EXTENDING COUNSELING & PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES TO DISTANCE EDUCATION:
A DELPHI EXPLORATION OF INSTITUTIONAL OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS AND DECISION-MAKERS AT A LARGE RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

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by
Erik Scott Wessel

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The dissertation of Erik Scott Wessel was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Robert Hendrickson
Professor of Education, Department of Education Policy Studies
Senior Scientist, Center for the Study for Higher Education
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

John Cheslock
Professor of Education, Department of Education Policy Studies
Director, Center for the Study of Higher Education

Jerry Trusty
Professor of Education, Department of Counselor Education, Counseling Psychology and Rehabilitation Services
Coordinator of Secondary School Counseling

Dennis Heitzmann
Affiliate Professor of Education, Department of Counseling Psychology
Director, Counseling and Psychological Services

Gerald LeTendre
Professor of Education and International Affairs
Department Head, Education Policy Studies

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

The numbers of students choosing to pursue their education at a distance is steadily growing. Distance education, often understood as a means for adults to further or diversify their educational attainment, is increasingly courting the demographic often referred to as “traditional age students” (18-24 yr. old). These students are choosing distance delivery of education for a myriad of life issues and circumstances, but there is increasing speculation that there may be an overrepresentation of students with mental and emotional concerns choosing distance delivery of education to avoid the social environment of an on-campus educational experience.

There are no statistics that clearly pinpoint the number of students with diagnosable concerns in distance education nationwide, however, looking at the broad scope of mental health issues nationally, the National Institute of Mental health in 2008 reported that over 13% of the entire U.S. population sought mental health services or treatment. More importantly, they indicate that as much as 40% of adults with serious mental illness do not receive treatment for their mental health problem. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that the distance learners, who represent the most diverse student population (age, race, etc.), would experience mental and emotional health concerns at a lower rate than the national statistics. Therefore, there is clear need to explore counseling and psychological support services to improve student access to expert opinion, improving students’ quality of life, promoting distance learner retention, and bolstering academic success among the distance learner population.
This study is an exploratory qualitative study guided by four research questions with a 3-phase approach. Phase I was a pilot of a literature generated Delphi protocol. The Delphi protocol sought to generate expert consensus through an iterative process focused on the guiding research questions. The guiding questions focused on the potential challenges and benefits of providing some form of counseling and psychological service expansion to online learners. The research questions also sought to illuminate practitioner perspectives on institutional responsibility to provide services and generate potential strategies that might be employed to meet distance learner needs. Each of the rounds of the Delphi survey built on the data received in the previous round through data aggregation, feedback to participants, and subsequent revisions to the Delphi survey. Upon completion of the Delphi phase targeted interviews were conducted with two of the panelists and two senior “decision-makers” for the purpose of expansion of the dataset and triangulation of data.

Through holistic and thematic coding of the data this study indicates that college counseling practitioners experience a high degree of conflict over expanding counseling services to the distance learner population. Student safety, individual and institutional liability and cost top the list of concerns, but those are balanced by the realization that access to services, retention of students, and academic success are all benefits of counseling to residential learners that are important for the distance learner as well.

The results of this study imply that the time is right to begin the conversation around expanding student services to distance learners. This, however, does not mean that we are currently at a point where we can confidently establish counseling and
psychological services in the distance learner environment. This study suggests a more incremental approach that consistently asks, “what can we reasonably do right now” to meet the needs of students in the distance learning environment. The findings of this study imply that future expansion of counseling and psychological services will need to include honest conversations about the merits of technology integration in counseling practice and technological education for mental health counseling students and staff. Additionally, experimental implementations of technology in counseling practice and a slight shift in focus from attempting to translate counseling and psychological services into the distance learning environment to first finding ways to effectively identify distance learner needs and help them make appropriate connections to campus support services, their local community support services, a peer network for student support, and psycho-educational support mechanisms will be critical. And finally, a concerted effort to promote a national conversation around licensure and professional liability balanced with expanding access to services will likely be necessary before any large scale changes can occur.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century it has become an almost certainty that an institution of higher education offers some form of distance education with online web-based implementations (Raphael, 2006). Within this same period of time the American economic recession has forced the hand of many learners that would otherwise choose a traditional education, to seek more localized educational options. Students are now looking to regional institutions or their local community college as a means of attaining the educational opportunity they seek. At the same time, a growing trend continues to proliferate as prospective college students of all ages and backgrounds look for education options that can be pursued from the comfort of one’s living room couch with nothing more than a computer and a high-speed internet connection. Statistics provided by National Center for Education Statistics clearly show that the numbers of institutions offering distance education and the number of students pursuing education at a distance are expanding at a steady rate (Nachazel, 2011; Parsad, Lewis, & Tice, 2008; Waits, Lewis, & Greene, 2003).

American higher education has undergone inevitable changes and transformations ranging from the continued growth of traditional student enrollment (70\% post high school enrollment between 2001 and 2009, compared to 62\% in 1999, NCES 2011, p. 4) to the steady stream in non-traditional adult learners coming back for continued training or a first degree (NCES, 2010). With this influx of students seeking educational opportunity it is inevitable that many would seek alternative options to the traditional delivery of brick-and-mortar colleges and universities. This upward trend is marked by
the achievement of one million online students in the mid 2000s (Raphael, 2006). For a variety of reasons (i.e. perception of time constraints, personal obligations, preference for online options, etc.) the 18-24 year old college student is increasingly utilizing online options (Moody, 2004).

Growth in the number of traditional-age online-learners does not come without concern. Despite the increase in initial enrollments, attrition rates for students engaged in online education are higher than traditional in-person courses (Carr, 2000; Moody, 2004) and in some cases can run twenty percent higher than courses taught in the traditional face-to-face format (Angelino & Williams, 2007). With no foreseeable decline in sight, many educational entities (largely, for-profit) have sought to meet the growing demand for easily accessible, affordable, quality educational opportunities (J. Lee & Clery, 2004). However, many traditional “brick-and-mortar” educational institutions are also rising to meet the market-driven demand. Many state institutions have continued to grow their distance education divisions in an attempt to keep up with current trends and meet constituent demands.

Concurrent to this steep upward trend in both traditional and online student enrollments; Colleges and universities nationally have experienced a drastic upward trend in quantity and severity of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and other potentially more severe maladaptive and debilitating complications (Kettmann et al., 2007). In fact, some have determined the current state of mental health affairs on college campuses to be at crisis levels (R. Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2005). Educational institutions are forced to handle the personal crises of students arriving with a wide array of disorders. The recent research of Krumrei, et al. (2010) indicated that mood disorders
and inclination toward self-harm are prevalent in the college student population at alarming rates. The mission of institutions of higher education rarely includes rhetoric about meeting mental health concerns of students, however, it is becoming an undeniable component to successful educational attainment for all student ages and demographics of students. With no evidence to indicate that those pursuing their education through online channels require less support via personal counseling services, there is reason to believe the lack of such services would be a detriment to student success irrespective of mode of educational delivery.

The demographics of higher education are shifting. As enrollments ebb on college campuses online enrollments continue to flow freely, with some estimates indicating online enrollments topping 20% of the undergraduate population (Nachazel, 2011). Concurrently, mental health issues are continuing to increase among the college student population. In fact, the annual report of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2012) reveals that 16 percent of their national college student sample \( (n = 75,383) \) indicated attending counseling for mental health concerns after starting college (p. 9). Subsequently, technology has been continuing its steady march into the very fabric of the college environment. It is nearly a certainty that today’s entering first-year college student will be met with a broad range of opportunities to interface with technology on campus. Almost universally, today’s students register for classes online, manage their coursework online, and can connect wirelessly to the Internet from wherever they happen to be on campus. Each student brings their “technological identity” defined as their “beliefs about one’s skills, opportunities and constraints to use technology, beliefs about the importance of technology, and one’s motivation to learn technology” (Goode, 2010).
Just as each student has their own technological identity, they also have many other identities, personal circumstances, and challenges to their educational success.

Successfully supporting the non-academic needs of learners in an ever-growing distance education field is going to require new ideas and an expanded conversation. Certainly, as technology continues to make inroads into the classroom and become the very essence of a classroom through online delivery of education, each institution of higher education will need to grapple with the complex web of challenges and opportunities technology presents.

**Purpose of the Study**

In a 2009 op-ed piece in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Brooks comments, “The internet provides a platform for learning about and interacting with the world. It should be no surprise that students line up for courses that make the best use of technologies that are so integral to their lives” (Brooks, 2009, para. 5). Distance Education isn’t a new concept, however, forward thinking institutions engaged in the development of online course delivery have begun to take a hard look at the co-curricular needs of the non-traditional student population. A few dissertations conducted through the last decade have also sought to illuminate student support services that are most important for online student success (Jackson, 2000; Bayless, 2001; Marsh, 2003; Ruth, 2005). Despite these efforts, the literature on student success relating to distance education is quite limited. Further, the literature relating to the personal counseling needs of students engaged in distance education is nonexistent.

This study is a first step toward a model for implementing personal counseling services in distance education, this proposed investigation looks to expand on the
findings from a 2008 study conducted by Centore and Milacci (Centore and Milacci, 2008) that sought to determine how mental health counselors use distance counseling and understand their attitudes regarding distance counseling methods. Although the 2008 study did not focus on the perspectives of college counselors, it is reasonable to assume that there would be some degree of consistency between professional groups trained in the same counseling theory, techniques and methods.

The Centore and Milacci study used quantitative survey methods to ascertain counselor attitudes and perceptions of various distance-counseling modalities (phone, text, video, etc.) and indicated an initial positive perception of telephone and video counseling, but many counselors surveyed indicated they did not use such methods in their practice. Additionally, ethical and efficacy issues were also perceived to be detrimental to the fulfillment of their "ethical duties" (p. 277). In expanding on this 2008 study, my research will focus on college counseling professionals, whose clientele are increasingly tech savvy and demanding of co-curricular student services that fit their needs, lifestyle, and personal circumstances (Lovejoy, Demireva, Grayson, & McNamara, 2009). This study will provide insight into perceived need, challenges, benefits, and potential strategies related to providing critical counseling and psychological services for students engaged in distance education; as well as, chart a path forward for educational institutions looking to engage and support students in their educational attainment at a distance.

To address this problem comprehensively, I ask the following four research questions:
Research Question 1: Do college/university mental health counseling professionals perceive a need and/or responsibility to provide counseling and psychological services to distance learners and what do they believe to be the most salient benefits and/or impediments to offering counseling services to students engaged in exclusively online education?

Research Question 2: Is a college mental health professional’s theoretical orientation related to their viewpoint on providing counseling services for students engaged in exclusively distance education?

Research Question 3: How do expert perspectives on providing counseling and psychological services to distance learners compare to those of key decision-makers within the department of student affairs?

Research Question 4: What strategies would college mental health counseling professionals most likely pursue to extend counseling and psychological services to students engaged in exclusively distance education?

Terms & Definitions

The terms outlined below are found in the prevailing literature on distance education, counseling and psychology, and student development, but are not used universally in the same way. In order to facilitate conceptual understanding for the purposes of this study the following definitions will be utilized. These terms will be more fully explained in the literature review.

- Online Counseling: (also termed: E-therapy, E-Counseling, CyberCounseling, Internet Therapy, telepsychiatry) – The utilization of internet connected communication channels by trained and qualified mental health professionals to build the therapeutic relationship and provide individual or group therapeutic interaction (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004)
• **Online Education:** (also termed: Distance Education, Online Instruction, Web-based instruction, Online Learning,) – The utilization of computer and other networked information sharing devices to virtually connect one or more instructors to one or more students in a synchronous or asynchronous learning environment in order to deliver educationally focused content and promote instructive interaction (Bernard et al., 2004).

• **Personal Counseling:** The research protocols in this study used “personal counseling” as a general term for mental and emotional health activities and services rendered to students in support of their academic experience. This term was not specifically defined to panelists and it was suggested a more accurate descriptive phrase for the work of mental health professionals might be “counseling and psychological services.” “Personal counseling” was used to differentiate the counseling services relating to mental and emotional health concerns, and not other counseling activities, such as career counseling. In the findings of the study, I move to using “counseling and psychological services” as the all-encompassing description of the services provided to students who require mental and emotional support.

• **Distance Learner:** This study specifically uses “distance learner” and “distance education” as opposed to “online learner” and “online education” due to the reality that many students taking courses online are also residential instruction students. As this study focuses on students that are not located in general locale of the brick-and-mortar institution, the term “distance learner” is preferred.
Justification for the Study

Various researchers and professional organizations have argued that comparable services of the same quality must be offered for students at a distance (Aoki, 1998; CAS, 2006). More specifically, in addressing the often-ignored issue of personal counseling for distance learners: the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher education, in 2006, adopted the following professional statement, “Reasonable efforts should be made to extend comparable counseling services to distance education students…services that effectively use electronic technologies should be offered when appropriate.” (p. 168). To date, no institution with a residential and distance education program has developed “comparable” personal counseling services for all students.

Literature on distance education/learning is a vast sea of perspectives and ideas. Similarly, college counseling boasts a dense field of literature spanning a multitude of subspecialties. Student development and support also brings to the table a rich theoretical framework. Even online counseling has a growing body of literature discussing its merits. However, to date, no study has taken an interdisciplinary approach spanning all four to explore counseling services for distance learners in higher education. Exploring the perspectives of college mental health professionals may provide clear insight into the challenges associated with providing comparable services chart a path toward a conceptual model of distance counseling for online learners.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This examination of relevant literature will follow an ever-narrowing progression beginning with the exploration of broad societal movements related specifically to online education. Figure 1.1 further outlines the flow of this review of the literature as it progressively reduces its scope from professional trends (Counseling and Higher Education) to Institutional issues (Colleges and Universities), departmental interests (counseling and student affairs), and finally the literature related to individual student’s and their development and support in the educational environment. Careful attention will be paid to the specific needs of the distance learner throughout.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”

C. Wright Mills
This research review of the prevailing literature takes an interdisciplinary perspective as it seeks to blend emergent themes from a variety of disciplinary sources. Embedded in this review will be a synthesis of perspectives from counseling/psychology, education, college student development, organizational theory, and law. The emerging synthesis of perspectives will culminate in an overarching argument comprised of the following points:

1. Distance education has expanded quickly compared to other modes of educational delivery in the history of higher education. With the continued innovation of educational technologies, learning at a distance will continue to grow.

2. Traditional-age college students are a significant and growing subset of the distance education market. They are tech savvy and will continue to demand learning options that are convenient, quality, and supportive.

3. Mental health issues in the general population are rising. This trend is mirrored in the college student population. Further, there is no evidence to suggest that distance learners experience success-inhibiting mental health concerns less than their in-residence counterparts; however, they have far less access to mental health support services.

4. The counseling profession is conflicted over the efficacy of interventions for those who reside at a distance from the counselor. However, the benefits to student access and success may outweigh current challenges.

5. Providing comparable mental health services to distance learners is cost effective in respect to cost-savings associated with student retention and is in-keeping with the educational mission of all institutions of higher education.
Societal Frame: National Movement Toward Online Education

*Increased education options through online mediums.* The proliferation of technology use in our everyday lives continues to transform society. It is therefore not surprising that education would be swept up in the technological revolution. To provide some perspective; as of 2007 there were nearly one and one-half billion users of the internet worldwide (International Telecommunications union, 2007). That number crossed the two billion mark just three years later in 2010 (International Telecommunications Union, 2010). Mobile phone usage continues to increase with text based communication seeing sharp upward trends and mobile “3G” internet connectedness is now utilized by nearly a billion people worldwide as of 2010 (International Telecommunications Union, 2010). It’s now 2012 and it’s likely a safe bet to say that the next round of statistics will show a continued exponential positive trend. Realizing the swift pace of technological advance into the national and global consciousness, one critical component is understanding the influence that technology has had and will continue to have on higher education in the United States.

In the United States undergraduate enrollments have increased by 34% in the first decade of the 21st century and are estimated to reach nearly 20 million by the year 2020 (Nachazel, 2011). This is in large part due to the rise in online education enrollments. Over ten years ago there were already over two million students enrolled in online education courses at the undergraduate level (Waits & Lewis, 2003). In under ten years
that number more than doubled and comprised 20 percent of the entire undergraduate population (Nachazel, 2011).

*Increase of traditional age online students.* Although it is still true that online education appeals to non-traditional students in higher numbers than traditional-age students (18-24), recent enrollments indicate that the population of online learners is diversifying in terms of age (Marsh, 2003). In 2010 the Chronicle of Higher Education published enrollment statistics for online education that showed the 18 to 25 year old age bracket surpassed those 26 and older by 5% at 226 two year institutions (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010). Although online education was originally established as a bridge to allow non-traditional learners access to higher education, many non-profit and for-profit institutions of higher education are realizing the demand for online learning from all age demographics (Marsh, 2003). If more proof is needed, one needs only to look at popular media. The myriad of television commercials with teenagers typing away on their laptops in their pajamas is indicative of this trend toward recruitment of the traditional-age student into the profitable market of online education.

*Increase in technological proficiency among millennial students.* “Nothing has made a greater impact in the way information is delivered to the average person in the past thirty years than the internet” (Barak & Grohol, 2011, p. 156). It is in recent memory that individual computers became commonplace on the campuses of colleges and universities across America. The technological explosion in the 1990’s brought the personal computer to the forefront with over 50% of student reporting using a computer by the end of the decade (Pryor, et al., 2007). Junco reported in 2005 that 85% of current college students own their own computer (Junco, 2004; Keup, 2008). This inescapable
reality of technology’s interface into the lives of college students is conceptualized well by Han (2009) who noted, “The unique feature of today’s college students is that they grew up in a time of rapidly expanding technology. Similar to earlier generations, the new generation has more positive attitudes toward technological information transmission and communication” (Han & Heo, 2009, p. 91). This generation of college-age “emerging adults”, dubbed the millennial generation by many, has not known a world without computers. By nature they tend to learn through visual modes of instruction and seek knowledge, understanding or self-help assistance through online channels (Neal, Campbell, Williams, Liu, & Nussbaumer, 2011).

Economic Recession effects on American Higher Education. The recession of 2008-2009 had the most significant effect on the American economic landscape since the great depression of the 1930’s. Shortfalls in state budgets have translated into drastic reductions in state appropriations for higher education nationally. This has transferred an increasing economic burden to American families, independent students, and adult students looking for further education (Zumeta, 2010). This trend also encourages institutions of higher education to pursue alternative streams of revenue and adopt cost-saving measures. Likewise, it pushes the consumer, in all demographics, to consider all options for educational attainment. Online education gives society the flexibility to pursue educational goals at a pace that also meets the requirements of individual responsibilities (Kolowich, 2009).

Increasing mental health concerns across U.S. population. According to the National Institute of Mental Health over 13 percent of the U.S. population sought mental health services or treatment in 2008. However, over 40% of adults with serious mental
illness did not receive treatment for their mental health problem (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.). Although the numbers may not seem dramatic, mental health issues in America have been steadily increasing through the first decade of the 21st century. Among the traditional college-age population these statistics may, in fact, be even higher. In 2008 the American College Health Association reported 31 percent of college students they surveyed “felt so depressed that it was difficult to function” (American College Health Association). That disturbing statistic has remained steady in years since the first survey in 2008 (American College Health Association, 2011). The Center for Collegiate Mental Health reports in 2012 that over 7% of their national college student sample reported having been hospitalized for mental health concerns. These statistics are not necessarily unique to those attending college. College students and their non-college-attending peers show similar mental health prevalence (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Clearly the data shows that depression and other concerns are a major challenge to mental health in America (Andersson, 2009). Furthermore, these concerns are evident regardless of demographic: adolescent, adult, college-attending, non-college-attending, etc.

**Professional Frame: Interest & Reluctance, Ethical concerns and Legality Questions**

So far we have established that online education is growing in popularity and demand. Further, we have discussed the proclivity of this college-age generation to utilize electronic mediums to access information and support. The economic circumstances and realities of contemporary American life have further ingrained online delivery of educational opportunities into the American consciousness. Concurrent to the rise of this current information age, we also must note the increase in mental health concerns. It is
not my intent to infer any mutual causality between the two, but rather point out the parallel trends and suggest that we may not be able to ignore the role technology will play in addressing the mental health issues experienced in our population. In this section we will discuss the various attempts to define mental health interventions provided to those at a distance. Additionally, we will examine the ongoing debate over appropriate methods of intervention delivery, the vague direction provided by professional organizations, as well as the significant legal challenges presented by the current state of mental health licensure requirements and unaddressed jurisdictional ambiguity.

Defining Technology Assisted Delivery of Counseling Services. Technology is evolving and expanding from month to month. Few, if any, fields have innovated as quickly as information technology in the past few decades. This often means that many fields spend a considerable amount of time playing catch-up to the current state of technological advancement. A review of the literature shows that the beginning of the 21st century saw a significant escalation in interest over online or technology-assisted delivery of counseling services. Early technology pursued primarily text-based communication, while subsequent innovations have led to the inclusion of auditory and visual intervention possibilities. However, finding a way to define the whole breadth of online mental health interventions is a challenge. Centore & Milacci (2008) and Barak (2008) note that online counseling is known by a variety of names in the literature. Some call it “webcounseling”, “e-therapy”, or “cybercounseling” (p. 268). In this case, a simple definition may be the most accurate. Barak (2011) defines online counseling and psychotherapy as “a mental health intervention between a patient (or group of patients) and a therapist, using technology as the modality of communication…” (p. 157). This
definition may not encapsulate the complexity of online intervention alternatives to face-to-face therapy, but it will likely continue to evolve as technology does.

*Increased Interest among the Professional Counseling Community.* Many have pointed out that interest in interventions at a distance, particularly those through online channels, have been in use throughout the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} and beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} (A. Barak & Grohol, 2011; Castelnuovo & Gaggioli, 2003; Rochlen, Zack, et al., 2004; Wade, Wolfe, & Pestian, 2004). Unquestionably there are those who take issue with online interventions for reasons that will be discussed later, however, the literature clearly reflects a growing collective voice supporting online delivery by detailing the potential benefits associated with such methods: including; increased accessibility and portability of services, long-term cost benefits, comparable positive outcomes to face-to-face therapy for many mental health concerns, and an alternative option for individuals who may not otherwise pursue therapeutic services due to stigma or other social concerns/inhibitions (Alleman, 2002; Baker & Ray, 2011; Barak & Grohol, 2011; Barnett, 2005; Haberstroh, Duffey, Evans, Gee, & Trepal, 2007; Han & Heo, 2009; Lovejoy et al., 2009).

*Professional Critiques of Technology-Assisted Counseling Delivery.* The use of technology in human services, particularly counseling services, is controversial. Lovejoy, et al. (2009) has compiled a fairly comprehensive list of criticisms explicated throughout the literature. The list includes allegations that the online environment dehumanizes the environment required for therapy. Also mentioned are issues relating to insurance reimbursements, costs for infrastructure, licensure constraints, questions over patient and/or clinician suitability, and the lack of ability to ensure professional credibility (p. 116). However, it is conceivable that as technology continues to advance and become
more mainstream in society, these issues will begin to be addressed. For example, as of 2011 the American Psychological Association Practice Organization reports that Medicare and 12 U.S. states now require insurance reimbursement for online interventions, but limit eligibility to services delivered through videoconferencing only. These logistical barriers to online counseling service delivery will be discussed below.

There are various challenges to counseling and psychological services provided through online mediums due to ethical concerns. One such concern is suitability of the patient for therapy at a distance. Patient suitability for therapy provided at a distance largely focuses on demographic characteristics. For example, rural or lower SES patients may be less likely to possess the required equipment to receive therapy at a distance and/or be less likely to possess the skills to use the technology effectively (Lovejoy, 2009). Additionally, others have noted that certain client issues may be less suited for distance or online therapy (Baker, 2011). For example, some have argued that clients with suicidal ideation, personality disorders, or psychosis are not ideal candidates for distance therapy due to the distinct possibility for harm to themselves or others (Rees & Stone, 2005). However, others have postulated that web-based online interventions may be a solution to treat college students at risk for suicide (Barak, 2007; Haas et al., 2008). This illuminates the reality that within the counseling profession there exists significant disparity of opinion in regard to adequate methods for therapy. As is true for all human-related sciences there will be differences of opinion, however, if a new means of providing critical assistance to individuals in emotional distress is conceived and it has the potential to save lives or even provide a better quality of life, there is, at minimum, a responsibility to consider its merits.
Ensuring professional credibility is critical to the counseling vocation. Not all who practice therapy through online mediums have the proper credentials, training or experience to provide therapy online or provide therapy at all. A 2003 survey of online counseling providers found that the majority had no credentials or training in mental health (Heinlen, Welfel, Richmond, & Rak, 2003). A subsequent study conducted in 2006 on the credentials of online “psychologists” showed that fewer than 10 percent of those offering online psychological services were actually licensed psychologists (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). In addition, of those who did identify as a licensed professional 35 percent did not provide evidence of credentials and the majority were licensed in the field of social work (p. 484). This lack of proper credentials and training is concerning, but has caused some advocates in the field to assert that it is a reason for more licensed psychologists to get involved in therapy provided at a distance to avoid the “risk [of] getting left behind or pushed out of this realm altogether” (Rummell & Joyce, 2010).

Some have questioned the efficacy of online therapy despite several studies to the contrary. Lovejoy (2009) notes that some studies have employed weak methodologies, thus limiting their ability to produce valid and reliable conclusions (Hersh et al., 2001). Subsequent studies have concurred with this assessment and have alleged that the effectiveness of online treatments “is largely based on anecdotal evidence with limited empirical data supporting their validity” (Rochlen, Zack, et al., 2004). However, Fitzgerald (2010) and Barak & Grohol (2011) contend that there are several studies published since 2004 that maintain the efficacy of therapy provided through online medium for a variety of client concerns; including anxiety-related issues, depression, stress, and insomnia (Griffiths & Christensen, 2006; Andersson, 2009; Azy Barak, Hen,
Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008; Ritterband, Thorndike, Cox, Kovatchev, & Gonder-Frederick, 2009; Robinson & Serfaty, 2008; V Spek et al., 2008; Viola Spek et al., 2007). Additionally, in regard to therapy conducted via videoconferencing, Quarto notes that Simpson’s (2009) study concluded the method was effective for the treatment of clients presenting for a variety of reasons: including, anxiety, depression, eating-disorders and relationship problems (Quarto, 2011; Simpson, 2009). All of these issues are experienced by a large subset of the college-age population. The debate about the efficacy of online therapy might not be settled, however, the promise it may have for effectively addressing the most prevalent college student problems may warrant a second look.

