years, my personal experience as a legislative advocate may have created biases. Participants may also have perceived me as an expert in the area of professional legislative advocacy.

## Significance

One of the essential characteristics of counseling professionals is to advocate on behalf of clients and the profession (Mallinckrodt, Miles, & Levy, 2014). The value of social change advocacy has a longstanding history in the profession of counseling (Pope, 2000; Toporek et al., 2009). According to Myers et al. (2002), social change advocacy implies an action in pursuit of social and political justice. In other words, social change advocacy requires activism to carry out systemic political and societal change. Furthermore, professional legislative advocacy requires activism to change the status quo, carry out systemic political and societal change, and influence legislators at the local, state, and federal levels.

Historically, counseling professionals have answered the call of social change advocacy on behalf of client populations (Grothaus et al., 2012; Ratts & Hutchins; 2009). Recently, Tennessee passed into law a bill allowing counselors to refuse service to clients who are involved in activities that are in conflict with the deeply held religious beliefs of the counselor. Tennessee's new law is a direct violation of the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) which indicates that counselors do not discriminate against clients based "on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital/partnership status, language preference, socioeconomic status, immigration status, or any basis proscribed by law" (ACA, C.5, p. 9). In a video, ACA's Chief Executive Office, Richard Yep, said, "It is an affront to our profession and we must stand firm to prevent other states from enacting a law like HB 1840" (YouTube, 2016).

In the past seven years, the American Counseling Association (ACA) has called for increased social change advocacy as it relates to the counseling profession (ACA, 2014). Yep (2010) stated, “The time is now for all professional counselors and counselor educators to advocate for the profession... You need to advocate for the profession with as much intensity... as is done for those whom you serve...” (p. 7). Despite the importance of social change advocacy for the profession, there remains a lack of student involvement in legislative advocacy for the profession of counseling (Collins et al., 2015; Haight, 1982; Myers et al., 2002). This study sought to identify the meaning counseling students place on advocating for the profession, factors that influence legislative advocacy, and methods of gaining entry to legislative advocacy by exploring their motivation and attitudes toward legislative advocacy for the counseling profession.

### **Summary**

This chapter provides an introduction to the study. The aim of this qualitative study is to explore the lived experiences counseling students and recent graduates to uncover the meaning ascribed to their experiences of involvement in professional legislative advocacy. Participants were generated from my personal contacts of counseling students who were involved in professional legislative advocacy. A brief background of the study and definitions has been provided within this chapter.

The conceptual framework guiding this inquiry is based on Astin’s (1999) theory of student involvement. Astin’s theory is useful for this study because it provides a lens for exploring the experiences of counseling graduate students and recent graduates who have been involved in professional legislative advocacy activities. Assumptions, scope

and delimitations, limitations, and ethical considerations have also been addressed in this chapter. Chapter 2 discusses the foundational literature for the study.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Emerging research has demonstrated a growing need for counseling students to be trained in legislative advocacy. One reason is that counselors are increasingly involved in political action and the legislative movement (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). According to Ratts and Wayman (2014), numerous studies have focused on the subject of advocacy for the counseling profession. Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of empirical data available on the motivation and attitudes of counseling students toward professional legislative advocacy for the counseling profession as an act of social change advocacy (Briggs et al., 2011; Remley & Herlihy, 2016). In addition, involvement in social change advocacy as a counseling student has received little attention in the literature (Collins et al., 2015). Most counseling students are not aware of professional legislative advocacy involvement at the academic level and thus may not develop a focus on advocacy as a core aspect of their professional identity (Lating et al., 2010). However, counseling students need to understand the importance of social change advocacy, more specifically legislative advocacy as it relates to the counseling profession, to promote leadership and advocacy and to influence legislators, according to some experts (Calley & Hawley, 2008).

The consistent necessity to promote systemic change through advocacy has been widely accepted as a core value in the counseling and mental health professions (Cashwell, 2010; Lee, 2007; Toporek et al., 2009); however, the action component (e.g., protesting, advocating, e-mailing, etc.) of advocacy has not carried over to practice

(Cooks et al., 2015; Ratts & Pedersen, 2014; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). Chang et al. (2010) agreed that counselors are called upon to alleviate societal problems and should be fighting oppression of diverse populations, addressing racial and sexual injustice in work settings, and advocating for families suffering from violence, and eliminating barriers to learning. Yet, many counselors do not advocate on behalf of the profession (Cashwell, 2010; Lee, 2007; Nilsson et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Toporek et al., 2009).

Some scholars have suggested that counselor educators can better prepare counseling students to become legislative advocates for the counseling profession by infusing legislative advocacy into the curriculum and the field experience (Cooks et al., 2015; Ratts & Pederson, 2014; Ratts & Wayman, 2014; Toporek et al., 2009; Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore, & Hof, 2008). Based on the literature review for this study, current research on professional legislative advocacy has shown that advocacy is a core value of counselors and that professional legislative advocacy is an important part of a counselor's professional identity (Lating et al., 2010; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Ratts & Wayman, 2014 ). Still, there is no research literature that focuses on the lived experiences of counseling students and their motivation and attitudes toward legislative advocacy (Briggs et al., 2011; Collins et al., 2015; Remley & Herlihy, 2016). To better understand the importance of professional legislative advocacy, the legislative advocacy movement within the counseling profession must first be understood.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I conducted 33 searches with broad keywords in a variety of mental health counseling and psychology related databases and search engines in order to gather as

much germinal material as possible that could help inform a study on student involvement in professional legislative advocacy. I used the keyword search words and terms listed in Table 1 using Boolean/phrase broad search with no combined categories without differentiating search fields.

Table 1

*Keyword Search Terms*

Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
ACA advocacy	Lawmaking	public policy
competencies	legislation	public policy advocacy
advocacy	legislative advocate	scholar-practitioner-training
advocacy competencies	lobbying	scientist-practitioner-
advocate	macro-systems	advocate
Astin's student involvement	master's student	social advocacy
theory	mental health	social advocacy movement
change agent	multicultural	social cognitive career
community mental health	multicultural counseling	theory
competency	nonprofit organizations	social construction
counseling advocacy	policy advocate	social justice
counseling programs	policy advocacy	social justice advocate
counseling students	policy instructional	social justice commitment
counselor	approach	social justice competency
counselor education	policy-making	social justice counseling
counselor educator	political action	social justice interest
critical consciousness	practicum	social policy
doctoral student	practicum course	students
doctoral training	professional identity	student attitudes
fieldwork	professional involvement	student involvement
higher education	professional legislation	student lobbying
intergroup dialogue	advocate	student involvement theory
		student motivation

I searched the individual terms in the following peer-reviewed databases: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Counseling and Psychotherapy Transcripts, Student Narratives, Reference Works, Counseling and Therapy in Video, SocINDEX with Full Text, Professional Legislative Advocacy with Full Text, ERIC – Educational Information Resource Center, EBSCO ebooks, CINAHL & MEDLINE Simultaneous Search, Academic Search Complete, Expanded Academic ASAP, ProQuest Central, LexisNexis Academic, Thoreau, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Full Text, Dissertations & Theses at Walden University, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) Datasets, and Google Scholar.

I then parsed the literature by the title of the document, date of publication, and relevance based on the information found in the abstract. Because there was very little literature that focused on the keywords of legislative advocate, change agent or social justice advocate, I broadened the search for common group relationship dynamics found in articles with the following keywords: advocate, advocacy, counselors, counseling students, social justice, social justice advocate, social justice counseling, students, and other keywords or phrases listed in Table 1. This included searching for information pertaining to advocacy and the meaning counseling students ascribe to professional legislative advocacy. I reviewed the literature for dynamics that might also exist in legislative involvement, protest, letter writing, professional advocacy, and societal implications for counseling students trained in legislative advocacy.

I began researching the literature July 2014. I concluded my source once I exhausted the literature for my study. It was difficult to find evidence-based studies or

empirical research on professional legislative advocacy or student involvement.

Therefore, I examined existing research on social justice and advocacy in counseling to draw out common experiences in an attempt to better understand the dynamics that might be occurring in student legislative advocacy involvement. I also examined nonscientific articles found in newsletter editorials, news stories, public commentaries, legal proceedings, forums and workshops, symposiums, blogs, and literary works in order to better understand potential issues faced by counseling graduate students who engage in advocacy on behalf of the counseling profession.

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Synthesis of Astin's Student Involvement Theory**

Student involvement theory has been widely cited in both qualitative and quantitative research in investigations of student development, and it has been widely used by university faculty members to design effective learning environments (Burch et al., 2015; Lund & Jolly, 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pike et al., 2012). Alexander Astin developed student involvement theory in July 1984 to describe the importance of student involvement in college and the link between student involvement and student retention rates. Involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to the academic experience (Astin, 1984). According to Astin (1999), students who spend time studying and participating in campus activities and organizations, as well as interacting with faculty, are more invested in the learning experience. Moreover, a student's degree of involvement will develop over time; involvement of students is determined based on their level of motivation. Astin (1999) asserted that involvement

can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. For instance, a quantitative can measure the number of hours a student spends calling legislators a while interviewing students to understand their motivation to get involved in legislative advocacy provides a qualitative measure. An assumption of student involvement theory is that student involvement enhances student learning and personal development (Astin, 1999).

### **Studies Utilizing Student Involvement Theory and Assumptions**

Multiple researchers have utilized student involvement theory to assess students in various educational disciplines and to explore various outcomes of student involvement (Burch, Heller, Burch, Freed, & Steed, 2015; Foreman & Retallick, 2013; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pike, Smart, & Ethington, 2012). Additionally, student involvement theory has used in both qualitative and quantitative methods. Notwithstanding the growing body of literature on counseling students and professional legislative advocacy, most publications in this area remain theoretical (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005).

Burch et al. (2015) explored themes related to social justice involvement utilizing Astin's Student Involvement Theory. The purpose of the study was to develop and psychometrically test a student involvement survey (four-factor model of student involvement). They hypothesized that student involvement consists of the separate constructs of emotional involvement, physical involvement, cognitive involvement in class, and cognitive involvement out of class. In this quantitative study, Burch et al. (2015) analyzed the correlation between fraternity/sorority involvement and academic performance of 214 undergraduate business students at a Southern University. As a

result, the authors developed a theoretically grounded student involvement scale that measures course level student involvement, and they suggested that educators can enhance "...their teaching by investigating involvement as a primary contributor to learning outcomes" (p. 224). They also said that they believed that educators should track student involvement at the course level and provide detailed feedback to improve programs for student involvement.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts**

#### **The Development and Evolution of Legislative Advocacy**

The counseling profession emerged in the late 1890s out of humanitarian concerns to improve the lives of children and young adults in communities (Gladding & Newsome, 2010). According to Glosoff and Schwarz-Whittaker (2013), counselors were labeled social reformers during the late 1800s. The researchers indicated that Lysander S. Richards coined the term *vocophers* or *counselor* in 1881 and published the *Vocophy*. The *Vocophy* detailed steps to successful career practices based on an individual's interest and tips from successful leaders to influence occupation success.

The 1900s called for a need for community counselors in settings outside of the school or university (Glosoff & Schwarz-Whittaker, 2013). Three major contributors to this movement were Frank Parson, Jesse B. Davis, and Clifford Beers (Gladding & Newsome, 2010; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Parson is known as the father of vocational counseling for his organization of the Bureau of Vocational Guidance in which young men were trained to become counselors and managers (Zunker, 2002). Davis was the first to provide a systematic school guidance program (Glosoff &



Schwarz-Whittaker, 2013). According to Gladding and Newsome (2010), Beers reported on the inhumane treatment of individuals in asylums and advocated for better treatment of individuals in mental health institutes. This was a result of the multiple hospitalizations Beers experienced due to symptoms of mental illness. Additionally, Beers established the first outpatient mental health clinic in 1913 in New Haven, Connecticut (Gladding & Newsome, 2010). While these pioneers did not contribute to legislative advocacy, their efforts in community counseling paved the way for professional advocacy.

The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 documented the first counseling legislation adopted by the federal government (Hillison, 1987). According to Hillison, The Smith-Hughes Act was the first piece of substantial legislation that was passed related to school counseling. The Wagner-Peyser Act of 1933 provided vocational counselors with a national employment system to help return unemployed workers to the workforce (Glosoff & Schwarz-Whittaker, 2013). The authors asserted that the George-Dean Act of 1936 allocated 14 million dollars for vocational education. In 1938, the Inception of Occupational and Information Guidance Services Bureau provided counselors with resources to match people with occupations (Glosoff & Schwarz-Whittaker, 2013). However, no formal legislation focused on the mental health needs of the population served.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH; 2016), the Veteran's Administration provided guidance services for veterans in 1944 and employed counselors to assist. The George-Barden Act of 1946 increased vocational funding to \$29 million

(NIMH, 2016). According to Glossoff and Schwarz-Whittaker (2013), that same year, NIMH was established to provide training stipends to doctoral students, and the National Mental Health Act was passed. The National Mental Health Act was the first legislation to focus on mental health and made mental health a national priority (Glossoff & Schwarz-Whittaker, 2013). The National Mental Health Act of 1946 addressed the need for school and vocational counselors to focus on the mental health of those they served. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1945 provided funds to higher education to train rehabilitation professionals (Elliot & Leung, 2005). The allocated funds allowed for the expansion of rehabilitation facilities, extended services to persons with mental illness and mental retardation, upgraded state rehabilitation agencies, and provided funding for research. However, funds extended services only to persons with mental illness and mental retardation.

In 1952, four independent associations -- The National Vocational Guidance Association (NVGA), the National Association of Guidance and Counselor Trainers (NAGCT), the Student Personnel Association for Teacher Education (SPATE), and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) -- joined to form what is now known as ACA in hopes of providing a greater professional voice (ACA, 2017). ACA was first named the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) and the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) before changing its name to the American Counseling Association (ACA). The American Counseling Association was the first national professional organization for counselors inside and outside academic and vocational settings (Glossoff & Schwarz-Whittaker, 2013). The Mental Health Study

Act was enacted in 1955 to improve and expand programs for mental health and public health (NIMH, 2016). Furthermore, the National Defense Act of 1958 was established to identify youth with strong mathematics and science skills to be recruited to work in the space program. Still, the need for professional counselors that focused on mental health issues was not identified.

Universities were authorized to improve counselor training in 1962 due to the enactment of Title V-D (NIMH, 2016). The Community Mental Health Centers Acts of 1963 established more than 2,000 mental health centers and provided an opportunity for counselors to be employed outside of educational settings (Sharfstein, 2000). In 1964, the Amendment to the National Defense Education Act expanded and improved vital funding for school counselors (Glosoff & Schwarz-Whittaker, 2013). Additionally, more funding was allotted through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to ensure that low-income primary and secondary schools established a national curriculum. Thus far, the need to address students' mental health and the impact of mental health on student learning was not addressed. For example, in 1972, the 1964 Civil Rights Act added Title IX of the Education Amendments which mandated that no one could be discriminated against, including through sex-biased appraisal (Glosoff & Schwarz-Whittaker, 2013). Additionally, Public Law 94-142 was enacted in 1975 to guarantee a free appropriate public education to each child with a disability.

Public Law 85-864, the National Defense Education Act of 1958, provided funding for guidance and counseling graduate institutes and expanded guidance and testing programs in schools, causing an increase in university enrollment in counseling

graduate programs (West, Osborn, & Bubenzer, 2003, pp. 28-29). Furthermore, pioneers Robert Stripling and Bill Dugan embarked on a quest for national professional standards for the preparation of counselors in the 1960s. Additionally, West et al. (2003) asserted that Stripling worked to secure a counselor licensing law in the state of Florida. In collaboration with Joe Wittmer, the two professors lobbied the state Senate representatives in Florida for the rights of professional counselors to practice.

According to West et al. (2003), Culbreath Cook was arrested and booked in 1972 in Virginia for practicing psychology without a license. However, with the support of fellow counselors, Carl Swanson, who was a counselor, attorney, and Episcopal priest, the judge determined that Cook was well within his rights to practice as the definition of counselor was different from the definition of the practice of psychology. The verdict of the Cook case and the passage of the first counselor licensure law in Virginia were vital to the counseling profession as they allowed counselors to practice as separate professionals without being accused of practicing psychology without a psychology license.

The emergence of the 2000s increased legislative enactments that greatly impacted the counseling profession. For example, the Veterans Benefits, Healthcare, and Information Technology Act of 2006 Section 2 provided language that included licensed mental health counselors and marriage and family counselors as mental health providers (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Additionally, Section 203 allowed for the use of telecounseling as an approved method of mental health counseling and Section 205 expanded services to civilian counselors.

According to the ACA Government Affairs (2017) web page, in 2008, the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and the Addiction Equity Act was enacted to supersede the 1996 Mental Health Parity law. The language within each Act ensured that large group health plans could not impose caps on mental health benefits. The December 21, 2017, edition of *Counseling Today* announced the authorizing of the Veteran's Health Care Improvement Act and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cure Act. The Veteran's Health Care Improvement Act of 2016, H.R. 6416, allowed doctoral-level licensed professional counselors to gain employment with the Department of Veteran Affairs. Before the Veteran's Health Care Improvement Act was signed by President Barack Obama, the language in the hiring contract for the Department of Veteran's Affairs excluded licensed professional counselors. On December 13, 2016, President Obama closed out the year by signing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cures Act, providing vital funding for mental health research and prevention.

As the profession of counseling continues to strive to be a reputable among other mental health professions, leaders have suggested that more legislative advocacy is needed to ensure the viability of the profession (Collins et al., 2015; Cook et al., 2015; Dollarhide, et al. 2016; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). Some have argued that counseling programs need to implement courses that make students aware of legislative advocacy and how to become involved in legislative advocacy (Cooks et al., 2015; Ratts & Pederson, 2014).

While numerous federal acts have been approved by the government to maintain and improve services for school counselors, vocational counselors, and the public, there

remains a lack of legislation which includes professional counselors in the language (Ratts & Pederson, 2014). According to Glossoff and Schwarz-Whittaker (2013), such exclusions (a) continue to block professional counselors from gaining Medicare and third-party insurance reimbursement; (b) deny the public access to affordable mental health care; and (c) deny counselors the ability to diagnosis and assess in some states. According to Sweeney (2015), preparing counselors-in-training at the academic level to become involved in advocacy for the profession of counseling increases social justice awareness, makes students better advocates after graduation, and promotes an affinity for legislative advocacy beyond graduation (Kress & Barrio-Minton, 2015).

