Developing the Personnel to Meet the Needs of Persons with Disabilities in Rural Settings Through Online Learning

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Overview

The functions and knowledge requirements of rehabilitation counselors have changed over the years and have been surveyed on multiple occasions. A recent 2013 study (Leahy, Chan, Sung, & Kim, 2013) examined the important knowledge requirements and functions of Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRC). The knowledge domains identified as critical to rehabilitation counseling practice were (1) job placement, consultation, and assessment; (2) case management and community resources; (3) individual, group, and family counseling and evidence-based practice; and (4) medical, functional, and psychological aspects of disability. The three major job functions identified were (1) job placement, vocational assessment, and career counseling; (2) counseling, psychosocial interventions, and case management; and (3) demand-side employment, workers' compensation, and forensic services.

Although knowledge requirements are consistent across geographical locations, the reality of practicing in a rural environment may impact the manner in which counselors carry out the functions of a rehabilitation counselor. For example, lack of appropriate community resources and available professionals to serve the needs of individuals with disabilities within rural settings can result in delay or less than adequate delivery of services. Referral to medical, psychological, and similar service professionals may not be possible or may result in the need for the consumer to travel significant distances outside of the rural area to obtain such services. Lack of local educational institutions to provide training for consumers may impact the way in which a case is managed or a rehabilitation plan is implemented. These challenges require innovative thinking and training to surmount. Counselor education and training in the knowledge domains must include focus on serving individuals with disabilities across geographical locations including rural locations. However, rehabilitation counselors must still meet the requirements of a qualified rehabilitation counselor. In order to meet the educational and training needs of rural rehabilitation counselors, new methods of training delivery should be implemented. Online learning is one approach to ensure the attainment and proficiency in the important knowledge domains of rehabilitation counselors in rural settings.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the challenges of serving a rural population and obtaining the training needed to provide services. The specific needs of adult learners in rural areas will be addressed. One approach to the preparation of students to practice in rural settings is the provision of online higher education.

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Learning Objective

By the end of this chapter, the reader should be able to:

1. Identify the professional challenges of working in rural areas.
2. Identify the reasons for personnel shortage of qualified rehabilitation counselors in state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies.
3. Identify characteristics of rural adult learners.
4. Identify ways in which distance education can be used to resolve the shortage of qualified rural rehabilitation counselors.

Introduction

The mission of the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program is to promote independence and the full integration of individuals into mainstream society, ideally in a state of optimal economic self-sufficiency (Rubin, Chan, & Thomas, 2003). The 1992 amendments to the 1973 Rehabilitation Act took steps to ensure the quality of services provided to persons with disabilities by establishing qualifications for rehabilitation counselors. Under these amendments, states were required to identify and define criteria necessary to be considered a "qualified rehabilitation counselor."

An existing standard of professional status in the field was identified as the Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) national certification. Since 1993, individuals taking the CRC exam must have a graduate degree in rehabilitation counseling or a related field and pass the certifying exam (Saunders, Barros-Bailey, Chapman, & Nunez, 2009). Many states adopted the CRC as the standard for being a qualified rehabilitation counselor. Alternative standards accepted included CRC eligibility, a master's in rehabilitation counseling, a master's in counseling or a related field, state licensure as a licensed rehabilitation counselor or licensed professional counselor, etc. Based on a review of the state plans, the majority of states require at least a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, counseling, or a related field to be considered a "qualified" rehabilitation counselor.

Table 34.1 identifies the state requirements based on the 2015 state plans submitted to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) (US Department of Education, 2015).

National shortage of rehabilitation counselors The 2015 state plans also detailed the number of personnel by category that provide vocational rehabilitation services to the public, the current number of vacancies, and the projected number of vacancies for qualified rehabilitation counselors between 2015 and 2020. The state plans show there were 8910 rehabilitation counselor positions with state VR agencies throughout the nation. Eight hundred seventytwo (9.8%) of those positions were vacant and available. The projected number of vacancies for the next 5 years was 2894. Assuming the number of projected vacancies was not due to an increase in the number of positions, this would represent a 32.5% turnover rate within the state agencies between 2015 and 2020. This is an alarming rate of decline in qualified state agency personnel available to provide rehabilitation services.

Further compounding the shortage of qualified personnel is the fact that the number of graduates from programs in rehabilitation counseling seeking employment with state rehabilitation agencies is declining due to the availability of alternative employment options (e.g., private practice, colleges and universities, mental health centers, insurance companies, community rehabilitation agencies, federal veterans administration vocational rehabilitation program, etc.) A 3-year summary from summer 2008 through spring 2011 by the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE) revealed that 62.4–64.1% of graduates sought employment outside of state rehabilitation agencies. The Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2014 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014) revealed that only 14.6% of rehabilitation counselors nationwide were employed by state agencies. The decline in available qualified personnel combined with the demand for agency rehabilitation counselors in the next 5 years poses a threat of decreasing quality and quantity of services to consumers with disabilities.