*Professional Association Guidelines for practice.* Various organizations for the mental health profession offer ethical guidelines and professional standards for providing services at a distance. Many of them concern the profession as a whole and thus devote a very small portion to standards that involve the utilization of technology. The American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) are the two most prominent professional organizations that address the use of technology in the counseling profession. The most recent code of professional conduct for the APA addresses technological use within four standards. Under informed consent, the APA requires any psychologist conducting services either “in person or via electronic transmission” to inform the client of the risks associated with counseling services and subsequently obtain the clients consent to progress with therapy. Additionally, the APA requires online therapists to inform clients of the risks to privacy and the limits of confidentiality. In general, these ethical guidelines are not substantially different than in-person therapy. The APA cautions against false or deceptive statements in electronic
media, as well as, guides online therapists to ensure any publicly available advice is based on professional judgment rooted in applicable literature and are in keeping with all ethical codes established by the APA (APA, 2002).

The 2005 code of ethics established by the American Counselor Association articulates that it is the responsibility of the counselor to determine if the client is in an appropriate state to receive therapy at a distance. They do not however specify how a counselor makes this judgment. The ACA maintains that counselors are responsible for knowing and abiding by local, state, national and international statutes in the delivery of services through electronic mediums. And lastly, the ACA provides a comprehensive process for establishing informed consent. This process includes: addressing the difficulty of maintaining confidentiality; informing the client about colleagues who may have access to client information; urging clients to be cautious about others who have access to their own technology (e.g. computer); inform clients of their legal rights; utilization of encryption, notification when encryption is not in use; inform clients about archival storage of information; discussing the possibility of technology failure; inform clients of emergency procedures when the counselor is not available; discuss time zone differences, local customs, cultural or language differences; and informing clients when services are not covered by insurance. (ACA, 2005).

When it comes to the ethical codes, Mallen and colleagues note that there is still a considerable amount of ambiguity when it comes to services provided through online mediums (Mallen, 2005). The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) and the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE) further more specific standards for ethical
practice in the online environment (National Board for Certified Counselors, 2007). They outline 14 specific steps to ensure ethical practice paraphrased herein (page 30):

1. Verify client identity
2. Obtain parent/guardian consent when applicable
3. Explain procedures to client in an orientation process
4. Explain to the client the possibility of technology failure and discuss alternatives
5. Explain to the client how to cope with potential misunderstandings
6. Work with the client to identify a local crisis services provider in the event of an emergency
7. Make the client aware of free public access points for obtaining access to internet resources.
8. Make web-sites a barrier free environment to clients with disabilities
9. Make yourself aware of local conditions, customs, languages, and events that may influence the clients responses and understanding.
10. Inform the client of encryption methods used to safeguard privacy.
11. Inform the client how session data is stored and how long it will be retained.
12. Internet counselors must insure the confidentiality of the internet counseling relationship and safeguard the release of information through electronic means.
13. Know legal and ethical codes for the practice of internet counseling in both the counselors state as well as the home state of the client. This includes laws governing age of consent, mandatory reporting laws, and liability insurance policies.
14. Provide links to websites of all appropriate certifying boards and licensure boards for consumer protection.

Probably the most comprehensive guidelines for therapy through electronic sources is the American Telemedicine Association’s 2009 resource on “Practice guidelines for videoconferencing-based telemental health (American Telemedicine Association, 2009). These guidelines are more specific to videocounseling modalities; however, the principles espoused are similar to the fourteen steps outline above but provide more detail. Despite ambiguities and lack of regulation from professional counseling organizations it is probably most important to remember that psychologists must apply strict ethical principles to their practice “regardless of their service delivery medium” (Fisher & Fried, 2003).
Similar to the counseling profession, the field of student affairs has professional organizations that promulgate standards of practice. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has long been the source of professional standards for student development. Their latest edition includes sections which include standards for online education and recommendations for the provision of counseling services for online learners (CAS, 2006). They maintain, “reasonable efforts should be made to extend comparable counseling services to distance education students…services that effectively use electronic technologies should be offered when appropriate” (p. 168). The standards go on to elucidate that these services should be “offered in accordance with applicable ethical standards” (p. 168). It is important to note that the Council recognized the importance of providing “comparable services,” but rightly stopped short of prescribing how that might be accomplished. Such a task requires a collaboration of professional perspectives to ensure the development of ethical and practical solutions.

**Legality, Licensure and Jurisdictional Ambiguity.** Probably one of the most challenging and ambiguous issues associated with online delivery of counseling services is licensure and jurisdictional issues. At present there is currently no precedent in case law that involves online mental health services. This is somewhat surprising, given that online counseling and psychological services are not effectively governed in the U.S. However, Zack (2008) points out that despite the lack of legal precedent current law still applies to online mental health in the form of existing statutes. When a case involving online mental health services does present itself to the courts the existing statues will provide the template for developing legal rules (p. 335). Zack also notes that it is likely
that, in the face of legal challenge, the courts will apply the same legal standard to online service delivery as it does face-to-face (p. 336).

The question of professional licensure and legal jurisdiction in the information age is generally more complicated in the United States as opposed to other countries worldwide. States have a good degree of sovereignty to set legal precedents for practice, and in fact, each state sets its own licensure standards for the counseling profession. Many of these standards are similar, but by no means can one assume them to be the same. In regard to jurisdiction, “the rights and liabilities of the parties are determined by the local law of the state which, with respect to the issue, has the most significant relationship to the occurrence and the parties…” (Rest. 2d Conflict of Laws § 145 (1971). This is somewhat problematic for online delivery of services because it does not specify which state would have jurisdiction. However, Zack notes, “online counselors should know that they are probably amenable to lawsuits filed in their clients’ state” (p. 340). For example, according to Zack, “The state of Pennsylvania authorizes jurisdiction over nonresidents causing harm or tortious injury by an act or omission in this commonwealth…[or] by an act or omission outside this commonwealth” (42 Pa. Cons. Stat. Ann. § 5322[a] [3]-[a][4]).

Licensure of counselors to provide services across state lines is exceptionally problematic. Lovejoy (2009) maintains that short of the adoption of a national license across all states, the practice of counseling services across state lines either in-person or via electronic medium is both unethical and prohibited by law (p. 253). However, Menzano and colleagues (2011) discuss considerations for videocounseling in college and university counseling centers, and note that there are changes occurring in regard to
counselor jurisdiction. They assert that although “licensure issues may make
videocounseling a viable option only for students who attend satellite campuses in-state
or who are participating in distance learning within their home state” there are some
states that are granting temporary licensure for some treatment providers (Menzano,
Goodwin, Rockett, & Morris, 2011, p. 330). In addition, Menzano and colleagues
mention the Association of State and Provincial Psychology boards (ASPPB) which has
established a certificate for “interjurisdictional practice” to allow psychologists to
practice in another state for up to 30 days in a given year. However, only three states
have accepted the IPC (Georgia, Idaho, South Carolina) (p. 330). In short, at present,
licensure and jurisdictional uncertainties may prove a challenging problem standing in
the way of developing some form of comparable counseling and psychological services
for distance learners.

Institutional Frame: Educational Mission vs. Fiscal Realities

*Steady Decline of Public Funding for Higher Education.* Funding for public
higher education has been declining for many years. The economic downturn of 2008-
2009 has created a shortfall in state budgets and thus translated into appropriation
reductions for many institutions of higher education across the United States. With less
funds flowing into college and universities, many have been forced to make difficult
decisions about what it considers most essential for the success of the institution and its
students. Counseling services for college students are not immune to budgetary
reductions or elimination of certain services. It is, therefore, the responsibility of
administrators to carefully weigh the needs of the student population in light of current
institutional student data and national data on student mental health concerns. Early on,
Vein, Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst (1974) called for counseling centers to adopt student development concepts as a means of broadening their services (p. 249). In 2012, it remains critical for college counseling to play its part in the mission of promoting student access and student success. This can only occur through adequate funding, tapping additional streams of revenue, and exploring creative solutions.

*Counseling advances the educational mission.* Keeling and Heitzmann make a simple, yet logically compelling argument about the necessity of counseling services. They point out that colleges and universities are not healthcare or mental health agencies. No college or university set out to become an outlet for healthcare services, and yet they have chosen to take on the responsibility for student health (Keeling & Heitzmann, 2003, p. 39). Administering healthcare is an expensive endeavor undertaken in a competitive environment. The only logical reason for providing health services on our campuses is that by doing so we are “advance[ing] the mission of the institution and promot[ing] student success” (p. 39). Keeling and Heitzman further the point by asking “why would universities recreate services available in the community – and in this case, services that are hard to administer and expensive to provide – unless providing those services somehow made it possible for them to do their work better?” (p. 39). Probably the most significant contribution to the universal mission of student success is increased retention of academically capable students through alleviating psychological barriers to their success. Sharkin (2004) and others note that counseling centers don’t always embrace retention as a significant objective of the department, however, studies have shown that the counseling center does have positive influence on retention (Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009; Sharkin, 2004; Wilson, Mason, & Ewing, 1997).
Increased public demand for accountability. The soft economic market has brought along with it increased vigilance and calls for accountability on the part of institutions of higher education. Administrators are being called upon to show exactly how their educational product is making a difference in the lives of college students at their institution. Consumers of online educational content are no different. They want to know that they are receiving the educational opportunities that are comparable to those experienced on-campus. Obviously there are many challenges to providing comparable services, which will be discussed in further detail later, but in order for an institution to advance its educational mission online, it stands to reason that steps must be taken to explore ways to provide the services that will make possible a greater degree of student success in their educational endeavors.

Ever present threat of litigation. We live in an increasingly litigious society. The threat of litigation does and should cause an institution to pause and consider the potential implications of student support services. Despite good intentions, there will always be the possibility of a student or representative of a student (i.e. parent, guardian, etc.) who brings a claim of negligence against the institution. Lake and Bickel (1999) discuss the duty of an institution to act proactively in the event that there is a potential for danger and reasonable precautions could help to prevent harm to the institution and/or its students (Bickel & Lake, 1999, p. 145). It is conceivable that some institutions may have considered counseling services for online students and reached the conclusion that such services are simply too risky. Unfortunately, these institutions mistakenly believe they can’t be sued for services they are not providing. To the contrary, Kadison (2004) asserts that “the reality is that not having basic services increases your risk in our litigious
society” (Kadison, 2004, para. 6). Bennet and colleagues (2006) emphasize that threat of litigation can be mitigated by close adherence to professional guidelines and ethical standards such as obtaining informed consent regardless of method of service (B. Bennett, Bricklin, & Harris, 2006).

*Imperative to consider the influence and role of technology.* According to Bates (2000) there are three significant reasons why higher education will be required to change the way it operates. The first is the imperative to produce more despite a decline in resources. Second, society itself is changing and its needs are shifting. Higher education will be required to shift with these changes. And lastly, the influence of new technologies (Bates, 2000, p. 8). Administrators should recognize the vast influence of technology in the lives of students. Technology is inevitability and therefore, many administrators are seeking to find ways to utilize technology in ways that more effectively meet the ever-changing needs of society. Counseling and psychological services on campus are not immune to these trends and will need to explore ways in which technology can help lower costs while producing a better product for a consumer base that is coming to expect services via technology as the new standard.

**Departmental Frame: Increasing demand, expectations, and scope of services**

*Quantity and complexity of student crisis on campus.* Directors of counseling centers across the country are becoming keenly aware of the growing problem of mental health issues among college-age students. In a 2009 survey of counseling center directors, Gallagher found that directors believe the quantity and severity of mental health issues that require immediate responses is growing exponentially on college campuses
In addition, in the 2011 version of the survey, researchers found that nearly ten students “were hospitalized per campus (2000 students in all) for psychological reasons…[that] is more than triple the percentage of students hospitalized in 2004 (International Association of Counseling Services, 2011). Another study found that “fewer than half of students who screened positive for major depression or anxiety disorders have received any mental health services in the previous year” (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). This finding parallels the societal reality that “many people who experience psychological and interpersonal concerns never pursue treatment” (Corrigan, 2004). In fact, some estimates say that in any given year, as little as 11 percent of individuals in America who are experiencing some form of diagnosable mental health issue and 2 percent of those with an un-diagnosable mental health issue will seek psychological help (Andrews, Issakidis, & Carter, 2001).

Counseling centers aren’t necessarily the front lines when it comes to mental health on campus. Student affairs staff, particularly those serving in residence life offices, often serve as triage counselors for students suffering a crisis that requires immediate response. In fact, Senior student affairs officers are also noticing a significant rise in student utilization of counseling services (Kitzrow, 2009). There are a lot of possible reasons for increases in quantity and severity of mental health concerns, however, one possible explanation is the proliferation of psychotropic medications that are enabling more individuals to seek educational goals and meet the social demands of college (Blom & Beckley, 2005). However, medication isn’t a silver bullet as it requires the individual to be on the right dose and have the ability to independently medicate on a consistent basis. Another option for those with mental and emotional concerns that hinder one’s
ability to function in an educational community is to pursue their education at a distance. It stands to reason that those with mental health issues may disproportionately opt for online education due to its flexibility. Suffice it to say, there is no reason to conclude that those pursuing online education experience mental health concerns at a lower rate than those on campus.

Some have called the mental health situation on campus a growing crisis (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2005). Others have labeled the current situation a “growing public health concern” (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Gollust, 2007). However one chooses to depict the current situation, the reality is that college counseling centers are experiencing increasing demand and an expansion in the types of demands upon their services. This in turn necessitates more staff and more training to meet the quantity and complexity of current demand for services (Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2011). Meeting the mental health needs of the online learner as well as the growing needs of those on campus will be a significant challenge in an environment when resources are plunging and demand is rising.

*Increasing imperative to do more with less.* As we have already mentioned, college campuses have had to react to shifts in student characteristics and demographics as well as a harsh economic climate (Archer & Cooper, 1998; Backels & Wheeler, 2001). At many institutions, public and private, the source of funding for health-related programs comes from the general funds set aside for regular operation of the institution, but recently some have noted student fees have become increasingly common as a source of revenue for services (Keeling & Heitzmann, 2003). In times of soft economic conditions, many institutions have asked counseling centers to do more with less, or
worse, eliminated some services altogether. Bishop (2010) notes that “campus counseling centers are not strangers to these types of discussions” (p. 249). Bushong (2009) and Farrell (2008) cite a 2007 study by the International Association of Counseling Services which shows that counseling centers are sinking under the benchmark of 1 counselor for every 1500 students (Bushong, 2009; Farrell, 2008). The same survey, conducted in 2011 showed the average ratio nationally is closer to 1 counselor for every 1,600 students with smaller schools having much better ratios overall (International Association of Counseling Services, 2011). This means that if we assume that the 31% of students who experience depressive symptoms, according to the American College Health Association, that means there is a potential for each counselor to need to accommodate 465 students annually. If we take the average number of individuals who pursue therapy in the general population (13 percent) and apply that to the college environment, that would mean each counselor could need to accommodate an average of 195 students annually. Assuming the average school year is 30 weeks long and the average student will be seen for five free sessions, the average counselor would need to see students slightly more than 30 hours a week to accommodate the needs of these 195 students. These numbers reflect the best-case scenario of 1 counselor to 1500 students at the presenting rate of 13 percent. No matter how you slice it, there is a clear and convincing theme that Counseling centers are being stretched thin.

The solution for many is to find additional revenue streams that supplement the allocation received from general funds. Bishop (2010) points out that many institutions are moving further toward the utilization of mandatory student fees as “a separate source of revenue to provide the needed funding for counseling as well as health services” (p. 249).
Keeling and Heitzmann (2003) assert that counseling staff have a wide variety of specialized skills that can be tapped to provide services to a broader campus constituency, thus allowing for on-campus contracting revenue (Keeling & Heitzmann, 2003). This, however, may be more an option for larger counseling centers at large institutions. In addition, with time being a finite resource, it stands to reason that counselors spending time in other on-campus contracting engagements naturally takes time from time allotted for counseling services to students unless the contracting is provided during hours the counseling center is normally closed. Probably one of the most interesting solutions offered by Keeling and Heitzmann is the concept of a collaborative consortium of counseling centers at multiple colleges and universities nationally. This is particularly interesting for the purposes of exploring counseling services for online learners. Keeling and Heitzmann envision capitalizing on the “economies of scale” as a means of sharing costs, thus, in theory, universally saving money which could be reinvested in support of the educational mission (p. 55). As an added benefit, this may also be a solution to the state licensure barrier to providing counseling services to students in distance education across state lines. If there was a network of counseling centers representing all 50 states, then it would be possible to provide “local” and legal counseling services for students regardless of location. This just may be one way to truly do a whole lot more with the limited resources of each institution and still provide comparable counseling services to online learners.

Current state of counseling services for distance learners. As of now, very few institutions have taken steps to provide truly comparable counseling services to online learners. Some may question the need for counseling services when the distance learner
can seek out such services in their own locale. However, it could easily be argued that publicly available counseling services are offered in or around college towns as well. Realizing that counseling services lend critical support to the educational mission of colleges and universities, some institutions have begun to think critically about its distance learners. However, contemporary examples and promising solutions are few and far between. Hunt (2010) notes that some institutions have established a phone triage system (University of Massachusetts and Cornell University). One interesting innovation utilized by the University of Maryland is an electronic question and answer service. Through this service individuals can anonymously post questions to “Dr. WEBster” which are subsequently answered by counseling center staff and subsequently posted to the cumulative question and answer bank on the university website. Others can then search past questions and answers for online advice. This asynchronous solution is just one possible tool to use in making services available to distance learners. However, this still pales in comparison to the level of services available on campus.

**Individual Frame: Distance learner profile, needs, and impediments to supportive services**

*Distance Learner Profile.* The profile of the distance learner is difficult to ascertain. This is because there are simply so many demographics that choose to take courses through online mediums. You have the adult learner who has traditionally been the primary draw for online educational opportunities. They appreciate the flexibility it affords them so that they can balance the demands of a job and perhaps a family as well. The traditional-age college student is a growing segment of the online learning population. Some of these students are taking online courses in addition to face-to-face
courses. Others are pursuing their degree entirely remotely. This diversity in demographic is not a new phenomenon. Online learners have been a diverse group for the past decade. Palloff and Pratt (2003) make note that the National Center for Educational Statistics indicated in 2002 that enrollments in online courses “spanned all age groups” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 3). They assert that the successful online learner is “self-motivated and self-disciplined” as well as “willing to commit a significant amount of time to studies…” (p. 6-7). While these characteristics are undoubtedly necessary for online learner success, the non-academic needs of the online learner must also be addressed. The following section will explore recent research on the specific needs of online students.

Distance Learner Needs. Expanding student services for students in distance education certainly requires a significant commitment of staff and financial resources. Therefore, it is important to come to some conclusion about the actual needs of distance learners. This is somewhat problematic because the demographics of distance learners are so heterogeneous compared to the average student on today’s college campuses. Despite the dearth of published literature on student services in distance education, there are five dissertations completed between 1997 and 2005 that sought answers to variations of the same question. In 1997, Potter explored Canadian student perspectives on support services for distance learners. In 2000, Jackson sought to determine the student support needs of distance learners. In 2001, Bayless researched the non-academic needs of distance learners. In 2003, Ruth also developed a study exploring online student services for distance learners. And finally, in 2005, Ruth conducted an investigation into the co-curricular student service needs of students engaged in distance education.
In the study conducted by Potter (1997) the two most commonly mentioned barriers to distance learners were “communication” and “personal issues” (Potter, 1997). Potter also notes that “students spoke passionately about personal adjustments brought about by adding the dimension of distance study to their lives” and adds, “the support of family in particular, but friends as well in some cases, was very important in being able to balance multiple roles” (p. 107). Interestingly, in Potter reports that in several cases students indicated requiring “counseling assistance – either personal, career or family counseling” and quoted one as saying “sometimes I felt the need to go and run to a desert; it was stressful.” Overall, students did not rate access to personal counseling as a significant barrier.

In the Jackson (2000) dissertation, the researcher used a panel of experts (DEPHI method) to illuminate practitioner perspectives on essential student support services. The researcher found 64 unique support services that were then coded into nine categories. Seven categories were enrollment, academic, financial or technical support related. The remaining two categories were defined as “community development services” and “career development services” (p. 112-113). Career counseling over the phone was the number one essential service identified under the career development services, but there was no mention of anything related to personal counseling services in Jackson’s findings (p. 112).

Bayless noted in her review of the literature in 2001 that there was strong support for providing non-academic services for distance learners. However, Bayless lamented the fact that very little research gave anything in the way of guidance to what should be offered and how it should be offered (p. 353). In this study of student and faculty views
toward online student needs, “General information about the institution” was the highest student need reported by the respondents (p. 78). Interestingly, the data showed students indicated “opportunity to talk with someone about personal matters” was not an important need. However, other low items on her scale were “assistance with special needs”, “opportunities to explore personal value systems”, and “opportunities to do community service.” All three are hallmarks of quality educational opportunity on campus; therefore, why would this not also be true for those online? It’s interesting to note in her data that the mean scores for the variable “opportunity to talk to someone about personal matters” increased for respondents above age 40; thus suggesting that as students increase in age they begin to realize the need or benefits of personal counseling.

In the ensuing section we will discuss a societal help-seeking stigma associated with counseling services that may lead to inaccurate reporting and thus, unreliable data related to self-report of counseling service needs. Despite her findings, Bayless herself comments, “even though many students may not take advantage of services to meet special needs or counseling, all institutions engaged in distance learning should consider providing these services. Meeting these needs for the distance learners who need them may very well make the difference between success and failure” (p. 375).

Marsh (2003) mentions the relative lack of research on the out-of-class experience of students engaged in learning at a distance (p. 20). However, she does cite a large-scale survey conducted in 2001 that identified the broad category of “student support services” as one of the top ten factors influencing “barriers to distance education” (p. 20). The authors of this 2001 study sought to replicate their results in a follow-up factor analytic analysis of student barriers to online learning in 2005 (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).
Unfortunately, this study didn’t further illuminate how “student support services” affect barriers to online learning. However, they did find “the single most important barrier to students learning online was a lack of social interaction” (p. 35). From this one can conceivably conclude there is some kind of link between social/interpersonal engagement and student success in online learning environments. We know that students on campus struggle with social engagement; its safe to say the online learner population has similar concerns. In Marsh’s multi-site critical case study of institutions providing “exemplary services to students studying from a distance” she noted the existence of perception that “counseling and other health services did not need to be provided because students didn’t expect this from their distance-learning program” (p. 104). She goes on to assert that although “this may be a common assumption…these students may actually have a need for this [counseling] service if they are adjusting to returning to school, balancing school with other life responsibilities, or lacking interpersonal interactions because they are disconnected from other students” (p. 104). In her analysis, Marsh furthers a similar sentiment as the counsel for the advancement of standards in higher education (CAS) in arguing, “services should be provided that are equivalent to, but not the same as, campus-based programs…” (p. 6). And concludes, “these issues and the value and feasibility of providing counseling from a distance are worth further investigation” (p. 104).

The fifth dissertation, conducted by Ruth in 2005, sought to further explore the co-curricular student needs for students in distance education. Citing conclusions from several studies in the late 90’s, Ruth argued that although many perceive distance learners to be significantly self-sufficient, the data suggests the contrary (Hardy & Boaz, 1997; McRae, 1999; Potter, 1997; Ruth, 2005). While furthering the notion that online learners
from a wide variety of demographics need support services, Ruth also stresses “[distance learners] still desire a human approach and the ‘human touch’ in terms of feeling connected to their home institution. They need to know that a real person exists on the other side to assist them and to encourage and support their opportunities for success throughout their academic program” (p. 93).

Finally, one published study in 2003 also asserted that the “support mechanisms” that exist for on-campus learners are significantly deficient in their availability to online learners, thus “leading to further isolation of distance learners” (Lapadula, p. 120). In this study, Lapadula undertook a broad evaluation of student support services for online learners at the New York Institute of Technology. Despite the sample size being relatively small (n = 92), a relatively high proportion (25-34%) indicated interest in various personal/mental health counseling options (LaPadula, 2003). Based on her review of the literature and research findings, Lapadula argued that “counseling services can help students cope with their environment and acquire self-understanding” thus, counseling services “[are] essential to a quality distance learning experience” (p. 122).

Though the generalizability of this study to all online learners is not definite, it provides a level of practical significance to the argument in favor of developing counseling services for online learners.

The totality of the available literature on student services suggests some distance learner interest in and need for personal counseling services. Beyond self-reported interest, institutions must determine the level of benefit students may receive from offering services that a smaller subset of the population requires. Years of practice and research confirm the benefit of counseling services to the educational mission, thus it is
not far-fetched to conclude that a similar portion of online learners would have a greater chance at educational success should some level of services be offered at a distance. Furthermore, the subsequent section will illuminate the phenomenon of help-seeking stigma within the American population and argue that literature on student self-report data may be negatively skewed as a result; thus suggesting that the need may be, in reality, significantly greater than respondents are willing to admit.

*The help-Seeking stigma phenomenon among distance learners.* Studies that utilize student self-report data relating to the need for counseling services inevitably find that the perceived need is significantly lower than what one would expect based on the level of mental health issues across the entire population. To this end, Hunt (2010) indicates that a “lack of perceived need for help” is a significant barrier to students’ utilization of counseling services (p. 6). American society is largely based on individualistic ideals; however, it is these ideals that lead many to believe they will be able to and should be able to manage on their own. Unsurprisingly, if an individual believes they are able to or should be able to manage their emotional well-being on their own, they are significantly less likely to request assistance from a professional counselor (Hess, 2011). Shame and guilt also play a role in student’s decisions to pursue therapy (Barak & Grohol, 2011). Self-concealment or perhaps intentional denial of personal problems also leads some students, particularly Asian student sub-groups, to avoid seeking counseling services (Liao, Rounds, & Klein, 2005). In terms of other minority groups, racial minority groups have a lower likelihood of pursuing therapeutic opportunities (Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007). More specifically, African-American students are significantly less likely to pursue counseling services, especially African-
American men (Duncan & Johnson, 2007; Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). Lower socio-economic demographics exhibit higher rates of stigma toward counseling and thus present for counseling services at a lower rate (Verhaak, 1995). Additionally, a large body of literature has established that men, in general, have a much higher stigma/negative attitude associated with help-seeking than women (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2002; J. L. Johnson, Oliffe, Kelly, Galdas, & Ogrodniczuk, 2012; Noone & Stephens, 2008; Oliffe, Robertson, Kelly, Roy, & Ogrodniczuk, 2010). However, it is interesting to note that one study found emotionally-oriented men preferred online counseling over face-to-face counseling as compared to men with low emotionality (Rochlen, Land, et al., 2004).