### **Education and Training for Counseling Students**

Training counselors regarding social justice and professional legislative advocacy are becoming increasingly important for the profession of counseling. Establishing educational standards across counseling academic programs provides an opportunity to infuse the topic into the counseling curriculum. Stripling contributed to the counseling field in 1981 by providing leadership that led to the establishment of the Council of Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (Remley & Herlihy, 2015). CACREP is the accrediting body for counseling programs and its specialties in the United States (CACREP, 2017; West et. al., 2003). Educational requirements for counselor licensure vary across states, but CACREP national educational standards ensure that professional counselors receive similar preparation. Adopting a model similar to the Scientist-Practitioner-Advocacy Training Model (Mallinckrodt et al., 2014) or the Scholar-Practitioner-Leadership Model (McClintock,

2003) at the academic level could be beneficial in assisting counseling students and counseling programs in fostering a life-long commitment to leadership and advocacy. According to Toporek et al. (2009) counselors possess key skills such as critical thinking, active listening, ability to assess and dialogue, as well as other skills to provide a sound foundation for legislative advocacy. Toporek et al. (2009) said, "...human relations, group dynamics, assessment, multicultural issues, and lifespan development..." courses teach counseling students skills that are transferable; making counselors great advocates (p. 265).

The entire curriculum that prepares counseling students to be professional counselors also provides them with skills to be advocates. Cook et al. (2015) said that theory courses provide evidenced-based approaches for counselors to use when providing services to multiple client populations. Students learn underlying professional principles through ethics courses. Counseling techniques courses emphasize various interventions that could be used to resolve societal issues, thus preparing counseling graduate students for legislative involvement. Human development courses provide an understanding of human physiology and human behaviors and this information could be used by counselors to convince legislators to pass laws that benefit society. Cook et al. (2015) said that research courses prepare counseling students to interpret data, conduct statistical analysis, and explore current research that can address problems plaguing society and the counseling profession.

Brubaker, Puig, Reese, and Young (2010) agreed with Cook et al. (2015) that counseling theory courses prepare counseling students for social justice advocacy. The

authors cautioned educators that if social justice is not infused into their pedagogy and teaching content, students may fail to understand how their theory of choice could guide in developing a professional identity. More importantly, students may be unaware of how their theory of choice may alleviate or perpetuate oppression. Brubaker et al. (2010) provided a case example demonstrating how counselor educators can integrate social justice into a counseling theory course to increase social and counseling awareness and how students can acquire knowledge and skills necessary to become social change advocates.

Bemak et al. (2011) explained the implementation of the Counseling and Development Program at George Mason University. The authors illustrated the successful integration of multicultural social justice values into an entire graduate counselor training program. The authors conducted a two-year study with George Mason University faculty to develop the counseling program. As a result of the two-year study, the counseling graduate program was able to develop a mission statement, admission criteria, and course content with a multicultural social justice focus. The mission statement is based on Davis' definition of social justice. According to Davis (1996), social justice is "a basic value and desired goal in democratic societies and include equitable and fair access to societal institutions, laws, resources [and] opportunities, without arbitrary limitations based on observed, or interpretation of, differences in age, color, culture, physical or mental disability, education, gender, income, language, national origin, race, religion, or sexual orientation" (Bemak et al., 2011, p. 1). Students are required to attend an orientation and agree to the mission of counseling graduate



program at George Mason University. The course content was developed to infuse multicultural social justice into each course. The university also infused mentorship and community involvement to foster student development toward multicultural social justice and move students to action.

Pieterse et al. (2008) examined multicultural coursework and syllabi of 54 counseling and counseling psychology training programs in the United States, of which 29 (52%) were doctoral programs and 25 (46%) were masters-level programs. The researchers analyzed course goals and objectives, required texts, course content, and methods of grade assessment. Reading lists were not reviewed in this study. The researchers found that 59% of syllabi stated goals related to social justice and 48% included content matter related to social inequity. Syllabi that incorporated multicultural competencies and focused on oppression were determined by raters to infuse a significant focus on multiculturalism or social justice. The raters of the data determined that 92% of the syllabi infused multiculturalism or social justice. Course syllabi focused more on multicultural training with little emphasis on social justice issues, more specifically, advocacy for the profession. The authors did not indicate whether the syllabi included student involvement in multicultural or social justice activities.

Zalaquett et al. (2008) examined the impact of a multicultural/social justice professional organizational development project. The aim of the study was to examine the impact of multicultural/social justice professional organizational development initiatives at five undisclosed universities throughout the United States. The initiative was designed to assist counseling faculty members, administrators, and students in

developing institutional change that would coincide with the multicultural/social justice movement in the fields of counseling and education. The national tour of the five universities was composed of lectures, videos, live demonstrations, as well as small and large group meetings. The average number of participants at each university was 100 with a range of 50 to 200. Participants included individuals who were enrolled in or affiliated with K-12 teacher education programs as well as counseling psychology and marriage and family therapy graduate programs. Upon conclusion of the national tour, one faculty member from each university (4 female; 1 male) was randomly selected to participate in a semi-structured interview that was aligned with data analysis procedures recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The interview questions addressed gender; the size of the institution; the number of students, faculty, administrators, and community members that attended a 1 or 1.5 day on campus training; the length of the training program; the impact on participants; and suggestions for further multicultural/social justice professional-organizational development interventions. The researchers also assessed four institutional categories: characteristics and overall evaluation, support of multicultural social justice education, the impact of the national tour on students, and the impact of the national tour on faculty members. The results of the study indicated that each program's policies and evaluation procedures infused multicultural social justice. The degree of organizational support for multicultural/social justice issues also increased. The results further indicated gains in the participants' knowledge of multicultural competence.

Social justice and advocacy are considered to be a principle value for counselors. In a phenomenological study by Dollarhide, Clevenger, Dogan, and Edwards (2016), six counselor educators and four doctoral level counseling students were interviewed to describe their experiences of social justice identity and to identify from their responses consistent themes that describe the experiences of social justice identity development. Utilizing Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological analysis, four themes emerged based on the participants' lived experience of developing a social justice identity. The first theme was that participants' social justice awareness emerged from family values, personal experiences with oppression or discrimination, or witnessing oppression or discrimination. The second theme encompassed the changes in four domains: context, cognition, behavior, and affect. Context refers to change in dialogue around social justice and increased community involvement. Participants' cognition of self-awareness, learning, and understanding of the dynamics of oppression and cognitive humility were increased. Participants' behavior moved from general awareness of social inequality to a specific population. No specific outcomes were addressed by the authors. Participants' affective and emotional reality, their feelings about the meaning of their activities, as well as their purpose in life and identity changed as they experienced a deepening of the meaning of their social justice efforts. The third theme was how participants developed their social justice identity. The fourth theme was the feedback loop by which participants attributed to their continuous social justice identity. According to Senge (1990), a feedback loop refers to a system structure that causes output from one theme to eventually influence input to that same theme. In other words, the first theme influences

the second and so on. The authors concluded that counselors have a moral obligation to address societal issues that detrimentally affect clients, students, and the community and to end the silence of oppression.

To address the disparity of developing a social justice identity, in 2001-2002, Jane Goodman's American Counseling Association (ACA) presidential initiative established the Task Force on Advocacy Competencies. The Task Force was charged with developing ethical and effective guidelines to ensure counselors and counselors-in-training demonstrate abilities, understanding, and knowledge to carry out counseling advocacy on three levels: clients/students, school/community, and the public arena (Cooks et al., 2015). Each level is comprised of two domains that specify advocacy with and on behalf of the one or more of the three levels. According to Ratts and Hutchins (2009), the client/student level uses "direct counseling to empower individuals" (p. 270) and advocacy is provided at the individual level. The school/community level focuses more on systems advocacy and collaboration. The public arena involves bringing awareness to the public regarding societal and systemic barriers that impact human development and advocating for policies that change the status quo.

In 2002, the Advocacy Competencies were completed but were not accepted by the ACA Governing Council until 2003. The Advocacy Competencies illustrate that counselors act with or act on behalf of clients/students, school/community, and the public arena (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003). Legislative advocacy is one component of the advocacy competencies that have a direct impact on society, political issues, economics, and cultural influences on human development. Hence, the Advocacy

Competencies provide a description of how counselors and counselors-in-training can become involved in advocacy and empowerment on multiple levels.

According to ACA's CEO, Richard Yep (2010), ACA provides annual training oriented toward advocacy for both students and professionals. The training focuses on advocacy for the profession; however, skills are interchangeable for non-professional issues (Terrazas, Todd, Harp, & Nickel, 2016). Furthermore, participants develop skills that foster confidence in addressing advocacy needs for clients, students, the public, and the profession. Terrazas et al. (2016) indicated that resources for advocacy are available via the ACA website (<http://www.counseling.org>).

### **Prevalence and Types of Advocacy Today**

Historical factors, professional identity, credentialing, and advocacy within the counseling profession have been explored by various researcher (Cooks et al., 2015; Ratts & Pederson, 2014; Ratts & Wayman, 2014; Reiner et al., 2013). Scholars have noted that professional counselors have been called upon to educate the public and policymakers regarding the benefits and uniqueness of the counseling profession. A call to action has been sounded among various professional counseling organizations in an attempt to establish a unified professional identity to achieve recognition across professions and to secure third-party reimbursement for services, Medicare reimbursement (affecting a viable income), accessibility to seniors and members of rural communities, funding for school counselors, and portability of licenses held by counselors from one state to another (Barstow, 2014; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; 2011; Terrazas et al., 2016).

Based on my observation and A. Terrazas (personal communication, November 02, 2017), the ACA Institute for Leadership Training is an opportunity for ACA members and non-counseling affiliates to enhance their leadership and professional legislative advocacy skills during a 4-day training experience. The training is comprised of lectures, videos, live demonstrations, as well as small and large group meetings. The first two days participants learn leadership and professional legislative advocacy skills. Each year, session content is developed to address the current issues to be discussed with legislators. However, the main content was designed to focus on ethical leadership, fiduciary responsibilities, and experiential activities geared toward legislative advocacy at local, state, and federal levels. Lecture and live demonstrations are the two primary methods of learning how to explain current legislative bills to elected legislators. White papers are disseminated to describe the legislative bills.

On the third day, participants are bused to Capitol Hill for a pre-scheduled meeting with legislators from their states to apply the knowledge learned from the two days of training. Participants can expect to answer questions pertaining to bills and how the legislation impacts the community. Some legislators are already knowledgeable about the issue. For those who are not, participants are encouraged to leave the white paper with the legislator or his or her representative for further review. Participants are told that the most important factor when addressing legislators is to remember to relax and explain their stories. As Terrazas has stated at the last four institutes, “You are the expert educating a person on a topic that is familiar to you.”

On the last day, participants report their experiences with legislators. They are able to identify which bills legislators favor. Expert speaker and legislative leaders in the field explain follow up procedures participants can apply when they return home, for example, writing a letter or email message or calling the legislators to thank them for their time.

ACA staff members and leaders have campaigned and met with legislators on Capitol Hill advocating for the inclusion of mental health access to seniors (S. 562), funding for school counselors, increased hiring of school counselors, and Medicare reimbursement for LPCs and MFTs (H. R. 2759). In 2014, a bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate that called for adding counselors to Veterans Administration training programs and recognizing counseling doctoral degrees. A number of proposed Senate bills were discussed during the ACA 2014 Institute for Leadership Training (Terrazas, 2016). Counselors within ACA have converged on the U.S. Capitol to meet with members of Congress for the past seven years to tell their stories in hopes their representatives would agree to cosponsor legislation that is favorable to counselors and their clients (Terrazas et al., 2016).

Scott Barstow was an ACA staff member from 2005 until 2014. Prior to his work with ACA, he served as Director of Congressional Affairs for the American Psychological Association and has more than 20 years of experience working in Washington, DC ([www.pcpcc.org](http://www.pcpcc.org), 2017). He has published over 90 newsletter articles in *Counseling Today* describing bills that were introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. Most were not enacted (ACA, 2017). Barstow's quarterly

publications in *Counseling Today*, “The Two-Minute Advocate” and “Washington Updates” have focused on legislative issues salient to the counseling profession (Barstow & Holt, 2010). For example, Barstow and Holt (2010) called for action by asking ACA members to contact congressional offices to cosponsor two separate House of Representative bills. In 2013, Barstow highlighted several pieces of legislation as high priority federal policy issues for the counseling profession. Barstow’s informative columns have provided counselors with vital information regarding bills introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate for the advancement of the counseling profession.

I developed the following timeline to illustrate the chronological history of legislative advocacy salient to the field of counseling. Content within the timeline provides a description of the bills introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. Additionally, this timeline provides a foundation for counseling students to explore the history of legislative advocacy within the counseling profession. Not all bills within the timeline were enacted into law. However, the timeline illustrates the legislative advocacy history of the counseling profession and includes the most prevalent types of legislation salient to the profession of counseling. Only acts that focused on mental health counseling are included.



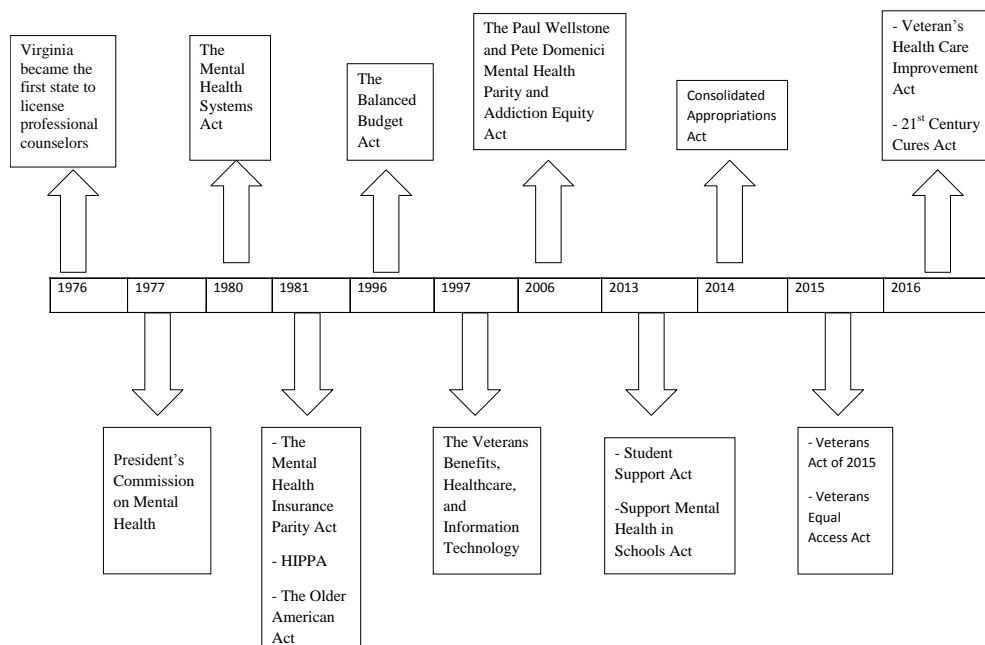


Figure 1. Historical timeline of professional counseling legislative advocacy.

### **Societal Implications for Student Training in Legislative Advocacy**

When properly trained, "...counselors can make great advocates" (Toporek et al., 2009, p. 265). According to Nilsson and Schmidt (2005), preparing counseling students for professional legislative advocacy during the time students spend in academia could help develop their skills to organize rallies, create ways to protest, form grass-root organizations, communicate with legislators and policymakers, and understand how to collaborate with other stakeholders. Awareness of legislative trends helps students identify issues important to meet the counseling needs of marginalized groups and promote multicultural/social justice advocacy competencies inherent to the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014). According to Section F.7.e, counselors, counselor education programs, counselor educators, and students have a

professional and ethical obligation to challenge the status quo and reduce or eliminate barriers that impede client progress (Pope & Vasquez, 2016; Welfel, 2015). Stylianos and Kehyayan (2012) agreed that legislative advocacy promotes “substantive systemic gains” for the public arena (p. 116). For example, legislative advocacy can ensure that individuals who reside in rural communities receive access to affordable mental health care and help local schools receive funding to promote the equal education of all students.

Being a change agent for social injustice and inequity at the client level, community level, and public area/governmental level should be an integral part of the learning experience of counseling graduate students (ACA, 2014; Kress & Minton, 2014; Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). According to Haight (1982) and Myers et al. (2002), counselors can be more effective advocates for clients when the profession is recognized by legislators and policymakers. “It is vital that ...counseling students become skillful, knowledgeable, and politically active to continue to have an impact on the passage of helpful legislation and on policies makers” (Toporek et al., 2009, p. 266).

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 provides an introduction to the rationale for this study. Current research on professional legislative advocacy has shown that advocacy is a core value of counselors and that legislative advocacy is becoming an important part of a counselor’s professional identity (Lating et al., 2010; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). My literature review strategy included identifying key words and key phrases using a Boolean/phrase broad search with no combined categories without differentiating

search fields. The conceptual framework guiding this inquiry is based on Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement which was summarized. I provided a summary of other studies that utilized Astin's theory as well as assumptions about the theory. I gave a detailed description of the development and evolution of legislative advocacy along with available education and training. I detailed the prevalence and types of advocacy used by counselors and discussed social implications. The methodological orientation of this study is described in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### **Introduction**

In this study, I explored the lived experiences of individuals who had been involved with professional legislative advocacy while they were a counseling graduate student. Participants were either currently counseling graduate students or had completed their counseling degree programs in the past 2 years. Participants had either attended an ACA Institute for Leadership Training or a similar state-level institute in the past while they still were counseling graduate students. I did not seek to identify, inform, or describe the experiences of participants during the Institute for Leadership Training; instead, I sought to describe the meaning counseling students ascribed to their experiences of involvement in professional legislative advocacy. I selected the population based on their involvement in professional legislative advocacy.

In qualitative research, researchers use their own experiences to inform analysis of the data they gather from participants. I have attended three ACA Institutes for Leadership Training and my experience were important in completing this study, but I was aware of my biases and bracketed them to avoid imposing my own views on the experiences of the participants in this study. Additionally, I remained in the role of a student researcher until the dissertation was completed, and I did not reply to any questions from participants regarding my expertise or experiences in the area of professional legislative advocacy. Use of these practices, I believe, helped me to produce a comprehensive and accurate assessment of participants' perceptions regarding counseling students motivation for professional legislative advocacy engagement.

I found a qualitative inquiry that incorporated interpretative phenomenological analysis (see Gill, 2014; Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001; Nel, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to be useful in uncovering specific themes that involve counseling students in pursuing professional legislative advocacy. The aim of this study was to identify the meaning counseling students place on advocating for the profession. Also, factors that influence legislative advocacy and methods of gaining entry to legislative advocacy were explored. The literature review demonstrated there is a paucity of empirical data available on the motivation and attitude of counseling students toward legislative advocacy for the counseling profession as an act of social change advocacy (Briggs et al., 2011; Remley, & Herlihy, 2016). Hence, the purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of counseling graduate students and recent graduates who had been involved in professional legislative advocacy through attending an ACA Institute for Leadership Training or at the state level.

