

**A Case Study of Faculty Perceptions of Collaborative Sessions for Student Practicum
Experiences in a Fully Online Education Counseling Program**

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Abstract

This qualitative single-case study is an examination of how faculty interpret and facilitate synchronous preclinical practicum experiences in a fully online educational counseling program. Data from 10 faculty questionnaires, five faculty interviews, and a student focus group were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Faculty described the sessions as relationally rich and professionally meaningful but cognitively and emotionally demanding. They viewed them as spaces for guided practice, reflection, ethical reasoning, and professional identity development. Because these sessions are without shared guidelines and university-mandated expectations, faculty and students experienced ambiguity and variability across sections. Students initially questioned the sessions' purpose but valued them more as they progressed through the program and fieldwork. Participants recommended clear learning objectives, shared exemplars, targeted online-facilitation training, workload recognition, and alignment with counseling competencies. Findings support intentional program structures that preserve faculty autonomy while improving consistency, sustainability, and developmental value.

Keywords: online counselor education, practicum, synchronous learning, faculty perceptions, collaborative sessions, supervision-adjacent learning

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A private nonprofit, primarily online university based in California University's School Counseling program requires weekly faculty-facilitated online collaborative sessions that count toward students' 100 practicum hours. Faculty have broad discretion over session content and activities, but little is known about how they interpret this responsibility. Without shared guidance, practices and student experiences may vary across sections. This qualitative case study was designed to allow researchers to explore how faculty plan, facilitate, and evaluate the sessions, with attention to student development, faculty support, and program consistency. The study addressed a central program-design question: how can nonprescriptive synchronous sessions remain responsive to students while providing coherent, practicum-aligned learning? Faculty perspectives were examined alongside student accounts to identify the sessions' perceived value, implementation challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

Literature Review

Online professional programs must recreate the relationship-rich learning traditionally associated with in-person professional preparation. This responsibility is especially important in counselor education, where readiness depends on supervised practice, interpersonal attunement, reflective judgment, and ethical decision-making (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2025). The literature relevant to online counselor preparation centers on three interconnected priorities: establishing meaningful presence and engagement, developing professional competence through collaborative practice and supervision, and creating sustainable program structures that balance instructional consistency with faculty autonomy.

Effective online instruction requires deliberate attention to engagement, connection, and instructor presence. Attendance during a live session does not necessarily indicate meaningful participation, particularly when limited nonverbal cues weaken interaction between instructors and students (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). This concern is especially consequential in counselor preparation because communication and relational engagement are not merely instructional conditions; they are also essential professional competencies. Synchronous video instruction can help restore the immediacy and interaction that may be difficult to achieve through asynchronous coursework alone. Faculty may use cameras, breakout rooms, polls, collaborative whiteboards, structured discussions, and student-led activities to encourage participation (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Salmon, 2013). However, technological disruptions, uneven student motivation, privacy concerns, and the need to manage multiple communication channels can create substantial cognitive demands for both instructors and students (Rapanta et al., 2020). Consequently, the effectiveness of synchronous learning depends less on the technology itself than on the intentional design of the activities conducted through it.

Purposefully designed synchronous sessions are important because counselor preparation relies heavily on experiential and collaborative learning. Students develop

empathy, active listening, boundary-setting, ethical reasoning, and case conceptualization by practicing these competencies (Bledsoe et al., 2021; Wilder et al., 2022). Although these experiences are the cornerstones of practicum and fieldwork, online coursework can provide structured opportunities for students to rehearse professional behaviors before applying them in school settings. For example, experiential groups and role-playing activities are well suited to this purpose. Experiential learning allows trainees to practice counseling skills, examine uncertainty, and develop self-awareness through participation and reflection (Kolb, 1984; Murphy & Schofield, 2024). Role-plays can provide a psychologically safer setting in which students practice difficult interactions, while group activities expose them to issues involving power, boundaries, conflict, and ambiguity. These experiences may foster trust, validation, and professional growth, but their effectiveness depends on skilled facilitation. Poorly managed groups may instead produce shame, discomfort, or heightened vulnerability among participants (Anderson & Price, 2001; Smith & Burr, 2022). Online experiential learning must balance appropriate developmental challenge with clear expectations, supportive facilitation, and psychological safety.