It is also important to highlight the critical role of the peer relationship in help-seeking behavior among the college student population. Neal and colleagues (2011) bring this to the foreground by highlighting a few recent studies on information seeking behavior which suggest that before other options are considered, the individual will first consult their peers for advice and support (Neal et al., 2011; Talja & Hansen, 2006; Veinot, 2009). In fact, according to Vogel (2009) more than 9 out of 10 individuals who sought out professional counseling assistance talked to at least one non-professional peer prior to seeking professional help (Vogel, Wade, & Ascheman, 2009). Individual help seeking trends are undoubtedly influenced by societal factors. The distance learner, however, may or may not have the social support capital to cope with the pressures associated with balancing personal, academic, and sometimes professional life all at the same time.
“The most often cited reason for why people do not seek counseling and other mental health services is the stigma associated with mental illness and seeking treatment” (Corrigan, 2004). This is a societal trend to which students are not immune. The stigma associated with counseling combined with the “strong sense of personal responsibility to address [problems] individually” may lead many to intentionally or unintentionally under-report the need for counseling services in traditional and online learning as well as the significance of counseling services to overall student success (Hess, 2011).

Furthermore, adding to the problems associated with the trustworthiness of student self-report data is Nichols (2010) application of Herzberg’s two-factor theory to his conceptualization of support services and student perception of those services. Nichols concludes:

“If student support services are not adequate, student behavior is adversely affected. However, students do not necessarily attribute their dropout behavior to the inadequacy of support. On the other hand, if student support services are adequate, students who benefit from them tend to attribute their success to intrinsic factors relating to self-motivation. Once effective support systems are put in place, students do not directly appreciate them but instead perceive them as silent enablers of personal motivation, active in the background even though their influence works directly on retention.” (p. 106).

This obviously produces a catch 22 for those looking to develop counseling services, or student counseling services in general, since societal counseling stigma may diminish the student self-report of counseling needs and students attribution of personal success may not accurately reflect the integral role of counseling (or other student
support service). In light of this real possibility that the actual need for counseling services distance learner populations is likely under-reported. The following section will contend that shocking low retention rates among distance learners is associated with the prevalence of mental health related personal issues, and compounded by the apparent lack of comparable counseling services for this segment of the college and university population.

*Low academic persistence among distance learners.* Student retention theory indicates that students who feel integrated with their institution persist at a significantly higher rate, which is particularly evident in the on-campus population (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1975). If on-campus learners often experience mental and emotional health concerns from a lack of integration and feelings of isolation, how much more is this true of the distance learner who is not just feeling isolated, but is also physically isolated from the campus community. In fact, various studies have noted the isolating nature of the online environment (Abrami & Bures, 1996; S. Bennett, 1999). Although feelings of isolation do not necessarily mean an individual will experience psychological problems, the counseling services provided to on-campus learners are in place to bridge the gap for these students. Distance learners, at present, are not as fortunate. If isolation results in attrition among the on-campus population, it unquestionably influences persistence decisions of some online learners and may even compound already existing issues of depression and/or anxiety.

Retention of students is important to many institutions because of the cost to recruit students in relation to the cost to retain students already enrolled, indeed, “it is obviously more efficient to retain enrolled students than it is to go through all of the steps
and expenses that must be committed to replace those who leave” (Bishop, 2010, p. 252). Indeed, various studies have established that student retention efforts are in the best interest of both the institution and the students enrolled (Barefoot, 2004; McGivney, 2004; Moody, 2004). Research shows that across all college demographics 5 percent of all college students cease their academic experience due to barriers caused by mental and emotional problems (Kessler, Foster, Saunders, & Stang, 1995). That number has undoubtedly increased significantly as the quantity and severity of mental health concerns has increased on our college campuses. However, even a 5 percent attrition rate translates into significant costs for colleges and universities. Furthermore, in regard to online education specifically, the attrition rate for online learners is 10-20 percent higher than their traditional face-to-face counterparts (Angelino & Williams, 2007). Anything that can decrease the attrition rate of students, particularly rates as high as those in online education, should be explored. Multiple studies have demonstrated that students who have received counseling have higher retention rates than those who did not (Bishop, 2010; Illovsky, 1997; Sharkin, 2004; Wilson et al., 1997). Certainly, personal counseling services is just one piece of the puzzle, but it is perhaps one of the least researched, least appreciated for its ability to promote student success and definitely one of the least implemented services for online learners.

**Introduction Summary**

In this chapter I have argued that those engaged in online learning, despite demographic diversity, require student support services comparable to those currently available to on-campus students. It may be true that those engaged in distance learning
may report counseling services as a low priority need, however, there is no reason to suggest that students at a distance require less opportunity for access to counseling and psychological services than their on-campus counterparts. Furthermore, we know that on-campus students are utilizing the counseling services at a higher rate than ever before, for reasons more severe than ever before.

The literature is clear that college campuses across the United States provide counseling services for students not because they desire to become health care providers, but rather for its essential role in supporting the educational mission. No issue is more central to a successful educational mission than promoting student retention and eliminating unnecessary student attrition. Research clearly shows that distance/online education has a significantly higher student attrition and non-completion rate than the traditional model. Furthermore, counseling services has been shown to counteract the forces leading to student attrition.

The isolating nature of online education undoubtedly plays a role in increasing the anxiety and depression of some students. Lack of connection to the institution, its professors, and integration with peer, furthers the notion that counseling services may be essential to promote the highest level of student access and success. Therefore, heeding the guidance of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) to explore ways to provide comparable counseling services to online learners; this study will expand upon previous work conducted by Centore and Milacci (2008) who identified perceived challenges/barriers to delivering counseling services online. Figure 2 (below) divides these challenges into three factor categories for the purpose of this study.
Figure 2: Perceived barriers to online delivery of counseling services by constituent. (Adapted from Centore, 2008, p. 277)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client (Student) Factors</th>
<th>Counselor Factors</th>
<th>Institutional Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of safety</td>
<td>Ethical duty</td>
<td>Student attrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality/Anonymity</td>
<td>Licensure and liability</td>
<td>Cost of services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social stigma</td>
<td>Efficacy of methods</td>
<td>Threat of litigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of counselor accessibility</td>
<td>Suitability of client</td>
<td>Connection to Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal connection to counselor</td>
<td>Ability to manage crisis</td>
<td>Increased demand for services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-pocket cost</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Furthermore, this dissertation sought to provide a theoretical understanding of professional viewpoints within the college environment by first exploring the perceptions and perspectives of counseling center staff and student affairs administrators. This study investigated perceptions relating to delivery of services to distance learners, salient barriers to providing counseling and psychological services at a distance, the variability of perspective and expectations across administrative levels, and explicated strategies college counseling practitioners are most likely to employ in the service of distance learners.
Chapter 3: Methods

This section will begin with a succinct overview of the overarching paradigms employed, problems to be addressed, and the research questions that will serve to guide the study. Although there are several paradigms of inquiry, the worldview of the researcher plays an important role in all types of research. Where the rationalistic (scientific) researcher maintains that parts of reality (variables) can be singled out, researcher and subject are independent, and context-free generalizability is the goal; the naturalistic researcher, in contrast, believes that events and phenomena are intertwined, the inquirer and subject always have an effect on one another, and generalizations are unreliable and always context laden (Owens, 1982). However, the researcher contends that, despite one’s viewpoint on the nature of reality and research, despite the fact that the “two paradigms often tend to compete for legitimacy and support, they are, in fact, complementary methods of investigation available for use in the knowledge-production process…” (p. 3).

The researchers own paradigm positionality reflects a leaning toward the naturalistic viewpoint. Guba (1982) notes that naturalistic inquiry “offers a contextual relevance and richness unmatched by any other paradigm” and “it displays a sensitivity to process virtually excluded in paradigms stressing control and experimentation” (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). With a desire to maintain rich contextual relevance and sensitivity to process; the conceptual framework for this study utilized a linear reduction of conceptual contexts to frame the research problem’s relationship to the various embedded contextual
groups (i.e. society through individual). A prominent American sociologist in the 20th century, C. Wright Mills, believed that a true understanding of the individual or a society could not be accomplished without the other. Truth, by its nature is contextual and to some degree socially created. From a naturalistic-phenomenological perspective; by understanding the thoughts, feelings, values, perceptions and actions of various individuals, we gain contextual understanding of the framework through which the world is viewed, leading to the collective actions which make up societal systems (Owens, p. 5).

Although there are various research methods with underlying paradigms, Owens points out, “one widely-used paradigm for gaining understanding and discovering meaning is that of expert judgment” (p. 2). Following a naturalistic paradigm, this study will employ multiple qualitative methods to answer the research questions, which guide the study. The principal research method (DELPHI) utilizes the collective wisdom of a panel of experts in an exploratory analysis of various issues related to the efficacy of developing counseling services for online learners. The phase II Delphi method will be preceded by a pilot study to develop Delphi protocol and followed by confirmatory, targeted interviews. The following section will outline in greater depth the purpose of the study, as well as detail the three phases employed in the research design. A concise rationale and justification will be presented for each design decision.

Research Purpose & Questions. The purpose of this study is to explore college mental health practitioner perceptions of online-learner needs; perceived barriers relating to the delivery of services to meet these needs; the relationship between counselor’s theoretical orientation and their viewpoint on the efficacy of online delivery; and finally, strategies professional counselors would be most likely to adopt to serve online learners.
The results from this explorative study are intended to provide a foundation for a model of counseling service delivery to online learners. Based on the conceptual framework outlined throughout the literature review, this study aims to attain a better understanding of how perceived barriers relate to counselor perspectives on the efficacy service delivery to online learners. To address this problem comprehensively, I utilize the following research questions to guide the study:

*Research Question 1*: Do college/university mental health counseling professionals perceive a need and/or responsibility to provide counseling and psychological services to distance learners and what do they believe to be the most salient benefits and/or impediments to offering counseling services to students engaged in exclusively online education?

*Research Question 2*: Is a college mental health professional’s theoretical orientation related to their viewpoint on providing counseling services for students engaged in exclusively distance education?

*Research Question 3*: How do expert perspectives on providing counseling and psychological services to distance learners compare to those of key decision-makers within the department of student affairs?

*Research Question 4*: What strategies would college mental health counseling professionals most likely pursue to extend counseling and psychological services to students engaged in exclusively distance education?

**Research Design: Sample Selection, Data Collection & Analysis Procedures**

*Description of research site.* Distance learning as a concept has been in existence for well over one hundred years. For example, the research site chosen for this study, as the land-grant institution of the state, began study via correspondence for rural students in 1892. The proliferation of technology has only furthered the development of learning at a
distance. Today, the distance education division is one of the most well-known and highly regarded distance education options in American Higher Education. With over ten thousand students taking online courses in 2011, distance education at this institution is among the largest online student populations in the country.

If statistics on the traditional college-going population are paralleled in the online population, 6% -10% of these students (Between 600 and 1000 students) will have seriously contemplated suicide in the past six months (Hunt, 2010, p. 4; Kadison, 2004). Over 50% (5000 students) have felt “overwhelming anxiety” and over 30% (3000 students) have “felt so depressed that it was difficult to function (American College Health Association, 2011).

The university system is provided mental health services through its division of counseling and psychological services (CAPS). CAPS employs a staff of 17 full-time and associate counselors and psychologists, 5 social workers, and 17 graduate interns and assistants. The size of the distance learning division combined with the counseling staff located at the university makes this an ideal case and research site for this study.

Description of research participant selection and sample demographics. Participants for the phase 1 pilot study were drawn from a purposeful and convenient sample of doctoral students in the department of counselor education at the research site. The Phase 2 Delphi protocol developed through the conceptual framework for this study was refined in this pilot phase. Phase 2 participants were recruited on a voluntary basis during a regularly scheduled staff meeting of counseling center staff. In addition, counseling center staff and administrators who the researcher had already reached out to were utilized to identify and make connections with current college mental health
professional staff to participate in the phase 2 Delphi study. The objective for the Phase 2 Delphi study was to develop an expert panel of college counselors and psychologists. The number of staff located in the counseling center and their familiarity with the university system made for the ideal population to draw a sample for the panel of experts for this study. Phase 3 interview participants were drawn from the Delphi panel to provide increased depth and triangulation of data. Additionally, two senior level professionals with supervision over counseling and psychological services at the university were approached to participate in this third interview phase.

The pilot sample consisted of four doctoral level graduate students in the counseling department at the university. Each of the four doctoral students were at similar stages of their program having completed at least one year of coursework. Each individual in the pilot study provided his or her perspectives in response to the initial version of the first round of the Delphi study. Building upon the feedback provided by the pilot study the Delphi was revised and administered to the primary research sample consisting of a panel of experts who work directly with college students providing counseling and psychological services. The Delphi panel consisted of eight experts. Half of the panelists were staff psychologists. One panelist serves as a Psychiatrist able to prescribe medication in support of broader counseling and psychological services. Two of the panelists were master’s level clinical social workers. And one panelist serves as a Nurse Practitioner and psychiatric clinical specialist. Each panelist has significant daily contact with students experiencing mental and emotional concerns. The phase 3 interviews utilized two of the staff psychologists to expand and confirm findings. The counseling center director joined the study in this third phase to provide a decision-maker
perspective necessary to explore the third research question focused on comparing practitioner perspectives with decision-maker viewpoints. Additionally, this study invited the student affairs vice president to participate by providing an overarching assessment relating to the provision of counseling and psychological services to distance learners.

Discussion of data collection design. This study employed a three phase sequential qualitative design that is depicted in the following design illustration: Pilot [qual] → Delphi [QUAL] → Interviews [QUAL]. Referring to the figure 3 visual map of the research design.

Figure 3: Visual map of the research design
The first phase of the study is designed as a pilot focus group. A structured, modified Delphi protocol utilizing a panel of experts was developed from the Phase I pilot and employed for Phase II. Subsequently, Phase III targeted interviews had dual purpose. First, they followed the Delphi method to provide further clarification and expansion of knowledge and insights. Secondly, targeted interviews expanded the conversation to include key decision-makers within the division of student affairs in order to generate data to answer research question 3.

*Phase I pilot design.* The pilot study is often conducted in qualitative research to develop an interpretation, which is “an understanding of the concepts and theories held by the people you are studying” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 58). In this case, the pilot study utilized a group of doctoral students in the field of counselor education to refine the Phase II Delphi protocol. The doctoral students represent a convenient sample for the researcher as they have completed coursework together in the past. All doctoral students in the pilot study either have or currently work with college students.

The conceptual framework of the study generated through this study’s thorough review of the literature provides the basis for the initial pilot study protocol and the pilot study was used to test the researchers ideas, methods and begins to develop grounded theory. The pilot study mimicked the Phase II design with modifications for time constraints and participant convenience. A first round open-ended qualitative survey based on the conceptual framework of this study was administered via a Google survey form distributed through email. A subsequent focus group of all pilot study participants served as a means to gain feedback on the accuracy of questions, identify ambiguities in the design, and improve feasibility of survey administration.
Phase II Delphi design. This phase employed an explorative research tool called the Delphi technique or method. It was named for the legend of the Greek Delphi Oracle who had a “network of informants” (Kennedy, 2004). Originally developed by a joint venture between the United States military and the RAND Corporation, the Delphi technique is a “social research technique whose aim is to obtain a reliable group opinion using a group of experts. It is a method of structuring communication between a group of people who can provide valuable contributions in order to resolve a complex problem” (Landeta, 2006, p. 468). Skulmoski (2007) notes, “the Delphi method is an iterative process,” and “[it] works especially well when the goal is to improve our understanding of problems, opportunities, solutions, or to develop forecasts” (Skulmoski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007, p. 1). Murray (1995) mentions several studies in the field of higher education that have used the Delphi technique and has categorized them into the following four areas: “(1) to develop goals and objectives. (2) to improve curriculum, (3) to assist in strategic planning, and (4) to develop criteria” (Murray & Hammons, 1995, p. 425).

The pilot-tested Delphi protocol was administered through an emailed link with a web-based delivery. The online delivery of the Delphi protocol ensures a degree of anonymity and convenience for the participants, as it does not require any of the participants to provide information in the presence of others. Keeney (2006) stresses that true anonymity isn’t practical for the iterative nature of the Delphi. However, for circumstances such as this, Quasi-anonymity is preferred. Quasi-anonymity guarantees the participants will not know how others responded but the researcher will typically know the identities of the respondents (Keeney, Hasson, & McKenna, 2006). To this end,
the identities of the Delphi panelists and their individual responses are only known to the researcher and identifying information is not included in the reported findings of this study. Maintaining quasi-anonymity was also important for the phase III research design, as participants for targeted confirmatory interviews were selected partially based on data from the Delphi.

For a Delphi study, sampling procedures are sometimes of the great concern. Building a panel of experts is sometimes challenging due to the subjective nature of selection criteria. However, for this study sampling issues were not of great concern due to the ability to include all college mental health professionals at a large research institution. Bowen (2008) emphasizes that “in this sampling strategy, the researcher does no seek ‘generalizability’ or ‘representativeness’ and therefore focuses less on sample size and more on sampling adequacy…” (Bowen, 2008, p. 140).

College mental health professionals at a single research university provide both a convenient sample as well as an appropriate sample composed of expert individuals who are able to effectively represent or have knowledge relating to the research problem and questions. The list of possible Delphi panel participants was comprised of the counselors and psychologists listed on the University website and vetted for the study with the help of counseling staff in supervisory positions (e.g. The director of counseling and psychological services). With the assistance of contacts in the counseling center, mental health professionals were informed of the nature and procedure of the study via letter and/or personal contact and asked if they would agree to participate. Additionally, no incentives were offered to participate in this study.
The progression of the Delphi procedures followed a three round design. As previously mentioned, round 1 was conducted via web survey with a qualitative design. Round one focused on baseline data. The questions sought to establish expert perspectives on the need for counseling services for distance learners and salient impediments to developing and/or implementing such services. Data gathered through round one sought to answer research question number one; “Do college/university mental health counseling professionals perceive a need to provide counseling services to online learners and what do they believe to be the most salient benefits and/or impediments to offering counseling services to students engaged in exclusively online education?” Part of the Delphi design calls data to be fed back to participants for the purpose of self-evaluation of perspectives in relation to the aggregate of responses from the entirety of the panel. Therefore, the round 2 protocol was an emergent, iterative design that developed out of the responses gained through round one and gave the participants the opportunity to clarify their previous responses in light of response data. It also provide an opportunity for panelists to build upon that baseline information gained in round 1 by responding to questions regarding theoretical counseling orientation and attitudes regarding the delivery of services to online learners. Similar to the previous round, respondents had the opportunity to review summative data gathered from the expert panel and clarify their responses prior to responding to the third round which built upon the previous two, but focus specifically on developing an initial list of strategies college mental health professionals would most likely employ in providing services to distance learners.
For most Delphi studies the researcher must make a subjective determination regarding the point of saturation. The point where no new data is being collected to add to the list of coding categories is usually where a Delphi study would stop (Bowen, 2008). This modified Delphi approach took a more structured method in determining the number of rounds required for the study. This is acceptable because of the enhancing nature of the third and final follow-up interview phase conducted as a part of the research design.

*Phase III interview design.* Purposeful targeted interviews followed the primary Delphi phase of the study. As a part of this phase the researcher conducted extended interviews with two of the eight panelists. In addition, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews with the Director of the Counseling Center and the Vice President of Student Affairs, who is responsible for the supervision of the student affairs department, of which counseling services is a part. The follow-up interviews served multiple purposes in the research design. The interviews, first and foremost, were a critical component to data triangulation going beyond the data gathered in the Delphi phase. This smaller sample of respondents also provided a means for conducting member checks to ensure trustworthiness of the data and eliminate any lingering ambiguities. Additionally, the interviews that include individuals outside of the expert pane, the Director and the VP, provided key data for this study’s third research question: “How do expert appraisals of efficacy and expectations for providing counseling services to distance learners compare to those of decision-makers within the department of student affairs?”

*Discussion of analysis procedures.* The structure of the overall design required the use of the constant comparison method, as it is a fundamental component to any
procedures that are developed out of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1993). In the constant comparison method there are typically four stages which include: comparing incidents, integrating themes, delimiting the theory and writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the Delphi procedure employed by the researcher, the newly collected data was not only compared to the previous data, but it also shaped the protocol for subsequent rounds in the study.

Due to the electronic delivery of the Delphi protocols, the experts themselves developed the data file through their responses. Each of their responses was automatically recorded in a secure response database that was accessible only by the researcher. This proved to save a considerable amount of time over conducting individual interviews. The researcher began analyzing the content and looking for inter-expert consensus and disagreement. A method of holistic coding was employed to code large pieces of the data to get a sense of the overall content. Thematic coding followed holistic coding of the data based on the research questions and primary objectives of the study. For example, in the first round of the Delphi study focused on perceptions of non-academic needs of distance learners, perceptions of challenges associated with providing counseling and psychological services to distance learners, and perceived benefits that could be realized if those services could be somehow expanded to the distance learner population. The same method was utilized in the analysis of Phase III interview data. Broad coding of emergent themes was used to organize passages into reports through the utilization of Dedoose Web Application qualitative data analysis software. Holistic coding and thematic analysis was conducted between rounds for the purposes of generating summative feedback for panelists.
Ensuring trustworthiness in the data

In qualitative research, validity and reliability, are reframed as “trustworthiness” of the data (Bowen, 2008). In other words, what practical steps have been taken to increase our ability to trust the data and the subsequent analysis of the data? This study will employ both constructive (during the main Delphi process) and evaluative trustworthiness procedures (post hoc) (p. 148). The Delphi design has high construct validity as it allows for participants to confirm their initial responses and the researcher’s interpretations. In addition, the three-phase design of the study allowed for multiple methods of data collection. Of particular importance was the enhancing and confirmatory nature of interviews in phase III, thus increasing the ability to triangulate data and generate credible theory. In addition, the study employed “negative case analysis” to explore instances where responses contradicted the prevailing evidence (p. 148). The findings in this study include a “thick description” of the phenomena being studied, which will include detailed descriptions of expert attitudes and perceptions (Geertz, 1977). Furthermore, the study developed a systematic and well-organized audit trail that flows from the transcriptions of qualitative data to the theory that was be built on the emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All these considerations were undertaken in order to increase the dependability, confirmability and overall trustworthiness of the study’s findings.
Seeking transferability of the findings

The degree to which the findings in one particular setting, situation or individual can be confidently applied to another setting, situation or individual is the generalizability (Maxwell, 1992). Maxwell notes that generalizability plays a distinctly different role in qualitative research as compared to quantitative research. In qualitative research generalizability occurs through the development of theory. The study’s ability to make sense of similar persons, situations or contexts is its level of generalizability (p. 293). In qualitative research there are two types of generalizability, internal generalizability and external generalizability (p. 293). In most qualitative research the goal is to achieve a high level of internal generalizability due to its highly situated and contextual nature.

Owens (1982) points to the work of Lee Cronbach who he says “brilliantly argued that generalizations are not enduring” and that, “they do, in fact, break down over time in all fields of science, the physical and biological as well as the social sciences” (p. 10). Generalization of findings is not necessarily the ultimate goal; however, Okoli asserts, “because a Delphi study solicits information from experts who have a wide range of experience, by inquiring about their experiences and opinions researchers significantly extend the empirical observations upon which their initial theory is based – thus strengthening the grounding of the theory and increasing the likelihood that the resulting theory will hold across multiple contexts and settings” (Okoli, 2004, p. 27) This “field-experimental” study explored the perspectives of individuals from a particular setting at a specific point in time; and although the results cannot be statistically generalized to other situations, the findings will reveal certain qualities, characteristics, and insights that are
gained will likely lend a great deal of transferability to other similar contexts, but should be subjected to further empirical testing across higher education environments.

**Research Limitations**

As with most qualitative research, this study sought to explore a singular context at a specific point in time. It should be noted that this study does not intend to offer universal generalizability to all educational institutions seeking to reach conclusions about offering counseling and psychological services for their own students engaged in learning at a distance. In fact, it is recognized that mental health practitioners at various institutional types have varying individual backgrounds, institutional resources, and other specific limiting factors; however, it is herein argued that this study provides a high degree of “face generalizability” in that there is not a compelling reason to believe that the results and insight generated from such results wouldn’t be able to be applied to other institutions with similar characteristics (Maxwell, 2004). This is particularly true for institutions with a similar student makeup, organizational type, institutional mission, counseling center model and distance education program.