In this chapter, I review the research methodology that I used to describe the lived experiences of counseling students and recent graduates who had participated in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed the study to remain more exploratory in nature, documenting the lived subjective experiences of the participants (Finlay, 2012; Reason, & Bradbury, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). It also helped me to create themes to understand counseling student motivation and attitudes toward professional legislative advocacy involvement (Finlay, 2012; Reason, & Bradbury, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). In the chapter, I also address participant selection, sample saturation criteria, the methodology

used for recruiting participants, and the instrumentation for data collection. A detailed account of interview procedures used is discussed, along with the methodology used for analyzing data. I also explain the procedures used for maintaining credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability of the data (Hall, 2009).

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I used qualitative research methodology in this study to examine the individual lived experiences of master's and doctoral level counseling students or recent graduates who had graduated within the past 2 years who participated in professional legislative advocacy. The primary goal was to summarize the full meaning of the participants' experiences as shared in their own words (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Qualitative researchers seek to uncover themes by utilizing questioning (Creswell, 2013).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is an approach utilized by qualitative researchers to identify phenomena through the perception of the individual based on his or her experience with the world (Lester, 1999). The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology study was to better understand the lived professional legislative advocacy experiences of master's and doctoral level counseling students who participated in legislative advocacy for the counseling professional (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, Smith, & Osborn, 2013).

### **Research Question**

What meaning do counseling graduate students and recent graduates ascribe to their experiences of involvement in professional legislative advocacy?

## Interview Questions

I based interviews around one central question and 13 subquestions. In my initial interaction with participants at the beginning of the interviews, I explained how professional legislative advocacy is described in the counseling literature, and then I asked them questions. The central question was, What meaning do you ascribe to your experience of professional legislative advocacy as a counseling student? I asked the following subquestions if they had not already been addressed by participants in responding to the initial question:

1. How important to you is legislative advocacy for the counseling profession?
2. What was your level of awareness of the essential elements of legislative advocacy prior to speaking with legislators?
3. What has been most rewarding during your experiences talking to legislators or their representatives?
4. What has been most difficult during your experiences talking to legislators or their representatives?
5. What has been most disappointing during your experiences talking to legislators or their representatives?
6. To what extent does you believe the time and effort you spent talking to legislators or their representatives was worthwhile?
7. Did any courses or experiences during your counseling graduate program prepare you to be an advocate for the counseling profession with legislators or their representatives?

8. To what extent do your personal values and beliefs drive your political action on behalf of the counseling profession?
9. To what do you attribute your passion for being involved in advocating for the counseling profession?
10. How would you evaluate the preparation you received prior to talking with legislators or their representatives?
11. Looking back on your experiences, is there anything that could have prepared you better for talking to legislators or their representatives?
12. What are some of the obstacles to counseling students becoming involved in professional legislative advocacy and how can those obstacles be overcome?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add?

### **Role of the Researcher**

I am a national certified counselor and an approved clinical supervisor with the National Board of Certified Counselors. Also, I am a licensed professional counselor in the State of Michigan and a clinical traumatologist who maintains a small private practice. I conducted one-to-one interviews with each participant using open-ended questions included in the interview protocol (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Interviewing participants can be a daunting process for both the researcher and the participant (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). I did not have to follow up with any participants with additional questions.

I was aware of my biases during the development of the interview questions (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Dworkin, 2012). As a professional legislative advocate, I had



been involved in legislative advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels. I am cognizant of my biases. As I conducted this study, I remained in the role of student researcher in my interactions with participants to eliminate being perceived as an expert in this area. Therefore, I incorporated member checking strategies from committee members, informants, and colleagues to ensure my questions and data result interpretations were written in a nonbiased manner (Creswell, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). I also consulted with my dissertation committee members during the entire dissertation process. The process I used for the analysis of the data I collected took into consideration any potential bias I had that could have influenced my objectivity. My goal was to present myself and the results in an objective manner.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The sampling methods selected for this qualitative research study were convenient and snowball sampling. Convenient sampling is utilized when researching subjects of the population that are easily accessible to the researcher (Etikan, 2016). According to Griffith, Morris, and Thakar (2016) a few originally contacted participants are selected at random by the researcher because they are relevant to the study; then they supply the researcher with an introduction to the subsequent set of potential participants. To ensure participants in this study have the characteristics I am seeking, I plan to select participants using criteria.

Criterion strategies are utilized as an assurance of data quality (Creswell, 2013). This sampling strategy is used when specific indicators are imposed in order for

individuals to participate in a study (Maxwell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2005). To participate in this study, individuals had to be currently enrolled as masters or doctoral level students or had to be recent professionals who had graduated within the last two years. All participants must have been a graduate student in a counseling graduate program at the time they participated in professional legislative advocacy and they must have been a member of the American Counseling Association.

I recruited volunteers using convenient and snowball sampling. First, I contacted all the people I knew personally who had attended the ACA Institute for Leadership Training who I had email addresses or telephone numbers for and asked them if they would be willing to participate in my study. I also asked them to send my request to others they knew who had been involved in professional legislative advocacy as a counseling student. I also posted a request for participants on CESNET (see Appendix B). Eight participants were recruited to participate in the study. The small sample size allowed me to gather rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon through in-depth interview procedures (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Dworkin, 2012; Lester, 1999). According to Dworkin (2012), saturation is reached when the information gathered does not yield any new themes or patterns. After eight participants had been interviewed, I consulted with my committee chair and determined that saturation of the data had been reached (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Creswell, 2009).

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Qualitative data are collected primarily in spoken or written language rather than numerical. According to Janesick (2011), possible data sources are interviews with

participants, observations, documents, and artifacts. The spoken data are transformed into written text for analytic use. For this study, the participants' spoken interviews were transcribed into written text. I examined the written text to identify emerging themes for the data.

Electing to interview participants requires purposive and iterative strategies. Production of interview data requires awareness of the complexity of self-reports and the relation between experience and language expression (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Janesick, 2011). In addition, to generate interview data of sufficient breadth and depth, practical skills and time are necessary. For the purpose of this study, I focused on interpretative phenomenological analysis data collection and management protocols utilizing interviews with participants. Smith (2011) ascertained that structured and semi-structured interviews are the proposed methods for interpretative phenomenological analysis data collection. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants to allow for new ideas to be brought up during the interview (Smith, 2011).

I conducted all of the interviews using the interview protocol set forth earlier in this chapter utilizing distance-based electronic methods such as video conferencing (Amato, 2012; Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Finn, Tunariu, & Lee, 2012; Sheff, 2014). Using electronic data collection allowed me to interview participants throughout the United States. According to Salmons and Salmons (2015), electronic interviews provide more openness and candor to participants than face-to-face interviews.

Individual interviews were conducted with participants in order to understand the meaning they ascribed to their participation in professional legislative advocacy (Baker &

Edwards, 2012). This approach has been used in other small sample studies because it helps to derive the richest possible data (Bazeley, 2013; Murtagh, Lopes, & Lyons 2011; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012; Patton, 2015).

All interviews were video recorded via a secured laptop computer (Bryman, 2012). Participants were sent a Zoom link to use for participation. Zoom technology has features that record the meeting. The recordings were accessed at a later date for transcribing. I activated a second recording device in case the Zoom recording failed. Participants were offered an interview by telephone in the event of unforeseen challenges to using Zoom. Telephone interviews were captured utilizing the secure application known as HD Audio Recorder Pro. This method records the interview, in real time, straight to a mobile device. When an interview was conducted by telephone, I utilized a second recording device in case the first recording device failed.

The interviews were between 30 and 60 minutes to reduce fatigue and to avoid over-burdening participants (Bryman, 2012; Salmons & Salmons, 2015). Before the interviews were recorded, participants were provided significant information in the informed consent document regarding the purpose of the study including the definition of professional legislative advocacy found in the counseling literature. Participants were allotted time to ask salient questions prior to conducting the interview. According to Turner (2010), allowing participants to ask questions prior to the interview helps to establish rapport. The script which included the protocol for my interviews and the definition of professional legislative advocacy is included in the interview protocol.

Creswell (2013) said that phenomenological researchers must develop a vigilant balance between open-ended possibilities and enough contextual structure in the interview questions to product thought-provoking, rich responses. Hence, open-ended questioning was employed for this study. In the interview process I followed Crawford's (2012) suggestions for effective interview strategies by providing clear explanations and information; using open-ended questions and probes, balancing rapport and neutrality, and utilizing appropriate body language. I used active listening, probing, as well as reflective skills during the interviews, reflecting back what had been stated, allowing the participants to provide feedback to determine the precision of their statements.

I utilized journal writing to ensure my thoughts were captured throughout the process. Janesick (2011) noted journal writing has an extensive and reliable history in long-term qualitative research. Journaling is beneficial in refining and understanding the researcher's reflections; understanding the responses of the participants; providing a tool to communicate between the researcher and participants as a form of triangulation of data; and serving as a tool for researchers to understand their work as researchers in a qualitative study since researchers become experts of their own thoughts and reflection (Shields, 2006). Journal writing was kept in a methodological journal to prevent lost data and to maintain secure confidential data.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis is matched in accordance with the strategy of inquiry. Strategies of inquiry for phenomenological research are descriptive and interpretive (Creswell, 2013; Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Turner, 2010). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

(Gill, 2014; Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001; Nel, 2006; Smith et al., 2009) was useful in uncovering specific themes relayed by participants related to counseling students and recent graduates being involved in professional legislative advocacy. Using IPA allowed the study to remain more exploratory in nature, documenting the lived subjective experiences of the participants, while also helping to create themes from which to understand counseling students' motivation and attitudes toward professional legislative advocacy (Finlay, 2012; Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Following the phenomenological writing structure of Smith et al. (2009) added to the quality of the study by providing a thick description from the lived experiences of the participants and through triangulating the data with my experiences and the literature (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Smith identified a four-step approach to data analysis: (1) individual transcripts are read and significant phrases are extracted, (2) emerging themes are extracted from the data, (3) all themes from all transcripts are collected to connect noted themes, and (4) the researcher checks to ensure that original transcripts support the themes as evidenced by the participants' actual responses.

Two methods were employed to analyze the data. I hand coded the data after each interview. Additionally, I used NVivo (<http://www.qsrinternational.com>) during the data analysis process. NVivo is a software program that is utilized to store data, create files for coding, and formulate patterns. Hard copies of the transcribed interviews and the jump drive containing the data will be locked in a fireproof safe in my home office for a period of five years. Once data analysis was complete, the data was removed from the computer and jump drive. Information that could possibly be used to identify any of the

participants was kept strictly confidential. Themes that emerged from the participants' data utilizing NVivo was taken into account in this study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

I maintained trustworthiness using several methods. I listened to the interviews, transcribed each interview verbatim, and had the data available electronically for additional review. I used member checking, utilized a peer reviewer, provided self-disclosure, disclosed discrepant information, provided rich and thick descriptions of what participants said in their interviews, as well as kept a reflective journal to ensure trustworthiness was maintained throughout the study.

### **Member Checking**

I cross-analyzed each transcript with the other transcripts in order to derive common themes among the participants. The aim was to find shared experiences or common themes starting with narrow themes and eventually combining those into larger and broader themes (Morrow, 2005; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012). Each theme included rich descriptions of content and included supported excerpts from the transcripts.

I gave participants the opportunity to verify what they had said in the interview in two ways. First, sent each participant a summary of his or her interview that I wrote after the interview was completed and asked participants to respond. Second, after I had extracted the themes from all of the interviews, I sent the themes to participants and asked them to respond to the themes and add any additional comments they had. I took these steps by email correspondence.

**Peer Reviewer**

I asked a peer to review what I did throughout the research process. This person reviewed all interview transcripts and asked questions in regards to the qualitative study. Enlisting the assistance of a peer reviewer allowed me to maintain an objective standpoint. It also provided an opportunity to have another person review what I had written so that it would be understood by others who read it (Creswell 2013).

**Self-Disclosure**

Janesick (2011) and Creswell (2013) posited that reflective journaling is critical in qualitative research. As a researcher, I am aware of my biases related to this study. Being a legislative advocate for the counseling profession is considered a bias. For me, being a legislative advocate is a way of life. For as long as I can remember, I have fought or stood up for persons who could not speak for themselves or who had been bullied by others. It has always been my belief that we are all connected on some level. And, it is our duty to care for and protect those who cannot care for or protect themselves. When legislation is enacted that prevents people from seeking services that affect their mental stability, it is my stance that every mental health professional has an obligation to advocate to repeal laws that cause emotional distress in the population we serve and the public arena.

I have been a legislative advocate for the counseling profession for the past four years. In my experience, I have witnessed the positive effects of professional legislative advocacy. For example, as a result of advocacy by counselors, Licensed Professional Counselors have been included in the language for reimbursement from Tricare (the



agency that provides healthcare to retired and active military service members) for mental health services; and continued funding for school counselors to provide services to children in school settings K-12 have been accomplished.

I anticipated that counseling students and recent graduates who participated in this study would communicate their knowledge of professional legislative advocacy involvement, but would not have a clear understanding of the process of legislative advocacy. I believed that the participants would have only one experience with professional legislative advocacy. I also believe that the desire to participate in professional legislative advocacy probably was motivated by a faculty member at the university of the student. Providing details about how my interpretation of legislative advocacy has been shaped by my background, experience, culture, and social/political involvement allowed me to bracket my biases as I interviewed participants, and later summarized and interpreted what they told me.

### **Discrepant Information**

While presenting evidence for themes I identified in this research project, I made a commitment to acknowledge any information that contradicted the themes I identified. At times, the different motivations and attitudes can reveal evidence that is contrary to the themes (Bazeley, 2014). Discussing discrepant information provides trustworthiness to the study and helps the researcher remain objective and truthful about the results.

### **Rich and Thick Descriptions**

I provided detailed descriptions of settings and what the participants said. I also provided quotes from some participants that supported each theme I identified. This

helped make the results more realistic (Creswell, 2013) and helped readers decide for themselves whether my conclusions regarding the data were appropriate.

### **Reflective Journal**

I used reflective journaling to document my thoughts as I conducted this study. Content included directions, ideas, dilemmas, and decisions. The purpose of this activity helped me analyze research activities, put ideas into narrative form, as well as clarify and direct the coding process while elaborating on processes (Flamez, Lenz, Balkin, & Smith, 2017). By keeping a reflective journal, I was able to constantly remind myself to bracket my biases to the extent possible and avoid imposing my biases during my analysis of the data.

### **Ethical Procedures**

To ensure the ethical safety of participants, I provided detailed disclosure statements to potential participants that explained any implications or potential harm to participants. Potential participants were sent an initial email message stating the purpose of the study. When potential participants chose to continue with the research process, then an additional email was sent with a detailed disclosure statement which included a consent form. The disclosure and consent document included the purpose of the study, data collection processes, procedures, a statement that this study posed no potential risk to participants, a statement that withdrawal from the study was possible at any time, and an electronic signature line (Creswell, 2013).

According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), counselors who conduct research are to ensure the emotional, physical, or social welfare of participants throughout each

research phase (ACA, G.I.e.). To protect the anonymity of participants, I assigned pseudonyms. When I described participants' backgrounds, I did that in a way in which individual participants could not be identified. Electronic communication has the risk of being breached and I notified participants of that possibility and indicated to them that I would take precautions to avoid our email correspondence becoming available to anyone else.

Due to participants being able to be interviewed in their own environments, there was very little chance that others would overhear my interviews with them. In this study, participants were asked to discuss their experiences with professional legislative advocacy and their meaning-making about counselor legislative advocacy. As a result, I did not anticipate participants being harmed in any way. No participants experienced any distress as a result of being interviewed. I had a list of resources to give to participants if they had become distressed.

The laptop that contained data from this research project and written documents generated were locked in a file cabinet kept within my home office. Recorded interviews and the corresponding transcriptions were stored on a password-protected computer and backed-up on two password-protected jump drives after I had transcribed the data (Salmons & Salmons, 2015). Securely File Shredder was utilized to scrub data stored on my laptop (i.e., informed consent and confidentiality and transcribes).

### **Summary**

In conducting this qualitative study, I sought to gain an understanding of the meaning counseling students and recent graduates ascribe to their involvement in

legislative advocacy for the counseling profession. A qualitative inquiry that incorporates interpretative phenomenological analysis (Gill, 2014; Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001; Nel, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was useful in uncovering specific themes for the involvement of counseling students in professional legislative advocacy. The methodology section began with an introduction to the problem and rationale that led to this qualitative paradigm. Information on the selection and ethical treatment of the participants was included, followed by my role as the researcher. Participants' raw data was collected utilizing traditional qualitative procedures to gather rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon through in-depth interview procedures with consideration to ethical codes, sample size, and saturation, as well as transferability (Bakers & Edwards, 2012; Dworkin, 2012; Lester, 1999; Mason, 2010; Morrow, 2005; Morse, 2010; Murtagh et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Finally, procedures on how the data will be collected, analyzed, and validated were presented. This qualitative design was chosen because it allowed me to gain an understanding of the experiences of master's and doctoral level counseling students or recent graduates who graduated within the last two years. Student Involvement Theory framed this study in an effort to uncover the meaning counseling students and recent graduates ascribe to professional legislative advocacy. In Chapter 4, I present my findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of individuals who had been involved with professional legislative advocacy while they were counseling graduate students. Participants were either current counseling graduate students or had completed their counseling degree programs in the past 2 years. All but one of the participants had attended a recent ACA Institute for Leadership Training. One participant had attended a similar state association institute. The ACA Institute for Leadership Training is a 4-day training program related to legislative advocacy and leadership. The institute was designed to train counselors on how to advocate for the counseling profession (M. Pope, personal communication, December 19, 2016). Additionally, participants learn legislative terminology that is most useful when addressing legislators. Furthermore, detailed descriptions of the current bills that participants are trained to advocate for are disseminated during large sessions by experts in the field. Moreover, small group sessions allow participants to learn how to justify their support of bills, define leadership roles, and explain fiduciary responsibilities. Additionally, the application of knowledge is applied through later face to face meetings with legislators on Capitol Hill. Furthermore, By the end of the institute, participants should be able to distinguish the difference between lobbying and professional advocacy, define legislative terms, advocate for the profession, identify which legislators are in favor of pending bills, provide a summary of their experience, and discuss follow up procedures with legislators.

I did not seek to identify, inform, or describe the experience of participants during the Institute for Leadership Training; instead, I sought to describe the meaning counseling students ascribed to their experiences of being involved in professional legislative advocacy. The population was selected based on their involvement in professional legislative advocacy. I used hermeneutic phenomenology to identify the essence of the counseling students' and recent graduates' lived experiences. I chose hermeneutics, a subtype of phenomenology (Lester, 1999), so that I could use the current research literature as a lens to interpret the participants' lived experiences. I interviewed eight counseling students and recent graduates using a semistructured interview process as outlined in Chapter 3. I used the interview protocol that I outlined in Chapter 3 when I interviewed the participants. The central interview question was, What meaning do you ascribe to your experience of professional legislative advocacy as a counseling student?

### **Interview Protocol**

After asking this initial question, I posed several subquestions to participants. First, I asked participants about the importance to them of legislative advocacy to the counseling profession (Question 1). After participants had responded to that question, I asked the remaining questions (Questions 2-13) if they had not already addressed that question in previous responses.