Supervision provides another essential relational context for counselor development. It supports professional competence, ethical judgment, reflective practice, professional socialization, and the gatekeeping responsibilities of counselor preparation programs (Okech & Geroski, 2015; Wilder et al., 2022). Professional standards emphasize the importance of trained and effective supervision because the quality of counselor preparation directly affects client welfare (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; ASCA, 2024). High-quality supervision can strengthen trainees' self-efficacy and professional growth (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Tang, 2020). Nevertheless, the limited availability and inconsistent quality of site-based supervision may constrain student development (Bledsoe et al., 2021; Brott et al., 2017). Program-managed online collaborative sessions may help address some of this inconsistency by giving all students access to common opportunities for guided practice, feedback, and reflection. Such sessions should be understood as supervision-adjacent supports instead of replacements for formal supervision.

The efficacy of synchronous instruction in counselor development depends on how faculty structure the learning experience. Synchronous engagement may range from live lectures and office hours to interactive discussions, simulations, or collaborative problem-solving. Therefore, its effectiveness is determined more by instructional design than by the modality (Belt & Lowenthal, 2023). Faculty value video communication for its capacity to strengthen community and make student participation more observable, although large class sizes and technological barriers may reduce these benefits (Lowenthal et al., 2021). For practicum-oriented learning, synchronous sessions are most valuable when active learning replaces extended lecture and students are required to demonstrate communication, responsiveness, ethical reasoning, and reflective judgment (Watson et al., 2023).

Several complementary frameworks can guide the design of online, practicum-oriented learning, including the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, competency-based education (CBE), entrustable professional activities (EPAs), and simulation-based mastery learning with

deliberate practice (Hennus et al., 2025; Lewis et al., 2022; McGaghie et al., 2025; Petit et al., 2023). The CoI framework emphasizes the interaction of social, cognitive, and teaching presence. Within remote supervision and work-integrated learning, structured communication, reflection, and feedback can strengthen student engagement and meaning-making (Bowen, 2020; Petit et al., 2023). Collaborative sessions can operationalize these principles through structured pre-briefing, guided practice, and facilitated debriefing.

CBE and EPAs extend this foundation by clarifying the competencies students must demonstrate rather than treating participation or time spent in class as evidence of mastery. In counselor preparation, these approaches could identify observable professional tasks, such as facilitating a small group, conducting an intake role-play, responding to an ethical dilemma, or presenting a case conceptualization. Transparent performance criteria could then be used to assess students' readiness to complete these tasks with increasing independence (Encandela et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2022). Simulation-based mastery learning and deliberate practice further support competency development by providing repeated opportunities for rehearsal, targeted feedback, and improvement until established performance standards are met (McGaghie et al., 2025). Evidence supporting deliberate practice in the development of interpersonal skills reinforces the value of structured, feedback-rich learning experiences over generalized live class attendance (Larsson et al., 2025).

Although synchronous collaborative learning offers important benefits, its implementation creates significant demands for faculty. Online teaching expands faculty labor through instructional planning, communication, technology management, feedback, and the emotional work required to sustain an engaged presence. These responsibilities may contribute to exhaustion and lower job satisfaction when institutional expectations exceed available time, training, or resources (Delgaty, 2013; Oh et al., 2025). Faculty may also experience role ambiguity when pedagogical, technical, supervisory, and managerial expectations overlap (Marques et al., 2024; Shephard et al., 2024). Faculty judgments about collaborative sessions are likely to reflect not only their perceptions of student learning but also whether the work is feasible, recognized, and adequately supported.