The Delphi procedures relied on the careful selection of experts to establish its reliability. Since this study utilized a single research site with a pre-established group with expert knowledge of the college mental health context this issue is diminished. However, the decisions related to sampling for the study may be seen as a limitation and future studies may choose to replicate the results using a panel of experts from a different institutional type or a panel comprised of experts across different institutions or institutional types.
**Researcher Position**

In any qualitative research, the validity of a study is influenced by the beliefs, values, and perspectives held by the researcher. It is of the utmost importance to be reflective throughout the process to ensure a forthright disclosure of one's own understanding which inevitably informs critical research decisions regarding design, analysis and eventual conclusions. In entering the field upon which the inquiry will be based, the researcher “enters the field with an open mind, not an empty head” (Fetterman, 2010). Certainly, as Miles and Huberman put it, “something is known conceptually about the phenomenon, but not enough to house a theory;” but, “the researcher has an idea of the parts of the phenomenon that are not well understood and knows where to look for these things” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As a career student affairs practitioner, the researcher approaches student services as a critical component to student success. Having served students in crisis, the researcher knows that periods of distress weigh negatively on the students’ ability to be successful. Compared to the traditional on-campus student, the distance learner experiences their crises without the significant student support services provided to the residential instruction student through face-to-face counseling and psychological services. The researcher acknowledges that his inclination is toward finding any way possible to offer comparable supportive services to distance learners, but also realizes the complexity of the situation in that it is not a matter of making a simple decision to provide such services. Therefore, realizing such ambiguity and complexity exists, this study seeks to fill the theoretical gap on the way to finding practical ways of satisfying the counseling and psychological services needs of distance learners.
Chapter Summary & Implications

The primary objective of this study was to develop a foundational understanding of expert perspectives on providing counseling services to distance learners. Specifically, the researcher utilized data collected through multiple means to begin the construction of a practical model for offering counseling and psychological services to the distance learner population. The three-phase research design allowed the researcher to build research protocols from the conceptual framework and subsequently from grounded theory drawn from data. The second phase of the research design provided a practical means for illuminating expert viewpoints on the need and perceptions of responsibility for the delivery of services to distance learners; as well as the concerns they believe to be the most salient barriers or challenges to successful implementation of services. Additionally, the Delphi phase of the study sought to generate strategies that might be employed to serve distance learners mental and emotional support needs.

In broad strokes, the ambition was to simultaneously contribute to “the improvement of institutional practices and policy formulation” and “the advancement of knowledge” (Smart, 2005, p. 474). Since there is virtually no precedent for providing counseling and psychological services to distance learners in the literature or in practice; this study aims to generate discussion, stimulate further exploratory and confirmatory research, and take one step toward answering the call of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) to provide comparable counseling services to support the academic ambitions of students in distance education.
Chapter 4: Mental Health Practitioner & Student Affairs Decision-Maker Perspectives

Literature on distance education/learning is a vast sea of perspectives and ideas. Similarly, college counseling boasts a dense field of literature spanning a multitude of subspecialties. Student development and support also brings to the table a rich theoretical framework. Even online counseling has a growing body of literature discussing its merits. However, to date, no study has taken an interdisciplinary approach spanning all four to explore counseling services for distance learners in higher education. Exploring the perspectives of college mental health professionals may provide clear insight into the challenges associated with providing comparable services chart a path toward a conceptual model of distance counseling for online learners. This dissertation seeks to tell the story of developing student support services in their early stages from the perspective of the practitioner. At present, the story of how counseling and psychological services will be expanded to distance learners is just beginning and far from complete. Although previous dissertations have focused on student services for distance learners and previous research has shed light on providing counseling services at a distance, none have combined the two. Therefore, this research is intended to be a practitioner oriented piece blending concepts from higher education administration with the somewhat parallel field (at least in terms of student affairs) of college counseling.

This dissertation argues there is significant merit to the exploration of practical implementations of counseling and psychological service support for distance learners.
This study is designed to serve as a first step toward a model for implementing counseling and psychological service support distance education. To that end, this investigation looked to expand on the findings from a 2008 study conducted by Centore and Milacci (2008) that sought to determine how mental health counselors use distance counseling and understand their attitudes regarding distance counseling methods. Although this recent study did not focus on the perspectives of college counselors, it is assumed that there would be some degree of consistency between similar professional groups. Although no line of inquiry produced unanimous responses in one direction or another, there certainly are significant themes that emerged and many of the findings of Centore and Millacci were echoed in these themes.

**Research Question 1: Practitioner Perception of Need, Benefits, & Challenges**

In this chapter we explore the findings related to research question 1: “Do college/university mental health counseling professionals perceive a need and/or responsibility to provide counseling and psychological services to distance learners and what do they believe to be the most salient benefits and/or impediments to offering counseling services to students engaged in exclusively distance education?” At the outset of this study, the experts on the Delphi panel were asked to share their perceptions and perspectives on distance learner needs. They were then asked to identify the most significant challenges they perceived to be impediments to functional service delivery to students at a distance. They were then asked to explore their own thoughts on what benefits could be drawn from finding ways to provide services to students in distance
education. The subsequent section outlines mental health practitioner viewpoints as described by the expert panelists.

**College Mental Health Practitioner Perception of Distance Learner Needs**

The distance learner comes to their educational experience with certain non-academic needs, as all learners do. The question is whether or not these needs parallel the traditional residential learner in any meaningful way? Previous research exploring online student needs illuminate student concerns over an ability to effectively communicate in an online environment, or grappling with personal issues that impede academic progress (Potter, 1997). This idea of societal/social/community interaction and support seems to be of significant consequence in regard to the success of the distance learner. In general, a lack of student support services has been described by panelists as a significant barrier to distance learner success and requires our attention.

*Non-Academic needs perceived to be similar to residential Instruction students.*

The Delphi panel of experts was asked in the opening question of the first Delphi survey to identify and describe what they viewed to be the most critical non-academic needs and/or concerns of distance learners. This was used to establish a baseline of professional perspective on the overall need for such services among the distance learner population. Their answers to this initial question suggest, from a mental health professional’s perspective, the distance learner population has the potential to experience significant barriers to their academic progress in many similar ways as compared to the traditional residential learner. It is not surprising, based on their professional background and expertise, that many on the panel discussed mental health focused concerns, although the
question did not specifically lead the respondent in that direction. One respondent indicated that “distance learners, like other students, experience a range of non-academic concerns including: depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, relationship problems…traumas, financial issues, anger control issues, psychosis/bipolar disorder, difficulties with coping skills, etc.”

The litany of potential mental and emotional concerns is almost always a detriment to the academic success of an individual. Several panelists argued that the needs of the distance learner may, in fact, be even greater than those of students in residential education. In support of this perspective one panelist said, “I would expect that distance learners may actually have higher needs for ongoing treatment and/or support services – and this would only reinforce my notion that providing assessment and referral services is probably critical.” Another stated, “there are a number of reasons why a student might choose to be in an online environment…[including] mental health problems…although an online learning environment offers convenience and lower costs, it doesn’t address the core reasons why a number of these needs exist.

We know that amidst a growing trend in traditional age distance learners, these mental and emotional concerns are not bound to any particular age group. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the distance learner experiences similar mental and emotional concerns as the residential instruction student and may require support at least at an equal or greater rate than the traditional residential learner.

*Several needs perceived to be universal to all students.* One panelist was particularly insightful in discussing foundational needs of all students to include; “a sense of belonging”, “a sense of identity”, “developing a connection to the institution”,...
developing “interpersonal relationships”, and succeeding through “developmental milestones.” This panelist went on to articulate a belief that the distance learner may, in fact, be a demographic population with a higher than average incidence of mental health concerns. Indeed, the reasons for choosing distance education are many (e.g. limited financial means, personal responsibilities or obligations, etc); but “social anxiety and other mental health concerns” are of significant concern should they be a driving factor in a student’s decision to pursue an education outside of the traditional residential education community.

Practitioner perception of high value of social interaction. More than one panelist implied there is value gained from social interaction in the academic experience. There was an apparent undertone from the beginning of the study that the online/distance experience was viewed as of “lesser quality” due to the inability to replicate the social learning and community connection of the residential environment. Although the questions asked to panelists did not specifically define a distance learner in regard to age status (i.e. traditional age or adult), one panel member noted that, in regard to the traditional age learner, they “would be concerned about their choice of being an on-line education.” And went on to explain their belief that “an online learner would feel fairly isolated socially and from other supports offered in a university setting…[including] limited access to professors…[and] there would not be the same access to critical services.” This finding of the detrimental isolating effect experienced in learning at a distance is in keeping with the work of Muilenberg and Berge (2005) who argue “the single most important barrier to students learning [at a distance] was a lack of social interaction” (p. 35).
Practitioner perception of increasing mental health need across all demographics. It is undeniable that there are a multitude of reasons why an individual of any demographic might choose to pursue their education at a distance as opposed to traditional residential instruction. One panelist expressed this notion in saying “there are many reasons why a student might choose to be in an online learning environment;” including, “needing to live at home” or “a lack of financial support.” They went on to indicate that another potential reason could be “mental health problems (such as anxiety).” Another panelist noted, “Many distance learners have struggled [previously] in on campus environments and may have a variety of current and/or chronic life stressors and/or mental health concerns.” Indeed, it is conceivable that those choosing to pursue their education at a distance, as one panelist put it, “may actually have higher needs for ongoing treatment and/or support services.” With no reason to believe the level of need required by distance learners to be any less than the traditional residential learner combined with previous research and professional perspective in support of a growing need in this population; it seems clear that more consideration of and action toward supporting these students needs is required. Indeed, as one panelist put it, “although an online learning environment offers convenience and [potentially] lower costs, it doesn’t [inherently] address the core reasons why a number of these [non-academic] needs exist.”

Knowing the prevalence of mental health concerns in the general U.S. population is alarmingly high, and that the mental and emotional concerns represented in the college-age population are comparable to the general population (and growing), student affairs and college mental health practitioners are largely unanimous in the assessment that the need for mental health services across the board (including distance learners) is great and
getting larger. To illustrate this point, one panelist put it plainly in stating that “the most critical non-academic concern of online learners includes access to resources available to on-campus students…to include: personal counseling, career counseling, club and group membership…and social interactions with other learners.” Having addressed the issue of establishing need for services from the perspective of this study’s expert panel, we now turn to the issues of student expectations of and institutional responsibility for the provision of counseling and psychological services. We will now explore the second part of research question one which examines potential benefits associated with providing such services and college mental health practitioner concerns over the challenges associate with the provision of counseling and psychological services to distance learners.

**Mental Health Practitioner Perception of Distance Learner Expectations**

*Perceived distinction between online and distance learners.* Overall, it was clear that panelists indicated a strong belief that the non-academic needs of distance learners were varied and significant. This was true in regard to their perception of the prevalence of mental health concerns for distance learners. However, as one panelist pointed out, it is important to differentiate between online learners and distance learners. Often used interchangeably, the two terms are not necessarily always synonymous. Many colleges and universities are seeing students blending the on-campus environment with the online environment. Students in residential instruction at the college or university are, at times, taking online offerings of courses instead of the in-person due to reasons of convenience or preference. These students, therefore, fit the definition of an online learner. However, by geographical location to the campus, they do not fit the definition of a distance learner.
Practitioner perception of students’ expectations for technology integration into services. This current generation of college students is undoubtedly the most technologically connected and come to colleges and universities with certain expectations regarding their technology options. Fifteen years ago students came to college with an expectation that they would have access to the internet in their residence hall room. Often they would bring a desktop or laptop computer with them. Since then technology has continued to shift and the majority of students are not only bringing wirelessly connected personal computers, but also tablets, e-readers, phones, and other information consumption and production devices. It is natural to conclude that as technology continues to proliferate on campus, students will continue to expect more and more of the campus services to be available at their convenience. Indeed, even panelists who were some of the most critical of the concept of counseling service delivery at a distance indicated that they believed the future does hold a place for “e-counseling” on campus. One panelist wrote, “I agree that video communication is becoming more the norm for students.” Another noted, “Video communication is becoming more the norm for students, so many students may feel very comfortable with the video experience of counseling.” The comfort level of students utilizing video enhanced communication at a distance is increasing; however, the comfort level of college mental health professionals does not match the student’s enthusiasm.

Practitioner perception of student services as a consumer choice. Although we have established a level of need among the distance learner population, several panelists indicated that they are “unaware of the contract [between the distance learner and the university].” One panelist also acknowledged they lack awareness of what distance
learners might expect. The question of institutional responsibility versus student expectations is potentially important as it has far reaching implications for practice. To this end, one panelist noted, “All students have ‘needs’ that are met to varying degrees by the institution they attend. Even students at a fully residential campus may have needs that the institution cannot or chooses not to meet. Students may choose a school that attends to their needs or they may choose to forgo having some needs met out of choice [in order to attend that particular institution].” This then, begs the question of institutional responsibility to its distance-learning students? If we operate under the premise that pursuing education at a distance is entirely a function of choice, then would a student choosing distance education be saying that they are willing to forgo certain services that might meet their need? Or does the issue of institutional responsibility to its students in the form of student services require more consideration than a simple dismissal due to a student’s “choice” not to attend the school in-person. In the subsequent section we will turn to a more complete discussion of institutional responsibility as we explore the concept of expectations for provision of counseling and psychological services from multiple vantage points.

**Practitioner Perception of Institutional Responsibility to Provide Services**

*Student services in secondary vs. post-secondary education.* One place to start in exploring institutional responsibility to provide counseling and psychological services (or any student service) to distance learners is first understanding the culture of comprehensive services in secondary education. One panelist noted, “colleges and universities do not provide the level of services offered to students in secondary education…many students who succeed in graduating from high school due to the
wraparound services they receive go to an on-campus college or university and struggle tremendously due to the lack of available resources.” Indeed, even on-campus services at colleges and universities vary widely. It is no guarantee that the same level of services a student experienced through their state funded secondary education will be available at their campus of choice. This panelist went on to say, “colleges and universities are currently debating whether it is their responsibility to provide intensive mental health services to individuals with chronic histories and many are concluding that it is not.” So this begs the question; if colleges and universities are, in some cases, concluding that it is not their prerogative or responsibility to provide comprehensive counseling and psychological services for students deemed to have more significant concerns, then is it reasonable to believe that many colleges and universities will come to the same conclusions to not support distance learners with chronic needs? The potential problem with both residential instruction students and distance learners is that the level of expectations for services coming out of the secondary education experience may not match the experience of support they will receive. The incongruence between past educational experience in terms of support services and the lack of similar services at the same level will inherently lead to attrition at the college level.

*Contractual obligations and mission imperatives.* Probably one of the most compelling discussions around this issue comes from the perspective of a contractual analysis. It was argued by one panelist, “if I buy a computer with the lowest level contract…and I walk out the door and I open it up and I can’t log in, that is my problem.” Similarly, a student who has “contracted” with the university to provide lets say one course or two courses online has not made the same level of commitment to the
institution then a student on-campus taking a full complement of courses and living on campus. Therefore, should we offer the same level of services to students regardless of their commitment to the institution?

Furthermore, if the mission of an online department within an institution is to provide the lowest cost of instruction possible to its students and increase access to education by eliminating financial barriers then the benefit of offering student services might compromise that mission. One panelist illustrated this well in saying, “if the institution makes the decision to say we are giving this rock bottom price for this really easy access and its rock bottom because we are not giving you services and there is no bricks and mortar and you don’t have to show up in a room and listen in a room that is heated and air conditioned…then that also feels like a consumer decision.” After all, student services are expensive to develop and implement. Therefore, offering a comprehensive array of student services, including some form of counseling services, may increase the per/student cost to levels unacceptable to the mission of the online department within the institution. However, if the mission of the online learning department is to increase accessibility of educational content and promote student retention and completion, then offering student services might be the only way to effectively accomplish the online learning mission at that particular institution.

The other side of the mission-focused perspective recognizes that student services might also give an institution a competitive advantage in the education market. If an institution chooses to make a really outstanding product through offering comprehensive, cutting edge services, then they may meet the needs of a subset of the potential student population. As one panelist put it, “that is the [niche] product we are selling.” These
services may perhaps fulfill a part of their mission to provide an educational opportunity for students who otherwise may experience roadblocks without such services. However, in offering a blanket of comprehensive services to promote student success, we might also be pricing some students out due to the ever-rising costs of providing such services.

Perception of mutual responsibility between institution and consumer. When asked about institutional responsibility to its online learners, panelist responses were mixed. One panelist noted, “There is no clear answer here.” This panelist further explained that the question itself is somewhat flawed in that it does not take into consideration both institutional and consumer responsibility. In other words, not just the institutions responsibility to its students, but also the responsibility of each student as consumers to understand exactly what they are purchasing. The panelist went on to admit they find themselves conflicted between two competing perspectives. They expressed the perspective that “the very concept of online learning means that the students can literally be anywhere in the globe and it is unreasonable to expect an institution to meet all needs in all places.” They went on to share the conflict they feel as a student affairs professional:

“I believe that higher education should philosophically provide the services needed to help their students succeed – and that they should provide those services in whatever context they provide the educational experiences. While you cannot provide all personal counseling services in an online or telephone environment, a university should at least meet a minimum standard…should they choose to provide beyond this metric, it would be a testament to their commitment
to investing in their students’ success. Especially those with the fewest resources.”

The panelists were conflicted on this point. Since the counseling center in this study (and most counseling centers nationally) are housed within the umbrella of student affairs, many psychologists and counselors consider themselves student affairs practitioners and have a deepened sense of and sensitivity to student needs. However, it was evident that this was balanced by the potentially conflicting idea that education is a commodity that is purchased along with certain services. One panelist, who indicated feeling conflicted by this very issue, made the contention, “If I attend a religious institution and I agree to sign a pledge that says I won’t have sex, do I stand on solid ground to complain if I later change my mind? If I choose to attend an online school because of certain benefits (low cost, ease of access, preferred learning style) do I then stand on solid ground to complain that the school doesn’t provide traditional brick-and-mortar services to me…?”

Others on the panel joined in the sentiment that pursuing education through online means is a student choice, and thus, by making that choice the student should also know that they are choosing a limited set of services that come along with the online environment. One panelist indicated that they believe the institution has little to no direct responsibility to its students to provide counseling and psychological services, citing that the primary purpose of a college or university is an “educational institution.” However, others noted that this is a hard distinction to make. Separating out what is a legitimate opportunity for education and what is not isn’t quite so simple. To this end, one panelist noted, “to me the university is not just about educating on academics, but is
about…ushering a person into an adult phase of life.” This panelist espoused the belief that there is a wholeness to education that is incomplete, for some, without the opportunity to address the “whole being” through counseling. The question presented here is a philosophical one. Does the decision on whether to explore, innovate, and implement counseling and psychological services for distance learners simply “boil down to a set of business decisions,” as one panelist argued, or is there a philosophical and perhaps ethical argument that also must be considered?

Overall practitioner consensus on responsibility to provide counseling services.

Overall, the clear consensus was that an institution offering online education should offer some form of counseling services. However, the panelists were all over the board in regard to the level of responsibility the institution should assume in the provision of such services. One common opinion that appeared repeatedly in the Delphi survey was the idea that the higher education institution does have the responsibility to be abundantly clear about what is available to online learners from a services standpoint and what is not. It is also important to mention that from the perspective of this study’s panel it was unanimous that regardless of where they fell on the responsibility spectrum, their opinion was not influenced by type, size, or demographics of a particular institution. As one panelist wrote, “I think every higher education institution needs to decide how to best meet student needs regarding counseling and psychological services, whether it be availability of counseling services on campus, off-campus, or both.” Another panelist argued, “I think it is a disservice to online learners if the university doesn’t provide the same level of resources to online learners as it does to on-campus students.” In terms of
institutional responsibility there must be a middle ground, however, this concept of “same level” or “comparable” resources is ambiguous.

Online education and traditional in-person delivery are difficult to compare. And in fact, online learning, as a mode of educational delivery, has been working toward “comparable” standing with the “gold standard” of in-person education. One panelist took issue with the word “comparable” as it is applied to the discussion of student services in higher education. As we move forward to discuss college mental health practitioner perspectives of challenges and potential benefits associated with offering counseling and psychological services for distance learners, it is important to understand that, as this panelist put it, “while it is easy to visualize online counseling, it is not identical to in-person services.” It is reasonable to concede that truly identical services are simply not possible. However, this study seeks to find practical solutions that meet the needs of students; as well as the responsibilities, goals, and missions of higher education institutions with distance learning divisions.

Practitioner Perceptions of the Challenges of Counseling Services at a Distance.

Seven Key Areas of Concern. The work of Centore and Milacci (2008) sought to examine barriers associated with online delivery of counseling services. Figure 2 on page 41 is adapted from their work and outlines client factors perceived as barriers and counselor factors perceived as barriers. This study adds the element of institutional factors perceived as barriers to the provision of counseling services through online delivery. In regard to challenges perceived by counselors, it was anticipated that ethical practices, licensure and liability, efficacy of methods, suitability of the client, and the ability to manage liability and crisis, would emerge as consistent themes. The panel of
experts employed in this study not only confirmed the findings of Centore and Milacci but also expanded their findings in connection specifically with the college environment. The experts employed in this study identified seven key areas of concern relating to the provision of counseling and psychological services to students at a distance: individual safety, incomplete communication, perceived weaker working alliance, student’s own awareness of suitability for services, complicated and expensive infrastructure, concern over insurance coverage, and individual/institutional liability. We now turn to a discussion of this study’s findings related to each of these eight areas of concern.

Practitioner concerns for individual safety & effective threat Assessment. It was clear and convincing throughout the study that college mental health practitioners are concerned by the prospects of counseling individuals in a different locale than the counselor. One panelist stated, “I am concerned about the risks of trying to provide mental health services long distance.” Another panelist expressed the concern this way, “The aspect of providing services in cases of crisis is also a huge concern. For instance, if the counseling is done via the telephone or a computer, there is no guarantee exactly where the student is. If the student is suicidal and leaves a session, then the therapist needs to know how to contact the local police or other emergency services.” A third panelist mentioned that they believe the potential for disaster is greater because at a distance “crisis situations are not as easily responded to.” Clearly, a reasonable cause for concern has been established and is warranted. However, this does beg the question: “are there certain conditions, that if addressed to the satisfaction of the counseling professional, would warrant a second look at the provision of services to students at a distance”? 
When asked this question, a few panelists indicated they are simply unwilling to provide services to individuals at a distance in any fashion. However, three of the Delphi panelists discussed the potential suitability of counseling at a distance for pre-established clients (students) with whom they have already developed a working alliance and therapeutic relationship. One panelist clearly established their conditions as, “you need to know where they are. You need to have an emergency contact. You need to have a local contact. And ideally you would have some kind of mental health professional…available in the same building [as the student].”

Panelists expressed a concern that critical assessments of a students’ current state may be a challenging aspect that needs to be adequately addressed. In discussing the potential risk associated with providing counseling at a distance, one panelist noted, “suicide and homicide assessment are critical components of counseling in a university setting, and it’s hard to imagine how these assessments can be conducted without live person-to-person interaction. In the process of assessing threat of harm to self or others, psychologists on campus are charged with making a judgment call based on their professional experience and expertise. Does the student present a potential for harm? Or do they not? There are significant ramifications related to this exercise of professional judgment, so it is unquestionably of the utmost importance to get it right. Although assessment methods is not a major focus of this study, any progress made toward any services for distance learners will have to take great strides in finding the best way forward to accurately predict potential for harm.

Having had the opportunity to reflect on the issue, one panelist acknowledged a feeling of frustration over this issue. “So I like the idea, the concept of [expanding
services to distance learners]” the panelist conceded. “And then I circle back around to…well, what if in session two the student says, ‘I just had this huge fight with my boyfriend and I am going to go cut myself, bye.’” It is this constant nagging of “what if…” that seems to firmly establish a significant roadblock for many professionals. This panelist went on to say “What I find frustrating about what I am saying is that it is unlikely to happen. It’s not a big \( n \). It’s a small \( n \). But liabilities are driven by small \( n \)’s. And I think increasingly universities are making decisions around the small \( n \), high cost events. Which is why it would be challenging to implement. But if there was a way to identify somebody who is low risk and would really benefit, then great.” This felt frustration is summed up as one panelist notes, “ugh…philosophically, I love the idea of providing what students need. Practically, it feels like a nightmare because of the need to avoid tragedy – which is already hard to do when a student is on-campus.”

Practitioner concerns regarding effective communication. By now many (particularly students) have had the opportunity to take advantage of emerging technologies that allow for a near-personal interaction. Google hangout, skype, apple facetime, adobe connect, and other videoconferencing platforms have emerged in the last ten years to allow the possibility of communication between two or more parties at a geographical distance via internet connection. In many respects this technology does a remarkable job at allowing people to communicate more completely without being in the same physical location. Knowing that a great deal of communication occurs nonverbally; having the ability to see, at minimum, the facial expressions of those you are communicating with aids in furthering the effectiveness of communication between two or more individuals. Real world applications for this technology are indeed vast, as
evidenced by the proliferation of telecommuting and teleconferencing. These technologies have undoubtedly made the world a much smaller place. However, in the field of counseling, where a premium is placed on effective communication, the question remains whether these technologies are adequate, let alone ethical, to use in support of providing counseling services to the masses. When asked specifically about assistive technologies used in the delivery of counseling services, the responses took a tone that indicated perspectives ranging from cynical to suspicious. One panelist labeled communication mediated through technology as inherently “incomplete.” Others indicated that in regard to effective communication, without a face-to-face delivery, the “lack of interpersonal interaction” and the “inability to read facial reactions and body language” would significantly hinder the helping process. One panelist took a slightly more positive approach in saying that there may be potential benefits for using several different types of mediums for weekly contact between a counselor and a client. However, they were quick to note that each technological means introduces its own limitations to the amount of information that could be conveyed. This panelist gave the examples of body language, smells, non-verbal sounds, as potentially important aspects of the therapeutic process that could potentially be missed during a virtually assisted counselor/client interaction. This panelist went on to say that this potential, therefore, inherently “reduces the counselors ability to work effectively with the client.” In essence there is a felt sense that the “less complete” communication possible through online means leads to the potential for the client or counselor to be less genuine, either intentionally or unintentionally, as they develop the working alliance. As one put it, “While technology affords us the opportunity to connect with a broad base of people in
various ways, it is also a detriment to open and honest communication…[the] nuance is lost and potential misunderstanding may be greater.” No one would be able to effectively argue that technology is able to provide a 1-1 analog to real world face-to-face communication. However, the potential for miscommunication is certainly not limited to technology mediated interaction. However, the point is well taken that any efforts in the provision of counseling services for distance learners would need to be honest about the limits and drawbacks associated with communication over certain technologies. However, it should be said that the proliferation of new and emerging communication technologies, the limits to communication may some day become a thing of the past.