1. How important to you is legislative advocacy for the counseling profession?
2. What was your level of awareness of the essential elements of legislative advocacy prior to speaking with legislators?

3. What has been most rewarding during your experiences talking to legislators or their representatives?
4. What has been most difficult during your experiences talking to legislators or their representatives?
5. What has been most disappointing during your experiences talking to legislators or their representatives?
6. To what extent do you believe the time and effort you spent talking to legislators or their representatives was worthwhile?
7. Did any courses or experiences during your counseling graduate program prepare you to be an advocate for the counseling profession with legislators or their representatives?
8. To what extent do your personal values and beliefs drive your political action on behalf of the counseling profession?
9. To what do you attribute your passion for being involved in advocating for the counseling profession?
10. How would you evaluate the preparation you received prior to talking with legislators or their representatives?
11. Looking back on your experiences, is there anything that could have prepared you better for talking to legislators or their representatives?
12. What are some of the obstacles to counseling students becoming involved in professional legislative advocacy and how can those obstacles be overcome?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add?

In Chapter 4, I present the data from my interviews with eight counseling students and recent graduates who reported having been involved in legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession. I also present details about the setting, demographics of the participants, and the data collection and analysis processes. Evidence of trustworthiness and the results of this study are also included in the chapter.

### **Setting**

I began sending invitations to potential participants for this study on April 9, 2018, when I received Institutional Review Board approval (No. 04-09-18-0324998) from Walden University. Data collection began on April 9, 2018, when I sent the initial round of invitations to the people I knew personally who had attended the ACA Institute for Leadership Training for whom I had e-mail addresses or telephone numbers; in these e-mails, I asked them if they would be willing to participate in my study. Within 2 days, eight individuals responded that they were willing to participate and met the criteria. After waiting another 7 days, I sent another round of invitations to two individuals who had not set a date for the interview. One participant had to reschedule 7 days from the original date due to a scheduling conflict.

I interviewed eight participants. Seven had attended the ACA Institute for Leadership Training, and one had attended a state-level similar institute. All met the criteria for the study. I attempted to conduct all the interviews using Zoom Videoconferencing; however, some interviews were conducted over the telephone due to complications with technology. Salmons and Salmons (2015) warned qualitative researchers of the pitfalls of using Internet technologies for qualitative interviews (e.g.



connectivity, Internet towers not being near, etc.). However, using this electronic interviewing approach allowed participants to complete their interviews where they felt most comfortable and allowed me to include participants from throughout the United States. In general, the participants interviewed at their workplace or in their home. One interview was conducted face to face after we both attended a local meeting. The interview was recorded using Zoom technology.

A major issue with technology included connectivity to the Internet or disconnecting to the Internet during the interview process (Salmons & Salmons, 2015). Internet connectivity or disconnections could be due to random breaks in the quality of service, service interruptions, or Internet towers not being near. Three interviewees had a break in the quality of the Internet, and they were disconnected from Zoom Videoconference. Of the three, two were due to random breaks in the quality of service and another was because of a loss of Internet connection. According to Salmons and Salmons (2015), loss of Internet connection is inevitable, even though there could be a strong Internet connection, calls and Internet service can still be dropped at random times. As the researcher, I apologized for the Internet disconnection and rebuilt rapport when the calls were reconnected. Although the calls were disconnected, all three participants completed their interviews via telephone and recording using Audacity Recorder on my laptop.

The last obstacle when using technology is the failure to record. The Zoom program failed to record the first question of one interview, although the Zoom program indicated it was recording. Thus, the participant had to be asked to repeat responses. The

difficulties were resolved but could have influenced some of the participants' experiences and responses at the time of the study, which may also influence interpretations of the study results.

### **Demographics**

A demographic overview of participants is shown in Table 2. Two participants were White, two were African American, two were Asian or Pacific Islander, one was Hispanic/Puerto Rican, and one was Bi-Racial East Asian and Indian. Their ages ranged from 28-40. Participants included three males and five females who practiced in several regions of the United States including Idaho, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia. Each participant had a master's degree in counseling. Three of the participants were doctoral students. One participant worked in community mental health, four worked as counselor educators, and three were full-time doctoral students. The participants who were counselor educators self-reported graduating with their doctoral degrees within the past year prior to the date of their interviews.

All of the participants were asked to submit the demographic questionnaire prior to the interview. However, none submitted the questionnaire prior to the interview date. Thus, I decided to ask my participants the eight demographic questions as part of the semistructured interview to help establish rapport: (a) Age? (b) Education level? (c) Gender? (d) Ethnicity? (e) How long have you been practicing counseling? (f) What jobs have you held other than counseling? (g) Have you participated in any social justice or lobbying activities for the counseling profession? and (h) Whom do you consider to be the main target(s) of your advocacy efforts? See Appendix C for a complete list of these

questions.

Table 2

*Demographic Overview of Participants*

Participant	Race	Gender	Age	Counseling Setting	State
A Joshua	White	Male	28	Community Mental Health	Michigan
B Amber	White	Female	40	Doctoral Student	Michigan
C Phillip	Bi Racial East Asian and Indian	Male	31	Doctoral Student	Virginia
D Brandon	Asian or Pacific Islander	Male	29	Counselor Educator	Idaho
E Isabelle	Puerto Rican/Hispanic	Female	37	Counselor Educator	New Jersey
F Justice	African American/Black (non-Hispanic)	Female	30	Counselor Educator	Texas
G Katarina	Asian or Pacific Islander	Female	31	Counselor Educator	Ohio
H Monique	African American/Black (non-Hispanic)	Female	36	Doctoral Student	Florida

### **Individual Profiles**

This section details the individual profiles of each participant. The profiles include a narrative of the participants' professional experience and legislative advocacy involvement(s), and my impressions as the interviewer. The Zoom interview also allowed for observation of body language and incongruences between the participants' spoken words and body language. I assigned participants pseudonyms to protect privacy and ensure confidentiality. To assign pseudonyms, I wrote four male names and four

female names on a slip of paper and folded the slips of paper in four. I placed the male names in a hat. Then, I drew the names to assign to each male participant. The same process was followed to assign female participants pseudonyms. I created an Excel spreadsheet with three columns. The first column identified the participant as a letter of the alphabet and the name I assigned.

### **Participant A: Joshua**

**Profile.** Joshua was a 28-year-old White male from Michigan. He has a master's degree in counseling. Joshua has worked in the counseling field for three years. He currently works in a community mental health setting with youth. Additional work experience includes grocery store produce clerk, pizza place server, youth care worker, and applied behavioral analyst. Joshua reported that he had no prior legislative experience outside of attending one ACA Institute for Leadership Training (ILT). His main advocacy efforts for the counseling profession were comprised of third-party reimbursement and greater access to mental health care.

**Interview and impressions.** Joshua was recommended by another participant in the study due to his having attended an ACA ILT. He accepted the invitation to participate via email confirmation, and we set a date to conduct the interview on April 13, 2018. Joshua emailed the consent form the same day of the interview. An invitation to join the recorded Zoom Videoconference was emailed to Joshua 30 minutes before conducting the interview. The interview began with me asking the eight demographic questions. Developing rapport was easy as Joshua and I were members and had served on the executive board for our state's counseling association. I thanked him for

participating in my study and reviewed the informed consent. He was asked if he had any questions before we began. There were no questions. We discussed the dissertation process and the challenges of completing the process. Joshua expressed that he did not want to pursue a doctoral degree, but applauded me for my efforts. To gain a better rapport, I decided to ask the demographic questions at the beginning of the interview to break the ice. Joshua appeared a little anxious at the start of the interview. He reported that he was at work in his office and had just finished a counseling session. By the end of the demographic questions, he appeared to be more relaxed as evidenced by a decrease in his rapid speaking. He answered each question with well thought out responses that were clear and detailed.

**Professional legislative advocacy involvement.** Joshua acknowledged that he did not have much experience in social justice or legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession. His only experience was attending one Institute for Leadership Training a few years ago. He described the meaning of professional legislative advocacy as promoting and raising awareness of the benefits of counseling professions. Joshua felt that professional legislative advocacy provided a platform for counselors to have a voice to discuss important issues that present barriers to mental health access. Joshua was candid in expressing his low level of awareness of the essential elements of legislative advocacy. He discussed how the Institute for Leadership Training offered by ACA to help with legislative advocacy involvement provided him with skills to discuss bills with legislators and resources. He explained how Institute for Leadership Training provided him with basic skills to speak with legislators; Joshua noted that the language legislators

use is different from the language of counselors. Thus, making it challenging to know if legislators support the bill(s) one is advocating for. Joshua stated, “So, probably the most difficult part is hearing that they will keep us in their thoughts with these issues; but it’s hard to have faith that reasonable steps will be taken.” Despite his concern about knowing whether legislators were willing to support bills he was advocating for, Joshua still believed the time and effort in speaking with legislators was worthwhile.

Joshua described his drive for advocating for the counseling profession as rooted in his family upbringing. He recalled his father’s experience as a group home owner and watching his father advocate for clients. He attributed his passion for being involved in advocating for the counseling profession to his father and faculty at his university.

Joshua evaluated the learning experience through Institute for Leadership Training as rewarding and helpful. Joshua described his experiences in this statement:

I really did not get much preparation at all before the conference I attended. It was mostly just like I said through word of mouth. Hearing about the advocates that we have. Hearing about them through getting involved through the Michigan Counseling Association and other organizations. Basically, hearing that we do have people that advocate on behalf of the counseling profession. But, I did not necessarily get the help in terms of how to get there, how to connect with them, the usefulness of connecting with them. Or, how to organize things. I guess I got the message that it was one person that did it all. As opposed through a collective effort. So, it’s nice to know that through the Institute for Leadership Training I attended that there are easy ways within my hectic schedule to connect with others that do advocate on behalf of the counseling profession. So, that helps.

Thinking back on his experience at the academic level, Joshua recalled not having any courses that discussed advocating for the profession, only instructors discussing their advocacy efforts. Those conversations inspired him to get involved with professional legislative advocacy. Joshua added, “It would have been useful, thinking about it now as

we talk, to just have had someone come into one of our classes just to talk about advocacy within the profession.”

Joshua concluded the interview by describing time and complacency as two obstacles counseling students face when getting involved in professional legislative advocacy.

### **Participant B: Amber**

**Profile.** Amber was a 40-year-old White female from Michigan. She has a master’s degree in counseling. Amber has worked in the counseling field for 4 ½ years. She currently works in a private practice setting with adults and youth. She is also a doctoral student and adjunct faculty member in counselor education at a local university. Additional work experience includes retail management, clerk, and cashier. Amber reported that she had no prior legislative experience outside of attending one ACA Institute for Leadership Training (ILT). However, she has participated in other social justice or legislative activities such as writing letters, calling legislators, and advocating on Capitol Hill. Her main advocacy efforts for the counseling profession focused on greater access to mental health care.

**Interview and impressions.** An email invitation to request Amber’s participation was sent to her personal email on April 10, 2018. She accepted the invitation to participate via email confirmation, and we set a date to conduct the interview on April 14, 2018. Amber emailed the consent form the same day of the interview. An invitation to join the recorded Zoom Videoconference was emailed to Amber two days before conducting the interview; however, the interview was conducted face to face and

recorded via Zoom. Amber and I decided it would save time to conduct the interview face to face after we attended a local meeting we were both set to attend. Developing rapport was easy as Amber and I are members and serve on the executive board for our state's counseling association. I thanked her for participating in my study and reviewed the informed consent. She was asked if she had any questions before we began. There were no questions about the study, but Amber wanted to decompress from a prior meeting we both had attended. We discussed the new ideas and implications for the state's organization. Amber and I took a few deep breaths before beginning the interview. Rapport was built during the compressing stage. I asked the demographic questions at the beginning of the interview to transition into the interview process. Amber appeared relaxed and ready for the interview. She answered each question with well thought out responses that were clear and detailed.

**Professional legislative advocacy involvement.** Amber acknowledged that she had some experience in social justice or legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession. Her experience was attending two ILTs over the past two years. Last year, she presented one of the learning sessions to attendees. She described the meaning of professional legislative advocacy as having many layers. She stated, "I think that we are in a really unique position in terms of being students who advocate because we are advocating for clients to have access to mental services; but, we are also advocating for us to have an ability to practice."

Amber identified the ability to work as counselors and job security as the two primary meanings she ascribed to professional legislative advocacy. Amber was



passionate about professional legislative advocacy and aware of the essential elements of legislative advocacy. She said that she learned the essential elements of legislative advocacy by attending the ILTs. Before attending the first ILT, she said she had no awareness of the essential elements of legislative advocacy. Amber ruminated on her experience with the following statement:

So, I got my knowledge from being trained through attending the American Counseling Association Institute for Leadership Training. My assumptions before attending that training, honestly, it was kind of intimidating to me. I didn't understand the process. I didn't know how we got in front of a legislator. I heard that we could call them, but I had no idea what to say. So I did not do that, because I didn't feel it was my place. I had no idea. I assumed that you needed credentials or creditability to speak to legislators. So, prior to attending ILT, I did not have that knowledge.

She reported feeling intimidated about the idea of speaking with legislators and not knowing the process. Amber discussed how accessible legislators were and her excitement in knowing that legislators were interested in what she had to say. While Institute for Leadership Training provided Amber with basic skills to speak with legislators, she noted the difficulty of engaging in professional legislative advocacy for counseling students. She expressed that it can be de-motivating to advocate on behalf of the counseling profession when counselors do not see the value of legislative advocacy because other mental health professionals have grown to cultivate a legislative agenda. Based on her experience of visiting the offices of legislators, Amber stated, "It would be nice to meet with a legislator instead of a staffer all the time."

Despite her frustration of not being able to speak with the actual legislator, she still believed that the time and effort spent in speaking with legislators' staffers was

worthwhile. Amber said her drive for advocating for the counseling profession was rooted in her family upbringing. She believed that her personal values and beliefs align 100% with her political action on behalf of the counseling profession. She attributed her passion for being involved in advocating for the counseling profession to her personality, her dissertation chair, and her mentors. Amber evaluated the learning experience through the two ILTs she attended as having been rewarding and helpful. Thinking back on her experience at the academic level, she recalled having one social justice course at the doctoral level. The course focused on developing advocacy competencies, creating a social justice advocacy package, and writing a letter to a legislator. Looking back at her experience with professional legislative advocacy, Amber recommended that professional legislative advocacy be woven into every counseling course and be a part of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling Education and Related Programs (CACREP) standards. According to Amber, “If that instruction were woven into every class at the master’s level, I would have been far better prepared at an earlier stage to become involved in legislative advocacy.”

Amber expressed not having an awareness of what legislative advocacy meant prior to attending her first ILT. She stated, “There was not an external assessment instrument that compared the transferable skills counselors and counseling students possess for professional legislative advocacy.” She further expressed that the lack of academic support for professional legislative advocacy as a counseling student is an obstacle to student involvement in legislative advocacy on behalf of the profession.

Amber concluded the interview pondering why professional legislative advocacy is not part of the counseling curriculum.

### **Participant C: Phillip**

**Profile.** Phillip was a 31-year-old Biracial East Asian and Indian male from Virginia. He had a master's degree in counseling. Phillip had worked in the counseling field for five years. He was currently working in a community mental health setting with youth. His additional work experience included teaching assistant and food services. Phillip reported that he had no prior professional legislative advocacy experience. His main advocacy efforts for the counseling profession were comprised of third-party reimbursement and greater access to mental health care.

**Interview and impressions.** Phillip accepted the invitation to participate via email confirmation and we set a date to conduct the interview on April 18, 2018. Phillip emailed the consent form to me on April 14, 2018. An invitation to join the recorded Zoom Videoconference was emailed to Phillip one day before conducting the interview. Developing rapport was easy as Phillip and I were members of three of the same professional organizations and had served on a leadership and professional advocacy committee. I thanked him for participating in my study and reviewed the informed consent. He was asked if he had any questions before we began. There were no questions about the study. We discussed the last time we were at a conference in Chicago and how we always had seen each other at conferences, but only had brief conversations. I asked the demographic questions at the beginning of the interview to break the ice and develop rapport. Phillip appeared relaxed and ready for the interview.

He answered each question with well thought out responses that were clear and detailed.

His tone of voice was calming.

**Professional legislative advocacy involvement.** Phillip ruminated on the time constraints he had experienced when speaking with legislators. He recalled being in a meeting room with a state legislator who had a group of people waiting to see him after their meeting and being escorted through the back door to meet with the legislator. He reported having five or ten minutes to discuss three bills. The biggest challenge was having multiple people in the room trying to get the information across to the legislator and sounding succinct. He also recalled feeling disappointed when one legislator canceled their meeting due to another meeting. Phillip pondered, "I wonder how much of that was out of his control and how much was politics." Phillip's eyes lowered, and his smile turned into a slight frown as he discussed his experience. However, he said that the time and effort spent talking to legislators or their representative was worthwhile.

Phillip attributed his drive for political action on behalf of the counseling profession to faculty mentors, school colleagues, as well as his personal values and spiritual beliefs. He was able to identify one course at the doctoral level in leadership and advocacy that addressed legislative advocacy activities. He did not become interested in advocating for the counseling profession until he attended a state conference. A group of students presented on their experience in speaking with legislators. Phillip reported that counseling conference program was his launching point of becoming involved in professional legislative advocacy. He evaluated his learning

experience through Institute for Leadership Training as helpful in preparing him to speak with legislators.

Looking back at his experience, Phillip felt he could have been better prepared if professional organizations dedicated more time and resources preparing counseling students and professionals in professional legislative advocacy. For example, having multiple sessions throughout the year instead a few days of training before speaking with legislators. And he said that including lobbyist or counselors with professional legislative advocacy experience in the Institute for Leadership Training sessions would be beneficial. Phillip identified the lack of academic instruction and knowledge in counseling programs as an obstacle for student involvement in professional legislative advocacy. He pondered, “Does the leadership (academics) value professional legislative advocacy?”

Upon concluding the interview, Phillip added that students could benefit more from having student-led roundtable discussions at conferences on this topic or having live streaming sessions for students who could not attend conferences.

#### **Participant D: Brandon**

**Profile.** Brandon was a 29-year-old Asian or Pacific Islander male from Idaho. He had a doctoral degree in counseling. Brandon had worked in the counseling field for five years. At the time of the interview, he was working at a university as a counseling faculty member. Additional work experience included admissions counselor and case manager. He reported having legislative advocacy experience before attending an ACA Institute for Leadership Training (ILT). Before attending ILT, he organized a day on the

hill for his state professional counseling organization. Other social justice or professional legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession included letter writing and protesting. His main advocacy efforts for the counseling profession focused on third-party reimbursement, greater access to mental health care, gun violence, and older adults.