The research makes clear the need to balance program consistency with faculty autonomy. Shared learning objectives, assessment criteria, and instructional resources can strengthen curricular coherence, promote fairness across course sections, and support accreditation alignment. Conversely, overly prescriptive requirements may limit faculty members' responsiveness to student needs and constrain their professional judgment (Choppin et al., 2022; Nikolaidis et al., 2024). Practicum-oriented collaborative sessions consequently require common competency expectations while preserving flexibility in facilitation and instructional delivery. A negotiated structure developed collaboratively with faculty may establish consistent standards while allowing instructors to adapt activities to cohort needs and introduce pedagogical innovations (Ghamrawi et al., 2024; Wehlburg, 2025). The literature suggests that synchronous collaborative sessions can strengthen online counselor preparation when they are intentionally designed around relational presence, experiential practice, structured feedback, reflection, and observable competency development.

Research Methods

This qualitative single-case study examined faculty perceptions of synchronous Zoom collaborative sessions used throughout one online School Counseling program. The bounded design supported close study of how practicum-related learning was interpreted and implemented in its institutional context. Multiple data sources provided triangulation and incorporated both faculty and student perspectives.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated close readings of faculty questionnaires, faculty interview transcripts, and student focus group transcripts. Audio recordings were compared with transcripts to ensure accuracy and preserve contextual nuance. Analytic memos documented initial impressions and supported reflexivity throughout the process.

Data were organized by research question and coded in NVivo to identify meaningful content related to the design, implementation, and perceptions of Zoom-based practicum experiences. Semantic and latent coding captured both explicit instructional practices, such as breakout rooms, role-plays, and case consultation, and underlying perspectives regarding student readiness, supervision, faculty workload, and instructional effectiveness. Related codes were grouped into categories and preliminary themes using code hierarchies and visual mapping tools.

Themes were reviewed across data sources for coherence, distinction, and sufficient support. Overlapping themes were combined, boundaries were refined, and unsupported themes were removed. Final themes were defined according to their relevance to the research questions and integrated into a cohesive narrative. Representative quotations preserved participants' voices, while connections to relevant literature supported interpretation. Analytic memos and NVivo records provided an audit trail and strengthened the transparency and dependability of the analysis.

Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation of questionnaires, interviews, and the focus group; comparison of convergent and divergent faculty and student accounts; and an NVivo-supported audit trail of coding and analytic decisions. Reflexive memos documented researcher assumptions and positionality. Participation was voluntary, responses were de-identified, and student data described program experiences rather than evaluating individual instructors. Prior to data gathering, the University's IRB provided an exempt determination on the application.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of faculty facilitating weekly online collaborative sessions in the School Counseling program as a way of providing practicum experiences for students?

Table 1: Data Supporting Research Question 1

Instrument Items	Representative Codes	Themes
Q1. Overall experience facilitating sessions	Meaningful engagement; Emotional labor; Cognitive load; Professional fulfillment	Relationally Rich but Labor-Intensive Facilitation
Q2. Role of sessions in teaching responsibilities	Bridge between theory and practice; Supervision-adjacent role; Mentorship	Zoom Sessions as Practicum-Adjacent Learning Spaces
Q15. Additional experiences faculty find important	Faculty presence; Invisible labor; Professional identity	Expanded Faculty Role Beyond Content Delivery

Theme 1: Relationally Rich but Labor-Intensive Facilitation

Faculty consistently described facilitating the weekly Zoom collaborative sessions as both professionally meaningful and emotionally demanding. Participants emphasized that these sessions were among the most relationally rich aspects of their teaching, allowing for deeper connection, real-time engagement, and authentic interaction with students that contrasted with more asynchronous course components. At the same time, faculty highlighted the significant cognitive and emotional labor required to sustain presence, manage group dynamics, and respond to students' needs in a virtual environment. As Faculty Participant 3 reflected, "It's one of the most engaging parts of my week, but also the most exhausting." Similarly, Faculty Participant 7 noted that the intensity of facilitation stemmed from the relational nature of the work, explaining, "I feel like I'm really *with* the students in these sessions in a way that doesn't always happen online." These accounts underscore how faculty viewed the sessions not as routine instructional time, but as immersive spaces requiring heightened attention, responsiveness, and emotional attunement.