Practitioner Concerns over the development of the therapeutic working alliance. The aforementioned challenge of diminished potential for effective communication and increased potential for misunderstandings naturally leads a counselor or psychologist to question the potential for developing the required connections that create the phenomena known as a working alliance or therapeutic relationship. One expert on the panel expressed a belief that the working alliance developed through a telephone or computer connection would lose what they described as “common factors” or the interpersonal interplay between counselor and client. However, this same panelist conceded that they expressed their belief somewhat tentatively because, despite their perception of need for concern, they were unsure if the concern was warranted or “supported by evidence” either for or against. Indeed, relevant research on the working alliance in a distanced relationship suggests that it is “possible through online counseling” (Leibert, Archer, Munson, & York, 2006). However, their study concluded, “clients receiving face-to-face
counseling experience a stronger alliance with their counselor compared to those receiving online counseling” (p. 76).

One panelist firmly argued that it is simply not possible to establish a relationship “via the computer.” This “relationship” that must be established is certainly distinct in nature from a common conception of interpersonal relationships in that it has a very specific purpose focused on establishing trust and respect to promote necessary change. Another panelist expressed the opposite perspective saying, “I do think that a strong working alliance can be developed via electronic communication.” It was clear that there was not a significant level of consensus relating to the degree to which an effective counseling relationship can be established at a distance through technological means.

**Practitioner concerns over student suitability to receive counseling at a distance.**
There is concern as to whether an effective working alliance can be developed to serve students needs at a distance, and there is also skepticism about universal suitability of students for counseling and psychological services at a distance. One panelist, who expressed deep concern over the risks of attempting to provide “mental health services long distance” argued, “there are many people out there with serious mental health problems who have needs that we can’t adequately meet even when they are on campus.” This panelist went on to say, “Students with new or even long-standing mental illness often don’t have the understanding, insight or judgment to know the extent of treatment they will need.” This question of student suitability for services is somewhat unique to counseling services. Other services, such as academic advising do not seem to suffer from this question. It is unquestionable that every student could stand to benefit from some kind of academic advising, even at a distance. However, this does not hold true for
counseling and psychological services. It is true that all students may benefit from some kind of counseling, but that does not mean that all students would necessarily be suited for counseling and psychological services at a distance. One panelist indicated that they believe a lack of awareness of suitability on the part of students and their family may lead to “a false sense of security or unrealistic expectations.” Certainly mental health practitioners want to provide the most complete and effective services to students, but the perception that students may not have awareness of the scope of their own needs seems to place more pressure on the counselor to effectively assess the critical needs of a student.

Practitioner concerns over developing necessary infrastructure for services. The infrastructure necessary to move closer toward effectively providing counseling and psychological services for students learning at a distance may prove to be challenging to implement. Technology on campus in general has proven to be a significant financial outlay for many campuses. Some institutions may already have the foundation necessary to provide video enabled interactions and some may not. However, the technology available to the end user may also prove to be a significant roadblock. Assuming that a video enabled interaction is the method of choice, the student would need to have access in their local environment to a computer that has a webcam, an internet connection with sufficient bandwidth for sustained video connection, and possible the necessary software to provide the link between the counselor and the student. One panelist suggested, “with students in as diverse locations as Indiana and India, developing an infrastructure for delivery is tricky without reducing the service to something second best.” Certainly, “second best” services is never what any service provider would be comfortable providing. However, assuming limited options for help and support in the students local
environment, what we might perceive as second best, might in fact be the best or only option for students in remote or rural environments. It is also important to note that the past five years have seen a proliferation of cost effective options for communicating with others at a distance via technology. At the current pace of technological innovation it is conceivable that the ability of technology to replicate the in-person interaction at a distance may indeed become more precise.

*Practitioner concerns regarding funding new service implementations.*

Infrastructure is certainly a potential issue from the perspective of potential cost for implementation and upkeep. Funding, in general, for student services is always one of many concerns. Funding for mental health services on campus is often viewed as a delicate balance between providing what is necessary to promote student success and what is fiscally possible given the cost of services and mission of the institution. One panelist noted, “there are lots of different funding models, but they are typically a very grudging, incremental approach.” Institutions of higher education often want to be on the cutting edge of academics, services and support; however, when it comes to the issue of mental health services, it is the rare institution that, as this panelist put it, decides to be “the leading edge of mental health services.” This panelist went on to say, “I think what you are seeing from a mental health perspective is a response to demand and the demand is impacting the university’s functioning.” Certainly, sources of funding within a college and university setting are limited. Larger institutions might have more ability to provide an expanded service offering due to a large economy of scale. One panelist described an experience at a previous institution where their department tracked the number of students utilizing services and went to the student committee charged with allocating a
fee charged to all students to support student services. They showed the board the numbers of students utilizing services and asked for a 25% increase in allocations. According to his panelist, “across 12,000 students it added up to a lot.” Costs for providing comprehensive counseling and psychological services are certainly high and always increasing – so the balance between cost and support must make sense for each institutional circumstance and be in line with the mission of the college or university.

Concerns regarding lack of knowledge of resources in students’ local environment. So far we have focused on the idea of providing counseling and psychological services to students learning at a distance, but there are certainly a myriad of options for student support, including the potential for seeking out comprehensive support in the students local environment. Indeed, finding local providers for a student may indeed be a better approach for some students or the only reasonable approach for particular concerns. However, providing students referrals to a local provider is a complex proposition in-and-of itself. As one panelist mentioned, “we often do not know what type of counseling services are available where the client is living, making it difficult to direct them to services they may need.” In exploring this possibility, another said, “case managers who understand these issues would need to be employed to help with this process.” Finding referral options for students was a very common suggestion among the panelists. However, it is clear that, as one panelist noted, “finding and connecting students to services in their locale can be an expensive proposition.” This is particularly true if the cost for said services is offset by the university to bring those services in line with what is provided to services on the college or university campus.
Practitioner concerns regarding practicality of providing services round-the-clock. In addition to the issues associated with providing students connections to local resources, there is the issue of time difference. Higher education today is increasingly a global market. This is particularly true for distance learners. Asynchronous delivery of courses provides the possibility for pursuing an education from an institution whose physical campus location is on the other side of the world. This means that providing synchronous services to an asynchronous learner requires any services to be provided on a 24 hour/7 days per week basis. As one panelist put it, “[the] challenge is the round-the-clock nature of online learning, which requires providing counseling around-the-clock as well.” As one might suspect, the prospect of providing services to students on a 24 hour basis is not popular among staff. When asked about providing services to online learners in significantly different time zones, it was immediately suggested by a few panelists that those students should be directed to some kind of self-help or automated service.

Practitioner concerns over insurance coverage for expanded services. Certainly services are never free. A service might be free for a student, but that services brings with it cost that is subsidized through some kind of fund that is usually paid for by student tuition fees. So in essence, the concept of free services for students is sort of a misnomer. The other source of funding for services may come from insurance sources that the student may have either personally or through their family. However, insurance is never a guarantee, and in the case of the international distance learner, the issue of insurance coverage may be even further complicated. A concern regarding “cost of services” was brought up by many practitioners on the panel. One panelist saw the issue as an institutional responsibility to “address the issue of student benefits.” This panelist went
on to say, “I think it is important that the college of distance education encourage students to have medical insurance coverage and offer them the option to purchase student insurance.”

The issue of student insurance coverage also causes us to revisit the contractual perspective that asks what level of services should be provided to students who have only “contracted” with the college or university for one course or two courses and are not in a degree program. As one panelist noted, “…the student who is just taking a class online…may not have health insurance…so if you are talking to somebody online and you are trying to find a local provider and they don’t have health insurance then right there you have a major roadblock.”

Practitioner concerns over increased burden on limited staff time. The number of students pursuing education at a distance is steadily growing. Adding the significant numbers of distance learners to the regular workload of college mental health practitioners would undoubtedly prove problematic. Clearly worried about the prospects associated with increased load, one panelist expressed their concern this way, “so we are just trying to manage the level of everyday risk on a daily basis. And we are [already] referring out here at a rate of 30 to 40 percent.” So 3-4 students out of every ten that come through the doors of the counseling center on campus seeking mental or emotional support are being referred out to the local community or to a campus clinic staffed by counseling students at the university. The concern over increasing capacity comes down to the reality that “local demand is [largely] unfunded and not able to be met.” For this panelist the bottom line is that each institution offering education at a distance must determine “what their product is, and what they are going to sell it as” while at the same
time being careful not to “overpromise,” while at the same time “already having trouble with the enormous commitment to students we are already making.”

Practitioner concerns over individual & institutional liability and risk. The prevalence of concern over individual and institutional liability was palpable throughout the study. It is clear that college mental health practitioners are concerned to a great extent with the real liabilities and uncertainties that come with their profession. One panelist noted, “the last twenty years have clearly demonstrated an increasing concern about correctly handling crisis and their associated liability.” It is understandable that college mental health practitioners would be hesitant to explore new modes of student service when questions of personal liability are yet unanswered and litigation claiming negligence are certainly not decreasing in society. A panelist was quick to express the concern that, in regard to the potential for liability within the counseling process, “what might begin as counseling intended for insight can quickly turn into a crisis where the individual is at risk to themselves or a threat to others.” This panelist expressed this concern in saying, “one of the greatest challenges to distance learners is the institutions hesitance to accept the liability associated with ongoing online counseling.” Looking to the future, the clear consensus among the panelists is that some form of mental health service will be and should be offered to students learning at a distance, but that “most institutions will opt to provide triage and referral services that do the best they can to find local resources near the individual.” The legal environment and precedent associated with counseling at a distance is still quite thin. There are certainly more questions that there are answers. And as one panelist wrote, “if you start an innovative program and someone commits suicide and you didn’t have anyone in place [to mitigate that risk], how far back
is that going to set you?” Certainly, no institution wants to explore this area of student support only to have to learn the hard way through a landmark lawsuit. Indeed, for a smaller institution, the prospects of litigation might be enough to eliminate the possibility of counseling and psychological services for distance learners.

**Practitioner Perceptions of the Benefits of Counseling Services at a Distance.**

Undoubtedly the challenges associated with providing counseling and psychological services to students at a distance are many. However, we will now turn to the potential benefits that might be realized if we find an effective way to support distance learners with mental and emotional needs. Through the Delphi survey, this study found five general areas where college mental health practitioners felt there is potential for significant benefit to the student experience and promotion of distance learner success. These five areas of potential for added value to the student experience are: the provision of a comprehensive network of support, the provision of access to expert opinions, improving quality of life and retention, similar benefits to the residential learner, and making connections with students who otherwise may not seek assistance.

*Benefits of counseling services: distance learners vs. residential instruction students.* When asked about the potential benefits associated with providing counseling services, panelists indicated that they expect the results of providing some kind of services to distance learners would significantly parallel the realized benefits of counseling services experienced by the on-campus population. As one panelist put it, “I view the benefits of personal counseling for on-campus vs. online learners to be the same.” Another said, “I view most of the benefits as being the same – increased insight, [the benefits of] an objective listener, [the experience of] unconditional positive regard,
supportive listening, psychoeducation, and all the other benefits associated with psychotherapy.” Presumably, the benefits of counseling would not necessarily differ between on-campus and distance learner. At present, the distance learner experiences the same academic and non-academic needs, but is often “faced with managing disparate services on their own and is therefore at a distinct disadvantage.” So still we are faced with the question of how to bridge the divide between an institution and its distance learners in support of their academic dreams.

The perceived benefit in providing a network of support & safety. An interesting finding of this study is that there seemed to be conflicting perspectives about safety for students in a distance-learning environment. On one hand, there was a clear perspective that ensuring the safety of a distance learner through a counseling experience at a distance was problematic. However, the opposite perspective was also furthered, that providing some kind of services (not necessarily traditional 1-1 counseling) may provide a “network of safety for a high-risk student.” One panelist noted that providing some kind of services of a counseling nature might “provide a more personal touch.” Philosophically, making an experience at a distance feel like less of a divide for the student may be exactly what some students need to be successful through completion of their course(s) or degree program.

The perceived benefit in providing access to expert opinions. One panelist expressed, “it is important for online students to have access to counseling but not necessarily online.” The concept of access to services was unanimously expressed as an ideal that should be available, but the mode of delivery and the responsibility for the provision of such services was far from unanimous. College mental health practitioners
believe that access to experts and the opinions are certainly useful in helping students gain insight, explore their options and opportunities, and make productive personal life decisions. In exploring the idea of access to expert opinions, one panelist noted that students in remote and rural areas may not have the same opportunities to engage with experts. This may put these students at a significant disadvantage. When the question was posed as to whether they would consider counseling at a distance more seriously for students in remote or rural areas, one panelist indicated, “in that case I think I would probably go more for online counseling.” However, this was offered tentatively as the panelist went on to say “maybe you do a one-time appointment just to get that visual and make sure this is an appropriate person for that kind of counseling.” In other words, this practitioner was still hopeful that a face-to-face appointment might be possible as a way to begin the therapeutic relationship, and then the follow-up appointments might be pursued at a distance through some form of technology mediated interaction. When pressed about making services available to distance learners with low or no access to services, several panelists expressed a need to “rule out people who aren’t going to be appropriate” before they would even consider extending some form of services at a distance to those students.

*The perceived benefit of improving quality of life & retention.* Possibly one of the most compelling reasons to further explore the provision of counseling and psychological services for distance learners is the potential benefit to quality of life and retention of that student in their academic course or program. One panelist noted, “in addition to improving a student’s quality of life, providing counseling services to online students who are dealing with personal and/or mental health problems can increase their ability to
engage in academic life, thus increasing the likelihood of academic success for the student.” Other panelists, including one who also asserted that counseling has the potential to increase one’s quality of life, joined this sentiment. Further, one panelist agreed, in theory, with these assessments while noting, “these are all benefits that would result from providing services to distance learners.” But this panelist also tempered that assertion in saying, “this doesn’t address how these services are provided…would these benefits be true for services provided through electronic/online/telehealth means? I would hope so, but I don’t think we know.” Certainly, providing access to counseling has the potential for increasing individual wellness and academic success. In addition to wellness and success, one panelist also indicated a belief that “in addition to improving a student’s quality of life, providing counseling services to distance learners who are dealing with personal and/or mental health problems can increase their ability to engage in academic life, thus increasing…retention rates of distance learners at the university.” Despite the undercurrent of practitioner perspective that acknowledges some form of expanded services to distance learners may just make a marked difference in the wellness, success and retention of students; it is safe to say that good intentions do not adequately address “how” these services might be offered in a way that addresses the complexity of concerns previously discussed.

Perceived benefit of supporting students who may otherwise not seek out/receive services. It is a relative certainty that there are students, both on-campus and at a distance, that may not naturally seek out counseling support services. Certain subgroups within a student population may be less likely to pursue counseling support services, and there is some sentiment that providing alternative avenues to counseling services may not only
benefit the distance learner but also the entire student population. The increasing use of technology with each successive generation of college students also warrants a second look at alternative counseling service delivery methods. The need for an expansion of our comfort level with technology across a variety of services in higher education is outlined as one panelist wrote, “there is so many technological differences between this generation and the ones before it and if we are not careful…we are going to lose those connection and those possibilities if you don’t get that creativity coming out. We need to figure out how we can do this.”

Research Question 2: Theoretical Orientation & Outlook

The second research question posed by this study was: “Is a college mental health professional’s theoretical orientation related to their viewpoint on providing counseling services for students engaged in exclusively distance education? This question sought to explore the role of theoretical orientation, defined as the theories that guide and frame practice for a college mental health practitioner, in relation to their perspectives and outlook on offering some form of counseling services to students learning at a distance. Through the course of the study it became apparent that the terminology of “personal counseling” was ambiguous and encompassed far too many components for some practitioners to effectively apply to a cohesive viewpoint on the challenges and benefits associated with counseling at a distance. Furthermore, it was suggested the more accurate terminology for the work done within a college counseling center is “counseling and psychological services.” I begin this section with an explanation of the wide scope of
services encompassed in college counseling and psychological services as outlined by various members of the Delphi panel. Following a discussion of the scope of services routinely offered through the counseling center on campus we will turn to a discussion of “general outlook” for providing these counseling services at a distance from the perspective of college mental health practitioners. The Delphi study and subsequent interviews also illuminated several conditions that college mental health practitioners established as non-negotiable prerequisites for any service offerings. In this section we will also address salient professional concerns and perceived potential consequences of leading in this area of student service offering. And finally, we will connect all this to a discussion of the stated preferred theoretical orientations of the mental health practitioners on the Delphi panel and how their professional approaches may influence their perspective on exploring counseling learners at a distance.

**The broad scope of “Personal Counseling” services.**

One panelist indicated, “Personal counseling services is a vague term that is not commonly used.” This panelist indicated that the preferred term is “counseling and psychological services.” Despite the terms we use, it became apparent through this study that there are a multitude of services that could be lumped into the umbrella terms of personal counseling or counseling and psychological services. For instance, one panelist asked if by using the term “personal counseling,” was I referring to weekly student-client interactions, psychological testing, psychiatric services, case management, triage and referral, intake and referral, crisis intervention, assistance with hospitalization, assistance with mental health related ADA accommodations, etc. In response to perceived ambiguity in defining exactly what personal counseling meant in the context of this
study, the second round of the Delphi survey asked each panelist to share how they define “personal counseling.” Although there was not a clear consensus, there were common threads that ran through each response. Panelists viewed “personal counseling” generally as an activity between a professional counselor and a student, usually in person, in a safe environment at a college counseling center for the purpose of addressing the presenting concerns of the student. However, it was clear that there are a range of ways students might come to the counseling center and a variety of responses available to the mental health professionals at the counseling center. For example, students might come in for a scheduled appointment for assessment and evaluation or they may walk in without an appointment. Students may also come in requiring a quick triage and referral or they may be experiencing crisis that requires immediate response. Students may require psychiatric services or some form of “talk therapy” provided by the counseling center or a referral for other services not specifically provided by the college or university. It became apparent that some panelists had trouble with extending the full-range of services that are traditionally offered at a counseling center on campus to those learning at a distance. However, many panelists were willing to explore certain components of college counseling and psychological services in support of distance learners.

**Practitioner Outlook on the Future of Counseling Services at a Distance**

Is there a belief among the college mental health community that technology will someday play a role in their professional practice? The somewhat surprising answer to this is yes. All but two panelists indicated at some point that they believed counseling would someday be provided at a distance on a more regular basis. Several of the panelists rightly noted that in the medical profession technology is already being used to link
patients to doctors and in psychiatry clients are connecting with their psychiatrist via technology in order to adjust medication. There was, however, a striking difference between the viewpoints on the future of technology assisted counseling and the willingness to pursue technology as a means of service delivery for students at a distance. This divide was evidenced as one panelist expressed, “most students would be comfortable with the video experience of counseling… but I don’t think you could say the same for the therapists.” Others shared this perspective in asserting that, “in-person assessment and therapy is the gold standard of treatment” and “online, phone or skype therapy [are not] a good idea for most real problems that are seen in person at the counseling service.” The data from the Delphi panel and subsequent interviews clearly showed a significant professional hesitancy to pursue any type of counseling services at a distance. Seeing therapy as an “interpersonal process that cannot be accomplished without the ability to interact face-to-face” was the prevailing viewpoint.

Amidst the unenthusiastic response also came a somewhat progressive undercurrent. Perhaps cracking the door open, one panelist expressed the belief that they think, “distance counseling will work well for some issues, some clients, and some counselors but shouldn’t be seen as a panacea.” Another panelist indicated that perhaps an online process could be explored if the student was experiencing a “baby problem,” however, they did not go on to explain at that time what they considered a baby problem to be. Another indicated that although they are “not a proponent of telephone or on-line counseling or other mental health treatment…[they] suspect it can be done safely and effectively by some counselors with many student clients.” This idea that “some cases” might be appropriate was echoed by another who agreed in theory, but added they “think
it is hard to assess which cases are amendable and which are not” and that “we are a long way from having adequate research to refer to. These responses lead to a natural question of what issues might a mental health practitioner consider a minor problem, thus warranting more exploration of the potential for counseling students at a distance?

In the second Delphi survey panelists were asked what issues they might feel comfortable addressing at a distance. Two panelists indicated no interest in exploring any technology aided counseling at a distance for any presenting concern. However, to varying degrees the other panelists indicated that issues such as mild anxiety, stress, relationship issues, and adjustment issues may all be candidates for addressing at a distance. However, even in conceding that there may be promise in counseling at a distance for these students with these “low-risk” problems, there was still some question as to who makes the determination of what is truly “circumscribed, low-stress, low risk, and able to be resolved in a brief time?” Certainly, all panelists indicated a strong desire to eliminate persistent and severe illness, severe depression, suicidal ideation, personality disorders, severe eating disorders, bipolar disorders, severe anxiety, psychotic disorders, and anger management issues from consideration, but even further, the question remained for some whether or not it would be possible to completely know with one hundred percent certainty that a student presenting with seemingly innocuous symptoms would not deteriorate to something more severe. The conflicted outlook on the future of counseling through technology was summed up well by one panelist who noted, “technology is amazingly promising, but it exists within the container of risk which universities are adverse to.” This same panelist, in expressing their awareness of “a pessimistic quality in their responses,” conceded that they strongly believe in the
intersection of technology and service to students, but that their outlook is also colored by the “fact that on-campus centers for counseling and psychological services current struggle with being under-resourced with huge waiting lists, and lines of students with serious, complex, and often life or death needs.” The prospect of extending service offerings to a whole new subgroup of students with significant numbers and the potential for significant and time-demanding issues may seem to many college mental health practitioners as simply unreasonable.

As a part of the third Delphi survey panelists were asked to reflect on the conditions that they feel would need to be in place if they were to even begin to consider offering counseling at a distance. It was not particularly surprising that many panelists defaulted to expressing concern over safety for the student. Aside from two panelists that indicated there were no conditions that, if met, would encourage them to consider providing counseling at a distance; the other six panelists indicated that the most significant conditions that would need to be addressed, in their opinion, were effectively identifying local referrals/resources in their community, having the opportunity to meet with the student in-person for an initial session, and having a pre-established face-to-face counseling relationship. Other conditions that were raised were a signed informed consent form, clear definitions of what personal counseling is and how the relationship would proceed, and a verification of the identity of the student and the location from which they are connecting.

As one panelist put it, “online counseling will most likely be an option for the future.” There is a distinct realization that technology is making inroads into our daily lives. Exploring the possibilities and potentialities is a worthwhile endeavor. Another
panelist shared the belief that “this is a challenging area to address” and added, “as we move as a field in this direction, I think there will be increased creativity in the provision of these services.” Interestingly, even those panelists with the most hesitancy regarding the exploration of combining counseling practice with technology indicated a belief that “online counseling will most likely be an option for the future.” There is a definite realization that despite reservations, the need for services among students is ever increasing. And although there is some concern that moving in the direction toward technology assisted delivery of services will increase the workload of college mental health practitioners, there may also be ways to implement technology in the future in ways that maximize our ability to support a larger population of students. Perhaps it will be true that, as one panelist put it, “with advances in technology, I do feel that there will be more options for online counseling in the future simply due to a growing need for such services, not only for online students, but also for individuals living in rural areas, individuals unable to leave their homes, etc.”

**Expressed Concern Over Offering Services that Could Increase Demand**

As one panelist commented, “Look[ing] at the history books…I don’t think universities have generally made the decision to provide a suite of services because that’s what they want to do…I think they have been dragged into it in many cases unwillingly.” However, what about the cases where an institution has chosen to take the lead innovating services for students in higher education? This question leads to an interesting concern that emerged through the Delphi and subsequent follow-up interviews. Colleges often make an effort to market the services that they offer to students because they believe students will be enticed to come to their institution because of that particular
service, however, in the case of counseling and psychological services, there is a sense that overemphasis on those services may inundate the institution with students with mental and emotional concerns. One panelist told the story of a colleague he knew at another prominent institution in the south who instituted a cutting edge program for students with eating disorders. At first this program seemed to be making a real difference and students were receiving the help they needed. However, shortly thereafter it started to become evident that the number of cases on that campus involving severe eating disorders had not just increased, but had increased dramatically. As this panelist described it, “They advertised it and suddenly all kinds of students are showing up on this campus and they were swamped with these really severe eating disorder cases because they were selecting the school… if you build it they will come and that is the last thing you want at a university.”

Connected to this idea that services may bring in a dramatic increase in demand that an institution is ill-equipped to handle, is the notion that by offering some form of minimal services, the institution may actually be harming students by not encouraging them to seek more comprehensive services in their local environment that would “ultimately serve them better.” Panelists were asked to respond to a series of statements made in Delphi round one as part of the second Delphi round. Professional perspectives on the issue of whether some form of minimal services is beneficial were split. One panelist noted, “I think [the unintended consequences of providing minimal services] is an important point that I didn’t consider. However, I think it’s better to provide students with some services if their local communities don’t have any available, even if it is via telehealth mechanisms.” Overall, the experts on the panel were clear that supporting
students in their educational experience was of the highest priority for a counseling center, but that did not necessarily mean taking the lead on “cutting-edge” services or providing something, as one panelist put it, “second best,” simply because it can be done.

Theoretical Orientation and Practitioner Viewpoint on Counseling at a Distance.

As a part of the first Delphi round, panelists were asked a preliminary demographic to identify their primary theoretical orientation to their counseling practice. The most commonly identified orientation was integrative/eclectic/holistic, indicating that they draw from a variety of theoretical foundations in their work with college students. Interpersonal, Cognitive-behavioral, humanistic, and existential theories were also mentioned as primary orientations. Through the course of the Delphi, one panelist indicated that “a counselor’s effectiveness counseling students at a distance may be dependent on the counselor’s theoretical orientation.” Another panelist joined this sentiment in saying, “I do agree that a therapists’ perception of whether or not…some disorders may or may not be able to be treated via electronic communication may be determined in part by their theoretical orientation and views on the process of change.