Table 34.1   State standards for meeting qualified rehabilitation counselor status

2015 qualified rehabilitation counselor standard	Number of states accepting standard
Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC)	15
CRC eligible	14
Master's in rehabilitation counseling	24
Master's + CRC	3
Master's + CRC eligible	6
Master's in counseling	1
Master's in counseling + additional courses	4
Master's in related	8
Master's in related + additional courses	7
State licensed rehabilitation counselor	3
State licensed rehabilitation counselor eligible	1
Bachelor in rehabilitation + experience	4
Current master's student	1
Other	2

Note: some states accept multiple standards

Shortage of rural rehabilitation counselors The demand for rehabilitation counselors, similar to other social service and counseling disciplines, is more acute in rural areas. Frequently identified causes (e.g., aging out of professionals, relocating, or securing alternate employment outside of the state agency due to higher salaries) may be responsible for the shortage of rural counselors. However, other factors may also be present. Faubion, Palmer, and Andrew (2001) examined the demographic characteristics of counselors in urban versus rural areas and large versus small offices. The dimensions of age, years of education, years of experience, years in office, gender, major, licensure/certification, having a disability, and race were studied. No significant differences were found in these demographic attributes between the groups. If demographic attributes are not contributing to the decision to work in a rural location, perhaps intrinsic and extrinsic factors can account for the choice. Studies (Faubion et al., 2001; Oetinger, Flanagan, & Weaver, 2014) have surveyed the perceptions of mental health counselors working in rural areas. Rural counselors reported factors that drew them to living and practicing in rural areas include slower pace of life, natural surroundings for outdoor leisure activities, less crime, strong community support, independence, a strong work ethic, a desire to work with diverse disabilities and underserved populations, and prior experience living or working in a rural area.

Challenges to rural counseling Factors that negatively impact the decision to practice in rural areas may be the unique challenges faced by rural counselors. Challenges faced by counselors working in rural areas include demographic characteristics of clients, small town attitudes, service delivery issues, and professional barriers. Rural counselors report their caseloads are overly composed of individuals who are living at poverty levels and clients who have lower levels of education. Small rural communities often have negative attitudes about disability, a stigma associated with seeking counseling services, and a reluctance to accept or suspicion of "outsiders." The lack of diversity or the acceptance of diversity within rural communities can also be a barrier for counselors desiring a practice with diverse populations. Population diversity in rural areas is increasing, however. The US Department of Agriculture (2015) reported that 21% of rural residents in 2014 were racial and ethnic minorities (http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/detail.aspx?chartId=59547). The percent of minorities in rural areas was previously reported to be 19% in 2009 (http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/176091/page7.pdf).

Heavy caseloads and the lack of local supporting and referral resources such as healthcare providers, mental health facilities, training facilities, employment opportunities, and social support services present problems with service delivery. Lack of public transportation or adequate means of transportation is another issue that is commonly identified as a barrier to providing services to individuals in rural areas (Arnold, Seekins, & Nelson, 1997; Faubion et al., 2001; Lustig, Strauser, & Weems, 2004).

Counselors report professional barriers that interfere with providing services. Professional barriers identified by many counselors include the major problem of establishing boundaries and precluding dual relationships within a small community. Ethically, counselors should not engage in dual relationships with clients. However, in a small rural community, a counselor could easily find that clients are also members of the counselor's church, parent organization, or other social organizations. There is a general lack of anonymity. The counselor must walk an ethical tightrope of maintaining professional boundaries in these situations (see Chap. 6 for additional discussion on ethics). Another professional barrier is the lack of readily available professional colleagues, supervisors, and mentors with which to communicate. This leaves counselors feeling at risk and can result in feelings of professional isolation (Breen & Drew, 2012; Oetinger et al., 2014). Finally, rural counselors often find that professional development and continuing education opportunities are not available locally and require that the counselors travel to metropolitan areas to remain current in their profession.

Training counselors to practice in rural settings Due to the shortage of qualified rehabilitation counseling professionals in rural areas, it is sometimes necessary for state agencies to hire personnel with lesser qualifications with the goal of securing additional training for those counselors to enable them to meet the qualification standards. This goal is complicated by (1) the lack of convenient local training and educational programs, (2) the time constraints of completing educational courses while maintaining full-time employment, and (3) the financial demands on personnel of paying for additional education.

Currently, there are 97 accredited graduate programs in rehabilitation counseling throughout the nation. Most of these are located in metropolitan areas. Individuals currently employed in a rural setting may not be able to commute to campus for the 2–3 years of full-time attendance required to complete the degree. State agency staff seeking to obtain their graduate degree in order to meet qualification standards are required to obtain their degree within a certain time frame and find it difficult to attend full-time courses while maintaining full-time employment. Although some state agencies have funded the additional training needed by their staff to meet the requirement, these funds are limited and often not available. Therefore, the staff encounters a significant financial demand to pay for additional education.

Increase in Adult Learners

State agency personnel who pursue additional education in order to meet state qualification standards are adult learners and nontraditional students, and these students have unique learning styles and needs. In higher education, the number of adult learners is increasing and appears to be poised to overtake traditional students. Collectively, adult learners define themselves as nontraditional students (Croix, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics defines a nontraditional student as a student with at least one of these seven characteristics: (a) does not enter college immediately after high school, (b) attends part time rather than full time, (c) works 35 h a week or more, (d) is financially independent as defined by financial aid criteria, (e) has dependents other than a spouse, (f) is a single parent, and (g) lacks a high school diploma (though may have a GED or other high school equivalency) (http://www.nces.ed.gov). Adult learners are diverse in regard to several factors. First, they are variable, with a wide variety of learning experiences. Second, adult learners differ in their motivation (external versus internal) to learn. Third, the physical aspects of aging can impact the learner (i.e., sensory, energy, health). Fourth, characteristics including cognitive, personality, and socioeconomic factors impact an adult's ability to learn (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Finally, as the paradigm shift in age continues to be significant, adult learners find themselves crossing boundaries to start new roles and to explore new environments (Lakin, 2009).