Despite demands of facilitation, faculty reported growing confidence and effectiveness over time as they became more familiar with Zoom as a facilitation platform and more adept at interpreting virtual group dynamics. Several participants described an initial learning curve, particularly in reading nonverbal cues, managing breakout rooms, and balancing multiple communication channels. However, with experience, faculty felt better able to anticipate student needs and create psychologically safe environments conducive to participation and professional growth. Faculty Participant 1 explained, "Early on, I was constantly second-guessing myself, but now I can *read the room* and adjust in the moment." Faculty Participant 5

similarly noted that facilitation became more intuitive over time, stating, “Once I understood how the group functions online, the sessions started to flow much more naturally.” Collectively, these reflections suggest that while the sessions were initially taxing, increased familiarity and practice enabled faculty to navigate the relational and technical complexities of Zoom-based practicum support more effectively.

Theme 2: Zoom Sessions as Practicum-Adjacent Learning Spaces

Faculty consistently framed the Zoom collaborative sessions as a critical bridge between theoretical coursework and applied practicum experience, often characterizing them as forms of “pre-fieldwork supervision” or “guided rehearsal” rather than traditional class meetings. Participants emphasized that these sessions marked a shift from content delivery to experiential learning, where students could practice skills, apply concepts, and engage in reflective dialogue about real or simulated counseling scenarios. As Faculty Participant 2 explained, “This is where the course becomes real,” underscoring the sessions’ role in translating abstract concepts into professional action. Similarly, Faculty Participant 6 described the sessions as distinct from lecture-based instruction, stating, “It’s not a lecture space, but a professional formation space.” Faculty viewed their role during these sessions as more closely aligned with mentoring, supervision, and skills coaching, positioning themselves as facilitators of professional growth rather than instructors conveying information. This distinction reinforced the perception that Zoom collaborative sessions functioned as supervision-adjacent environments designed to support counselor identity development, ethical reasoning, and readiness for practicum engagement.

Theme 3: Expanded Faculty Role Beyond Content Delivery

Faculty emphasized that facilitating the Zoom collaborative sessions involved substantial emotional labor and carried significant implications for their professional identity. Participants described the work as requiring sustained presence, attentiveness, and emotional availability that extended beyond typical instructional responsibilities. This labor was often described as difficult to measure or formally recognize, despite its central role in supporting student development. As Faculty Participant 4 explained, “This work takes presence in a way that’s hard to quantify.” Faculty also articulated a strong sense of responsibility for students’ professional formation, viewing the sessions as influential spaces where counselor identity was actively shaped. Faculty Participant 9 captured this sentiment by stating, “These sessions are shaping who students become as counselors.” Together, these perspectives illustrate how faculty understood their facilitation not merely as teaching, but expanding the faculty role beyond the content in the course into the realm of professional counselor formation.

Research Question 2: How do faculty describe the opportunities and challenges of leading these sessions without prescriptive guidelines?

Table 2: Data Supporting Research Question 2

Instrument Items	Representative Codes	Themes
Q3. Benefits of non-prescriptive design	Instructional autonomy; Responsiveness to student needs; Creativity	Instructional Freedom and Pedagogical Agency
Q4. Challenges encountered	Uncertainty; Planning ambiguity; Technology issues; Participation variability	Navigating Ambiguity in Online Practicum Design
Q5. Managing uncertainty	Professional judgment; Informal peer benchmarking; Trial-and-error	Reliance on Experience Over Formal Guidance