Interestingly, as the data was coded for general positive and negative perspectives, it became evident that the three panelists identifying as integrative, eclectic, or holistic came through as conflicted about providing counseling services at a distance. Each expressed significant misgivings and concerns about providing services, but balanced those concerns with a desire to explore ways to aid students who might need support to be successful. One panelist indicated, “Counseling at a distance might be less appropriate for interpersonal, personality, grief, and eating disorder concerns.” Certainly, theoretical orientations were developed in the field of counseling to address the wide
array of presenting problems. Therefore, as one panelist noted, it may be “less about the particular theoretical orientation of counselors and more about their ability to form a therapeutic alliance with clients.” And the ability to form this therapeutic alliance may be influenced by various factors, such as the counselor, the medium used to communicate, and the student’s specific concerns. Although this study did not find clear differences in practitioner outlook on providing counseling and psychological services to distance learners by theoretical orientation, from the perspective of multiple panelists, there certainly was support for the notion that there may be greater promise for utilizing technology for “psychoeducation” and issues requiring a “cognitive behavioral approach.” This sentiment is in line with the findings outlined in previous studies that found psycho-education and cognitive-behavioral therapies as most compatible with technology assisted (online) delivery of counseling services (Haberstroh, 2008, 461).

**Research Question 3: “Decision-Maker” Appraisals of Need & Feasibility**

The third question explored by this study sought to balance the perspectives espoused by college mental health professionals with those of “decision-makers” within student affairs, the department which houses counseling and psychological services at this large, public eastern research university. Specifically, the third research question asked, “How do expert perspectives on providing counseling and psychological services to distance learners compare to those of key decision-makers within the department of student affairs?” Two interviews were conducted as a part of the post-delphi data gathering phase to explore this research question. The director of the office of counseling
and psychological services and the vice president of student affairs were interviewed as a part of this phase. Questions focused on the following five areas: 1) the current conversation around counseling services for students learning at a distance; 2) perspectives on the non-academic needs of distance learners; 3) perspectives on institutional responsibility; 4) perspectives on the potential benefits of offering counseling services to distance learners; and 5) perspectives on the most significant challenges associated with providing counseling services to distance learners.

The Current Conversation around Counseling Services for Distance Learners

It is important to note that there is currently an ongoing conversation among senior staff members surrounding student services for distance learners. The conversation is bigger than just counseling and psychological services, and encompasses many student services. Some of those conversations have been brought about because of critical cases, as in potential student conduct issues among those learning at a distance. In engaging the Vice President of Student Affairs in conversation about this issue he noted, “there is a conversation now that has been fairly robust in terms of student conduct…the other area [the division of online learning] has been interested in counseling and psychological services… but we are just engaging in conversations now.” From the perspective of the Vice President, the question that must be asked is “what can we do for a student who’s experience with [the institution] is wholly online…and how can we in as comparably a way as possible make our services and programs equal to what we are providing now to the resident instruction student?” In discussing these issues with the Vice President it became clear that there was real interest in finding solutions and serving students in comparable ways to those students in residential instruction. However, the VP noted, it
can take a while for such a large institution to begin moving toward such large undertakings and that the current conversations “have to rise to a level where they are a real priority.” The Vice President indicated that the institution is positioned to be a national leader when it comes to providing “a full compliment of services and programs…[that] a really comparable to what the resident instruction students has.” At present there are very few, if any, other institutions that have begun serious conversations about how to approach the expansion of student services, like counseling and psychological services, to distance learners. As the Vice President noted, “I don’t know of any peer who is doing it now in any meaningful way. I don’t know of peers who are actually engaged in this discussion in the way that I think we absolutely need to be.” It is clear that from the top down this institution has the motivation to pursue these questions and seek reasonable solutions. In the following we will explore further perspectives on student needs balanced with challenges and opportunities associated with the process to find supportive solutions for distance learners in a way that avoids, as the Vice President put it, “becoming the next lead story in the chronicle of higher education.”

**Decision-Maker Perspectives on the Non-Academic Needs of Distance Learners**

As a part of the follow up interviews conducted with the Vice President of Student Affairs and the Director of Counseling and Psychological Services (herein referred to as VP and Director), both were asked to describe their understanding of the most salient non-academic needs of distance learners. Through the interviews it became apparent that both the VP and the Director held a belief that despite potential demographic differences between the distance learner population and the residential instruction student population, both demographics shared a strong desire to have “a more
complete student experience.” The VP described this as opportunities to be engaged in a whole variety of non-academic experiences such as student government, and other student organizations. While the VP took a more broad approach to define “needs,” the Director indicated that in his opinion the non-academic needs of the distance learner “would coincide with what we perceive to be the most critical non-academic concerns of traditional campus-based learners. This perspective aligned directly with those of the experts on the Delphi panel.

The Director went on to discuss the commonly held, yet erroneous, assumption that the distance learner is in need of community integration to a lesser degree due to the assumption that they are integrated socially in their home community. As the VP noted, it is wholly possible that the distance learner is “more isolated” because of their geographical distance from the institution itself. The VP went on to note a surprising trend, as he put it, “[distance learners] are in some respects even more deeply bound to [the institution] that our residential instruction students might be. They join the alumni association at a higher percentage than students who had a residential instruction experience.” Despite the distance, it is a fundamental desire for individuals to belong to something bigger than themselves. Finding ways for students to engage in the life of the institution is a critical need regardless of mode of educational delivery. Indeed, student support services are a piece of the puzzle for helping the residential instruction student engage in the life of the institution, and are an, as yet, underexplored avenue for helping the distance learner engage in similar ways to the life of the institution.
Decision-Maker Perspectives on Institutional Responsibility

As the conversation moved away from perspectives of student needs and shifted to an institution's responsibility to its distance learners, the VP and Director split somewhat in regard to their principal philosophy of institutional obligation in regard to offering student services. However, in the end, the conclusion was the same, ultimately it is about supporting the student and their educational experience in any way reasonable. The key term in that phrase being “reasonable.”

The Director noted that in his experience many institutions look at counseling and psychological services as less of a universal mandate to serve all students, and more as a service supplement to further the educational mission of the institution. In describing this distinction, the director told a story about working at a small Midwestern university that had a counseling center on campus. He noted, “even though we had a counseling center, I was distinctly aware of the fact that the counseling center was not expected to meet the needs of the commuters to that campus…[therefore] our job was to make these students aware of what was available to them in their home communities.” From the Director’s perspective, the institutional mandate to provide counseling and psychological services is highly situational and perhaps dependent on the circumstances of the student demographics. Let's say that is true for a campus whose clientele often commute to campus and are, in general, from similarly serviced home communities in terms of mental health services. This does not necessarily provide a 1-1 correlation to a campus whose distance learners can be from literally any community nationally, or globally. This does also beg the question, can we assume that a student’s
home community has the resources or opportunities to provide them the support they require to be successful in their institutions distance learning environments?

The director also brought up the interesting question of student expectations as compared to institutional expectations. As the director put it, “the reality is that, the reason they are not here, is that they have reasons not to be here.” Therefore, the question remains; what expectations do distance learners truly have for the services they should be provided? Regardless of student expectation, there is the rationale from the perspective of equitable services based on cost for attendance. In other words, if a student learning at a distance is paying an equal or similar cost to attend, they could reasonably expect to receive the same level of services that a student in residential instruction would receive. As the director put it, “lets assume that [courses] costs the same as an on-campus student…that to me suggests that, yes, we should provide students, to the extent we can, the services that every student is eligible for on campus.”

The VP came to some similar conclusions. He argued that student support is the ultimate goal, but approached the issue of institutional responsibility in a slight different way. The VP argued, “I think the measurement should always be, ‘what can we reasonably do that actually is going to add something to student success? That’s student success for any student at [the institution], whatever form that student takes.” He added, “I think this is one of the most important initiatives we have going right now.” Ultimately, his litmus test for institutional responsibility came down to a question of are we doings “all we say we reasonably can?” He acknowledged, that the key to success is going to be “a matter of incrementally chipping away at this” and the reality that, “resources [aren’t] necessarily going to allow us to do it all at once.” Ultimately, the
bottom line for the VP of Student Affairs is summed up in his own words, “We are at a point where we have got to make some decisions about how we are going to do this, but to throw up our hands at some point and say ‘it is too complicated’ or ‘we can’t get this done’ or ‘resources prevent us from doing it’ won’t be acceptable to me.”

Decision-Maker Perspectives on Potential Benefits of Providing Counseling Services

What is the potential value added as a result of extending some form of counseling services to students learning at a distance? This is essentially the question posed to this study’s expert panel and also to both the counseling center director and student affairs VP. When asked about the potential benefits, the counseling center director immediately made the case that for all students the counseling center provides an increased capacity to learn effectively. It was clear that the director believes in the overarching educational mission in saying, “I never hesitate to remind the administration of our role in educating students. They learn about themselves, those things that they might not learn in the classroom. I like to think that we sort of pre-dispose students…to give their very best in the classroom as well as outside the classroom.” Of course he was talking generally about any student they serve. But it was clear that the director extended this potential benefit to distance learners, should some form of counseling services be offered. The director went on to describe how counseling services advances the educational mission. He expressed, “if a student is impaired or to some degree disabled emotionally, they will not be able to use their full capacity to learn. They are distracted. They are shut down. They are not easily stimulated in an academic way. And consequently, if we can do our job well, we remove those distractions, we increase their sense of self-
empowerment. We clear their vision so that they can focus on the information at hand…and we can also retain students.”

In this, the director laid out a vision for how counseling services might make a significant contribution to some of the more prominent issues in distance learning. Indeed, distance learners are required to be somewhat self-directed; therefore, if an individual is not at their full capacity to learn and is distracted or shut down, they will certainly not be successful or as successful in their academic pursuits. Retention is also a significant concern for distance learners compared to their residential instruction counterparts. Past literature has stated, “counseling centers don’t always embrace retention as a significant objective of the department,” however, “the counseling center does have positive influence on retention” (Sharkin, 2004). The counseling center director noted that the services offered in the counseling center have the potential to provide the support needed to avoid attrition in online programs. He also expressed a concern for the potentially isolating nature of learning at a distance, saying, “I have some sensitivity to the online learners out there who are not sitting quietly and alone with their troubles in front of their computer ready to open it up and access the next lecture, and simply shut it down.” As Lapadula put it, the exploration of “support mechanisms” to aid these students is a necessary step to remedy the “significant deficiency in their availability” and avoid “further isolation of distance learners” (LaPadula, 2003).

The Vice President of Student Affairs (VP) expressed the far-reaching potential associated with exploring service delivery to distance learners. He articulated, “what is most interesting about this to me, actually, is much of what I portend we might be doing for the [distance learner] is going to be very useful to all students…most of whom
increasingly expect services and programs to reach them virtually.” The VP indicated that student affairs, in general, is, at times, “a little archaic in the way we are interfacing with students.” Indeed, making progress in the area of counseling service delivery to distance learners might also bring with it innovations in the way we support all of our students. Particularly, as our campus constituents become increasingly adept interfacing and communicating via technology.

**Decision-Maker Perspectives on the Potential Challenges to Providing Services**

In follow-up interviews with the counseling center director and the student affairs VP, each were asked to identify the most critical challenges that would need to be addressed before any service delivery could be offered. The objective was to first determine their perspective on the most salient challenges and the second was to compare their responses to those of the mental health practitioners in the Delphi panel. The eight themes consistent throughout the Delphi phase in regard to challenges were: safety, communication, working alliance, suitability for service, infrastructure cost, service coverage and cost, technology effectiveness, and liability. Between the Director and VP, they also identified the majority of these concerns, including: safety/risk, cost, infrastructure, technology effectiveness, and liability. To these the director and VP added: staff time, confidentiality concerns, licensure, and staff-buy in. The following section will highlight each of these concerns as they were described.

*Crisis/Risk Management.* Without a doubt the most often identified challenge was that of managing the risk associated with providing counseling services. The questions that start with “what if…” often permeate the conversation and take center stage as practitioners consider the possibilities and potential of delivery of services at a distance.
The counseling center director illuminated the prevailing sentiment well in saying “I think most of us would be willing to live with risk if we knew that there weren’t going to be some real dire consequences to us personally or to that individual.” Colleagues who are counseling students regarding their career goals or advisors who are helping students navigate the academic waters provide their services on a daily basis without much thought to “dire consequences” that could result from the work that they do. This makes counseling and psychological services in the college environment a student service that truly is somewhat unique.

**Infrastructure Cost.** Not necessarily surprising was the mention of cost. The college environment is one with finite resources. Student services can be an expensive proposition and in an environment where funding is limited, there are always those who make the argument that resources would be better used to bolster the services that are already in need of more funding. When you start talking about a service that requires technological infrastructure many immediately start to count the cost. As the director noted, “you are going to run into many expenses in creating an infrastructure that works. You have to have technical people addressing this. You have to have counselors consulting along the way.” Indeed, some form of technology assisted counseling delivery for distance learners would not only take some investment in technology infrastructure, but it would also require additional counselors/counselor time and perhaps technological support that is dedicated to the initiative.

Are there solutions that could potentially use the technology infrastructure currently implemented on campus? There may be some campuses across the country that have far advanced technology in regard to communication capabilities. But as the VP
noted about the present institution, the current state to technology is somewhat antiquated. “We don’t have the most robust or successful IT infrastructure for this purpose…so we have this capacity limitation…so I think that is going to be a challenge as we try to become much more sophisticated about all these things.

**Technology Effectiveness.** The experiences of technology in the small, somewhat inconsequential matters often leads us to make similar conclusions about their effectiveness in the larger matters. For example, the counseling center director articulated that his office has used video enabled communication via the internet through the skype platform. The main use of skype has been to conduct interviews and the experience has been, in his words, “a little clunky and it doesn’t feel real sometimes.” He noted, there “are not good visuals” as well. For a counselor these experiences would certainly cause one to pause in considering the use of said services for counseling delivery at a distance. It is of great importance for the conversation to be smooth and not “clunky.” The conversation would need to feel as “real” as it would between two people sitting face to face. This may be attributable to available bandwidth on the part of the sender or receiver, but at the moment there is no reliable way to make certain that the connection is going to be clear. The researcher has also had considerable experience with video enabled communication via the internet. On most occasions the interaction goes well, but often that is with a great deal of prior experience on both sides. Initial connections are often plagued with problems that range from malfunctioning technology to user error. Simply put, these interactions would need to be seamless. They would just need to work, everyday and all the time. However, as the VP made mention, “technology is going to help us chip away at all of those things. There is going to be some need that isn’t met
with the current technologies that future technologies might allow us to meet.” Just because technology may not be at the point of widespread fail-proof implementation doesn’t mean that possibilities should not be continually explored as technology continues to proliferate and improve. To drive this point home, the VP asserted, “too often I have heard people quickly go, ‘well, here is an example of something that just is impossible and so we shouldn’t even go there. That is just going to be too difficult and is going to create problems that aren’t good for us or our students.’ I am hoping to avoid that issue.”

*Liability.* There is a clear understanding in the counseling profession that individual and institutional liability is a very real concern. Anytime a professional (especially a specifically licensed professional) is working with an individual with any level of mental and emotional concerns there is always the potential for risk and subsequently the potential for liability. Institutions assume some level of liability when they offer services to students, particularly counseling services, but mitigating the potential for liability is high priority. Therefore, as the counseling center director acknowledged; more so than just about any other student service on campus, there is often hesitation to break new ground and be the one to chart a path forward. He said, “we can’t decide if we want to be on the cutting edge…or let somebody else trudge through and serve up something that seems to work…”

Liability is forever intertwined with the potential for risk. As one of the Delphi panelists aptly pointed out, this potential for risk may be small in number, but the fallout from unmitigated risk can be extremely large in effect. Without some kind of in-person arrangement, whether that be face-to-face with a counselor or a support person in the
same local as the individual, there is simply no way to completely mitigate the potential for risk and liability to the exact same degree. The director noted that in the case of an individual who gives reason for concern, they have a well-established plan to deal with a variety of contingencies, but “we don’t have the same leverage with an off-site arrangement.” To be clear, the director of the counseling center expressed, “if we were expecting to never be in the potential liable circumstance there wouldn’t be counseling.” Because, as he put it, “every time we sit somebody down we share some responsibility and some potential liability.” There is definitely some level of comfort with taking on some level of risk and liability, however, “right now the line is pretty clearly drawn.” The staff in the counseling center are working under conditions that provide a certain level of tried and tested comfort. The mental health counseling staff understands the risks and their responsibilities as services are currently offered. Taking services to the next level and including distance learners would definitely cross that comfort line. “What we are not certain about is how much we want to edge out from that in venturing out into some of these domains. I think it is inevitable and there will be plenty of case law that will follow from online therapeutic encounters that go bad…we are back to ‘who wants to be cutting edge?’

_Licensure._ One of the most significant concerns in seeming opposition to the provision of counseling services to students at a distance is the legal grey area of practicing across state lines. Counselors are licensed by each individual state and thus are generally bound to practice in those states alone. The VP of Student Affairs keyed in on this concern in saying “I find counseling and psychological services to be really complicated because of these licensure issues…our staff are licensed to practice in the
state of Pennsylvania an so what exactly does that mean?” Obviously students learning at a distance can be located anywhere in the country, let alone anywhere in the world. The issue of providing services to students learning from abroad is outside the scope of this study and was not specifically discussed by the researcher and the research participants, but is definitely an interesting question to ponder as research continues in this area.

Very few on the Delphi panel noted the legal issues brought about by licensure limitations. Presumably, the issue of risk and liability overshadowed the issue of licensure. Indeed, if a practitioner believes that counseling at a distance is risky, at best, then they have very little reason to consider the issue of licensure across state lines. However, the counseling center director, realizing that the conversation has already commenced on an institutional level, has certainly considered some more of the issues that may be on the periphery, with licensure being one example. The counseling center director indicated that for this to truly work it might just take a concerted effort on the part of both professional counseling organizations and each of the states to concretely affirm the legality of providing counseling services across state lines via electronic mediums. There are still unanswered questions in regard to licensure now, and as the VP put it, “we don’t know what this might mean in the future?” or “How the profession and licensure credentialing [may] change in recognition of all this.” The VP acknowledged, “We can’t necessarily lead in this area but we can stay apprised of what the opportunities might be and how we might be able to work around things without violating law and other expectations.” He added, “[this institution] certainly doesn’t have a history of being a precedent setting school. We tend to be a little more conservative…[but] there is huge competition out there out there and so we are going to have to set ourselves apart from
the competition and what we are talking about can be a large part of how we do just that.”

Effective Confidential Environment. Whenever communication via technology has to be confidentiality, there is always concern over the security of the system that is in place or would be put in place. In general, keeping confidentiality in a face-to-face environment is simple. The conversation must take place in an isolated environment and the content of that conversation is kept between the counselor and client. When technology plays a role in that interaction there is always the possibility, although probably remote, that the content of the conversation could be intercepted for whatever reason by a third party without the knowledge or consent of the counselor or client. The counseling center director suggested that this would have to be adequately addressed before beginning any new pilot of counseling services at a distance via technology.

“There are a lot of issues, I assume, about safety or somebody hacking into this exchange. All the kind of confidentiality issues and worries about that safety come to play here as well. So there would have to be all those assurances.”

Staff Time/Buy-in. In the conversation with the counseling center director it became apparent that, as other staff mentioned, there already is a perception of insufficient staff time to account for the current level of need among the residential student population. The director suggested that it would be challenging to “take time out from doing what you ordinarily do in order to address this kind of thing.” In addition to the crunch on staff time is staff buy-in. It was clear that there are significant misgivings about pursuing any kind of technology assisted communication modes for counseling distance learners. Some, in fact, indicated absolutely no desire to pursue this direction in any way. The question was posed to the director, if the level of resources and support
could make up for the staffing it would take to reasonably move in the direction of expanding services to online learners, could we move forward with something? And the answer was yes, but the director acknowledged that he might have some “challenge convincing [his] own staff that we can do this.” However, in the director’s estimation, he believes most of his staff are on-board because they truly want to support students, but simply “would need to get more comfortable with it” and come to terms with how it might be accomplished in a safe and effective manner.

Research Question 4: Potential Strategies to Meet Distance Learners’ Counseling Needs.

As this is intended to be a practitioner oriented piece, the strategies and possibilities for implementation is of the greatest importance. To this point we have explored practitioner perspectives regarding salient potential benefits associated with extending some form of counseling services to distance learners. We have also discussed, at length, the wide array of challenges that need to be overcome before we might be able to move forward with any type of actual counseling and psychological services for distance learners. In this final chapter we will answer the fourth and final research question: “What strategies would college mental health counseling professionals most likely pursue to extend counseling services to students engaged in exclusively online education? “ To accomplish this we will outline several options generated as a result of this study. Each option will be described and the pros and cons of that potential implementation will be examined. First, we will begin with a brief overview of the
current state of the conversation among administrators on campus and current options for services for distance learners at the university.

In discussing the potential for expanding some form of counseling services to online learners the VP of student affairs expressed, “the problem for me is that I have the 33,000 foot perspective…but the detail and the nuance and the level of sophistication we really need to have about each of these many issues is not something I possess.”

Certainly, as we have discussed at length, there are a great many of challenges associated with offering some form of counseling services to distance learners. As many Delphi panelists noted, this is a very complicated issue with many moving pieces to consider. Therefore, we now turn to a discussion of potential solutions. Many of the ideas generated through this study do not completely satisfy the entirety of the goal of comparable services. However, as the VP noted, “I am not eager for us to quickly identify the most challenging aspects of this and decide it can’t be done because of these three things… I would rather flip that and start working away at the collection of things we do for the resident instruction student that we can easily translate into the online world.” For an issue that is still quite contentious, it is probably best to work on what can be accomplished in the immediate and continually set new goals.

At the moment the university does not provide any routine services for distance learners beyond rapid triage and referral. There are currently no advertised services for distance learners and cases are addressed as needed as they come in. One panelist noted that they “assume a majority of colleges/universities don’t provide any such services” and this study has not found many notable programs currently in place at other institutions across the country. Some institutions, such as the University of Maryland, use an
asynchronous question and answer platform. Students can email in questions and they are then posted anonymously online with a personal response. Maryland also has a fairly extensive online self-help library that is open access for anyone. With only basic services currently implemented, we are currently in a place to consider as many options as possible. The Delphi approach to this study presented an optimal way to generate ideas for services and then explore those ideas further. Many of the concepts discussed below came out as a part of the first and second round Delphi surveys and then were expanded upon in the third round and follow-up interviews.

**Strategies Employing Minimal Contact Interventions**

*Information Only/Self-Help Modules.* One approach is to provide students something, but keep the resources required to a minimum. Certainly, what many students are looking for are answers to the questions that they have and, at times, all they need is something to read that provides factual information that may help them draw their own conclusions. Panelists described this information as “psychoeducational” and all panelists were in agreement that offering this kind of information is a good place to start.

A second approach that falls under the self-help category of services is educational modules that can be delivered in an online environment. Several panelists indicated the existence of established self-help modules that on topics such as anxiety management, cognitive behavioral strategies and communication skills. One panelist argued, “if there is a commitment [to provide services to distance learners]…I think it may lie in the area of self-help. Promoting self-help, encouraging self-help, making tools really easily and readily available and that may include walking them through ways to find a local provider that takes their insurance.”
Self-help avoids some of the most significant concerns. The risk and liability associated with providing self-help resources is minimal to non-existent. The staff time required on a regular basis is minimal; but, as one of the panelists noted, self-help is not free to provide. In fact, it takes significant resources to generate the material and keep it current. It was suggested that perhaps there were collaborative potentialities in the development of self-help services between institutions, but that will be discussed in greater detail later.

Contracting with Local Providers. Through the Delphi study it was suggested by one panelist that perhaps institutions with distance learning divisions could contract and pay out to local providers to provide services to students who request them. This suggestion was born out of a strong belief on the part of this panelist that providing services at a distance was not the correct course and a face-to-face counseling interaction is the only process that should be pursued. They suggested that in order to provide “comparable services” the institution should predetermine a number of sessions, comparable to what is offered for free to residential instruction students, and provide some kind of “voucher” for comparable services in their immediate locale. In this approach the student would be responsible for finding his or her own source of services. Of course, this addresses the main concern of student safety, but it does not address the issue of students in areas that are underserved in terms of counseling and psychological services.

Triage, Local Referral & Case Management. Already somewhat in place is the concept of triage and local referral. At present, if a student in distance learning were to contact counseling and psychological services requesting assistance, the office would do
its best to provide triage counseling for the immediate issue, to the degree possible and appropriate, and then would encourage the student to seek services in their immediate locale. This process may seem simple at the outset, but is actually quite complicated. For instance, finding a reputable local referral source takes time and maintaining an accurate and up-to-date listing of referral sources for students that could literally be anywhere is verging on impossible. One panelist noted that they have trouble maintaining accurate listings for the third party services providers in the immediate local of the university. It was suggested that one potential solution is to tap into the insurance databases of providers and find a way to aggregate that data for students. Suffice it to say, providing an elaborate case management process that could be advertised as a service for distance learners would eliminate or transfer most of the risk and potentially connect students with local support, but the staff time and resources required to accomplish the broad scope of this solution may be cost prohibitive for one institution to manage. It is also important to note, as one panelist did, “many colleges and universities don’t have case managers and trying to get students connected in the college community is a stretch.” Therefore, comprehensive case management services for students learning at a distance may be more appropriate in certain settings, but still may be more complicated to implement than is immediately possible.

*Crisis Hotline.* Providing a crisis intervention hotline is certainly not a new concept in community health services. Crises are unpredictable and as one panelist expressed, “[crises] can be challenging to handle even with very well-developed procedures, policies, and relationships.” In light of these challenges, crisis hotlines “serve a critical role in connecting those in need to services.” However, typically these crisis
intervention hotlines are often provided from within a specific locale for individuals within that locale. They are often provided locally because then the helper is able to make quick connections to police or first-responder services in the event of an expressions of intent toward imminent hard to self or others. However, there are certainly national hotline numbers such as the suicide prevention hotline, Adolescent suicide hotline, adolescent crisis intervention hotline, domestic violence hotline, and even a hotline for help finding a local therapist. There are a variety of places individuals can gain access to these resources online (i.e. http://www.healthyplace.com/other-info/resources/mental-health-hotline-numbers-and-referral-resources/). Indeed, one panelist expressed that previous conversations regarding providing services to learners at a distance have focused on this concept of a crisis hotline for these students. The panelist conceded that “it hasn’t moved very far” because of certain challenges associated with the distance learner population. Since the student could be located literally anywhere, there is question as to whether or not you would need to staff a crisis hotline 24/7? Currently the university does contract with a service called Protocall to provide a sexual assault and relationship violence hotline (http://www.protocallservices.com). The Protocall website describes their services to students in this way, “Our model of telephonic brief interventions is specifically designed to help your students get what they need in the moment – warmth, respect and empathy, coupled with accurate information gathering and excellent safety assessment and stabilization to help your day staff follow up smoothly” (http://www.protocallservices.com/student-counseling-services/). Hotlines and hotline services like Protocall often meet the most immediate needs of an individual, but they do not provide any continuing services beyond the initial contact and referral. Therefore, the
concept of implementing some kind of crisis hotline for distance learners might be just one component of an overall comprehensive mental health support plan for a college or university with distance learners.