More than half of nontraditional students enroll in 2-year institutions, and they are more likely to consider themselves working adults first and students second (Kaziz et al., 2007; http://www.worldwidelearn.com). In addition, adult learners may have started on a more traditional educational path and stopped with intentions to return, but work, family, financial need, or lack of previous success did not permit them to do so. Other circumstances such as multiple careers, fewer stable social structures on which to rely, longer life spans, dealing with aging parents, transportation, childcare, domestic violence, and the need to earn an income can serve as challenges for adult learners (Cercone, 2008). In fact, efforts to manage the complexities of career, family, and other personal choices often add to a somewhat chaotic educational and learning process.

Characteristics of adult learners Adult learners are heterogeneous. They return to school for a variety of reasons, and they span the age spectrum. All students come to school with a variety and range of work and experiences and educational backgrounds, which impact how and why they participate in learning (Wynne, 2013). In addition, adult learners usually approach learning

differently than younger learners in that they (a) are more self-guided in their learning; (b) bring more, and expect to bring more, to a learning situation because of their wider experience and can take more away; and (c) require learning to make sense and will not perform a learning activity just because the instructor said to do it (Rochester Institute of Technology, 2012). It is important to remember that when it comes to learning, adults are not oversized children. They have a certain level of maturity, which brings unique characteristics that affect how adults are motivated to learn. While each student has individual learning needs, adult learners share a cluster of characteristics, which are generalized across the population.

Research on instructional design and e-learning suggests that adult learners tend to have a list of generalized characteristics as described below (http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/learning/instructionaldesign/studentslearn.htm#adult; http://theelearningcoach.com/learning/characteristics-of-adult-learners; Wynne, 2013). First, they are autonomous. Adults prefer a sense of control and self-direction. They like options and choice in their learning environment. Adult learners prefer to work at their own pace. Second, adult learners are goal-oriented and prefer to partake in learning activities that help them reach their goals. Third, adult learners are practical. Adults prefer practical knowledge and experiences that will help make their work easier or provide important skills. They tend to be impatient of busy work that does not have immediate and direct application to their objectives. Fourth, they like to gain competence and mastery in workplace skills as it boosts confidence and improves self-esteem. Fifth, many adults prefer to learn by doing rather than listening to lectures. Sixth, adults possess a wealth of knowledge that they acquired throughout life, and they bring this depth and breadth of knowledge to the learning situation. They are more realistic and have insights about what is likely to work and what is not. Adult learners are more readily able to relate new facts to past experiences. In addition, they enjoy having their talents and information used in instructional situations and like the type of learn-

ing that gives them practical activities that build on their prior skills and knowledge. Seventh, adults want to know the purpose of training and the motivation underlying an organization's training initiative. The eighth characteristic is that adults may exhibit several emotional responses to changes in job responsibilities or policies that require them to reengage in the learning process, and these emotions can interfere with the learning process. Ninth, they are result-oriented and have specific expectations for what they will get out of learning activities. Tenth, most adults have numerous responsibilities and commitments to family, friends, community, and work. Eleventh, depending on their age and physical condition, adult learners may acquire psychomotor skills more slowly than younger students and have more difficulties reading small fonts and seeing small images on the computer screen. Twelfth, adults require the big picture view of what they are learning and need to know how the small parts fit into the larger landscape. Thirteenth, adult learners often take responsibility for their own success or failure at learning. Finally, many self-directed adult learners prefer a learning community with whom they can interact and discuss questions and issues.

Adult learners are sometimes fatigued when they attend classes. Thus, they prefer teaching devices, a variety of methods, audiovisual aids, a change of pace, and a sense of humor that add interest and a sense of liveliness. They want anything that makes the learning process easier. In addition, adult learners are mature people and prefer to be treated as such. They learn best in a democratic, participatory, and collaborative environment. Adult learners need active rather than passive learning experiences. Unlike youth learners, adult learners are intrinsically motivated. They are motivated by internal incentives and curiosity. In addition, adult learners are motivated by the usefulness of the material to be learned and learn better when material is related to their own needs and interests (http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/learning/instructionaldesign/studentslearn.htm#adult). Another characteristic that distinguishes adult learners from youth learners is that adult learners are problem-centered rather than

subject-oriented. That is, adult learners seek educational solutions to where they are compared to where they want to be in life as opposed to seeking to successfully complete each course, regardless of how courses relate to their own goal (Rochester Institute of Technology, 2012).

One of the major challenges of institutions of higher education is to understand how adult learners identify themselves. Adult learners want mobility and connection from family, education, work, and community (Lakin, 2009). To further understand adult learners, Cercone (2008) developed 13 characteristics of adult learners to consider when designing online instruction. Cercone's characteristics are grouped into the biology of adults, learning styles, experiential learning, self-directed learning, and transformative learning.

Barriers for adult learners Adult learners face a plethora of barriers that can affect their willingness, ability, and desire to return to school. Some of these barriers include career, childcare, family and financial responsibilities, rigid schedules and limited time, tight budgets (i.e., debt) and lack of money, poor academic preparedness and self-confidence, and lack of information and services (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). According to Croix (2012), "the same characteristics that define a nontraditional student all make it more difficult for that student to get an education" (p. 6). The vast majority of adult learners have work, family, and other responsibilities and find it difficult to free up time and dollars to attend school intensively (Kaziz et al., 2007). Moreover, the gap between high school and college and between undergraduate and graduate school means that nontraditional students may find themselves unprepared for the rigors of college or graduate-level coursework.