Theme 1: Instructional Freedom and Pedagogical Agency

Faculty emphasized that the nonprescriptive nature of the Zoom collaborative sessions afforded a high degree of instructional autonomy and responsiveness to student needs. Participants valued the flexibility to adapt session content in real time, particularly in response to students' practicum contexts and emerging challenges. As Faculty Participant 1 explained, "The lack of a script lets me respond to what students actually need that week," underscoring how autonomy enabled situationally relevant facilitation rather than rigid adherence to predetermined content. Similarly, Faculty Participant 8 noted, "I can tailor activities based on student challenges and hot topics," highlighting the ability to align session activities with students' lived experiences. Faculty described using this freedom to incorporate creative and interactive strategies such as role-plays, case studies, and reflective dialogue, which they viewed as essential for meaningful professional learning. This autonomy was perceived as a strength of the session design, allowing faculty to exercise professional judgment and draw on clinical expertise to create developmentally appropriate and context-sensitive practicum support.

Theme 2: Navigating Ambiguity in Online Practicum Design

Faculty identified several recurring challenges associated with facilitating the Zoom collaborative sessions, many of which stemmed from ambiguity and the demands of synchronous online instruction. A prominent concern involved uncertainty about expectations, with participants expressing difficulty determining the appropriate scope, depth, and structure of session content in the absence of clear guidelines. This ambiguity often contributed to self-doubt and ongoing recalibration of facilitation practices. As Faculty Participant 5 reflected, "Sometimes I wonder if I'm doing too much, or not enough," capturing the persistent tension faculty experienced when making instructional decisions. In addition, faculty reported uneven student participation, technology disruptions, and the cumulative challenge of sustaining

engagement and relational presence in a virtual setting. Managing multiple technological elements simultaneously also emerged as a significant challenge. Faculty Participant 3 noted, “Managing breakout rooms, chat, attendance, participation, and time all at once is a lot,” highlighting the cognitive load associated with real-time facilitation. Finally, Participant 10 noted, “I am glad we use the 3, 2, 1, reflection for students who cannot attend the Zoom collaborative, but I never know if there is value in having all students complete this form. Together, these challenges illustrate the complex interplay of instructional, technical, and attention demands shaping faculty experiences of Zoom-based practicum sessions.

Theme 3: Reliance on Experience Over Formal Guidance

Faculty described navigating uncertainty in the absence of prescriptive guidelines by relying heavily on professional judgment, prior supervision experience, and informal peer comparison. Participants frequently drew on their backgrounds in clinical supervision to guide decision-making, using familiar in-person supervision models as reference points for structuring Zoom sessions. As Faculty Participant 6 explained, “I think, ‘What would I do in a live supervision group?’ and start there,” illustrating how past practice served as an anchor in the virtual environment. Faculty also reported checking in with colleagues or the program director to gauge norms and expectations across sections. Faculty Participant 2 noted, “I check in with the program director informally to see what I should be doing,” highlighting the role of peer networks in reducing uncertainty. While this adaptive approach allowed faculty to maintain flexibility and responsiveness, several participants expressed a desire for clearer benchmarks or shared reference points to support consistency, provided such guidance did not limit professional autonomy or constrain instructional creativity.

Research Question 3: In what ways do faculty perceive the sessions as contributing to student professional growth?

Table 3: Data Supporting Question 3

Instrument Items	Representative Codes	Themes
Q6. Contribution to professional growth	Skill rehearsal; Ethical reasoning; Professional identity	Professional Identity Formation Through Guided Practice
Q7. Student perceptions of value	Initial skepticism; Increased appreciation over time; Practicum relevance	Student Reframing of Value Through Experience
Q8. Meaningful impact examples	Confidence gains; Ethical insight; Skill mastery	Transformative Learning Moments in Zoom Sessions