**Strategies Employing Interactive Interpersonal Interventions**

“Check in” only with established clients. Although the Delphi panel expressed a range of concerns, half of the respondents indicated that there may be some promise for utilizing technology to “check-in” with students with whom they have a pre-existing relationship with. One panelist said, “I think if one has an established therapeutic relationship and an online process is used to check in with a stable client then it may be appropriate.” Another noted, “I would consider addressing ongoing concerns of a non-urgent, and non-severe nature that had been previously, and thoroughly discussed with the student in-person.” Even panelists who had the most concern over technology aided counseling interactions suggested that there might be some promise in this kind of arrangement. One such individual put it this way, “[if we had an] established relationship first and then used an online process to check-in – I agree there is some potential here.”

Another indicated, “in many ways, this would be an optimal arrangement.”

*Comprehensive Counseling Services.* The full range of services that are provided by center for counseling and psychological services on a college campus is extensive and covers: walk-in services, intake, long-term therapy, consultation, evaluation and assessment, psychological testing, triage, crisis response, couples therapy, group counseling, psychiatric services, comprehensive case management, outreach and education, resource and third party referrals, career and vocational counseling, and collaborative services with other campus departments such as Disability Services. It is no
surprise that some panelists, when asked about providing “personal counseling services” to distance learners, asked what exactly would be included in a definition of services given the broad range available to residential instruction students. Certainly, in order to continue to pursue counseling service expansion to distance learners, each of these facets would need to be broken out and dealt with individually. Some would certainly be easier to entertain, such as offering outreach and education through online modes. Or perhaps the referral process could be aided in some way through online means via a searchable database. However, the majority of service offerings suffer from the most contentious concerns (ex. Safety concerns and providing extended therapy). It was suggested that issues like student safety might be addressed by utilizing some kind of mental health center where safe and secure connections could be established via internet. These connecting point centers would have trained staff who would be able to respond in the case of emergency. They would also be able to verify the identity of the individual. One panelist noted, “ideally you would have some kind of mental health professional” where others indicated, in the absence of a trained professional, they would consider involving a responsible individual as a third party (ex. Parents, family, etc.). One panelist noted that this idea is certainly not a new concept and is indeed in effect in some underserved area, particularly in the specialization of psychiatry. This panelist indicated, “every area in the U.S. at least has a mental health system that is supposed to cover a targeted area. In some rural areas in this state or in the inner city where it has been impossible to keep a psychiatrist, some provider groups have a nurse or counselor sit with the person in a rural clinic while a skype type intervention occurs with the psychiatrist.” To be clear, these interactions do not often include very much intrapersonal counseling but rather focus on
identifying concerns and prescribing a medicinal solution to address symptoms. Colleges and universities certainly do not have the resources or capacity to be able to establish these kinds of centers to serve all possible locations where students might be located. Therefore, this brings us back to needing some kind of local resource that is already established. Therefore, barring a national push toward this kind of solution, the potential for providing more comprehensive counseling services might be minimal.

*Inter-institution Service Consortium.* It was suggested by several panelists that providing comparable or comprehensive counseling services to distance learners may be beyond the scope of any one institution, but with the combined resources of many institutions in partnership it may be more reasonable. It was suggested that perhaps institutions with distance learning divisions could establish agreements to provide local services to students who seek support but attend another consortium institution in another state. In exchange, all other consortium institutions would reciprocate the service provision to students in their locale. This concept was specifically mentioned as part of follow-up interviews. Although interviewees felt that consortiums are a good idea, it was suggested that “a better trajectory would be that a consortium would co-develop materials for online self-help and referral.” The thinking being that although a service consortium is an interesting idea, a student in a state like Kansas can still be a significant distance away from an institution that would be a consortium member. As a part of this discussion it was also suggested that offering this kind of service might dissuade an individual from seeking out service in the immediate area that might actually serve them better.

*Non-Clinical Student Success Advisor.* Possibly one of the most interesting concepts seeks to provide the support that might be needed without specifically focusing
on providing specific services. The concept of a student success advisor was generated as a part of the Delphi study. Under this concept, each online course would be assigned a “student success advisor” that would be separate from their academic advisor. This success advisor would be a non-mental health student affairs practitioner that would serve as a link between the student and the institution for non-academic concerns. This individual would have direct access to consult with campus staff in the counseling center and other student services. They would also be able to devote resources to help student’s problem solve and find resources that could help them with their concerns. As this individual is not a mental health practitioner they would not be able to be a direct counselor or serve in an ongoing case management capacity, but could help the student find individuals that could meet those needs. When this idea was mentioned one panelist said, “Yeah I think that is a great idea. So they are kind of your point person if questions come up…what’s nice about that model is that you kind of have a name and associate for your support person so there is sort of a relationship there but you are not describing it as an online counselor…the major criteria for that position might be ‘exquisitely skilled at google searches’ for tracking down local resources for students.”

There quite a few practical questions that would need to be addressed if this were to be pursued. For example, one panelist who spoke positively about the concept indicated they would want to know “what would an average case load be?” And also would ask the question, “would the student need to take a set number of credits for this service to be available to them?” In asking this question in particular this particular panelist shared a story of a friend and colleague who was recently hired on at CEO of a new startup that seeks to lower the cost of transferable general education coursework.
The idea being that students would pay a low flat rate (99 dollars) per course and then be able to transfer that coursework, making up their first two years of college, to the college or university of their choice. In this arrangement there are certainly none of the usual student services offered to the student. The idea being that some students are looking for the credit hours without the “frills.” And as this panelist noted, “if I am paying 99 bucks a class, I shouldn’t expect a whole lot [other than the coursework and credits].”

In terms of a business model associated with offering distance learners access to a professional student success advisor, one panelist asserted that the plan would really be quite simple. This panelist said, “if you take the proposition of a success advisor and you say every online student should have a named advisor…how many students do we have, how many credits, what is the charge per student necessary to pull of those warm bodies [for the time frame they would be needed by students]…you factor it in, hire the people, and give them the equipment to do it. I actually don’t view it as being that super complicated.” Certainly, there are issues that would come up as the possibility was explored, but the idea of a student success advisor may be a core component to addressing comparable effective “support”, even if comparable “services” is more challenging.

**Chapter Summary**

Mental health practitioners and decision-makers leading counseling and psychological services on campus all recognize the presence of mental and emotional concerns across all learner demographics. Indeed, even distance learners have crises related to belonging, identity, developmental milestones and interpersonal relationships. The findings of this study reassert the importance of addressing these crises effectively in
order to promote student success regardless of their chosen medium for educational attainment. Another common thread emerging from both the Delphi phase and subsequent interviews is the realization that students are coming to campus with increased expectations regarding technological integration into academic and non-academic experiences and services. Overall, a negative viewpoint on the merits of pursuing counseling services at a distance prevailed. However, this viewpoint was certainly tempered at all levels (practitioner and decision-maker) due to the realization that continual technological innovation will continue to open new doors and provide for increasing possibilities and potential for meeting the varied needs of students learning at a distance.

Realizing that students emerging from secondary education often come from environments with greater levels of built in support, it easy to see how the post-secondary environment can be seen as a challenge for some students to transition into – even if pursuing education at a distance. One current of perspective that emerged continually through this study was the balance between institutional responsibility and consumer choice. One clear finding is that practitioners believe that regardless of the level of services an institution chooses to offer, that must be accompanied with clear and transparent public communication regarding the level of support a student should reasonably expect to receive if they experience mental and emotional health concerns.

The findings of this study present various challenges associated with transitioning counseling and psychological services to the online environment to meet the needs of distance learners. Individual safety, assessing potential threats, ensuring effective and complete communication, ensuring student suitability to engage in a counseling
relationship, building near fail-proof infrastructure, managing associated costs, managing the draw on staff time, maintaining compliance with appropriate licensure requirements by state, and mitigating the individual and institutional liability burden are all significant concerns impeding the rapid expansion of counseling services to distance learners.

The challenges are certainly balanced to some degree by the benefits to students that could be realized through expanding counseling and psychological service offerings to distance learners. Practitioners in the study clearly established that providing universal access to expert opinions, seeking to increase students’ quality of life, improving student retention, and reaching out to otherwise unconnected students are all tangible and worthy outcomes that could be improved through counseling in general, and expanding counseling services to distance learners specifically.

Despite not finding a clear connection between practitioner position on providing counseling services to distance learners and their theoretical counseling orientation, it became clear in the findings of this study that practitioners find themselves conflicted between student support and institutional/environmental realities. There was some support for the notion that certain issues might be effectively addressed at a distance, particularly those that did not involve interpersonal, personality, grief, or specific disorders (i.e. eating disorders). However, the findings of this study illustrate the difficulty in determining the true nature of the concern prior to engaging with the student.

Ultimately, through this study the goal shifted from asking “how do we provide comparable counseling and psychological services to distance learners” to “how do we meet the needs of distance learners in a comparable way.” The findings illustrate that taking our current counseling offerings and transitioning them wholesale to the online
environment is probably not feasible, effective, or even safe. However, the findings of this study contend that there is certainly a perceived and real need among the distance learner population for counseling and psychological support, there is a mission imperative for many educational institutions to provide a more complete student experience for distance learners, and as the VP aptly put it “we are at a point where we have got to make some decisions…but to throw up our hands and say ‘its too complicated’ or ‘we can’t get this done’ or ‘resources prevent us from doing it’ won’t be acceptable. In the following conclusion to this study we turn to focus on applying the findings of this study and providing concrete recommendations for practice.

Chapter 5: Conclusion & Recommendations for Practice

This study explored practitioner perspectives of distance learner needs and the potential for extending some form of counseling and psychological services to distance learners. The most consistent theme throughout the study was practitioner concern and conflict over doing what is in the best interest of the student and finding a way to provide the services a student needs to succeed. It became clear that those two overarching goals are not necessarily compatible in all circumstances. However, this study suggests that there is some common ground that might prove to be reasonable first steps toward comparable services; which effectively support distance learners, increase student retention, and enable academic success. In the ensuing section we will conclude by first discussing limitations and proposed future research. This will be followed by a discussion on the integration of business-oriented and student-centered philosophies of service
provision. We will then move to a discussion of student needs and help-seeking behaviors. And finally, we will settle on a proposed model for service delivery that seeks to take into consideration the myriad of concerns and complexity of issues related to expanding some form of counseling and psychological services to distance learners.

Balancing Business Realities, Liability Concerns & Student Support Needs

Choosing to provide counseling services to an entirely new student demographic is certainly not as easy as simply making the decision to do so. In theory, providing students a variety of services intended to help them succeed is always a good idea. However, there are indeed very real business considerations that must be addressed. If there is one undeniable truth, it is that student services are always expensive to offer. Therefore, in coming to conclusions about offering student services that are transferrable across institutions, it must also be conceded that the specific suggestions offered in this study will need to be adapted to each individual institutional context. However, this study contends that many of the conceptual ideas and practical solutions generated as a part of this study can be modified to meet student needs and institutional realities on a broad scale.

One panelist outlined a very pragmatic approach for service delivery decision-making. This panelist suggested that, delivery concerns aside, if they had to provide counseling and psychological services at a distance they would first start with an examination of the distance learner population. In other words, at this particular institution, how long are most students enrolled online? Are most students’ goals to obtain a degree or to simply get a few classes out of the way? It was also suggested that in each institutional context it would be important to survey students in such a way that
assessed the reality of student need. This study concludes, from a review of the literature and from practitioner perspectives, that there is a definitive need among distance learners for access to counseling and psychological support services. However, it is probable that need for services may vary based on the circumstances surrounding student enrollment in distance learning at each specific institution.

No institution wants to find itself a part of a landmark court case that sets the precedent for the rest of higher education. However, without much legal guidance, we are left to speculate somewhat on the correct course of action. To provide nothing by way of support services to distance learners may not be the correct course of action and may actually open the institution up to liability, particularly if the student seeks out support services from a distance, is informed that support services are not available, and some form of tragedy ensues. In terms of liability, the best course of action is likely to be clear about what you can currently provide to students at a distance while ensuring a reasonable assurance of student safety. Following clear communication about what is available, providing synchronous and asynchronous psycho-educational options may go a long way toward proactive prevention. And finally, as this conversation continues and technology progresses we may be able to utilize new and possibly unforeseen tech advances in the support of students with mental and emotional health concerns on campus and at a distance.

Several panelists asserted that whatever level of counseling service an institution decides to provide, it should always be abundantly clear to its current and prospective distance learners what they should expect to receive should they contact the institution to request support services of any kind. In other words, if an institution that offers distance
learning decides that it is going to offer a “no frills” educational experience at a low cost, it should be up front about that.

As one panelist articulated, in an institutional plan, “[an institution should] develop a clearly defined set of services, pathways to handle crisis, and all of the legalese required to minimize liability to the providers and the university.” A high level of communication and transparency that sets realistic individual and institutional expectations while minimizing ambiguity is certainly a best practice in the overall effort to meet student needs and ensure student success.

**Toward a Conceptual Model of Distance Learner Needs & Behavior**

We now turn to a discussion of a conceptual model of distance learner needs and behaviors developed from a synthesis of the literature and qualitative findings of this study. In *Figure 4* (pg. 142) we start with an individual distance learner who experiences an initiating event or period of personal crisis. They experience a level of life stress that causes thoughts and emotions that cause a difficulty or inability for the individual to function productively in the academic environment. The individual’s first impediment to finding support is always the barrier of “self.” This study explored the real concept of help seeking stigma, and depending on one’s disposition toward seeking assistance, they may seek counseling options. However, if they have a negative disposition toward counseling or their immediate societal environment places a negative stigma on counseling they may be reluctant to explore counseling options at the outset. These individual beliefs regarding counseling will naturally leads an individual to either have intentions to seek help or no intention to seek help.
Figure 4: Conceptual Diagram: Distance Learner Help-Seeking Patterns

Distance Learner

Experience of a stress inducing event(s), thought/emotions producing stress or inability to function effectively.

Individual believes counseling services may help. Individuals social norms promote help-seeking behavior.

Intention to seek help

Low level problem/ Able to seek assistance from local environment. Integrated into educational environment.

Student requires support services to avoid attrition and potential for increased depression, anxiety, etc.

Institution offers adequate counseling support services to meet student needs.

Support Acquired. Low/No attrition potential. Increased likelihood for student success.

High level problem/ No local environment assistance. Experiences environment as isolating. High level of transactional distance.

Institution does not offer adequate counseling support services to meet student needs.

Attrition Possible. Potential for/increased likelihood of compounding anxiety, depression, other mental health concerns

Individual does not believe counseling will help. Individual’s social norms promote negative stigma toward help-seeking behavior.

No Intention to seek help

Educational environment effectively identifies problem, refers to necessary resources.

Isolating environment. No intervention

Barrier 1: SELF (Individual) Internal

Barrier 2: PLACE (Environmental) Internal/ External

Barrier 3: Institutional (Support) Internal/ External
We now move to the second potential barrier, which we here describe as the barrier of “place.” If the individual intends to seek help and they have what might be classified as a low level issue they may be able to seek assistance either from their local environment or from their integration with the educational environment at a distance. However, if they have a high level problem, do not have any local environmental support, and experience the distance learning environment as isolating they may require some form of institutionally provided counseling and psychological support services to be successful and persist. If the institution provides some form of counseling and psychological support for the distance learner that adequately meets the needs of the individual this study suggests they will be more likely to persist. However, if the distance learner has unmet mental and emotional concerns and the environment is perceived by the distance learner as isolating, attrition is possible and the possibility for compounding mental health concerns is present. If the educational environment effectively identifies students with concerns and also offers adequate support services to meet distance learner needs they will be more likely to persist. This study also acknowledges that the presence of adequate support services does not necessarily mean distance learners will avail themselves of those services even if they have the intent to do so. But for those that do, it could be the difference between greater levels of discouragement and a much-needed moment of personal success.

**Policy and Practice Implications**

3 Critical Implications for Policy. 1) Each institution with a distance education department must make a decision regarding mission. Each must decide where they will
place themselves on the sliding scale of services versus cost and make those decisions abundantly clear to prospective students to enable them to make appropriate decisions regarding their educational needs and desired experience balanced with their means to cover the cost of the educational experience. (2) Any institution that aims to provide an education of “equal” quality to its residential instruction must be continually making progress toward meeting non-academic needs of all students. This process will require each institution to continually ask, “What can we reasonably do now?” and continue to set the bar higher as new options, ideas, and opportunities emerge. (3) In an environment of legal uncertainty, liability and licensure ambiguity in the distance education frontier, each institution must determine its own level of acceptable risk. This begins with an honest understanding that all institutions incur a level of liability risk when engaging with students in person and at a distance, but the institution that does not go far enough in providing support services may also open themselves up to the potential for liability. Each institution must make a determination in regard to what they feel is a reasonable level of support required to meet obligations to its student clientele.

3 Critical Implications for Practice. 1) We must commit to keep an open mind as new technologies emerge and deepening our own technological competence in this world of increasingly digitally competent learners. We need only realize that in the span of twenty years we have gone from basic computers in a few homes to the ubiquitous presence of technology in our lives and environments. Few, if any, individuals would have been able to predict the scope of technological advance in the past 20 years, therefore, it stands to reason that we are not presently aware of the opportunities that will be realized as the next 20 years of technological advances unfolds. This is likely to be
increasingly relevant as communication technologies continue deepen their role in our daily lives. 2) We must consider how we teach new practitioners in the counseling and psychology field in ways that are inclusive of emerging possibilities of service delivery through technologically mediated modes. Panelists were almost unanimous in asserting that technology would someday play an ever-increasing role in their practice. Therefore, it is important for college mental health practitioners to keep apprised of emerging technologies, how students are using those technologies, and how we might be able to leverage those technologies to meet needs in a more efficient way. It will be important for both counselor education programs and also college counseling departments to encourage its counseling students and counseling practitioners to engage in honest conversation about technology use in counseling practice. 3) We must commit to continue the conversation around making progress toward less isolating distance learning environments and more robust student services to meet the needs of distance learners. If distance education is to truly establish itself as a comparable educational option for students it must also address environmental factors that lend to a potentially isolating experience. This is partially a pedagogical issue, but is in large part an issue of assessing and addressing the diversity of student needs.

*Model for Distance Learner Counseling & Psychological Support.* This study sought to provide practical solutions for assessing and addressing student needs. The primary goal is to provide practitioners with a multi-faceted approach that begins to address the complexity of the situation while taking steps toward what we might reasonably be able to do now. Certainly, what is suggested here is not a 1-1 expansion of services between the residential environment and the distance learning environment,
however, it is a step in the right direction. The following model for service delivery is the culmination of relevant data from literature and professional perspectives and ideas.

Figure 5 (below) offers a visual representation of how support services might be approached in a safe, effective, and financially reasonable way by integrating and improving service elements that are already established in the residential environment. It should be noted that this model has been developed for the particular circumstances of a large public institution, however, this study contends that pieces of the model may be able to be adapted for other institutional contexts.

Figure 5: Conceptual Model: Distance Learner Counseling & Psychological Support
**Self-Help Component.** This model begins with an initial contact with a distance learner who looking for some form of mental and emotional support in order to increase their ability to proceed in the academic experience at a distance. This model proposes an established and effectively advertised three-part approach to providing this distance learner with the support they need. The first part to the approach is a comprehensive self-help service. Acknowledging that online materials can take considerable resources to develop, update and maintain, it is suggested by this study that institutions with like-goals should explore the use of a consortium model to develop materials for students to explore their concerns and develop solutions on their own. These materials are two-fold; they can be either asynchronous psycho-educational modules where students can proceed through a series of video-based experiences, a store of static informational content in an easy to access format, or a combination of both. It should also be noted that this information should provide distance learners with easy to identify guidance on when to seek out emergency resources such as their local 911 services, local crisis hotline numbers, or even national hotline numbers that might be able to help a distance learner address a more specific concern in the moment.

**Peer Support component.** Although probably not sufficient for supporting some distance learners if relied on alone, the power of a peer support system for distance learners should not be overlooked. The VP of Student Affairs suggested that the distance learner population lags behind in regard to student experience offerings. One example he gave was that distance learners, who have their own division within the university, do not have student government representation. Many students in the residential environment find connections and support in a more general way by being involved in groups that
encourage peer interaction. Although offering these kinds of opportunities might not appeal to all distance learners, there are others who might feel less isolated by having these kinds of opportunities. Outside the scope of this study, but important nonetheless, is the potential that could be realized by providing more robust peer-to-peer forums for general support. Not necessarily peer counseling, per se, but student led support groups to encourage socialization and integration into the educational community.

Skilled-Help Component. The area of “skilled help” is where this study seeks to make the most significant contribution in terms of recommendations for practice. The most significant objections to expanding counseling and psychological services to distance learners came from both practical and ethical concerns. College mental health practitioners made it clear that student safety was the number one priority and ensuring safety while providing services at a distance is undeniably problematic. Beyond safety, many panelists argued that effective communication and relationship development for encouraging productive change for an individual is best-accomplished in-person. Although technology has greatly expanded its communication potential in the past five years, many feel it is still not able to convey all of the nuances that inform the therapeutic relationship. Aside from interpersonal and technological concerns there was also sentiment that expanding services would put an undue burden on already taxed staff time. Additionally, there was hesitancy to lead the way in providing a student service that opens individual professionals and the institution itself up to legal uncertainties and the potential for litigation if something did not go quite right. With the myriad of reasons not to explore expanding counseling and psychological services to distance learners, there is
certainly an undercurrent of student-centered philosophy that desires to meet the needs of all students regardless of status (residential, distance). Therefore, the subsequent recommendations of this study diverge from the goal of comparable services to focus on comparable support. In other words, similar to the sentiment of the Vice President of Student affairs, what are we currently doing for residential instruction students that we can reasonably adapt for the distance learner. Certainly, as previously discussed, providing asynchronous and static self-help resources and exploring peer engagement/support communities are just a few ways we might begin this movement toward comparable support.

The cornerstone of this study’s recommendations for practice is the development of a “student support referral services”, or an all-encompassing mechanism to begin to address the full-range of non-academic needs encountered by the distance learner. In figure 4 on page 124 the student support referral services would serve in addition to an academic advisor and would be responsible for meeting any and all non-academic needs of distance learners to the best of their capability. Each distance-learning course would have student support referral services assigned to the course to be the primary contact for distance learners during business hours. This service would not necessarily be staffed with a licensed counselor who could provide any type of ongoing counseling service or support, but would serve as a connecting hub. The student support referral service staff members could be trained to consult with counseling and psychological services. They could be connected to other campus resources such as the student conduct office, or an office that supports women students, international students, or students with a disability.
They could be provided the resources to explore and recommend local counseling service options for students. This option for student support could also provide quick access to crisis hotline numbers. They would certainly have knowledge of self-help information and could direct students to resources that might meet their needs and answer their questions. Overall, the support services could provide a direct connection via phone, chat, videochat with an actual person at the university, thus making the educational experience that much more personal. Obviously this is not a 1-1 equivalent to the services that are provided to students on campus, but it could be a bridge to meet their needs and in a sense provide a 1-1 equivalent in support.

**Asynchronous Self-help Learning Modules.** The distance learner isn’t necessarily seeking support during the regular business hours of an institution. Indeed, the residential instruction student often finds himself or herself seeking some form of counseling support services after hours. Psycho-educational self-help options that are well advertised and accessible are certainly one way to provide some form of support round the clock. The university already has an established relationship with the ProtoCall crisis line service. This study recommends this continue to be expanded as a means to provide multiple pathways for distance learners and residential instructions students alike to find support when they need it.

**Technology-Aided “Check-in” with Established Clients.** Finally, as a means of staying on the cutting edge without opening up practitioners and the institution to undue liability concerns, this study recommends that technology aided informal counseling interactions could be implemented to “check-in” with students who currently utilize
counseling services. These students would be those who have pre-existing therapeutic relationships with counselors at counseling and psychological services and are deemed by their therapist as significantly low-risk. These interactions would not necessarily provide a formal counseling interaction, but rather keep the relationship going in situations like a break between semesters. Certainly, not many distance learners would fall into this category, if any. However, if we are to take the long view approach and believe, as many of the practitioners in this study do, that technology will continue to make inroads into counseling practice, then providing opportunities for staff to familiarize themselves with technology in their counseling practice may be an important first step.

**Discussion of Transferability, Limitations and Proposed Future Research**

*Transferability of Findings*. This study intentionally focused on practitioner and decision-maker perspectives as it is these individuals that have the most insight on and influence over the possibility for expanding counseling and psychological services to distance learners. This study utilized a Delphi design that inherently limits the sample size. Despite the small sample size, this study generated what is believed to be a fairly comprehensive discussion of practitioner viewpoints on the benefits and concerns associated with counseling and psychological service provision to distance learners. Certainly it is possible that college mental health practitioners at different institutions might have different viewpoints, but with strong parallels between the findings of this study and reviewed literature, it suggests there is a potential for a high degree of transferability and usefulness to other higher education contexts with a distance learning division.
This study was conducted at a large public research-intensive university on the east coast. This particular institution has a large and growing distance learning division and a student affairs department of counseling and psychological services. Therefore, the findings of this study are most likely to be transferable to similarly sized institutions with both a distance learning division and counseling and psychological services for residential instruction students. However, I contend that there are many findings in this study that would hold true regardless of institutional type and makeup. For example, it is likely that similar institutions would also face challenges associated with mitigating the risk inherent in a distance delivery of counseling and psychological services. This might be even more challenging for smaller institutions as they often have fewer financial and staff resources to draw upon. The issue of licensure of psychologists across state lines and the blurred legality of practicing across state lines via electronic means is a national concern that would affect any institution with ambitions in this direction. And certainly, the current state of technology and its questionable ability to adequately replicate the face-to-face environment is a universal shortcoming. Finally, the cost of building and maintaining the infrastructure necessary for the delivery of counseling and psychological services on a large scale is a concern for large institutions and would certainly be so for a smaller institution. However, it is important to remember that although many of the concerns illuminated in this study are highly transferable to various educational contexts, the potential for increasing access to services, quality of life of the student, and overall academic success, make this a worthy conversation to begin and a worthy conversation to continue into the future.
Limitations. Although this study argues there is strong reason to conclude there is counseling needs among the distance learner population, it is recommended that future research consider putting some quantitative numbers to distance learner concerns. There is a great wealth of data, including the center for Collegiate Mental Health reports, which give us insight into the mental health needs of the college student population. It is recommended that studies like these be expanded in some way to include the distance learner population.