For adult learners, barriers may be specific to the learner (e.g., learner style, educational goals) and to the program, including student, organizational, faculty, and course barriers. In addition, participation barriers (i.e., situational, social-psychological, structural), personal barriers (e.g., childcare/elder care issues, financial issues), and a host of other barriers (e.g., cultural, political,

geographic) may interfere with adults' ability to pursue higher education. In distance learning (DL), program barriers present the greatest challenge (Davis, 2009). Benders (2011) suggests that barriers for adult learners may not be true limitations in the concept of creating an obstacle that cannot be conquered, rather as emotional state of being or perceived inability. Nevertheless, even when barriers exist in the mind, they are formidable to accomplishing the intended task or knowledge base. In contextualizing the perceived barriers of adult learners in an accelerated undergraduate degree program, Deggs (2011) found three types of barriers: (a) intrapersonal, (b) career- and job-related, and (c) academic-related barriers. The results of the study suggest that barriers are never extinct for adult learners and they must work to overcome or manage barriers, which emerge from their multiple life roles.

Specific areas in which practices and policies shape how postsecondary institutions impact adult learners' success are accessibility, affordability, and accountability. Accessibility is concerned with how program structure and delivery in traditional higher education disadvantage working adults. Barriers relating to accessibility include time, flexibility, and instructional methods. Affordability focuses on how current patterns of student financial aid and institutional funding are inherently biased against adult learners, particularly those who work and attend school part time. "An American college education is said to be the most expensive college education in the world" (De Vito, 2009, p. 6). With a struggling economy, cost is a substantial issue for adult learners as well as what types of financial assistance is available to combat the cost of college. Accountability relates to how current formulas for greater accountability in higher education threaten to create and intensify institutional incentives that favor enrollment of traditional students over adult learners. Traditional students are often seen as the bread and butter (i.e., tuition) of universities. Accountability measures are intended to provide ways to assess program quality and to assist institutions to improve by identifying strengths and weaknesses (Kaziz et al., 2007).

Services adult learners need to be successful Adult learners not only expect but also need certain services that can facilitate their success as students. They need flexible class schedules, financial aid packages, childcare services, transportation options, course credit for life experiences, distance-learning options, accelerated class options, academic and career services, and education awareness campaigns that promote available education services (Nebraska Institute for the Study of Adult literacy, 2012). Often, adult learners returning to the classroom after years away need to "polish off some academic rust" and need assistance in writing and developing strong study skills. Adult learners may also experience many logistical challenges such as advising, paying a bill, purchasing books, or completing a drop and add transaction (Hill, 2011). Many of these challenges are mediated through electronic access.

Utilization of Distance Learning to Increase Supply of Rural Rehabilitation Counselors

Nontraditional and rural adult students have had a substantial impact on the way that higher education operates. The most significant impact is the increase in online educational programs. Online education is considered an important innovation in higher education design and delivery that is changing higher education products and services for all institutions (Kaziz et al., 2007). According to Croix (2012), the face of higher education will be reshaped by several twenty-first-century trends including (a) movement from a well-rounded education to a career-oriented work training model, (b) increase in time to degree is increasing for conventional degree programs and decreasing for fully online programs, (c) fast-track courses and intensive programs mean a new form of study, (d) fully online degree programs are numerous, and (e) government funding that favors the out-the-door-and-into-the-workplace model of education as job training. "Many adult learners want to take advantage of online learning environments, pri-

marily due to busy schedules and the online format's convenience" (Cercone, 2008, p. 138).

The advent and increased availability of broadband Internet has allowed increased opportunities for the delivery of higher education training to rural communities. Currently, there are 31 online rehabilitation counseling graduate programs in the United States (http://www.grad-schools.com/search-programs/online-programs/rehabilitation-counseling). The Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE), which accredits only programs in the United States, is the accreditation body for these programs. CORE is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and is a member of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) (http://www.core-rehab.org/). Of these online programs, some are 100% online, while others are a combination of online and campus formats (Dziekan & Main, 2012).

Distance-learning programs offer several advantages toward meeting requirements for qualified rural rehabilitation counselors by including (a) multiple learning tools (e.g., print, graphics, audio, video, interactive activities); (b) learner self-pacing; (c) speedy interchange among learners; (d) ready access to a wealth of information, including libraries, databases, and other resources; (e) convenient accessibility for students with various disabilities; (f) instructors who are continually available to learners; (g) time for thoughtful contributions; (h) time for the instructor to guide the interaction with questions that promote analysis and evaluation; and (i) mentoring through personal electronic messages (Harley, Jolivette, & McNall, 2004). A distance-learning program is not restricted to particular states and is available on a nationwide basis.

Case Study of a Distance-Learning Program

The online program in rehabilitation counseling at the University of Kentucky was developed and designed with the rural adult learner in mind. The program began in 2004 and was the first and only fully online graduate program at the university.

Previously the university had provided graduate training to rural learners who were employed as rehabilitation counselors through live compressed-video courses conducted during evening hours. It was necessary for the students who had worked a full day to then attend classes for several hours after work. Although students were able to matriculate through the program, the average time frame for completion of the degree was 3 years compared to 16 months for traditional classroom students. This structure did not meet the needs of nontraditional students, who had employment obligations, family responsibilities, and other time constraints. An online distance-learning environment offered a means to overcome these barriers. The goal of the new online program was to provide a coordinated, cohesive, and accessible learning experience for nontraditional rural adult students that would provide relevant knowledge in an expeditious manner. To accomplish this goal, a sequence of steps was taken.