Theme 1: Professional Identity Formation Through Guided Practice

Faculty overwhelmingly perceived the Zoom collaborative sessions as critical for students’ professional identity development and transition from academic learners to emerging

practitioners. Participants described the sessions as spaces where students began to internalize the mindset, language, and responsibilities of professional counselors through guided practice and reflective engagement. As Faculty Participant 4 explained, “This is where they start thinking like counselors instead of students,” emphasizing the shift in students’ professional orientation. Similarly, Faculty Participant 7 noted, “They practice language, boundaries, and ethical thinking in real time,” underscoring the sessions’ role in fostering applied competencies that are difficult to cultivate through coursework alone. Faculty frequently cited skill areas such as professional communication, self-reflection, case conceptualization, and confidence as key outcomes of participation. These findings suggest that Zoom collaborative sessions functioned as formative learning environments where students actively rehearsed professional behaviors and developed the self-awareness necessary for effective counseling practice.

Theme 2: Student Reframing of Value Through Experience

Faculty believed that students’ perceptions of the Zoom collaborative sessions evolved over time, particularly as students entered active fieldwork placements. Participants noted that early in the program, students often focused on the sessions’ instrumental value, viewing them primarily as a requirement for accumulating practicum hours. As Faculty Participant 1 observed, “At first they just want to know it counts for hours,” reflecting a compliance-oriented perspective. However, faculty reported a noticeable shift once students began engaging directly in practicum work. Faculty Participant 8 explained, “Later, especially in individual and group counseling classes, they realize it’s helping them develop critical skills they cannot build in isolation,” emphasizing how students came to recognize the sessions as essential sources of support, reflection, and guidance. This progression suggests that the value of the collaborative sessions became more apparent as students encountered the emotional and practical demands of fieldwork or got deeper into the core courses, reinforcing the sessions’ role as meaningful, supervision-adjacent spaces rather than administrative obligations.

Theme 3: Transformative Learning Moments in Zoom Sessions

Faculty shared specific moments that illustrated how the Zoom collaborative sessions facilitated meaningful breakthroughs in student confidence, skill development, and ethical awareness. Participants described observing visible shifts in students’ professional behavior as a result of repeated practice and guided reflection. Faculty Participant 5 recalled a notable transformation, stating, “A student who was terrified of group facilitation led a role-play beautifully by the fourth Zoom session,” highlighting how structured rehearsal within a supportive environment helped students overcome anxiety and build competence. Other faculty emphasized ethical growth as a key outcome of the sessions. Faculty Participant 2 reflected, “We processed a difficult ethical dilemma, and you could see the shift in how they thought,” underscoring how collective discussion and faculty-guided reflection supported deeper ethical reasoning. These moments were frequently cited as affirmations that the sessions functioned as more than discussion spaces, instead serving as developmental

environments where students practiced thinking, speaking, and acting like professional counselors.

Student focus group data corroborated faculty perceptions and added depth to understanding how the sessions were experienced from the learner perspective. Students described the Zoom collaborative sessions as initially confusing, but increasingly valuable over time, particularly once practicum responsibilities intensified. Student Participant 1 explained, “At first it felt like another meeting,” reflecting early uncertainty about purpose. However, this perception shifted as practicum demands increased. Student Participant 3 noted, “Now it’s the one place we can process what’s actually happening,” emphasizing the sessions’ role as an emotionally supportive space for reflection and meaning-making. Several students described the sessions as normalizing and reassuring, with Student Participant 2 stating, “It feels like group supervision, even if it’s not officially called that.” Students consistently valued role-plays, case discussions, and faculty feedback, and reported that the sessions helped them feel less isolated during the program. Students also noted these sessions helped them prepare for the skills they would need in their fieldwork courses. Together, faculty and student accounts highlight the sessions’ capacity to foster confidence, ethical insight, and a sense of professional belonging within an online counseling program.

Research Question 4: How do faculty reconcile their personal teaching style with program expectations in facilitating online collaborative sessions?