**Interview and impressions.** Brandon accepted the invitation to participate in my study via email confirmation. We set a date to conduct the interview on April 19, 2018. Brandon emailed the consent form to me on April 12, 2018. I invited Brandon to join the recorded Zoom Videoconference via email one hour before conducting the interview. Developing rapport was easy as Brandon and I are both members of three professional organizations and serve together on one committee. I thanked him for participating in my study and reviewed the informed consent. He was asked if he had any questions before we began. There were no questions about the study. We discussed the last time we were at a conference together in Chicago and how we always see each other at conferences but have had only brief conversations. To gain a better rapport, I decided to ask the demographic questions at the beginning of the interview to break the ice and develop rapport. Brandon appeared ready for the interview as evidenced by his excitement. During the interview process, the Zoom technology was interpreted three times; however, it did not appear to disrupt the interview process. He answered each question with well thought out responses that were clear and very detail oriented.

**Professional legislative advocacy involvement.** Brandon's experience with social justice or legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession can be described as extensive as he has organized a legislative advocacy day for his state

organization and has attended several ILTs. He noted feeling independent in organizing the event because none of his counseling faculty members or counseling students had been previously involved in professional legislative advocacy. Brandon said he did not have anyone to model what a professional legislative advocate looks like in the counseling profession. He described the meaning of professional legislative advocacy as empowering. He said that he believed that professional legislative advocacy is important to distinguish counselors from other mental health professionals. Brandon stated, “If I’m not fighting for the profession, then what am I doing for others?”

Brandon said that he had little experience in professional legislative advocacy and was unaware of the essential elements of professional legislative advocacy before attending ILT. He said he did not have any courses on the topic during his academic master’s degree program experience. He credited his learning of the essential elements of legislative advocacy to ACA’s Government Affairs office, to have done it himself, and to the role modeling of his mentors. Brandon stated, “The most rewarding thing about talking to legislators is being surprised about what they already know about the bill and that they are advocating for counselors.”

Brandon found it disappointing when he had to speak with staffers instead of legislators. He was afraid that staffers would not relay the information he had provided to the legislator as he had intended. Another disappointment was not having a set meeting place to discuss issues with the legislators or their staffer. He noted that some meeting spaces did not provide a confidential setting to discuss sensitive information. He also thought it was difficult to meet with a legislator for 15 minutes and sound succinct

on the issues with multiple people in the meeting. Brandon detailed one of his experiences with a legislator in this brief scenario:

I remember once meeting with a congressional representative and the legislative staff. I would say that I was irked because we were meeting over here; no we're meeting over there. It's harder to meet in the hallway, but, sometimes it happens. And, I have to get over that. But sometimes the meeting space doesn't meet the safety requirements to discuss these issues; especially if they are a bit contentious. So, we have to be a little courageous in that. I would also say that it is harder when you have a large group of people. But I know what that means to us. Higher numbers or a mass of people get better results or a favorable outcome. They are looking for personal accounts and experiences. It's hard to have more than five people share their individual story in 15 minutes.

Despite his disappointments and difficulties, Brandon still felt his time and efforts spent talking to legislators or their staffers had been worthwhile. He stated, "I think that every moment we spend with our legislators is worthwhile and I hold onto that hope."

Brandon revealed that he had no courses which focused on professional legislative advocacy but attributed his personal values, mainly his racial and ethnic identity, for the drive he had for political action on behalf of the counseling profession. He attributed his passion for professional legislative advocacy to his counseling mentors. Brandon stated, "I had mentors who believed in me as a student and I didn't have to wait until I became a counselor educator to make that change or that impact on the profession."

Brandon evaluated his learning experience through Institute for Leadership Training as poor but stated that he had acquired some good take away information. He thought having videos on how to be an advocate, role plays, and more training in the Institute for Leadership Training curriculum would be useful. He identified counselor educators and supervisors who do not value legislative advocacy as an obstacle to



counseling students' involvement in professional legislative advocacy. Brandon stated, "Many students look to educators and supervisors as models in terms of what I do, who I advocate for, and what issues do I advocate for."

In Brandon's closing remarks, he said, "I think we should be preparing students and providing more training in regions for professional legislative advocacy. Not just the training through Institute for Leadership Training a day before the visit."

### **Participant E: Isabella**

**Profile.** Isabella was a 37-year-old Puerto Rican female from Idaho. She had a doctoral degree in counseling. Isabella had worked in the counseling field for 13 years. She was working in a university setting as a counseling faculty member. Additional work experience included out-patient program manager and care manager supervisor. The only experience she had with social justice or professional legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession included letter writing and attending an ILT. Her main advocacy efforts for the counseling profession had focused on third-party reimbursement and professional advocacy.

**Interview and impressions.** Isabella accepted the invitation to participate via email confirmation and we set a date to conduct the interview on May 3, 2018. Isabella emailed the consent form to me on May 1, 2018. An invitation to join the recorded Zoom Videoconference was emailed to Isabella one hour before conducting the interview. Developing rapport was easy as Isabella and I are members of three of the same professional organizations. I thanked her for participating in my study and reviewed the informed consent. She was asked if she had any questions before we began. There were

no questions about the study. Isabelle appeared ready for the interview as evidenced by her relaxed shoulders. She answered each question with a calm, steady tone. Her responses were brief and straight to the point.

**Professional legislative advocacy involvement.** Isabelle's experiences with social justice or legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession were comprised of letter writing to legislators and attending one ILT. She described the meaning of professional legislative advocacy as empowering. She believed professional legislative advocacy is important and helps to impact the community. Isabelle reported that she was not aware of the essential elements of professional legislative advocacy before attending the ILT. Isabelle stated, "...nothing in my classes talked about advocating for the counseling profession."

Isabelle believed that having a legislator's time was her most rewarding experience in speaking with legislators. She explained that the most difficult thing in speaking with legislators was explaining who counselors are. She stated, "I felt like I had to prove myself and my profession." Her most disappointing experience when talking to legislators or their representatives was, "Not getting a response after you reach out to your legislator for help."

Isabelle expressed that the time and effort she spent talking to legislators or their representatives was worthwhile. She stated, "I think it's important to inform them about our profession and the things we provide to the community."

Isabelle did not have any courses in her counseling graduate program that prepared her to be an advocate for the counseling profession with legislators or their

representatives. She said that her drive for political action on behalf of the counseling profession was due to her being a Christian and her having a strong social justice obligation. She attributed her passion for being involved in advocating for the counseling profession to her “passion for leadership and being a leader involves advocacy.”

Isabelle evaluated her learning experience through Institute for Leadership Training as poor. She stated, “Through the ILT, I received some preparation, however; I would have liked for it to be more hands on.”

Looking back on her experiences, Isabelle was able to identify several points that could have prepared her better for talking to legislators or their representatives. Role plays, background literature, and detailed scripts were identified by Isabelle as steps for better preparing students for professional legislative advocacy. She also felt legislative advocacy should be woven into the counseling curriculum. Some of the obstacles Isabelle noted to counseling students not being involved in professional legislative advocacy were lack of time, financial obstacles, lack of knowledge, and fear. To get over these obstacles, Isabelle suggested, “Funding for students to attend advocacy days would help eliminate these obstacles.”

In conclusion of her interview, Isabelle added, “I would just like to expand the knowledge of advocacy in our profession.”

### **Participant F: Justice**

**Profile.** Justice was a 30-year-old African American/Black (non-Hispanic) female from Texas. She had a doctoral degree in counseling. Justice had worked in the counseling field for one year. She was working in a university setting as a counseling

faculty member at the time of the interview. Justice had no work experience outside of being a counseling faculty in a university setting. She had extensive professional legislative advocacy experience including organizing at the grass-roots level, writing letters, protesting, calling legislators, and attending Institute for Leadership Training and state level advocacy meetings. Her main advocacy efforts for the counseling profession had focused on greater access to mental health care, third-party reimbursement, and human trafficking.

**Interview and impressions.** Justice accepted the invitation to participate in this study via email confirmation. She set a date to conduct the interview on May 4, 2018; however, the interview was rescheduled by the participant due to having a faculty emergency. We rescheduled and conducted the interview on May 6, 2018. Justice emailed the consent form on May 4, 2018. An invitation to join the recorded Zoom Videoconference was emailed to Justice one hour before conducting the interview. Developing rapport was easy as Justice and I are members of the same professional organization. We discussed how we had seen each other in passing during conferences but never had the time to get to know one another. I thanked her for participating in my study and reviewed the informed consent. She was asked if she had any questions before we began. There were no questions about the study. We discussed the last time we were at a conference and how we had only a brief conversation during a mixer. Justice appeared relaxed for the interview as evidenced by her calm demeanor and steady breathing. She answered each question with well thought out responses that were clear.

**Professional legislative advocacy involvement.** Justice's experiences with social justice or legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession were many and varied. She described the meaning of professional legislative advocacy as empowering. She believed professional legislative advocacy is a very important function for counselors and counseling students. According to Justice:

There is funding available, and by going to advocacy day, we let our legislators know that we are the people who provide services. We are representatives of individuals who can't come to you or don't know how to contact you.

Justice discussed her low level of awareness of the essential elements of professional legislative advocacy before attending ILT. She noted the benefit of acquiring information on professional legislative advocacy from other counselors and leaders in the field. Justice recalled her most rewarding experiences talking to legislators or their representatives as actually having the opportunity to speak directly to the legislator and to bring other counseling students to ILT. Justice stated, "Being able to speak directly with my legislators and knowing that my voice was heard and getting personalized feedback from them and knowing that they actually did follow up based on our conversations."

Justice ruminated on her most difficult experience in speaking with legislators or their representatives. She expressed that not having the attention or respect of legislators was the most difficult experience to which she had to adjust. According to Justice, "I had attended an advocacy day and spoke with one of our state reps, and you could tell that he wasn't listening; so from my experience, consideration from legislators is very difficult to obtain.

Justice spoke with passion and conviction when discussing her most disappointing experience when speaking with legislators or their representatives. She stated, “The disregard legislators have for the many people in our state that need services, which need someone to provide a voice for them; especially because that someone was elected to be our voice. This is most disappointing for me as a legislative advocate for the counseling profession.”

Justice believed the time and effort she spent talking to legislators or their representatives was worthwhile. She said that one visit with legislators or their representative might not produce results. But, she said that she encourages counseling students to continue speaking with legislators until someone listens. When asked if she had any courses or experiences during her counseling graduate program that prepared her to be an advocate for the counseling profession with legislators or their representatives. She responded, “No not really. We had a leadership and diversity class which kind of spoke about legislative actions and policy. However, it didn't focus on teaching what to do and how to do it.”

She said she had received better instruction from her state counseling organization. The training informed her about what professional legislative advocacy looks like and what to expect from legislators. Justice credits her grandfather's contributions to the civil rights movement as her drive toward political action on behalf of the counseling profession. She said that her grandfather was a reverend at the time when the clergy was heavy with civil unrest. His political actions helped with civil and community care. Justice attributed her passion for being involved in advocating for the

counseling profession. She stated, “Definitely my mentors and professors in my graduate program. All of them were leaders within ACA, and so they all spoke toward our responsibility as professional counselor advocates.”

Justice evaluated the preparation she received before talking with legislators or their representatives as good. She described the learning and tools she received as informative and useful. Looking back on her experiences, she felt having a centralized place to get to know more about how to learn about a legislator's position on particular political issues, and being helped to understand policy more could have prepared her better for talking to legislators or their representatives.

Justice discussed some of the obstacles to counseling students becoming involved in professional legislative advocacy. She mentioned, “Getting there and getting the information” as two major obstacles for lack of student involvement in professional legislative advocacy. She stated, “The financial strain and time strain are obstacles. Without the support of agencies that will assist in getting students to these meetings; these obstacles will always be there.”

In her closing remarks, Justice offered this advice:

I think the greatest thing that we could do is lend our voices. I know it takes time; but, time takes time, and we have to make time. So, I want to keep encouraging students and other professionals to keep writing those emails and sending those letters. If you have two minutes out of your day, that will make a world of difference.

### **Participant G: Katarina**

**Profile.** Katarina was a 40-year-old Asian or Pacific Islander female from Ohio who held a doctoral degree in counseling. Katarina had worked in the counseling field

for five years. She was working in a university setting as a counselor educator at the time of the interview. Katarina had no additional work experience outside of being a counselor educator. Katarina's participation in social justice or legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession in the past had included being a community organizer and attending both national and state level Institute for Leadership Training meetings. Her main advocacy efforts for the counseling profession had focused on third-party reimbursement, greater access to mental health care, and portability.

**Interview and impressions.** Katarina accepted the invitation to participate via email confirmation and set a date to conduct the interview on May 1, 2018. However, the interview was rescheduled and conducted on May 4, 2018, due to a scheduling conflict on behalf of the participant. Katarina emailed the consent form on April 12, 2018. An invitation to join the recorded Zoom Videoconference was emailed to Katarina one hour before conducting the interview. Developing rapport was easy as Katarina and I are members of the same three professional organizations. I thanked her for participating in my study and reviewed the informed consent. She was asked if she had any questions before we began. There were no questions about the study. We discussed the last time we were at a conference in Atlanta and how we always see each other at conferences but had only brief conversations in passing. Katarina verbalized her excitement about participating in my study. She was eager to begin the interview. During the interview process, we had Internet connectivity issues. So, we decided to end the Zoom video conference and record the interview using Audacity Recorder on my laptop. I did have to



repeat the first sub-question twice for better clarification; however, she answered each question with well thought out responses that were clear.

**Professional legislative advocacy involvement.** Katarina's experiences with social justice or legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession in the past had included being a community organizer and attending both national and state-level meetings. Katarina described the meaning of professional legislative advocacy as a vehicle for success to position counselors and counselor educators so that they could earn a livable wage. She stated, "When I think about the meaning of professional legislative advocacy, I think about anticipating the future needs of the profession."

Katarina believed professional legislative advocacy is essential to the counseling profession to increase the reimbursement rate for professional services and to reduce barriers of clients to counseling services. She discussed the lack of a solid and unified counselor identity as a barrier in speaking with legislators. She stated, "...it's important to meet with our legislators so that they can hear from constituents about our scope of practice and the services we provide and the way in which we can support our community."

Katarina described her level of awareness of the essential elements of legislative advocacy before beginning to speak with legislators as low. She discussed not knowing what professional legislative advocacy meant or why it was important. She expressed feeling intimidated at the thought of meeting with legislators and not knowing what to say and being afraid that she would not be able to make a difference. She stated, "Going back to my very first experience, I didn't know anything about legislative advocacy."

Katarina's most rewarding experience in talking to legislators or their representatives was meeting with the legislator instead of a staffer. She discussed how receptive the legislator was to hear what she had to say regarding the services counselors provide, the types of counseling issues we address with clients, and the manner in which we help the legislators' constituents in their community. Her most difficult experience in talking to legislators or their representatives was learning the terminology. She discussed the mindset counseling students must have to be involved in professional legislative advocacy. Katarina explained that counseling students are not exposed to the language of legislators or taught the process of how a bill turned into law. She also noted that legislative advocacy should be a part of the counseling curriculum and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards. She stated, "It's not something that is provided in our education or any of the CACREP Standards." Actually, the CACREP standards do require that students be exposed to the process of advocating for the profession, but specifics of how to be an advocate are not addressed in the standards.

Katarina recalled her most disappointing experience in talking to legislators or their representatives. She expressed being disappointed when she was set to meet with a legislator, and an intern showed up instead. When she talked to interns or legislative interns, she said she was concerned that important information from the meeting would not be disseminated to the legislator as she presented it. She was also unsure if interns or legislative assistants cared about the issues discussed during the meeting. However, she

strongly believed the time and effort she spent talking to legislators or their representatives was worthwhile.

Katarina did not have any courses or experiences during her counseling graduate program that prepared her to be an advocate for the counseling profession with legislators or their representatives. Her drive for political action on behalf of the counseling profession can be described as self-motivated. In her own words: “I would say my social values and dedication toward social justice advocacy and a personal mission of wanting to leave this world better than how I found it.”

Katarina attributed her passion for being involved in advocating for the counseling profession to having a mentor who was actively involved in advocating for the counseling profession. She discussed not knowing about legislative advocacy until she took a two-week one-credit summer course one of her mentors taught. She learned the importance of professional legislative advocacy, how it impacts the counseling profession, and how to get involved as a student. Her greatest preparation in speaking with legislators or their representatives was organizing a day on the hill for her state organization. She evaluated the preparation she received through Institute for Leadership Training before talking with legislators or their representatives as supportive. Looking back on her experiences, she felt she would have been better prepared for talking to legislators or their representatives if she had more courses that focused on professional legislative advocacy during her counseling master’s degree program. She stated, “I would have liked to have seen more courses that integrated these topics in counselor education programs; both clinical mental health and school counseling programs.”

When asked, what are some of the obstacles to counseling students becoming involved in professional legislative advocacy she stated:

I think one of the biggest obstacles is refusing responsibility. I think it's easy for students to think that someone else can do it or that someone else is currently doing it; so they don't have to. And, they think that "Well my voice doesn't matter." And also thinking that other counselors know more than I do. So, they don't take the time to get involved. I think that's the biggest challenge. I think the way to overcome that barrier is to continue to remind students they are powerful and to continue to expose them to professional legislative advocacy opportunities. Because if they have more opportunity to have their voices heard and the more they are exposed to the idea, the more likely they will be to take action instead of waiting for someone else to do it.

Katarina passionately discussed the importance of students becoming involved in professional legislative advocacy. She thought students did not get involved in advocating for the profession because they think someone else should do it, that their voice does not matter, or they lack interest in advocating for the counseling profession. Katarina concluded her interview with the following statement: "This is a little off topic, but I really appreciate that you are doing research on this topic because I don't think it's anything I've ever seen before."

#### **Participant H: Monique**

**Profile.** Monique was a 36-year-old African American/Black (non-Hispanic) female from Florida. She had a master's degree in counseling. Monique had worked in the counseling field for 11 years at the time of the interview and was currently working in a community mental health setting. She was also a doctoral student and an adjunct faculty member in counselor education. Additional work experience included direct care staff for abused and neglected youth, food service, and camp counselor. Prior to attending ILT, she had participated in other social justice or legislative activities such as

grass-roots organizer, community organizer, letter-writer, and protester, and she had called legislators. Her main advocacy efforts for the counseling profession had focused on greater access to mental health care, human trafficking, and gun violence.

**Interview and impressions.** Monique accepted the invitation to participate via email confirmation and set a date to conduct the interview on April 22, 2018. However, the interview was rescheduled and conducted on May 4, 2018, due to time constraints. Monique emailed the consent form on May 4, 2018. An invitation to join the recorded Zoom Videoconference was emailed to Monique 30-minutes before conducting the interview. Developing rapport was easy as Monique and I am members of the same three professional organizations and have served together on various committees. I thanked her for participating in my study and reviewed the informed consent. She was asked if she had any questions before we began. There were no questions about the study. Monique appeared tired, so I asked if she felt up to conducting the interview. She said she was tired but willing to do the interview. She answered each question with brief, well thought out responses.