Proposed Future Research. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the research took a broad look at the issue of service expansion to distance learners. It should be noted that due to the exploratory and preliminary nature of this study, each of the concerns illuminated as a part of this study could be used as a starting point for further research. For example, case law moves at a much slower pace than technological advancement but it is continually evolving. Therefore, future research might delve even deeper into the issue of licensure, legality, and liability. Another aspect that would need to be explored further is funding models for distance learner student services. This study discussed funding based on a standard student fee for service as one model. Yet another study could be undertaken to further explore emerging communication technologies and their potential role in student support services. The emergence of student services for distance learners is certainly just beginning. For institutions with a distance-learning division that wish to focus on high quality over high quantity educational options, student services will certainly be a necessary component to a comprehensive and complete educational experience.
References


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Appendix A: Delphi Protocol – Round 1

Round 1 – Cover page: Informed Consent Disclosure

Counseling Learners in Distance Education

Title of Project: Toward a Model for Personal Counseling Services in Distance Education

Erik Wessel, Principle Investigator
400 Rackley Building

Dr. Robert Hendrickson, Advisor and Dissertation Chair
* Required

Informed Consent Disclosure

Purpose:
This study seeks to explore perceptions of online-learner needs, perceived barriers relating to the delivery of services to meet these needs, and strategies most likely to be adopted to serve online learners.

Procedure:
This phase of the study utilizes an iterative process consisting of three data-gathering rounds. Round 1 consists of four open-ended qualitative questions. Each question asks you to identify your perspective and explain your response in as much detail as possible.

Duration:
Each survey (3 total - one every 2 weeks) will take approximately 30-40 minutes to complete.

Confidentiality Statement:
Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties. Only the primary investigator will have access to identifying information connected to individual responses. No identifying information will be used in the reporting of data.

Voluntary Participation:
Your decision to provide responses for this research study is completely voluntary. You may stop at any time.

Research Protections: Disclosures:
IRB Protocol ID: 39979 (exempt status study).
This study is being conducted by a Penn State Researcher (Doctoral Student). This study is being conducted strictly for research purposes.

Questions?:
Please contact Erik Wessel at (717) 421-6149 or via email at ewessel@gmail.com

I agree to participate in this study. By clicking "yes" you have acknowledged you understand that this survey is voluntary and your consent to participate is implied by submission of your responses. *

☑ YES
☐ NO

Continue »

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Appendix A: Continued

Round 1 – Participant Identification Disclosure

Counseling Learners in Distance Education

* Required

Survey Identification
Identifying data will only be accessible to the primary investigator and will only be used in analysis. Individual responses will not include identifying information in the reporting of data.

First name *

Last name *

Working Title *

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Appendix A: Continued

Delphi Round 1 – Item 1

Counseling Learners in Distance Education

* Required

Question (1 of 4)

Please identify and describe your viewpoint on the most critical non-academic concerns of online-learners?

Please identify and explain in as much detail as possible:

[Blank space for answer]

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Appendix A: Continued

Delphi Round 1 – Item 2

Counseling Learners in Distance Education

* Required

Question (2 of 4)

Please describe the differences in counseling services provided for online learners and those students in an on-campus environment? *

Please identify and explain in as much detail as possible:

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Appendix A: Continued

Delphi Round 1 – Item 3

Counseling Learners in Distance Education

* Required

Question (3 of 4)

What do you view as the potential benefits associated with providing personal counseling services to online-learners? *
Please identify and explain in as much detail as possible:

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Appendix A: Continued

Delphi Round 1 – Item 4

Counseling Learners in Distance Education

* Required

Question (4 of 4)

Please identify and describe your perspective on the most significant challenges associated with providing counseling services to online-learners? *
Please identify and explain in as much detail as possible

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Appendix A: Continued

Delphi Round 1 – Item 5 (open response)
Appendix A: Continued

Delphi Round 1 – Thank You/Submit

Counseling Learners in Distance Education

Thank you
Thanks for your interest in this study. Once you click submit (ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE) your responses will be recorded. Your responses are greatly appreciated!

Data will be aggregated and reported back to participants prior to round 2 of this DELPHI study. Round 2 (of 3 total) will be sent to you in approximately two weeks.

The primary investigator (Erik Wessel) can be contacted via email at eswessel@gmail.com

Submit
Questions?: eswessel@gmail.com

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Appendix B: Delphi Protocol – Round 2

Delphi Round 2 – Cover Page/Confidentiality Reminder & Data Feedback Statement

Counseling Learners in Distance Education (2)

Title of Project: Toward a Model for Personal Counseling Services in Distance Education

Erik Wesol, Principle Investigator
400 Rackley Building

Dr. Robert Hendrickson, Advisor and Dissertation Chair

Confidentiality Reminder:

Although identifying information will be known to the primary investigator, no identifying information will be made available to anyone other than the primary investigator or reported out in either the final report or the participant feedback data.

Data Feedback For Participants

Below you will find a variety of comments and perspectives pulled from the data and reported back to you. Every attempt has been made to eliminate any identifying information in the feedback data.

** Please read the participant feedback data carefully and completely prior to responding to the subsequent questions **

Additionally, similar to the round 1 survey, the second page includes survey identification information as well as a preliminary question regarding your preferred counseling theoretical orientation.

Questions will relate directly to each of the three major sections outlined below.

** Clarification of Terms: Personal Counseling Services is used broadly in this study to refer to all services routinely provided to on-campus students for the purposes of effectively assessing and alleviating mental and emotional health issues. This includes, but is not limited to; psychological assessment, crisis intervention, resource referral, learning accommodation support, and counselor-client therapy, etc. However, this study does NOT focus on career assessment and counseling.**
Appendix B: Continued

Delphi Round 2 – Data Feedback Continued

Perceptions of online learning, online learner needs, and the provision of personal counseling services to online learners.

One respondent pointed out six concerns for online students: need to belong, sense of identity, connection to institution, personal mental health concerns, interpersonal relationships, and developmentally appropriate milestones. Another respondent indicated that the needs of the online learner are similar to the on-campus learner despite the wider range of student diversity in online education.

One respondent commented “the most critical non-academic [concern] of online-learners include[s] access to resources available to on-campus students. These resources include personal counseling...”

One respondent identified “addressing and treating any personal and/or mental health concern that might be impacting learning and academic achievement” as a significantly pressing non-academic concern for online learners.

One respondent commented that “universities viewed online learning as a way to make money but didn’t sufficiently think through the personal needs [of students].”

One respondent commented “…I would expect that online learners may actually have higher needs for ongoing treatment and/or support services – and this would only reinforce my notion that providing assessment and referral services is probably critical.”

One respondent indicated he/she believes that “online counseling will most likely be an option for the future.”
Appendix B: Continued

Delphi Round 2 – Data Feedback Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of CHALLENGES associated with delivery of personal counseling services to online learners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One respondent indicated counseling at a distance might be less appropriate for “interpersonal, personnel, grief, and eating disorder” concerns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>One respondent implied that the effectiveness of counseling students at a distance might be dependent on the counselor’s theoretical orientation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>One respondent indicated that he/she is “skeptical of the ‘personal’ nature of personal counseling offered to online learners.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over half of respondents (5) indicated client safety and effectively managing crisis was one of the most significant challenges. Others mentioned “lacking knowledge of local resources” for the student as a challenging factor.</td>
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<td>One respondent noted that it is “hard to imagine how...assessments can be conducted without live person-to-person interaction.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>One respondent indicated a belief that counseling at a distance has the potential for a “weaker working alliance”...yet went on to say she is unsure if “these challenges are supported by the evidence.” Another respondent also identified “the need for a therapeutic relationship” as a “significant challenge” for delivery of personal counseling services at a distance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One respondent noted “developing infrastructure for delivery” is “tricky...without reducing the service to something second best.” In addition, this respondent also expressed concern over the financial expense associated with “finding and connecting students to services in their locale.” Others also mentioned the complicated nature of “finding local referrals” for online students. One noted that “it is already complicated to maintain an accurate and up-to-date list of such local resources around just one counseling center...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One respondent described the use of electronic mediums in societal communication, in general, as “less than complete forms of communication.” And although “it would be possible to provide several different mediums for weekly contact between a client and counselor...each technology limits the amount of information being conveyed.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One respondent expressed concern that “having minimal services offered online...may keep a student from seeking out assistance...through community services which would ultimately serve them better.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One respondent described higher education institutions as “hesitant” to accept the liability associated with ongoing online or telephone-based counseling.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Continued

Delphi Round 2 – Data Feedback Continued

** Perception of BENEFITS associated with delivery of personal counseling services to online learners

In regard to student client access to services, one respondent noted, “It is important for online students to have access to counseling,” but did not elaborate how to achieve access.

One respondent indicated that there might be some benefit “in some cases” and another identified “less chronic or severe” issues as most appropriate to be treated at a distance. Anxiety and mild-moderate depressive symptoms were given as examples.

One respondent indicated that he/she “suspects [counseling at a distance] can be done safely and effectively by some counselors with many student clients.”

One respondent indicated, “Most students today would be comfortable with the video experience of counseling.”

One respondent mentioned, “If [a counselor] has established a therapeutic relationship” then the use of online methods to “check-in with a stable client…may be appropriate.”

One respondent indicated that providing services to online students may “improve the quality of life” for the individual, “increase ability to engage in academic life,” “increase the likelihood of academic success for the student” and “likely increase retention rates of online learners”

One respondent indicated that the benefits of counseling provided to online learners would produce the same results as counseling for on-campus students. He/she says “Either way, I view most of the benefits as being the same – increased insight, an objective listener, unconditional positive regards, supportive listening, psychoeducation, and all of the other benefits associated with psychotherapy.”

Continue »
Appendix B: Continued

Delphi Round 2 – Survey Identification

Counseling Learners in Distance Education (2)

* Required

Survey Identification
Identifying data will only be accessible to the primary investigator and will only be used in analysis. Individual responses will not include identifying information in the reporting of data.

First Name *

Last Name *

Please IDENTIFY & DESCRIBE your counseling theoretical orientation and how you approach counseling from your preferred style. *
(i.e. your preferred approach to counseling practice - cognitive behavioral, person-centered, psychodynamic, interparasocial, eclectic, etc.)

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Appendix B: Continued

Delphi Round 2 – Practitioner Perception of Needs

Perceptions of online learning, online learner needs, and the provision of personal counseling services to online learners.

One respondent pointed out six concerns for online students: need to belong, sense of identity, connection to institution, personal mental health concerns, interpersonal relationships, and developmentally appropriate milestones. Another respondent indicated that the needs of the online learner are similar to the on-campus learner despite the wider range of student diversity in online education.

One respondent commented “the most critical non-academic [concern] of online-learners include[s] access to resources available to on-campus students. These resources include personal counseling...”

One respondent identified “addressing and treating any personal and/or mental health concern that might be impacting learning and academic achievement” as a significantly pressing non-academic concern for online learners.

One respondent commented that “universities viewed online learning as a way to make money but didn’t sufficiently think through the personal needs [of students].”

One respondent commented “…I would expect that online learners may actually have higher needs for ongoing treatment and/or support services – and this would only reinforce my notion that providing assessment and referral services is probably critical.”

One respondent indicated he/she believes that “online counseling will most likely be an option for the future.”

(1) Please CHOOSE two statements from above you agree with most completely and DESCRIBE why you feel they are important. *

(2) If you have concerns about or disagree with a statement included above, identify the statement and share your perspective. *

If none, please indicate “Agree with all”
Appendix B: Continued

Delphi Round 2 – Practitioner Perception of Challenges

Perception of CHALLENGES associated with delivery of personal counseling services to online learners

One respondent indicated counseling at a distance might be less appropriate for “interpersonal, personality, grief, and eating disorder” concerns.

One respondent implied that the effectiveness of counseling students at a distance might be dependent on the counselor’s theoretical orientation.

One respondent indicated that he/she is “skeptical of the ‘personal’ nature of personal counseling offered to online learners.”

Over half of respondents (5) indicated client safety and effectively managing crisis was one of the most significant challenges. Others mentioned “lacking knowledge of local resources” for the student as a challenging factor.

One respondent noted that it is “hard to imagine how...assessments can be conducted without live person-to-person interaction.”

One respondent indicated a belief that counseling at a distance has the potential for a “weaker working alliance”... yet went on to say she is unsure if these challenges are supported by the evidence.” Another respondent also identifies “the need for a therapeutic relationship” as a “significant challenge” for delivery of personal counseling services at a distance.

One respondent noted “developing infrastructure for delivery” is “tricky...without reducing the service to something second best.” In addition, this respondent also expressed concern over the financial expense associated with finding and connecting students to services in their locale.” Others also mentioned the complicated nature of “finding local referrals” for online students. One noted that “it is already complicated to maintain an accurate and up-to-date list of such local resources around just one counseling center...”

One respondent described the use of electronic mediums in societal communication, in general, as “less than complete forms of communication.” And although “it would be possible to provide several different mediums for weekly contact between a client and counselor...each technology limits the amount of information being conveyed.”

One respondent expressed concern that “having minimal services offered online...may keep a student from seeking out assistance...through community services which would ultimately serve them better.”

One respondent described higher education institutions as “[hesitant] to accept the liability associated with ongoing online or telephone-based counseling.”

(3) Please CHOOSE the THREE statements you feel are most important and SHARE your perspective on your selections.

(4) If there is a statement (or statements) above that mentions a “challenge” you disagree with or have a different opinion on, please identify that statement(s) and provide your perspective.

If none, please indicate “Agree with all.”
Appendix B: Continued

Delphi Round 2 – Practitioner Perception of Benefits

Perception of BENEFITS associated with delivery of personal counseling services to online learners

** No two respondents identified the same benefits.

In regard to student client access to services, one respondent noted, “It is important for online students to have access to counseling,” but did not elaborate how to achieve access.

One respondent indicated that there might be some benefit “in some cases” and another identified “less chronic or severe” issues as most appropriate to be treated at a distance. Anxiety and mild-moderate depressive symptoms were given as examples.

One respondent indicated that he/she “suspects [counseling at a distance] can be done safely and effectively by some counselors with many student clients.”

One respondent indicated, “Most students today would be comfortable with the video experience of counseling.”

One respondent mentioned, “if a counselor has established a therapeutic relationship” then the use of online methods to “check-in with a stable client…may be appropriate.”

One respondent indicated that providing services to online students may improve the quality of life for the individual, “increase ability to engage in academic life,” “increase the likelihood of academic success for the student” and “likely increase retention rates of online learners.”

One respondent indicated that the benefits of counseling provided to online learners would produce the same results as counseling for on-campus students. He/she says “Either way, I view most of the benefits as being the same – increased insight, an objective listener, unconditional positive regards, supportive listening, psychoeducation, and all of the other benefits associated with psychotherapy.”

(5) Please CHOOSE the THREE statements you feel are most important and SHARE your perspective on your selections.

(6) If there is a statement (or statements) above that mentions a “benefit” you disagree with or have a different opinion on, please identify that statement(s) and provide your perspective.

If none, please indicate “Agree with all”
Appendix B: Continued

Delphi Round 2 – Open Response, Thank You & Submission

Open Response

Please use this section to provide any thoughts and/or comments not specifically applicable to the previous four questions.

Thank you

Thanks for continuing to share your professional perspective and insight. Your responses are extremely valuable to this study.

Similar to round 1, data will be aggregated and reported back to participants prior to round 3. Round 3 (of 3 total) will be sent to you in approximately two weeks.

The primary investigator can be contacted via email at eswessel@gmail.com

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Appendix C: Delphi Protocol – Round 3

Delphi Round 3 – Cover Page

Counseling Learners in Distance Education (3)

Title of Project: Toward a Model for Personal Counseling Services in Distance Education

Erik Wessel, Principle Investigator
400 Hackley Building

Dr. Robert Hendrickson, Advisor and Dissertation Chair

Delphi Survey - Round 3

This is the third and final round of the Delphi Web-Survey. Thank you for your participation.

** Please Note:
Due to the open-ended nature of this qualitative study, it is possible you may find questions contained in this round to be somewhat redundant given the answers you provided in a previous round. The iterative nature of this study (i.e. building upon previous rounds) naturally requires a level of redundancy to gain the most complete picture possible. Please share your perspective, expertise and insight regarding the following items.

Continue »
Appendix C: Continued

Delphi Round 3 – Survey Identification

**Counseling Learners in Distance Education (3)**

* Required

**Survey Identification**
Identifying data will only be accessible to the primary investigator and will only be used in analysis. Individual responses will not include identifying information in the reporting of the data.

**First Name** *

**Last Name** *

**From your experience, how would you define "personal counseling services" in the context of the university community?** *

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Appendix C: Continued

Delphi Round 3 – Survey Identification

Counseling Learners in Distance Education (3)

* Required

Survey Identification
Identifying data will only be accessible to the primary investigator and will only be used in analysis. Individual responses will not include identifying information in the reporting of the data.

First Name *

Last Name *

From your experience, how would you define "personal counseling services" in the context of the university community? *

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Appendix C: Continued

Delphi Round 3 – Institutional Responsibility

Questions (1 & 2)

(1) Please share your perspective on the level of responsibility a higher education institution should assume in regard to the provision of personal counseling services to students learning at a distance?

(2) In what way (if at all) would your answer to the previous question change depending on the type, size, demographics of a higher education institution?
Appendix C: Continued

Delphi Round 3 – Viewpoint on Distance Delivery of Counseling

Over half of respondents indicated they "most completely agree" with the belief that "online counseling will most likely be an option for the future." One individual noted "increased use of technology by all segments of society... make(s) it all but inevitable that this will be an option sought by potential clients, even if it is not embraced by counseling professionals."

Understanding that there are naturally differing levels of comfort with counseling individuals at a distance,... if you were to provide personal counseling services at learners at a distance (i.e. online learners not within reasonable traveling distance to University Park)....

(3) What conditions (if any) would need to be met for you to consider providing personal counseling services to students at a distance? *

(4) What issues (if any) would you feel comfortable addressing at a distance? *

(5) What issues would you only consider addressing through local referral? *

(6) If a local referral option was not available (i.e. in the case of a student in a rural/remote area) what other options would you consider for that student? *
Appendix C: Continued

Delphi Round 3 – Strategies for Service Delivery

Question (7)

Based on your responses from the previous page, what strategies and/or creative solutions do you have for providing comparable personal counseling services to learners at a distance? *

* "comparable" (not necessarily identical) to services provided to students local to university park

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Appendix C: Continued

Delphi Round 3 – Open Response, Thank You & Submit

Open Response

Please use this section to provide any thoughts and/or comments not specifically applicable to the previous questions.

Thank You!

Thank you for sharing your perspective and expertise. I look forward to sharing my findings with you at the conclusion of my study.

** Phase 3 Interviews

This study is designed to be implemented in multiple phases. The Delphi web-survey was phase 2 and will be followed by targeted semi-structured interviews (phase 3). The purpose of these interviews will serve to confirm and expand findings from the web-surveys. It is not my intent to interview all participants, but rather a few targeted (1 hour) interviews will be requested on a voluntary basis.

Click SUBMIT below to record your responses

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Appendix D: IRB Approval

Date: May 08, 2012
From: The Office for Research Protections - FWAR: FWA00001534
      Stephanie L. Krout, Compliance Coordinator
To: Erik S. Wessel
Re: Determination of Exemption

IRB Protocol ID: 39979
Follow-up Date: May 7, 2017
Title of Protocol: Toward a model for personal counseling services in distance education:
                  Exploring college mental health practitioner’s perceptions of counseling
                  methods for students engaged in distance education at a large-public research
                  university.

The Office for Research Protections (ORP) has received and reviewed the above referenced eSubmission
application. It has been determined that your research is exempt from IRB initial and ongoing review, as
currently described in the application. You may begin your research.

COMMENTS: (i) Participants are to be informed of the following during the recruitment process: the
investigator is a Penn State researcher, and the study is being conducted for research purposes. (ii)
Participants are to be informed of the following basic ethical principles of human participant research
during the consent process: the investigator is a Penn State researcher, the study is being conducted for
research purposes, a description of the procedures will be provided as to what the participant will do as
part of the study, participation is voluntary, participants may end their participation at any time,
participants may choose to not answer specific questions.

The category within the federal regulations under which your research is exempt is:
45 CFR 46.101(b)(2): Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude,
achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i)
information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or
through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses
outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be
damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Given that the IRB is not involved in the initial and ongoing review of this research, it is the
investigator’s responsibility to review IRB Policy III "Exempt Review Process and Determination"
which outlines:
• What it means to be exempt and how determinations are made
• What changes to the research protocol are and are not required to be reported to the ORP
• Ongoing actions post-exemption determination including addressing problems and complaints,
  reporting closed research to the ORP and research audits
Appendix E: Recruitment Communication

Study Title: Toward a model for personal counseling services in distance education: Exploring college mental health practitioner’s perceptions of counseling methods for students engaged in distance education at a large public research university.

Purpose: This study seeks to explore the benefits and challenges associated with providing personal counseling services from the perspective of the college mental health practitioner.

Research Questions: Guiding questions focus on perceptions of benefits or challenges associated with the provision of counseling services and exploring potential strategies for the provision of counseling services.

Research Design: This study employs an iterative DELPHI survey design. Participants will receive an initial (round 1 of 3) four question qualitative survey via emailed link. This secure form will include an informed consent cover page followed by four open-ended questions. Participants will be asked to take the time to provide detailed responses to each question. Response data will then be aggregated and coded for themes by the primary investigator. Approximately 2 weeks after round 1 participants will receive the round 2 web-survey which will be developed from response data from round 1. Feedback data on the round 1 responses will be provided to each participant on the cover page of the round 2 web-survey. The final (round 3) survey will include feedback data from rounds 1 and 2.

The DELPHI protocol is designed to maximize quality data potential while minimizing the time requirement for participants. Each survey will be designed to take approximately 30-40 minutes to complete. The total time commitment for the DELPHI phase of the study should be approximately 1½ - 2 hours spread over a month’s time.

Identifying information will be collected from participants for the purposes of follow-up. No identifying information will be reported in the feedback to participants or in the study itself. The primary investigator will be conducting a limited number of follow-up interviews at the conclusion of the DELPHI phase for the purposes of confirmation and expansion of data. Participants may receive a request to participate in a voluntary follow-up interview.

This study has been granted exempt IRB status (IRB Protocol ID # 39979). As part of the informed consent for this study the following disclosures are made:
- The primary investigator is a Penn State Researcher in the dissertation phase of his doctoral work.
- This study is being conducted for research purposes.
- The procedures to be employed in this study have been provided.
- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and participants may end their participation at any time.
- Although the study relies on comprehensive answers from all participants in the DELPHI phase, participants may elect to not answer specific questions in the web-survey by simply responding “no answer”.

The emailed web-survey (round 1 of 3) will include an electronic cover page for informed consent and agreement to participate in the study. Providing your name and email below acknowledges your agreement to receive the web-survey via email. Thanks in advance for your interest!

Full Name (Printed) __________________________________________ Email __________________________________________

Please Return to:
Primary Investigator: Erik Wessel -- 400 Rackley Building, Penn State University
Appendix F: Delphi Phase – Round 1 Email to Participants

Hello [name],

I want to thank you for your willingness to participate in my dissertation work. I hope you find it interesting and insightful. Overall, my goal is to provide useful knowledge for the department and find better ways to support the students we serve.

This study will consist of three rounds. All rounds will be administered via online web-survey (linked below). Each round will consist of 4-6 open-ended qualitative questions and should take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. Should you have a question about a particular item on the survey please feel free to contact me at eswessel@gmail.com.

Although the survey will remain open, I hope to begin analyzing the data from the first round beginning on Tuesday, June 12th (one week from today). Data from the first round will be coded for themes and initial themes will be reported back to all participants (with no identifying information) at the beginning of the round two survey. Subsequent rounds will follow in a similar manner.

The timing of subsequent rounds is subject to change. However, I anticipate the round 2 survey to be sent out around the 19th of June and round 3 around the 3rd of July.

Below is the link to the round 1 survey. Thank you again for providing your expert perspective and opinion.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dDFydkhKR19sM2dEeVZEcHlpXzdGYIE6MQ

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Erik Wessel
Vita

Erik Scott Wessel

425 Kemmerer Road, State College, PA 16801
(717) 421 - 6149 eswessel@gmail.com

EDUCATION


Bachelor of Arts in Student Ministries, Youth Ministries & Outdoor Education: Trinity International University (2004)

PRESENTATIONS


Wessel, E.S.; Rameker, M.; Hurst, J. (2010). Designing effective learning experiences in the residential university environment. ACPA Residential Curriculum Institute – Invited Presentation


PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Graduate Assistant, Penn State Academic Leadership Academy (August 2011-May 2013)

Doctoral Intern & Case Manager, Penn State Office of Student Conduct (September 2012-July 2013)

Administrative Coordinator for Research & Assessment, Penn State Office of Residence Life (August 2008-July 2011)

Residence Life Coordinator, Penn State Office of Residence Life (August 2007-August 2008)

Residence Hall Director/Coordinator for Leadership Programs, Grove City College (August 2004-2007)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Department of Educational Policy Studies, College of Education, Penn State University

Legal Issues in Student Affairs, CSA 597B: 2012 (Co-Instructor)

Higher Education Graduate Program, Geneva College

Foundations of Counseling and Advising for Higher Education Professionals, Winter/Spring 2013; Summer/Fall 2013