Table 4: Data Supporting Research Question 4

Instrument Items	Representative Codes	Themes
Q9. Teaching style integration	Relational approach; Structured facilitation; Flexibility	Personal Pedagogy in a Virtual Supervision Space
Q10. Tension with program expectations	Consistency vs. autonomy; Equity concerns; Comparison across sections	Tension Between Faculty Autonomy and Program Consistency
Q11. Balancing structure and flexibility	Loose frameworks; Adaptive facilitation; Responsive planning	Structured Flexibility as a Facilitation Strategy

Theme 1: Personal Pedagogy in a Virtual Supervision Space

Faculty described intentionally integrating their personal teaching styles into the facilitation of Zoom collaborative sessions, drawing on relational, reflective, or structured approaches to support student engagement and learning. Participants emphasized that these styles reflected their professional identities and clinical backgrounds, shaping how sessions were organized and experienced by students. Faculty Participant 6 explained, “I’m very relational, so I build in check-ins,” highlighting an approach centered on emotional attunement and connection. In contrast, Faculty Participant 3 described a more structured facilitation style,

stating, “I’m more structured, so I always have an agenda, but I’ll abandon it if needed,” illustrating the use of planning as a guide rather than a constraint. Across styles, faculty emphasized adaptability, noting that personal pedagogy provided a foundation for responsiveness while still allowing sessions to evolve based on group dynamics and emerging student needs.

Theme 2: Tension Between Faculty Autonomy and Program Consistency

Several faculty acknowledged ongoing tension between maintaining instructional autonomy and ensuring program-level consistency across Zoom collaborative sessions. Participants expressed concern that variability in facilitation styles and session structures could lead students to compare experiences across sections, potentially raising questions about equity. As Faculty Participant 7 noted, “I worry students compare notes and wonder why sessions feel different across different instructors teaching the same class,” reflecting apprehension about uneven student experiences. At the same time, faculty emphasized the importance of flexibility in responding to cohort-specific needs and practicum contexts. Faculty Participant 4 captured this tension by stating, “I value flexibility, but I know the program wants equity.” These accounts illustrate how faculty navigated competing priorities, balancing professional judgment and individualized facilitation with an awareness of institutional expectations for consistency and fairness within the program.

Theme 3: Structured Flexibility as a Facilitation Strategy

Faculty described addressing the tension between structure and flexibility by relying on loose frameworks to guide Zoom collaborative sessions. Rather than following rigid scripts, participants outlined broad plans that provided direction while allowing space for responsiveness to group dynamics and emerging student needs. Faculty Participant 2 explained, “I plan three anchor activities and see where the group takes it,” illustrating how structure functioned as a starting point rather than a fixed agenda. This approach was viewed as essential for maintaining both psychological safety and authentic engagement. As Faculty Participant 8 articulated, “Structure keeps us safe; flexibility keeps it human.” These reflections highlight how faculty intentionally blended planning and adaptability to support meaningful practicum-aligned learning while preserving relational connection in the virtual environment.

Research Question 5: What recommendations do faculty have for improving the design and structure of these sessions?

Table 5: Data Supporting Question 5

Instrument Items	Representative Codes	Themes
Q12. Design or support changes	Clearer objectives; Recognition of workload; Shared resources	Need for Program-Level Support and Recognition
Q13. Desired training or resources	Facilitation training; Peer mentoring; Exemplars	Professional Development for Online Practicum Facilitation
Q14. Vision for future sessions	Competency alignment; Supervision integration; Intentional design	Toward a Formalized Online Practicum Framework

Theme 1: Need for Program-Level Support and Recognition

Faculty offered several recommendations aimed at improving the design and support of the Zoom collaborative sessions while preserving instructional autonomy. Participants emphasized the need for clearer learning objectives to help anchor facilitation decisions and align sessions more consistently with program outcomes. Faculty also suggested the availability of sample session models or exemplars that could serve as reference points rather than prescriptive templates. As Faculty Participant 5 explained, “Not a script, just guidance,” capturing the desire for structure without constraint. In addition, faculty called for greater recognition of the workload associated with facilitating these sessions, particularly the emotional and cognitive labor involved. Faculty Participant 9 noted, “Some acknowledgment that this is labor-intensive. I have to prepare for this lecture and collaborative session beyond the hours I am allotted in my teaching contract for the term,” underscoring concerns that the intensity of facilitation was often invisible in workload calculations. Collectively, these recommendations point to the need for program-level supports that enhance clarity, equity, and sustainability without undermining professional judgment or instructional flexibility.