**Professional legislative advocacy involvement.** Monique's experiences with social justice or legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession were extensive. She described the meaning of professional legislative advocacy as empowering. She said she believed that professional legislative advocacy is important to bring about change to the counseling profession. She also internalized professional legislative advocacy as part of who she is as a professional counselor. When asked her level of awareness of the essential elements of legislative advocacy before speaking with

legislators, she responded: “Pretty solid, but I felt like it became more specific and directed after attending the ILT and getting some more tips and techniques in ways of advocating for the counseling profession.”

Monique’s most rewarding experience in speaking with legislators or their representatives was having her voice heard. She stated, “Having my voice heard and the ability to educate them about what is important within the counseling profession which ultimately benefits their constituent as well as their families.”

She described her most difficult experience as speaking with aids or staffers of legislators and not knowing if they would pass on the information to the legislator. She described her most disappointing experience in speaking with legislators or their representative as, “Having to talk to third-parties and navigating through the system trying to contact a legislator.” However, she still believed the time and effort she spent talking to legislators or their representatives was worthwhile.

Monique recalled having two courses during her counseling graduate program that prepared her to be an advocate for the counseling profession with legislators or their representatives. Her personal values and beliefs drive her to engage in political action on behalf of the counseling profession. She attributed her passion for being involved in advocating for the counseling profession as self-motivated based on her long family history of advocating for the voiceless. Monique evaluated the preparation she received before talking with legislators or their representatives as good. She stated, “I would evaluate it as insightful and good. It helped me to fine tune my advocacy skills. Also, it helped me confirm some things I already knew.”

Looking back on her experiences, there was nothing Monique could think of that could have prepared her better for talking to legislators or their representatives.

However, she did address one obstacle to counseling students involved in professional legislative advocacy. She noted, “There is not a lot of emphasis on the importance of professional legislative advocacy.” Monique concluded the interview with these closing remarks, “Professional legislative advocacy is something I think we all should be involved in on behalf of bills that we are passionate about; even if you’re not passionate about legislative advocacy.”

### **Data Collection**

I recruited participants using my personal contact list of individuals who had attended the ACA Institute for Leadership Training and whose e-mail addresses or telephone numbers I had. I asked them if they would be willing to participate in my study. Snowballing was also used in that those who agreed to participate recruited other participants. The recruitment announcement was emailed to each person.

Each person who responded sent an e-mail message to me. Once I received the email message, I responded within 24 hours. Nine individuals inquired about the study, and I sent them consent forms to complete. Each was scheduled for their interview via Zoom invitation. I sent a follow-up email message to each participant to email their informed consent prior to the interview. Two participants emailed their consent one or two days prior to their interview; the other six email their consent the same day of the interview. One individual was excluded from the study due to not meeting the criteria. During the screening phase, the individual reported not having attended an ACA ILT;

thus, excluding that person from the study. The individual was thanked for the willingness to participate in the study.

There were a total of nine people who responded to the initial email or indicated they had heard about it about the study from other colleagues. A total of five responded as a result of a personal email from my personal email list and four were recommended by other participants. Although nine people responded, only eight met the criteria for the study and were interviewed. The snowballing strategy worked well in that participants were willing to refer their colleagues to the study.

### **Recording the Interviews**

I attempted to interview the eight participants in this study using Zoom meetings (Zoom, 2017), a platform that allows individuals to see each other, hear each other, and record conversations. Four were interviewed in their offices, three in their homes, and one face to face in her car. Once the interviewee connected on the line, I informed the participant when I was going to start recording. After each meeting, the Zoom program automatically downloaded the recorded meeting in a Zoom folder, which is password protected. Zoom was interrupted during two interviews due to Internet connection problems, and in those two situations, I completed the interviews by telephone. The interviews by telephone were recorded using Audacity Recorder on my laptop. Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes each.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began after I had completed and transcribed the eight interviews with participants. Transcribing each audio recording took me from 24 to 48 hours per



recorded audio, which was a total of about 480 hours. I used approximately 38 pages of memo notes which I kept in a composition notebook.

After transcribing the data, I entered the first phase of coding. During this phase of coding, I identified several words that were repeated throughout the interviews (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Line by line coding allowed me to find common words, which led to themes. I also used my memo notes and the transcriptions to assist with salient words. The words and phrases I found included *empowerment, awareness, mentor, involvement, preparation, confidence, and culture*.

During the second phase, I identified the most frequent codes, sorted and organized the data with NVivo (QSR, 2018), a qualitative research program, which supported the data analysis process (Creswell, 2013; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). I used NVivo's word frequency inquiry to assist with how often words and phrases were used.

During the third phase, I asked participants to review their individual transcripts and the overall themes that emerged during data analysis. However, none of the participants responded. Three peer-reviewers were also recruited to review the data I collected and to discuss my thought processes with me as I developed themes. However, only one of the three peer-reviewers responded.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was maintained throughout this study using several methods. My first step was listening to the interviews over and over again to immerse myself in the data. I then transcribed each interview verbatim. I had the data available electronically for additional review to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. I used the following

strategies to ensure trustworthiness was maintained through this study: member checking, a peer reviewer, self-disclosure of my own biases, the process of presenting discrepant information, rich thick description, and reflective journaling.

### **Member Checking**

I emailed a summary of the transcribed interview to each of the participants to (a) check for accuracy, (b) gather additional data if needed, and (c) explore what may have been undiscovered (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). A summary of my findings from the interview was also provided to the participants (Creswell, 2009). A list of themes was provided with a detailed explanation for each theme. All of the participants were given an opportunity to review the themes that emerged and provide feedback, however, none of the participants responded.

### **Peer Reviewer**

I asked three peers to review what I was doing throughout the research process. Of the three, one provided feedback. The peer reviewer reviewed what I wrote and asked questions in regard to my qualitative study. For example, one question was “Did all the participants attend a leadership institute?” The peer reviewer and I used email communication to correspond. The peer reviewer was knowledgeable regarding the topic and provided good feedback. The reviewer felt the themes presented were good but encouraged me to think more critically as a researcher. Two pages of notes were provided by the reviewer. The reviewer noted on May 21, 2018, “Based upon developments in the aforementioned major themes (work, advocacy, and empowerment), it is easy to understand the increasing importance of advocacy.” Some candidate themes

were eliminated or merged due to the lack of support found in the interview transcripts. A total of three email correspondences were exchanged before a consensus of themes was reached. Additionally, I continued weekly discussions with my dissertation committee chair to assist with the data collection and analysis process. This process allowed me to maintain an objective standpoint and eliminate any biases. It also afforded me the opportunity to present information so that it would be understood by others who will read what I had written (Creswell, 2014).

### **Self-Disclosure**

At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, and I let the participants know my experience and passion with the idea of advocating for the counseling profession. Additionally, in chapter three, I summarized my biases so that I could bracket them. I was aware of my biases during the development of the interview questions (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Dworkin, 2012). I was cognizant of my bias as a legislative advocate for the counseling profession. I remained in the role of a student researcher, which allowed me to eliminate being perceived as an expert in this area. I utilized member checking strategies such as committee members, informants, and peer reviewer to ensure my questions and data result interpretations were written in a nonbiased manner (Creswell, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). I also consulted with my dissertation committee members during the entire dissertation process.

### **Discrepant Information**

Evidence of the themes was presented in my research. The multiple perspectives uncovered some evidence that was contrary to some of the themes. As a result, I

presented information contradicting some of the themes. For example, according to Brandon, “Meaning-wise, I not only find it very meaningful, but I also find it empowering for me and for the profession. So, I think in that regard it is meaningful.” Joshua said, “I would say that the main meaning is to really promote the profession of counseling and the skills we provide and the medical benefits that our clients can benefit from their experience.” In contrast to both Joshua and Brandon, Justice described the meaning as “just recognizing the importance and magnitude of the voice that I have as somebody who was studying and intimately tied to providing care for individuals in the community and consumers in counseling.”

Another example of discrepant information is when the participants all agreed that there were obstacles for student involvement in legislative advocacy. However, there was no specific barrier identified. Monique stated, “Having to talk to a third-party and navigating through the system trying to contact legislators.” Justice stated, “The financial strain and time strain are obstacles. Without the support of agencies that will assist with getting students to these meetings, obstacles will always be there.” Katarina said, “I think one of the biggest obstacles is refusing responsibility. I think it’s easy for students to think someone else can do it or that someone else is currently doing it, so they don’t have to.” I discovered that acknowledging discrepant information provided a method for remaining objective, provided trustworthiness to the study and produced truthful results.

### **Rich and Thick Descriptions**

I provided detailed descriptions of the participants’ interview settings and what the participants disclosed. I also provided multiple perspectives regarding each theme. I

provided frequent and long direct quotes allowing the participants' voices to be heard.

This enabled the results to become more robust (Creswell, 2014).

### **Reflective Journal**

I keep a journal of my thoughts in a reflective journal throughout conducting my study. The content of my journal was comprised of ideas, decisions, directions, and dilemmas. The journaling process aided me in analyzing the data, clarifying and directing the coding process while expounding on processes, and putting ideas into a narrative (Sloan & Bowe, 2015).

### **Results**

The interviews for this study produced several themes. The interviews focused on gaining an understanding of the meaning counseling students and recent graduates ascribed to their involvement in professional legislative advocacy for the counseling profession. The interviews were structured around the research question: What meaning do counseling graduate students and recent graduates ascribe to their experiences of involvement in professional legislative advocacy?

The data from the interviews was extensively analyzed to develop thick, rich descriptions. The following 10 themes emerged from the data:

1. awareness,
2. faculty mentor,
3. involvement,
4. incorporating legislative advocacy into the curriculum,
5. lack of confidence,

6. student learning and personal development,
7. legislative culture,
8. motivation,
9. student obstacles to professional legislative advocacy, and
10. problems in working with other professions.

### **Theme 1: Awareness**

Each participant developed a meaning of professional legislative advocacy through attending an ACA Institute for Leadership Training (ILT) or a state-level institute. Amber stated, “I assumed that you needed credentials or creditability to speak to legislators.” As the participants reflected on the meaning associated with learning new material related to professional legislative advocacy as well as gaining awareness into the multiple facets of professional legislative advocacy, it appears that the participants obtained a minimal understanding of their experience. Brandon and Joshua developed two very different meanings of the multiple facets of professional legislative advocacy as a result of attending an ILT. According to Brandon, “Meaning-wise, I not only find it very meaningful, but I also find it empowering for me and for the profession. So, I think in that regard it is meaningful.” Joshua said, “I would say that the main meaning is to really promote the profession of counseling and the skills we provide and the medical benefits that our clients can benefit from their experience.” In contrast to both Joshua and Brandon, Justice described the meaning as “just recognizing the importance and magnitude of the voice that I have as somebody who was studying and intimately tied to providing care for individuals in the community and consumers in counseling.”

**Theme 2: Faculty Mentor**

Graduate students often become involved in legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession as a result of the influence of faculty members who were role models and mentors. As participants ruminated on their experiences, they recalled the influence of counseling faculty members as the most significant factor for becoming involved in an ACA ILT. Katarina mentioned, “I would attribute it to a mentor that I have; who instilled in me the value and importance of legislative advocacy.” According to Phillip, “I had very little awareness of what was involved until I become a doctoral student. I became more active with faculty and students here at the university as well as within the state.” Brandon agreed, “I had mentors that believed in me as a student and I didn’t have to wait until I became a counselor educator to make that change or that impact.” Having a sense of community with common goals and interests motivated the participants to continue professional legislative advocacy activities after graduation. When asked who encouraged her to become involved in advocacy, Justice said, “Definitely my mentors and professors in my graduate program.”

**Theme 3: Involvement**

Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy spent on professional legislative advocacy. The in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiences to which students commit their time and energy related to professional legislative advocacy was a contributing factor to the participants’ learning experiences. While the participants received little to no classroom knowledge related to legislative advocacy, involvement in out-of-classroom learning experiences through the American Counseling

Association Institute for Leadership Training (ILT) provided participants with the necessary skills that prepare students and professionals for professional legislative advocacy activities. Isabelle stated, “Through the ILT, I received some preparation; however, I would have liked for it to be more hands on.” Amber concurred, “So, I got my knowledge from being trained through attending an American Counseling Association Institute for Leadership Training.” However, Amber expressed during the interview having one course that mentioned advocating on behalf of the counseling profession. Additionally, Justice and Monique each expressed having at least one course that touched on the topic. Phillip described his first introduction to professional legislative advocacy in the following statement:

So, I guess the first introduction I got in a school setting was in my doctoral program. I went to a state conference with a group of graduate students. At that conference, I remember meeting students from other universities. The talks they were presenting on were based on the work they were doing in terms of legislative advocacy work. I was like, “This is really interesting. How do I get involved in this?” That really pushed me into learning how to do this. I asked at the conference what does this involve? They told me. That summer, I attended a leadership institute (ILT). I think that was the launching point of becoming active with legislative advocacy.

#### **Theme 4: Incorporating Legislative Advocacy Into the Curriculum**

This theme reflected the unified call to action of counseling academic programs to incorporate professional legislative advocacy into the counseling curriculum.

Participants were unable to identify a single course that provided in-depth knowledge or skills to prepare students in talking with legislators, even though one participant did say legislative advocacy was mentioned in a couple of courses. According to Joshua, “No specific courses or seminars or things like that” prepared him to speak with legislators.



Katarina agreed, “I would have liked to have seen more coursework that integrated these topics of legislative advocacy in counselor education programs; both clinical mental health and school counseling programs.” Isabelle stated, “If I had background literature or had courses on how legislation operates, it would have helped.” Brandon agreed, “There was no coursework, nothing in the curriculum, no training around professional legislative advocacy.” Phillip stated and pondered:

I think it could be administrative. What are they valuing? Are they valuing there should be more instruction related to clients as opposed to professional advocacy as well? I think that plays into the amount a freedom a faculty member has when providing instruction. Does the leadership value legislative advocacy? We could use legislative activities assignment in the class setting to overcome this issue and being intentional.

#### **Theme 5: Lack of Confidence**

As participants reflected on their experience in speaking with legislators, having limited knowledge and skills related to professional legislative advocacy contributed to the feeling of being unprepared. Amber stated, “In talking with legislators, at first I was concerned with remembering facts, what to say. Honestly, it was kind of intimidating to me. I didn’t really understand the process.” In contrast to Amber and other participants, Monique was the only participant who expressed feeling confident in speaking with legislators. Similar to Ambers’ experience, Katarina said, “I was really intimidated at the thought of meeting with someone and not knowing what to say and afraid that I wouldn’t be able to make a difference.” Isabelle noted, “I felt like I had to prove myself and my profession.” Learning new language salient to legislators and resistant legislators were

the primary sources attributing to the diminishment of participants' confidence level.

Katarina stated:

I think the most difficult part is learning the terminology. It's a very different way of thinking and it's a different set of information that a lot of counselors; no let me speak for myself, that I had not had any exposure to. So, the political aspect of legislative advocacy is important. It's not something that is provided in our education or any of the CACRP Standards, and I wonder as I'm talking this through if that is something that may be important to incorporate into our standards as counselor educators? How can we set up our students to feel more prepared to engage in legislative advocacy? And, one of those ways might be in teaching those different terms.

### **Theme 6: Student Learning and Personal Development**

A major outcome of participating in professional advocacy activities could be the facilitation of counseling students developing their strengths and approaches to the counseling process and strengthening their own professional identity. Brandon stated, "I think we should be preparing students and ACA regions should be providing more training for professional legislative advocacy." Katarina agreed with Brandon in the following statement:

I think it will be really great for counseling students to see that professional legislative advocacy is an important topic and hear all the things we can do as a profession to lay the foundation for this issue; to be able to be more mainstream and for it to be a part of the profession instead of looking at it as a bonus or an extra piece that someone else will do.

### **Theme 7: Legislative Culture**

The participants highlighted the need for a culture that includes professional legislative advocacy. To provide greater access to mental health services, we as counselors must take a holistic approach to professional legislative advocacy by cultivating a new behavior and belief. Joshua stated:

Yeah, you mentioned graduate school. It would have been useful, thinking about it now as we talk, to just have someone come into one of our classes. Just to talk about advocacy within the profession. Talk about the major issues that are at play. Talking about some of the advocacy organizations that kind of play a central role in what we do. Because I feel that no matter what profession you go into, it kind of helps to know the larger picture of things, larger perspective of things. Especially, when you hear rumors of stuff. Rumors of what's happening. It's good to have someone come in and solidify all that for us. I would say at the graduate level it would have been nice to have a little bit more information.

I asked Joshua, "When you say [have someone come to talk to you], would you prefer a lobbyist, legislator, or someone from the counseling profession to talk to you?"

He responded:

That's a good question. I think all three would be useful, such as in a panel format. But if I had to pick one, probably someone in the profession that has experience with professional legislative advocacy. So that they can give us an honest summary of what's happened and what's about to come. Adapting a legislative culture may influence counseling students to stick with professional legislative advocacy beyond the academic setting.

Katarina stated, "I think the most difficult part is learning the terminology... It's a very different way of thinking and a different set of information I received within my counseling programs." Amber noted, "It should be a part of CACREP standards like ethics, theories, and interventions." Brandon said, "Outside of Institute for Leadership Training if there are videos on how to do this, role plays, and more training in the curriculum... incorporating it into a classroom setting."

### **Theme 8: Motivation**

This theme reflects the motivation and passion toward professional legislative advocacy. To gain a better understanding as to what motivates counseling students toward advocating for the profession, we must first understand how counseling students'

personal values and beliefs drive their political action. Phillip describes how his personal values and beliefs drive his political action in the following statement:

Most of my personal values and beliefs drive my professional involvement in legislative advocacy work. I think if I didn't value them both equally, that might heavily influence the amount of time and energy and how much I invest in the work of advocating for the profession in the first place. My spiritual voice and my parents, who are both educators, have also influenced my involvement with legislative advocacy. My parents instilled in me the idea of respecting and valuing all people. I hold to my spiritual beliefs and the Biblical scripture of taking care of the children and orphanages. Engaging in legislative advocacy work is a way to help multiple people across the state...across the nation.

Similar to Phillip's statement Brandon stated, "My heritage and values have a lot to do with political action activities." Isabelle added, "Being Christian is one of my values that led me to counseling advocacy." On the other hand, Katarina attributed her motivation and passion toward professional legislative advocacy to being self-motivated.

### **Theme 9: Student Obstacles to Professional Legislative Advocacy**

Even though students are motivated to become involved in legislative advocacy, there are challenges to doing so that are unique to students. This theme emerged as students reflected on the barriers to engaging in professional legislative advocacy.