Structure of program The first step was to decide upon a mode of course delivery. Distance learning is an "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructor" (Schlosser & Simonson, 2006, p. 1). Modes of distance-learning delivery can be synchronous (live), asynchronous, or a combination of both. Prior efforts with distance learning in this program had been synchronous. This mode of delivery did not allow the flexibility needed by nontraditional students to overcome the barriers of time constraints and family and work obligations. A primarily asynchronous format for course delivery was chosen as this allows the students to essentially be freed from the time constraints of attending face-to-face instruction. Students, who may be employed full time, are still able to complete the program in a reasonable length of time.

Although most coursework was presented asynchronously, certain courses (e.g., practicum and internship) were delivered through synchronous instruction and delivery (live videoconferencing) to comply with accreditation guidelines and to promote effective student clinical fieldwork experiences. Practicum and internship courses are designed "for the student to learn the skills and standards to prepare for a job as a counselor with the modeling and advice of a supervisor experienced in the field" (Morissette, Bezyak, & Ososkie, 2012). Section D of the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE) Accreditation Standards (2014) states, "D.3.1 When using distance education modalities, supervision may be provided using a variety of methods such as video conferencing, teleconferencing, real time video contact, or others as appropriate" (http://www.core-rehab.org/Files/Doc/PDF/CORE%20Graduate%20Standards%20and%20Self%20Study%20Document%2010-2014.pdf). The rehabilitation counseling program is able to connect rural students in practicum and internship sites through the use of real-time contact, thus allowing students to learn from each other's practical experiences.

Accelerated course format The second step was to insure that students could complete the program in a reasonable time frame. The demands of time, family, and resources on the nontraditional rural adult learner necessitated completion of an education program in an expeditious manner. For this reason, an innovative accelerated format was devised. To assist with employment and family obligation constraints of adult learners, students took two courses at a time versus four courses. The courses, normally taught during a 16-week semester, were taught in 8-week blocks. This accelerated format did not alter the course material or assignments, but still allowed students to complete the entire master's program in a 16-month time frame. The quantity of courses and amount of work and assignments were unchanged. The quality of the instruction was of primary concern, and courses were developed to ensure that campus instruction and distance-learning instruction were equivalent, i.e., the same syllabi, course material, course texts, and course assignments were used. Course lectures were equivalent in content and often completed by the same instructor for both campus and online courses.

Harley et al. (2004) have reviewed the use of an accelerated format of instruction. They concluded that an accelerated format would produce more counselors in a shorter period of time and would, therefore, create an immediate response to the CSPD requirements that rehabilitation counseling staff be "qualified." According to Harley et al. (2004) "accelerated DL can be an effective alternative to traditional formats" for counselors "who require lifelong learning and access to educational programs" (p. 125). In fact, Deggs (2011) states that awareness of the needs of adult learners has prompted higher education to design and implement accelerated degree programs. Student perceptions are generally positive in accelerated distance-learning courses and indicative of student satisfaction.

Cohort-based instruction Rural students often feel a sense of isolation and disconnect from centers of higher education and urban peers. Maintaining cohesiveness among students was considered an integral part of delivering distance-learning courses. For this reason, the program utilized a cohort-based instructional model. Truluck (2007) states, "Building a community is a necessity for online learning to succeed" (p. 3). In a cohort-based model, the students begin and end the program at the same time, following the same sequence of coursework, "which allows for greater interaction among students" (US Department of Education [DOE], 2006). Success rates have been observed to be higher in a cohort-based model than in a self-paced model (US DOE, 2006).

Coordination of program After establishing the structure of the online program, the next step was to hire a coordinator who would serve as an advisor and mentor to the students. Students who attend campus courses have the advantage of easy access to instructors, faculty, and peers that allows for frequent interaction and quick responses to program study problems, questions, or concerns. Rural students, however, do not have an equally easy access to these sources for mentoring and advising. The establishment of a coordinator of the program who would serve directly

as the advisor and mentor to the rural and distance-learning students was an effort to increase access to these services. The coordinator monitored students from admission to graduation. The coordinator developed advising methods and procedures that would provide the students with a sense of community and promote retention in the program. The coordinator also developed orientation materials that would provide the student with not only essential information concerning university services and procedures but also with skills to matriculate through an online learning management system. Specific methods of mentoring provided included (a) live group orientation at the beginning of the program, prior to the initiation of field work, and prior to graduation; (b) provision of a detailed orientation manual which outlined the technological requirements, course procedures and expectations, university guidelines and services, sequence of coursework to be followed, procedure for requesting accommodations for disabilities, textbooks needed, procedure for registering for courses, and contact information for potential problems if encountered; (c) frequent individual advising sessions; (d) and development and implementation of a Virtual Student Advising Center for distance-learning students. The interaction and instruction provided through the advising, orientation, instructor discussions, internship supervision, and colleague interaction assisted in providing the students with overcoming the challenges of a rural work environment.

Course development and delivery Finally, courses were developed and offered. A course sequence that matched the on-campus program was implemented and included courses that addressed CORE accreditation guidelines. A special course in rural rehabilitation was also provided to prepare students to work in a rural environment. The course was designed to teach students how to understand the demographics of rural America and the incidence of disabilities in rural areas; be familiar with approaches, techniques, and instruments used in providing rehabilitation services in rural America; understand the unique challenges for the rehabilitation

service provider when providing services in rural areas; be aware of the many ethical issues related to the rehabilitation professional providing services in rural areas; and gain knowledge of the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation program.