Theme 2: Professional Development for Online Practicum Facilitation

Faculty identified a clear need for targeted professional development to support more effective facilitation of Zoom collaborative sessions. Participants emphasized the value of training focused specifically on advanced Zoom facilitation skills, including managing breakout rooms, fostering engagement, and supporting group process in virtual environments. Many faculty described learning to facilitate these sessions through experimentation rather than formal preparation. As Faculty Participant 1 acknowledged, “I learned by trial and error,” highlighting the absence of structured onboarding or guidance. Faculty also expressed interest in peer observation or mentoring opportunities that would allow them to learn from colleagues’ facilitation approaches. Faculty Participant 6 noted, “Watching another faculty member would help immensely,” underscoring the perceived benefit of shared practice and

collaborative learning among instructors. Additionally, faculty requested access to exemplars of effective sessions to serve as developmental models, reinforcing the desire for practical, experience-based resources rather than prescriptive mandates.

Theme 3: Toward a Formalized Online Practicum Framework

Faculty envisioned the future of Zoom collaborative sessions as more intentionally designed, structurally supported, and clearly positioned within the practicum framework of the program. Participants emphasized the importance of aligning sessions more explicitly with counseling competencies to clarify learning goals and strengthen their legitimacy as practicum-relevant experiences. Faculty also expressed interest in tighter integration between collaborative sessions and formal practicum supervision, suggesting that clearer connections could enhance continuity and developmental coherence for students. As Faculty Participant 4 stated, “I’d love to see these treated as legitimate supervision spaces,” reflecting a desire for institutional recognition of the sessions’ supervisory function. Similarly, Faculty Participant 8 observed, “They could be even more powerful with intentional design,” underscoring the belief that shared frameworks and purposeful structure could amplify the sessions’ impact. Together, these perspectives highlight faculty interest in evolving the sessions from individually interpreted practices into collectively supported, supervision-informed learning environments that maintain flexibility while strengthening consistency and professional rigor.

Conclusions

This qualitative case study included faculty perceptions of weekly online Zoom collaborative sessions used to provide practicum experiences within the online School Counseling program. Drawing on faculty questionnaires, faculty interviews, and a student focus group, the study included an examination of how faculty experienced these sessions, navigated opportunities and challenges in the absence of prescriptive guidelines, perceived contributions to student professional growth, reconciled personal teaching styles with program expectations, and articulated recommendations for improvement. Collectively, the findings position Zoom-based collaborative sessions as central, supervision-adjacent learning spaces that meaningfully bridge coursework and fieldwork preparation in a fully online counselor education program.

To build on the findings of this study, several recommendations for future research are warranted. First, additional studies should examine Zoom-based collaborative practicum sessions across multiple institutions and program types to explore how faculty perceptions and implementation practices vary by organizational context, accreditation requirements, and institutional support structures. Multi-site or comparative case studies would strengthen understanding of transferability and identify program-level conditions that support or constrain effective online practicum design. Second, future research should incorporate longitudinal designs that follow students across coursework, practicum, and internship to examine how participation in Zoom collaborative sessions influences professional identity development, skill acquisition, self-efficacy, and readiness for independent practice over time. Linking faculty

perceptions to student developmental trajectories would provide a more robust picture of instructional impact than cross-sectional data alone. Finally, future studies should investigate the effects of structured faculty training, shared facilitation frameworks, or peer-mentoring models to offer actionable guidance for programs seeking to scale and sustain high-quality online practicum.

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