Amber stated, "If that instruction were woven into every class at the master's level, I would have been far better prepared at an earlier stage to engage in legislative advocacy." Phillip stated, "Getting my master's in Canada, legislative advocacy was not a huge thing that was promoted by the faculty."

The participants identified several obstacles faced by counseling students when gaining entry into professional legislative advocacy. Monique stated, "Having to talk to a third-party and navigating through the system trying to contact legislators." Justice

stated, “The financial strain and time strain are obstacles. Without the support of agencies that will assist with getting students to these meetings, obstacles will always be there.” Katarina argued, “I think one of the biggest obstacles is refusing responsibility. I think it’s easy for students to think someone else can do it or that someone else is currently doing it, so they don’t have to.”

### **Theme 10: Problems in Working With Other Professions**

This theme reflected how the participants found a lack of community support in working with other mental health professions to advocate for a common resolution. Amber stated, “When you keep hearing the same response from other professionals, it can be de-motivating.” When discussing the advocacy activities of other professions, Monique agreed that “There is not a lot of emphasis on the importance of advocacy and working with other mental health providers.” Participants identified who they would like to collaborate with regarding lobbyists as well as specific actions that took place within the context of partnerships with other professions. Participants felt having a centralized database to understand more about legislators’ positions and how to contact local legislators (technology, social networking sites) could be beneficial to counseling students and counseling professionals. According to Justice, “Having a centralized place to get to know more about the legislative efforts that are being put forth and understanding policy more.” Joshua stated, “It would have been useful to have someone come into one of our classes to discuss legislative advocacy.” Phillip stated, “Having lobbyists and maybe some counselors who have actually done this to tell their experiences.”

## Summary

In this chapter, I provided an analysis of the data I collected for this study. I began with an introduction, then discussed the interview setting, participant demographics, procedures used for data collection, procedures used for data analysis, and the results. In this study, I attempted to answer the research question: What meaning do counseling graduate students and recent graduates ascribe to their experiences of involvement in professional legislative advocacy?

A summary of the interviews and themes were provided to each of the eight participants to provide corrections and feedback. Participants were asked to respond with corrections and feedback promptly. However, none of the participants responded.

As a result of the data analysis, I discovered ten (10) common themes: awareness, faculty mentor, involvement, lack of academic policies, lack of confidence, student learning, and personal development,) legislative culture, motivation, student obstacles to professional legislative advocacy, and problematic issues with collaborative networks.

The interviews and data analysis revealed that counseling students who are involved in advocating on behalf of the counseling profession acquired their training by attending either a national or state Institute for Leadership Training. The meaning ascribed to professional legislative advocacy was unclear as the participants' perspectives and understanding of the topic were broad. However, each participant felt professional legislative was important to the future of the counseling profession.

The participants I interviewed had only one course or no courses that discussed advocating for the profession. Instead, the participants I interviewed said they had

mentors who encouraged them to become active in professional legislative advocacy. Multiple obstacles to students' involvement in professional legislative advocacy were identified during the interview process. Some of those obstacles noted were financial constraints, not knowing the importance of advocating on behalf of the profession, and time. Although the participants attributed different meanings to professional legislative advocacy, they all agreed that the topic should be woven into the counseling curriculum.

In the next chapter, I will discuss major findings from this research study, implications from the findings, and recommendations for further research. I will conclude with a discussion of how my findings related to social change, offer personal reflections, and a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the process by which counseling students engage in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession. In this chapter, I include a discussion of major findings as they relate to the literature on identifying the meaning counseling students ascribe to advocating for the counseling profession, factors that influence counselors to become involved in legislative advocacy. I also explored were the ways that counselors gain entry into legislative advocacy and additional research that helps to answer the research question: What meaning do counseling graduate students who engaged in the American Counseling Association Leadership Training Institute ascribe to their experiences? In the chapter, I also discuss how my research findings connect to motivation theories and academic policies. The chapter also includes the limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, and a brief conclusion to the study.

What motivates counseling students to engage in professional legislative advocacy is multidimensional. In analyzing data, I identified 10 themes:

1. awareness,
2. faculty mentor,
3. involvement,
4. incorporating professional legislative advocacy into the counseling curriculum,
5. lack of confidence,



6. student learning and personal development,
7. legislative culture,
8. motivation,
9. student obstacles to professional legislative advocacy, and
10. problems in working with other professions.

Some factors related primarily to having a mentor, some to direct involvement with the ACA Institute for Leadership Training, and some were a combination of the successful interplay of both. It is my belief that all of the 10 themes I discovered in this study help contribute to an environment where counseling students involved in professional legislative advocacy are challenged and can continuously grow.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

I developed the 10 common themes after interviewing the participants in this study. Professional legislative advocacy had a variety of meanings for each individual. These themes describe the motivating factors that contributed to counseling students becoming involved in professional legislative advocacy.

#### **Theme 1: Awareness**

Awareness of professional legislative advocacy was an essential element of motivation for the participants. This finding was congruent with historical literature that indicates that counseling students need to understand the importance of social change advocacy, more specifically professional legislative advocacy as it relates to the counseling profession, in order for counseling students to promote leadership and to influence legislators (Calley & Hawley, 2008). Awareness for this study's participants

was the result of their attending an ACA Institute for Leadership Training. Two participants were aware of professional legislative advocacy through their academic experiences prior to attending the ACA Institute for Leadership Training. Both Katarina and Monique reported having at least one course that briefly discussed advocating for the counseling profession. As the participants discussed their experiences of attending an institute, they said that they learned new material related to professional legislative advocacy and that they gained awareness of the multiple facets of professional legislative advocacy. Although the participants said that they obtained a greater understanding of professional legislative advocacy by attending the ACA Institute for Leadership Training, the participants of this study did not attribute their knowledge of professional legislative advocacy solely to attending an institute.

Lating et al. (2010) agreed that most counseling students are not privy to professional legislative advocacy involvement at the academic level; thus, they may not develop a focus on professional legislative advocacy as a core aspect of their professional identity. The findings in the Lating et al. study were congruent with the findings of this study in that most of the participants reported not having any courses that focused specifically on professional legislative advocacy. Two participants reported having one or two courses that briefly discussed professional legislative advocacy.

There were several contradictory statements made by the participants. For example, while some participants said they were exposed to professional legislative advocacy by someone else, their decision to get involved was their own idea, they stated. This contrast indicated that students can be exposed to professional legislative advocacy

at the academic level; however, the conscious decision to get involved in the process may be an individual choice.

Participants invariably described a genuine love for advocating on behalf of the counseling profession. Participants cited their experiences as empowering the counseling profession, promoting the profession and the skills counselors provide, and recognizing the importance and magnitude of having a voice within the legislative process. The participants expressed moderate satisfaction with information learned through attending the institute.

### **Theme 2: Faculty Mentor**

Monique expressed ownership of her professional legislative advocacy involvement, but the other participants referenced direct faculty-student mentorship as an important factor in their becoming involved in advocating for the counseling profession. One of the noticeable themes was the significance of mentors. Several scholars have suggested that course content should focus on counseling graduate students becoming involved in legislative advocacy (Grothaus et al., 2012; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Reiner et al., 2013; Singh, 2010). Graduate students often become involved in legislative advocacy activities for the counseling profession as a result of the influence of faculty members who are role models and mentors. As participants reflected on their experiences, they recalled the influence of counseling faculty members as the most significant factor for becoming involved in an ACA Institute for Leadership Training, which is consistent with the findings of several studies (Astin, 1993; Astin & Astin, 2000; Myers et al., 2002). The participants in these studies said that mentors helped them

become involved in professional legislative advocacy. The content of graduate courses within counseling graduate programs was not often cited in this study as factors that helped participants move toward advocating on behalf of the counseling profession. Their direct mentor relationship was a key factor in motivating them to become involved in professional legislative advocacy.

Having a sense of community with common goals and interests motivated the participants to continue professional legislative advocacy activities after graduation. Most of the participants noted they were encouraged to become involved in professional legislative advocacy by a mentor and by professors in their graduate programs. It is important for counseling faculty to get to know their students as individuals and to be able to understand what motivates their students (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). Counseling programs are designed to teach theory, practical applications, and competencies. Counseling faculty members should also model and mentor students into becoming professional legislative advocates.

### **Theme 3: Involvement**

Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy spent on professional legislative advocacy (Astin, 1993; Astin & Astin, 2000). In-classroom and out-of-classroom investments of time and energy related to professional legislative advocacy contributed to the participants' learning experiences. The participants noted receiving little to no classroom instruction related to professional legislative advocacy. Participants' involvement in the out-of-classroom learning experiences through the American Counseling Association Institute for Leadership Training provided them with

the only information and skills they gained as graduate students related to becoming involved in professional legislative advocacy activities.

The literature emphasized that the involvement of students in learning is directly related to the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1993). Historically, a student's growth and development are dependent on the amount of time spent involved in campus activities and time shared with faculty (Astin & Astin, 2000). The lack of student involvement in professional legislative advocacy continues to be prevalent in the counseling profession (Briggs et al., 2011; Remley & Herlihy, 2016). One participant cited *time* as a barrier to student involvement.

The results of this study align with the literature regarding the importance of the physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience. Toporek et al. (2009) suggested that most students are aware of the need to advocate on behalf of clients/students and school/community. However, the concept of advocating for the good of the public in general or for the counseling profession is not as obvious to them. As a result, the shift from the theory to the practice of involvement is often difficult to achieve.

The findings in this study are consistent with the literature as it relates to a student's degree of involvement (Astin, 1993; Astin & Astin, 2000; Myers et al., 2002). The results of these three studies indicated that a student's degree of involvement will develop over time and a student's involvement is contingent on his or her level of motivation. Participants said that their involvement in the American Counseling

Association Institute for Leadership Training enhanced their learning and professional development. The participants indicated the role of a professional legislative advocate should be a part of a counselor's identity. The participants in this study agreed that they had a mentor who had extensive insight into professional legislative advocacy, which prompted their involvement.

#### **Theme 4: Incorporating Legislative Advocacy Into the Curriculum**

The world reported one major structural barrier to gaining knowledge of professional legislative advocacy was the lack of teaching students how to be advocates for the profession within the counseling curriculum. In previous literature, a commonly cited barrier related to professional legislative advocacy was incorporating legislative advocacy into the curriculum (Bemak et al., 2011). The participants agreed that counseling academic programs need to incorporate information and skills related to professional legislative advocacy into the counseling curriculum. Two participants identified one or two courses that addressed the concept of legislative advocacy but indicated the courses provided little knowledge or skills to prepare students to dialogue with legislators as advocates for the counseling profession. The literature indicated that advocacy concepts should be systematically infused into the counseling graduate program curriculum to create a positive mindset and attitude toward professional legislative advocacy (Cooks et al., 2015; Ratts & Pederson, 2014; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). More specific training on professional legislative advocacy should be added into the curriculum.

Bemak et al. (2011) suggested that from the time students enter a graduate counseling program, they are encouraged to think critically and to question all aspects of counseling theoretical tenets, applied concepts, and research outcomes. Furthermore, from the inception of their graduate programs, counseling students should also be exposed to basic tenets of professional legislative advocacy that will help foster an attitude for service extending beyond clients/students and the school/community. In spite of the literature citing the need for graduate students' involvement in advocacy, counseling programs have been slow to incorporate this learning into the counseling curriculum (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Toporek et al., 2009).

At one time, the advocacy movement primarily focused on advocating for clients/students and school/community to reduce barriers inhibiting personal, academic, and career development (Grothaus et al., 2012; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Toporek et al., 2009). In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift for counselors to direct their advocacy efforts toward legislative advocacy that supports the counseling profession. For example, counselors and counseling students are encouraged to advocate for the profession of counseling to help impact policy changes (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). Students entering the profession as well as current professional counselors are encouraged to advocate for the profession at the government level to ensure the continuation of the counseling profession as it relates to third-party reimbursement for their services, increased access to counselors to be able to deliver mental health care services, and increased funding for school counselors (Nilsson et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Lating et al. (2010) agreed that counseling students should be introduced to professional legislative advocacy and its core beliefs, purposes, and objectives during orientation. Grothaus et al. (2012) discussed the need to integrate advocacy into strength-based counseling interventions. Training counselors to become involved in professional legislative advocacy is becoming increasingly important in the profession of counseling. Establishing educational standards across counseling academic programs provides an opportunity to infuse the topic into the counseling curriculum.

Mallinckrodt et al. (2014) and McClintock (2003) have suggested that adopting a model similar to the Scientist-Practitioner-Advocacy Training or the Scholar-Practitioner-Leadership Model at the academic level could be beneficial in assisting counseling students and counseling programs in fostering a life-long commitment to leadership and advocacy; more specifically, professional legislative advocacy. Participants in this study indicated that counseling programs should integrate more coursework on the topic of professional legislative advocacy and provide legislative activities assignments in the classroom setting.

### **Theme 5: Lack of Confidence**

The theme, lack of confidence, emerged as participants reflected on their experiences in speaking with legislators. Having limited knowledge and skills related to professional legislative advocacy contributed to their feelings of being unprepared. The participants cited “learning a new language” salient to legislators and “resistant legislators” as two primary causes attributed to the participants’ low confidence level. The findings are congruent with the views expressed by Dollarhide, Clevenger, Dogan,



and Edwards (2016) and Toporek et al. (2009). For example, Amber stated, “In talking with legislators, at first I was only concerned with remembering facts, what to say. Honestly, it was kind of intimidating to me. I didn’t really understand the process.” Similar to Amber’s experience, Katarina said, “I was really intimidated at the thought of meeting with someone and not knowing what to say and afraid that I wouldn’t be able to make a difference.”

According to Toporek et al. (2009), “...human relations, group dynamics, assessment, multicultural issues, and lifespan development...” (p. 265) courses teach counseling students skills that are transferable; making counselors great potential advocates for the profession. Yet, counseling programs and counselor educators have been reluctant to infuse professional legislative advocacy into the curriculum which could lead to a greater confidence in counseling students’ ability to advocate on behalf of the profession.

As professional legislative advocacy has become a realization of a counselor’s identity, counseling students must see counseling faculty model what a professional legislative advocate/social change agent looks like. Toporek and colleagues (2009) noted that counselors possess key skills such as critical thinking, active listening, ability to assess and dialogue, as well as other skills that could provide a sound foundation for legislative advocacy. Connecting skills that students are already learning to professional legislative advocacy in the classroom setting could increase counseling students’ confidence when speaking with legislators or their staff members.

Cook et al. (2015) said that counseling technique courses emphasize various interventions that could be used to prepare counseling graduate students for legislative involvement. Brubaker et al. (2010) agreed that the skills that students learn can help prepare them for advocating for the counseling profession. Yet, no one has tied course content to legislative advocacy. In a study by Pieterse and colleagues (2008), it was determined that most counseling program syllabi focused extensively on multicultural training, but put little emphasis on advocacy for the profession. The researchers found that 59% of the syllabi stated goals related to social justice and 48% included content matter related to social inequity. The raters of the data determined that 92% of the syllabi infused multiculturalism and/or social justice. However, none of the syllabi included content related to advocating for the counseling profession. The participants in this study agreed that infusing professional legislative advocacy into the counseling curriculum is a solution to developing counseling students' attitudes toward professional legislative advocacy.

### **Theme 6: Student Learning and Personal Development**

Professional ethical codes and CACREP Standards (2017) mandate that counseling programs incorporate advocating for the profession into the curriculum (ACA, 2017); yet, they do not provide guidelines as to how to incorporate such learning. A major theme that emerged from this study was how the participants learned about advocating for the counseling profession and how it impacted their personal development and their professional identity. Brubaker et al. (2010) provided a case example of how counselor educators can integrate social justice into a counseling theories course to

increase social and counseling awareness and for students to acquire knowledge and skills necessary to become social change advocates. However, the participants in this study discussed the need for more experiential learning and personal development; specifically focusing on professional legislative advocacy. Brandon stated, “I think we should be preparing students and ACA regions should be providing more training for professional legislative advocacy.”

Dollarhide et al. (2016) described how participants developed their social justice identity. However, the literature does not describe or offer suggestions on how to prepare participants for professional legislative advocacy activities. Participants of this study suggested that experiential activities should be used to engage student learning and personal development. The participants were able to identify several professional legislative advocacy experiential activities to promote student learning and personal development. Examples included assignments, demonstration videos, lectures, role-plays, and workshops. Joshua suggested, “...having someone come into one of our classes to discuss legislative advocacy.” Astin (1993) agreed that the more time and energy a student spends on an activity, the more they are apt to stay involved. A deeper indication is the need for counselor educators to assess the personal development desires of their students. More research is needed to determine if the amount of in-classroom activities or experiential learning increases student involvement in professional legislative advocacy.

### **Theme 7: Legislative Culture**

The participants of this study expressed a need for a culture within the counseling profession that encourages legislative advocacy. As stated by one participant, Katarina, “I think the most difficult part is learning the terminology. It’s a very different way of thinking and a different set of information I received within my counseling programs.” Joshua expressed, “Adapting a legislative culture may influence counseling students to stick with professional legislative advocacy beyond the academic setting.” An example of creating a legislative culture within the academic setting was illustrated at George Mason University (Bemak et al., 2011). Students there were required to attend an orientation and agree to the mission of George Mason University which included professional social justice advocacy through course content and mentorship.

Counselors and counseling students are encouraged to advocate for the profession of counseling to help impact policy changes salient to the profession (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). Lating et al. (2010) agreed that counseling students should be introduced to advocacy and its core beliefs, purpose, and objectives during orientation. In addition, advocacy concepts should be systematically infused into the counseling graduate program curriculum to create a positive mindset and attitude toward legislative advocacy (Cooks et al., 2015; Ratts & Pederson, 2014; Ratts & Wayman, 2014). At the inception of their graduate programs, counseling students should be exposed to basic tenets of legislative advocacy that will help foster in them an attitude for service extending beyond clients/students and the school/community (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Toporek et al., 2009). In spite of the growing literature for an increased need for

graduate students' involvement in professional legislative advocacy, counseling programs, and counselor educators have been slow to develop a legislative culture that promotes professional legislative activity for counseling students.

Thus, indicating a greater need for counseling programs and counselor educators to develop a legislative culture both in and out of the classroom setting. Educating counseling students on how legislation is passed and how it impacts the counseling profession might encourage students to get involved as students, as well as carry that attitude beyond graduation. In an interview, Sweeny advised that preparing counselors-in-training at the academic level increases social justice awareness, makes students better advocates, and promotes an affinity for professional legislative advocacy beyond graduation (Kress & Barrio-Minton, 2015).

### **Theme 8: Motivation**

To gain a better understanding as to what motivates counseling student toward advocating for the profession, counselor educators must first understand how counseling students' personal values and beliefs drive their political action. According to Astin's Student Involvement Theory (1984), a student's degree of involvement will develop over time and a student's involvement is determined based on his or her level of motivation. Using Astin's Student Involvement Theory, Burch et al., (2015) explored themes related to social justice involvement to develop and psychometrically test a student involvement survey (four-factor model of student involvement). The author's hypothesis was congruent with the findings that student involvement consists of the separate constructs of emotional involvement, physical involvement, cognitive

involvement in class, and cognitive involvement out of class. Although these findings are generally compatible with ideas expressed by Astin (1984) and Burch et al. (2015), there are several areas in which they differ from the findings in this study.