To assist with the design and implementation of online courses, the University provided a Teaching Academic Support Center (TASC) with instructional design personnel. TASC was essential for successful development of online courses and provided instructors with assistance from initial planning through preparation and delivery of courses. It "ensures that the online learning experience is both enjoyable and productive for instructors and students alike" (Weiss, Schreuer, Jermias-Cohen, & Josman, 2004).

A consistent template was used in all courses to assist students with navigating through the learning management system, (i.e., Blackboard). This template was used specifically for formatting menu items and navigation through the course in a manner that did not impact course content delivery. Modes of instruction and assignments varied to insure that the students were stimulated to learn.

One aspect, however, remained consistent throughout all courses. A discussion board forum was provided to facilitate class interaction. Discussion board participation was seen as an important tool to connect students and instructors and to promote active participation in the course. For discussion boards, the instructor posted discussion questions or perhaps case studies for consideration. In most instances, students were then required to post their thoughts as well as respond to the posts of others and received a grade on their participation based upon a rubric. In other instances, discussion board participation was voluntary and not graded.

Accessibility issues for rural students Initially the program attempted to deliver Internet-based courses over all Internet connections. However, in some rural areas, students were limited by lack of access to broadband Internet connections. It was determined that the use of slower "dial-up" Internet access delayed delivery of the material,

and therefore students were advised against using this method. This problem existed only in the first couple of years of the distance-learning program. Subsequently the availability in broadband connections has increased substantially, and rural students are no longer reporting difficulties in connecting to courses. Other accessibility issues encountered revolved around making courses accessible to students with disabilities.

The student population in the University of Kentucky's graduate program in rehabilitation counseling consistently includes a number of students with various types of disabilities. A primary concern for the distance-learning program was ensuring that all courses were accessible to all students. While this accessibility is a requirement of law under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the logistical components to providing this service proved challenging. The major issues associated with providing accessible courses were (a) captioning of asynchronous audio material; (b) live captioning of synchronous classes; (c) alternatives to timed quizzes and exams; (d) textual descriptions of visual presentations, i.e., charts, pictures, etc., used in courses; and (e) presentation of material in formats that could be read by computer-assisted technology.

It was essential to adopt a proactive versus reactive approach to course accessibility. With campus courses, accommodations are routinely made for students in a class on an as-needed basis. Students often do not inform the instructor of their need for accommodations until the first week of class. Procedures and vendors (e.g., sign language interpreters, note takers, etc.) for providing accommodations for campus students are in place and do not require a lengthy time to be initiated. Students in rural areas, however, may experience a lack of available interpreters or note takers in their geographical area resulting in a delay in coordinator of these services. Students in online programs can be located throughout the nation, and the need for accommodations is not always known by the instructor prior to the beginning of a course. There was discussion and debate over the need to provide completely accessible web material if a student with a disability was not enrolled in a course. However, federal law

requires that all web material be accessible from the beginning. Further, speaking strictly from a time management standpoint, all material must be accessible from the beginning of a course especially if the courses are accelerated. Time to complete the transcription and captioning of audio material can take several weeks. In a course that lasts 8 weeks, this would create a distinct disadvantage for students with disabilities. Initially, courses made use of transcripts for asynchronous audio material for students with hearing impairments. While this is a temporary solution to alternative delivery of audio material, it is not recommended nor does it follow the guidelines of the federal legislative requirements.

Securing captioning services also proved to be a challenge. Although accessibility is a federal requirement, funding for captioning is generally not addressed or budgeted by programs. Since all captioning companies are not equal, it is important to evaluate the services provided by each company prior to selecting a vendor. In addition to cost-effectiveness, expediency and accuracy are essential. For example, several courses in the rehabilitation counseling program utilize medical terms. If a captioning vendor does not have a medical transcriptionist on staff, this can result in numerous inaccuracies in transcripts. Even the best transcriptionist cannot always understand dialects or accents of instructors or speakers. Therefore, it is also necessary that the transcribed material be reviewed and edited prior to the completion of captioning.

Technology issues were also present. In fact, the most frequent problem reported was related to technology. To address this problem, a 24 h help desk was implemented to assist students in overcoming technical difficulties. Also, required software programs for successful completion of the online program were made available to the students without a fee.

Student outcomes Student outcomes were reviewed within the distance-learning program and in comparison to the traditional campus-based program. A review of student outcomes must first take into consideration the differences between students who attended campus courses versus those that attended online. A demographic comparison of distance-learning students versus campus program students revealed several differences. The typical distance-learning student was employed full time in a rehabilitation agency, had been out of college for several years, and was unable to attend campus programs due to their remote location. The majority of campus students had obtained their undergraduate degree within 3 months to 1 year prior to enrollment. They were not employed full time or, if employed, worked part time outside the rehabilitation field. A small number of campus students had taken some graduate-level courses while still enrolled as an undergraduate. The average age of distance-learning students was 38.4 years, and the average age of campus students was 28.9 years. Within the 12-year span of students enrolled in the campus-based program, there has been a slight increase in the number of students who may be classified as nontraditional, older, and veterans. The distance-learning program consistently had students who were in this category. The DL program also saw an increase in the number of veterans enrolled in the program.

A review of student outcomes included (a) graduation rate, (b) grade point average (GPA) upon graduation, and (c) competency evaluation of graduates based upon the pass rate on a nationally certified examination (Certified Rehabilitation Counselor exam). From January 2004 through December 2012, 406 students began the accelerated distance-learning program, and 364 of those graduated (89.6% program graduation rate). Distance-learning students who were enrolled full-time graduated in the same amount of time as campus counterparts. The length of time to completion was 16 months. There was no significant difference (3.78 on a 4.0 scale for distance-learning students and 3.83 for campus students) between the grade point average (GPA) upon graduation. The pass rate on the national certification examination for both campus and distance-learning students was consistent and exceeded the national average. There has also been an increase in the frequency at which campus and distance-learning students have expressed an interest in pursuing additional credentials to become licensed professional

counselors. Overwhelmingly, upon graduation, distance-learning students remained employed with public rehabilitation agencies, and on-campus students obtained employment with state rehabilitation agencies, nonprofit rehabilitation programs, disability resource programs in postsecondary education, and in medical, corrections, and veterans administration positions. In some instances, both campus and distance-learning students matriculated to administrative positions.

Summary

Lack of rural educational institutions that provide graduate training in counseling fields contributes to difficulty finding available qualified personnel to meet the demand for rehabilitation counselors. Innovative approaches to recruitment and training of individuals willing to serve in rural areas must be undertaken by state agencies. Research has shown that individuals with prior experience living in rural areas are more inclined to practice in rural areas upon graduation. The individuals from rural backgrounds may be reluctant to relocate temporarily to metropolitan areas where educational facilities are generally located to receive the necessary graduate training in counseling. One potential method of training rural counselors is the use of distance-learning programs. By providing distance education training and continuing education for individuals residing in rural areas, this obstacle is resolved.

Funding for rehabilitation counseling distance education programs has been supported in recent years by the Rehabilitation Services Administration. The agency implemented training funds that paid the educational costs for individuals seeking employment as state VR counselors. Most of these grants, however, did not include a provision that the graduate work in rural areas. Therefore, there was little impact on the recruitment of qualified graduates to work in rural America. Another source of funding is student loans. Teacher and physician education student loans have provisions to encourage practice in rural settings. In particular, a portion of the student loan debt is forgiven for each year the

professional practices in a rural area. A similar program designed for rehabilitation counselor and other mental health professionals could act as an incentive to becoming rural counselors. The provision of loan forgiveness has been shown to increase the chances of selecting a rural practice among physicians (Daniels, Vanleit, Skipper, Sanders, & Rhyne, 2007). Phillips, Quinn, and Heitkamp (2010) found similar results in the recruitment of social workers to rural areas.

Other methods of training rehabilitation counselors to work in rural areas may be easier to implement. One method is for educators to provide a particular course or courses addressing the unique aspects of counseling in the rural sector. This would be beneficial in preparing counselors to acclimate to the rural culture. Learning to identify the challenges to the provisions of services and how to potentially overcome those barriers is essential to preparing the counselor for rural practice. Boundary and ethical issues inherent in rural settings must be addressed in order for the counselor to function effectively.

The reluctance to practice in rural areas is often a result of persistent negative stereotypes and non-exposure to rural communities. One study (Phillips et al., 2010) revealed that social work students recommended that rural social workers speak to classes to help "dispel stereotypes and excite interest in rural practice" (p. 57). Another method of training could be the provision of graduate field experience, i.e., a practicum or internship, in a rural setting. This could serve to alleviate the reluctance to practice in the area. Students should be provided with the opportunity to experience those aspects of rural life that have been shown to draw professionals to rural practice, i.e., slower pace of life, less crime, natural surroundings for outdoor leisure activities, strong community support, independence, a strong work ethic, and an opportunity to work with diverse disabilities and underserved populations.

The provision of distance-learning graduate programs in rehabilitation counseling can assist state rehabilitation agencies in implementing a "grow-your-own" approach to developing counselors in rural areas. For example, in rural areas

agencies should consider recruiting persons who live in the area as paraprofessionals, provide training to them, and recruit or support them in educational endeavors that eventually lead to obtaining the credentials to meet the standards of a qualified rehabilitation counselor. Such efforts can be planned in conjunction with RSA and other state human service agencies.

Provision of ongoing supervision and mentoring by senior staff on a regular, consistent basis should be provided to rural counselors. Breen and Drew (2012) suggest that such support is essential to alleviate isolation and maintain effective rural practice. Opportunities for continuing education should be provided to negate the effects of professional isolation. Distance-learning courses and webinars can assist with providing these opportunities.

The demand for rehabilitation counselors continues to exceed the supply of available qualified rehabilitation counselors. The need for qualified rehabilitation counselors in rural areas is seen as acute. Overcoming the reluctance of rehabilitation counselors to practice in rural areas is essential to securing appropriate professional services for individuals with disabilities who reside in these areas. Various techniques and programs can be considered to assist with meeting this demand. The provision of graduate training through distance learning is one step in addressing the challenges faced by rural counselors. In addition, increased exposure to rural areas and professionals from rural areas, provision of ongoing supervision and mentoring, and financial compensations or incentives can begin to address challenges faced by rural counselors. In order to achieve success in increasing the supply of qualified rural rehabilitation counselors, concerted efforts of both rehabilitation counseling educators and rehabilitation state agencies must be taken to insure that rural consumers with disabilities are provided with needed services by qualified rehabilitation counselors.