The participants attributed their involvement in advocating on behalf of the counseling profession to the encouragement or guidance of a mentor, out-of-class involvement, and personal values. Some participants attended regional training, state training, or the annual American Counseling Association's Institute for Leadership Training. Of the eight participants interviewed for this study, only one participant, Katrina, indicated her motivation was self-motivated as illustrated in Table 3. The issues that drove the participants toward professional legislative advocacy involvement varied in nature. When participants spoke with legislators during the Institute for Leadership Training, the issues addressed were developed by the Institute for Leadership Training team and did not deviate from the institute's primary issues for the current year. All of the participants, except one, stated that the primary issue that led them to advocate on behalf of the profession was greater access to mental health care. It is expected that the student's motivation will change over time as will their level of involvement (Astin, 1984, 1999; Burch et al., 2015).

Table 3

*Participants' Motivation*

Participant	Issues/Drive	Motivation(s)
A Joshua	promote the profession; skills we provide; access to mental health care; medical benefits	family values; mentor
B Amber	access to mental health care; ability to work; security	family values; mentor
C Phillip	recognition; mental health access; reimbursement; ensure the longevity of the counseling profession	family values, religion; mentor
D Brandon	empowerment; reimbursement; gun violence, mental health access	heritage; family values; mentor
E Isabelle	Empowerment	religion; mentor
F Justice	promoting the profession; ability to work; recognition; empowering; human trafficking; reimbursement; mental health access	heritage; mentor
G Katarina	mental health access; reimbursement; empowering the profession	self-motivated; mentor
H Monique	mental health access; reimbursement; human trafficking	heritage; self-motivated

These findings are consistent with previous research (Burch et al., 2015). Hence, counseling students might be more likely to get involved in professional legislative advocacy if they see faculty involvement, if it is incorporated in the classroom curriculum, or if they are self-motivated. However, interacting with faculty appears to be the more significant predictor of a counseling student's motivation to become involved in professional legislative advocacy activities.

### **Theme 9: Student Obstacles to Professional Legislative Advocacy**

When students are motivated to become involved in legislative advocacy, there are obstacles that are inevitable. The participants identified several obstacles faced by counseling students when gaining entry into professional legislative advocacy. However, the literature does not focus on the specific obstacles students face when getting involved in professional legislative advocacy. Instead, much of the literature has focused on advocating for clients/students and school/community to reduce barriers that stunt personal, academic, and career development of the clients served by counselors (Grothaus et al., 2012; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Toporek et al., 2009). However, counselors and counseling students have been encouraged by Ratts and Hutchins (2009) and Ratts and Wayman (2014) to advocate for the profession of counseling to help impact policy changes salient to the profession. But, there is no roadmap on how to gain entry into professional legislative advocacy. Monique stated, "Having to talk to a third-parties and navigating through the system to try to contact legislators" as a barrier to professional legislative advocacy. Justice stated, "The financial strain and time strain are obstacles. Without the support of agencies that will assist with getting students to these meetings,



obstacles will always be there.” Katarina said, “I think one of the biggest obstacles is refusing responsibility. I think it’s easy for students to think someone else can do it or that someone else is currently doing it, so they don’t have to.”

This theme uncovered several obstacles that students face when it comes to gaining entry into professional legislative advocacy. The participants were not able to agree upon one single obstacle that inhibits counseling students to become involved in advocating on behalf of the counseling profession. Three overriding factors identified in this study included “lack of professional legislative advocacy awareness,” “financial strain,” and “time constraints.” More research is needed to determine which obstacles deter counseling students from getting involved in professional legislative advocacy.

#### **Theme 10: Problems in Working With Other Professions**

According to Reiner et al. (2013), the Joint Commission on Interprofessional Affairs (JCIA) comprised of the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Nursing Association was established in 1982 to develop common goals among the four major professions. Reiner et al. (2013) indicated that the four organizations deliberately and inadvertently kept professional counselors from contributing to the dialogue. However, the JCIA no longer exists. At the present time, there is little or no coordination among mental health professional organizations related to legislative advocacy.

In a study by Myers et al. (2002), the authors highlighted the continued lack of understanding of counseling credentials and the importance of educating other mental

health professionals about the roles and competencies of professional counselors. The authors suggested that counselors can be more effective advocates for clients and the counseling profession when the profession is recognized by other mental health professions, as well as by legislators and policymakers. The participants in this study found a lack of community support in working with other mental health professionals to advocate for common goals. For example, participants noted that other mental health professionals have said that “counselors are not important.” Additionally, they expressed that “counselors are not respected by other mental health professionals.” Several participants discussed their frustration about having to educate legislators on the distinctions among the various mental health professionals and how counselors provide relief to the community. Participants also noted the total disregard for the counseling profession by other mental health professionals as a problem in working with other professions on legislative issues.

If other mental health professionals do not view the counseling profession as a reputable profession, this might sway how legislators interact with counselors or the decisions by legislators not to pass legislation that positively impacts the counseling profession as a whole. Collaborating with other mental health professionals could minimize confusion and build an alliance. Multiple perspectives, skills, and backgrounds represented in a professionally diverse group could facilitate critical analysis of best practices and could lead to creative and positive involvement with legislators.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Chapter 1 highlighted the limitations of this study. This section will discuss the ramifications of these limitations on the study. All participants had a different preconceived meaning of the operational definitions that may have affected their input; thus making it difficult to replicate this study. Another limitation was that participants appeared to not be engaged in the research process. For example, none of the participants completed and returned the demographic surveys I asked them to complete prior to the interviews, and none of them reviewed the interview summaries or proposed themes that I provided them with. This suggested that the participants were not committed to the research project, even though they did participate in the interviews.

Transferability is another limitation of this study. It may be difficult to apply the data of this study to another study or setting and produce similar results. Technology was another limitation to the study as problems arose with connectivity during the interviews with two of the participants. Interview bias was another limitation. To avoid interview bias, I remained in the role of a student, utilized a semi-structured interview protocol, and used non-judgmental language throughout the process.

The next step in studying the phenomenon of graduate counseling students becoming involved in legislative advocacy would be to build a stronger overall evidence base that legislative advocacy is effective. There are still gaps in the knowledge base that need to be filled to truly understand the development of professional advocacy. The next section addresses recommendations for further research on legislative advocacy in the counseling profession.

## **Recommendations**

Advocacy in the counseling profession dates back to the inception of the counseling field. However, the application of professional legislative advocacy has not been fully conceptualized; thus, providing many opportunities for further research exploring professional legislative advocacy involvement. For example, there is a need for further research examining how variations of professional legislative advocacy may influence counseling faculty, educational settings, and CACREP standards. Therefore, a quantitative study measuring the attitudes of counselor educators toward becoming involved in legislative advocacy may be insightful. Researchers could create a new instrument measuring professional legislative advocacy readiness to evaluate counselor educators' readiness to engage in legislative advocacy. I also recommend exploring whether mentoring and modeling professional legislative advocacy influence students' engagement in legislative advocacy activities. A phenomenological study on counselor educators' lived experiences when advocating for the counseling profession with legislators could provide further insight into their stand on professional advocacy.

Further research analyzing the lived experiences of counseling graduate students when advocating for the counseling profession with legislators is needed. Participants in this study revealed variations in how much training in professional legislative advocacy they received. Defining and exploring what it means to be competent in professional legislative advocacy is recommended.

All participants in this study noted the importance of having professional legislative advocacy incorporated into the counseling graduate curriculum. Students need

to learn about the historical roots of professional legislative advocacy, how to gain entry into professional legislative advocacy, and its importance to the counseling profession. I recommend exploring whether the pedagogy of professional legislative advocacy from a historical context supports students being involved in professional legislative advocacy or whether course content in legislative advocacy results in students becoming involved in the process.

All of the participants in this study noted their desire to have professional legislative advocacy in their graduate courses to better prepare them for professional legislative advocacy involvement. It may be valuable to examine whether counseling academic programs adopting a model for professional legislative advocacy is beneficial. As stated in chapter 2, adopting a model similar to the Scientist-Practitioner-Advocacy Training Model (Mallinckrodt et al., 2014) or the Scholar-Practitioner-Leadership Model (McClintock, 2003) at the academic level might be beneficial in assisting counseling students and counseling programs foster a life-long commitment to leadership and advocacy. I also recommend conducting a study using an instrument to examine legislative advocacy awareness, comfort level, and values toward legislative involvement among counseling students.

Two of the participants in this study recommended including professional legislative advocacy as a CACREP Standard. CACREP Standards (2016) state: (a) “advocacy processes needed to address institutional and social barriers that impede access, equity, and success for clients” (p. 9); (b) “current topical and political issues in counseling and how those issues affect the daily work of counselors and the counseling

profession” (p. 36); and (c) “the role of counselors and counselor educators advocating on behalf of the profession and professional identity” (p. 37). As such, CACREP Standards provide the counseling field professionals with theoretical guidelines, however, all of the participants in this study noted experiential components of implementing these CACREP Standards are lacking. I recommend that counseling graduate programs incorporate experiential activities such as letter writing, legislative role plays, video demonstrations, and inviting experienced legislative advocates as guest speakers in the classroom. Providing experiential activities in counselor education classrooms could help counselor educators prepare counseling students to speak with legislators, understand how legislative advocacy looks, and increase counseling students’ confidence levels when speaking with legislators. The effectiveness of these activities could be measured in quantitative studies.

## **Implications**

### **Individual Implications**

My study offers evidence for increased training in professional legislative advocacy at the academic level (Toporek et al., 2009). The study appears to support the argument for a change in preparing counseling graduate students for professional legislative advocacy while they are graduate students, helping them to develop their skills to organize rallies; provide ways to protest; create grass-roots organizations; communicate effectively with legislators, and learn how to collaborate with other stakeholders (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). Awareness of legislative trends helps students identify issues that impact the counseling profession and promotes social justice

advocacy competencies inherent to ACA's Code of Ethics, Section F.7.e. This section states that counselor educators are to inform counseling students and supervisees of their ethical obligations (ACA, 2014). According to Stylianos and Kehyayan (2012), legislative advocacy promotes "substantive systemic gains" (p. 116). Counselors may begin to incorporate professional legislative advocacy as a part of their counselor identity. Moreover, counselors might realize the valuable role they can make in implementing systematic change for the counseling profession and the clients they serve. Additionally, professional legislative advocacy provides a new area for continuing education. Continuing education provides counselors with skills to enhance their knowledge base, while simultaneously offering continuing education hours needed for licensure.

### **Organizational Implications**

If the tentative conclusions of my study are confirmed by further research, there will be a case for adopting a legislative advocacy model or legislative advocacy guidelines to mobilize change. Attention to macro and policy practice, as well as effects of proposed legislative bills on practice, provides a rationale for the adaptation of a legislative advocacy model (Stylianos & Kehyayab, 2012). I believe that the divisions of the American Counseling Association and the Public Policy and Legislation Committee should establish a task force to develop a professional legislative advocacy model for the counseling profession.

### **Implications for Counseling Graduate Programs**

Educating students on the importance and history of the counseling profession may help students develop a passion and commitment to professional legislative advocacy. Professional legislative advocacy is vital in the development of policies and laws that impact the mental health of our nation. My study offers supportive evidence for empowering students with the knowledge and training that would allow them to become better-informed legislative advocates for the counseling profession. Students can develop skills to both counsel client and become professional advocates. Students who engage in legislative advocacy will develop a sense for new legislative trends that extend beyond graduation. Students who develop a passion for professional legislative advocacy may become practitioners with a passion for professional legislative advocacy. Incorporating professional legislative advocacy into the curriculum of counseling graduate programs could ensure counseling programs adhere to professional standards and ethical codes. Counselor educators will need to research best practices for incorporating professional legislative advocacy into their programs.

### **Societal Implications**

Professional legislative advocacy is one component of social justice with the perspective that emphasizes societal concerns, including issues of equity, self-determination, interdependence, and social responsibility (Vera & Speight, 2003). Counselors are expected to be aware of how their negative reactions toward persons from racial and ethnic groups other than their own may prove detrimental to the counseling relationship and have knowledge of how sociopolitical influences (e.g.,



poverty, racism, and stereotyping) may affect the self-esteem and self-concept of racial and ethnic minority clients.

According to Johnson, Epp, Culp, Williams, and McAllister (2013), professional counselors are more accessible in rural and minority areas as compared to psychologists and psychiatrists. The bipartisan legislation, S. 562 (addendum to S. 604), covers medically-necessary outpatient mental health services for licensed professional counselors and marriage and family therapists under the same terms, conditions, and reimbursement rates of clinical social workers. When professional counselors, counselor educators, and counseling students advocate on behalf of the profession, they increase access to mental health services to the general public, thus, increasing the viability of the counseling profession.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate students and recent graduates who have been involved in professional legislative advocacy. I utilized a phenomenological design and semi-structured interviews to uncover themes associated with professional legislative advocacy involvement of counseling master's and doctoral level students or recent professionals who had graduated within the last two years (Bryman, 2015). I incorporated a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to increase the understanding of counseling students' motivation and attitudes regarding legislative advocacy. Ratts and Hutchins (2009) noted the importance of political action and legislation, particularly advocacy efforts, becoming a real part of the counselor's existence. This study contributed to the growing body of

literature of this new phenomenon. Based on my findings, I suggested that counselor educators incorporate professional legislative advocacy into the counseling curriculum to help counseling students develop a mindset toward social justice involvement, foster skills to speak with legislators, and promote the counseling profession as a whole. The results of this study suggested that direct faculty-student mentoring and modeling foster greater potential for students later becoming involved in legislative advocacy for the counseling profession.

In this study, counseling students emphasized the multi-faceted necessities of professional legislative advocacy. Even those participants in the study who did not have a clear understanding of the essential elements of professional legislative advocacy felt that the learning materials from American Counseling Association Institute for Leadership Training were beneficial in helping them speak with legislators. Throughout most interviews, the participants said that their involvement in professional legislative advocacy was *empowering*. While some participants admitted to feeling intimidated prior to attending an American Counseling Association Institute for Leadership Training, participants still felt their time and effort in speaking with legislators or their staff members was worthwhile.

Although advocating for the profession is essential for the future of the counseling profession, professional legislative advocacy has received little systematic attention (Myers et al., 2002). Despite the findings in this study, there still is much to understand related to legislative advocacy in the counseling profession. As Haight stated in 1982, which still is true today, "If we as a profession are to continue to have an impact on the

passage of helpful legislation and the modification of oversights of laws, then individual counselors have to be knowledgeable, skillful, and active in the political arena” (p. 605).

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

My interview with participants will consist of a brief introduction followed by the definition of professional legislative advocacy or direct lobbying which will then lead to the central question. The central question will be followed by open-ended sub-questions. If a sub-question has already been addressed by a participant before it was asked, it will not be asked. If emergent themes arise, I will utilize additional open-ended questions to explore the themes.

### I. Initial procedures

- Purpose of Study –I would like to thank you for choosing to participate in this interview as I know your time is valuable. I would like to explore the lived experiences of counseling students and recent graduates who have been involved in professional legislative advocacy. The purpose of this Hermeneutic phenomenology study is to gain an understanding of the meaning counseling students ascribe to their involvement in professional legislative advocacy for the counseling profession.
- Obtain Completed Forms
- Informed Consent
- Consent to Record Interview (Video or Audio only)
- Demographic Information Sheet – give an opportunity to discuss the information sheet and add information if the participant chooses to do so.

## II. Introduction

- Professional legislative advocacy is an attempt to influence legislation by stating a position on a specific proposed statute to legislators or other government employees who participate in the formulation of legislation (Drutman, 2010). Over the past seven years, ACA staff members and leaders have campaigned and met with legislators on Capitol Hill advocating for issues such as the inclusion of mental health access to seniors (S. 562), funding for school counselors, increased hiring of school counselors, and Medicare reimbursement for LPCs and MFTs (H. R. 2759).
- Initial Question
- I will ask questions and subsequent questions listed in chapter 3.

## III. Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Thank you for your time and participating in this interview. You will be provided by email message with a summary of this interview to review to ensure what you said is documented correctly. I will make corrections if needed. I will also contact you by email message once I have developed some themes regarding this topic based on my interviews with you and other counselors and will ask you to react to the themes I have developed.

## Appendix B: Request for Participation

Date:

Name of Participant:

Region:

Dear (Participant Name),

My name is Nakpangi Thomas and I am a doctoral student in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Walden University. I am conducting dissertation research on professional legislative advocacy, a term used to describe the efforts to influence the introduction, enactment, or modification of legislation. Even though there is a growing body of research in the field of legislative advocacy, little is known about what influences student involvement in professional legislative advocacy. *Involvement in this study could help the counseling profession attain better research, data, and evidence-based practices for helping counselors and counselor educators better understand how to encourage future counselors to be more involved in professional legislative advocacy. Therefore, assist in developing a curriculum that fosters a professional legislative advocacy mindset.*

This study has been approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board and the reference number is IRB # 04-09-18-0324998 and the expiration date is April 8, 2019. I would appreciate any help you might be able to offer in completing this study. All information gathered during this study will be held in strictest confidence assuring that no one's identity is revealed. Participants would need to meet with me one or two times either via phone or video conference for a total commitment of approximately 30 – 60 minutes. Participants can determine how we communicate. Participants will not be pressured to share any information or experience that they are not comfortable sharing and are also free to discontinue involvement at any time. The meetings are designed to help me learn about the dynamics of each individual's experience of involvement in professional legislative advocacy.

Please feel free to contact me or provide me a time when I can contact you to schedule an initial meeting. My telephone number is [redacted] or you can email me at [redacted]. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration!

Respectfully,

Nakpangi Thomas, MS, LPC, CT

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## Appendix C: Demographic Questions

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Education Level: Master's  Doctorate Gender:  Male  Female

Ethnicity:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian or Pacific Islander             | <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> African American/Black (non-Hispanic) | <input type="checkbox"/> White            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Native American                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Latino/Hispanic  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Puerto Rican                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify): |

\_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been practicing counseling? \_\_\_\_\_

What jobs have you held other than counseling? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Have you participated in any of the following social justice or lobbying activities for the counseling profession?

 grass-roots organizer  community organizer  letter-writing  protest  calling legislators  other: \_\_\_\_\_

Whom do you consider to be the main target(s) of your advocacy efforts?

- 
- school funding
- 
- veterans
- 
- children
- 
- third-party reimbursement
- 
- gun violence
- 
- 
- access to mental health care
- 
- disabled populations
- 
- human trafficking
- 
- 
- other: \_\_\_\_\_