Resources

Evaluating the Impact of Rural Universities on Local Communities (February 12, 2015) is a compilation of seven group projects written by MBA students enrolled in a management and organization course in the Eastern Oregon University's College of business MBA program. Available at https://www.eou.edu/rural/files/2015/02/Evaluating-the-Impact-of-RuralUniversities-on-Local-Communities.pdf

Open and Distance Education Policy Briefing (2013). International Council for Open and Distance Education. Available at http://www.icde.org/assets/AboutUs/Who_we_are/OpenandDistanceEducationPolicyBriefingMarch20133.pdf

Renes, S. L. (2015). *Increasing access to higher education through e-learning*. InTech Open Science/Open Minds. Available at http://cdn.intechopen.com/pdfs-wm/48959.pdf

Skillman, S. M., Keppel, G. A., Patterson, D. G., & Doescher, M. P. (2012, October). *Final Report #136: The Contributions of Community Colleges to the Education of Allied Health Professionals in Rural Areas of the United States*. Available at http://depts.washington.edu/uwrhrc/uploads/RHRC_FR136_Skillman.pdf

United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA): https://www.usdla.org

USDLA Quarterly Journals: https://www.usdla.org/resources/usdla-quaterly-journals/

Learning Exercises

Self-Check Questions

1. What are the reasons rehabilitation counseling graduates are not pursuing employment with state rehabilitation agencies?
2. What are the problems found in the case study with providing accessible distance education courses?
3. What are some methods that can be used by counseling educators to assist in recruiting rehabilitation counseling graduates to work in rural areas?
4. What are some ideas that state rehabilitation agencies could implement to recruit rehabilitation counseling graduates to work for their agency in rural areas?

Experiential Exercises

1. Identify a rural area in your state and determine the prevalence and types of disabilities that exist in the geographical location from government sources.
2. Identify a rural area in your state, and outline the rehabilitation service providers, community, and support services available for the area. Compare these findings with providers and services in a major urban area in your state.

> **Discussion Box**
>
> Discuss the use of distance learning to increase the supply of qualified rehabilitation counselors. What are potential advantages and disadvantages of using distance education to increase the supply of rural rehabilitation counselors? How could distance education methods be improved to increase delivery of continuing education to rural counselors?

3. Identify the educational graduate school programs in rehabilitation counseling, counseling, or a related field available in your state. Indicate which of these programs/universities are within commuting distance (75 miles) of rural state areas.
4. Design a study to investigate the effectiveness of rural internships in recruiting graduates to work in rural areas.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Based on state plans submitted in 2015 by state VR agencies, what credential/education is required by the majority of states to be considered a "qualified rehabilitation counselor?"
   (a) CRC credential
   (b) LPC credential
   (c) Master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, counseling, or a related field
   (d) All of the above
2. Federal mandates to ensure the quality of services provided to individuals with disabilities by establishing qualifications for rehabilitation counselors was a result of which of the following Acts?
   (a) Rehabilitation Act of 1973
   (b) Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992
   (c) Americans with Disabilities Act
   (d) Civil Rights Act
3. Which of the following is a reason for shortages of qualified rehabilitation counselors in rural areas?
   (a) Aging out of professionals
   (b) Reluctance of graduates to pursue employment with state VR agencies
   (c) Reluctance of graduates to practice in rural areas
   (d) All of the above
4. Which of the following are challenges to providing rehabilitation services to rural communities?
   (a) Characteristics of clients and professional barriers
   (b) Small town attitudes, service delivery issues, and reduced salaries for counselors in rural areas
   (c) All of the above
   (d) None of the above
5. What demographic characteristics of counselors have been found to contribute to the decision to work in rural areas?
   (a) Age, years of education, and years of experience
   (b) Gender, having a disability, and race
   (c) College major and licensure
   (d) All of the above
   (e) None of the above
6. State agency personnel who pursue education in order to meet qualification requirements are generally which of the following?
   (a) Adult nontraditional students
   (b) Students who have completed an undergraduate degree in the last year
   (c) Personnel wishing to pursue administrative positions within the agency
   (d) All of the above

7. Which of the following is NOT a primary barrier that can affect the decision of adult learners to return to school?
   (a) Career, childcare, and family responsibilities
   (b) Lack of self-confidence and academic preparedness
   (c) Limited time and budget
   (d) Limited commitment to pursue higher education
8. Which of the following is true regarding distance education graduate programs in rehabilitation counseling?
   (a) They are not approved by the Council on Rehabilitation Education.
   (b) They are presented only in a live format during daytime hours.
   (c) They can be presented in a synchronous, asynchronous, or live format.
   (d) They restrict the student enrollment to in-state students.
9. Which of the following best describes accelerated mode of distance-learning instruction presented in the case study?
   (a) Condensing course length from 16 to 8 weeks
   (b) Allowing students to progress through courses in a self-paced format
   (c) Reducing the amount of material and courses necessary to secure the degree
   (d) Allowing students to waive certain educational electives to complete a degree in a shorter time frame.
10. What effect did the funding of training for rehabilitation counselors by the Rehabilitation Services Administration have on the recruitment of rural rehabilitation counselors?
    (a) Resulted in a major increase in rural counselors
    (b) Produced a moderate increase in rural counselors
    (c) Had little impact on the recruitment of rural counselors
    (d) Doubled the number of rural counselors

Key

1. c
2. b
3. d
4. c
5. e
6. a
7. d
8. c
9. a
10. c

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