

# Counseling in the context of education for young adults

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*In this paper we have tried to present some of the various activities of a counseling center at a university. We have pointed out that counseling is a service available to students taking courses at the university and that counseling is designed to help the essentially normal student by giving him the opportunity to explore issues of career choice, educational planning and vocational direction with a professionally trained counselor. It is thus that counseling contributes toward the entire educational process of students at the university.*

This article is concerned with a description of counseling in an adult educational setting. More specifically it is a description of the activities methods and philosophies within a Counseling Center at a large midwestern state university in the United States. The principles and methods of counseling are similar whether the student is formally matriculated in the university or whether he is taking one or two courses in the context of the continuing education program for adults. The primary technical difference consists of the fact that counseling for students enrolled in the continuing education service takes place in the evenings and focuses more directly on matters of career choice, educational planning and use of leisure time. Due to the fact that the Center's resources are focused more toward the matriculated university student, more extensive psychological counseling for adults is usually referred to outside agencies. There is one other difference. Counseling for adults taking continuing education courses is on a fee basis as opposed to being free as it is for matriculated students. It should be recognized however, that the proportion of

adults taking university courses on a continuing education basis is relatively small compared to the number of adults deciding to matriculate at the university and taking part time or full time university work. Thus my description of counseling will be geared toward the majority of students at the university recognizing that the principles of counseling are somewhat similar for all our clients.

Perhaps it might be best to begin with a list of statements illustrating some of the problems about which American university students seek counseling:

'I am having trouble in deciding on a major.'

'I can't seem to think clearly on exams. I get so nervous.'

'I am having troubles at home. I don't know what to do about them.'

'My grades are not as good as I think they should be. I don't understand why.'

'There are some things bothering me that I don't want to talk about with my family or friends.'

'I am not getting good grades in courses related to my major. It isn't what I expected. I wonder if I should change it.'

'I often wonder why I am in college. I feel I don't have any real purpose in being here.'

'I am ill - at - ease in class and social situations. I wish I could overcome this.'

Thus, the Counseling Center provides assistance to students experiencing the developmental problems and concerns of late adolescence, including decisionmaking regarding present issues and immediate and longer range plans. In addition, the Counseling Center also provides psychotherapy for those students who require

help with deeper personal and emotional problems.

*Those to whom Center Services are available*

A. *Students*

The services of the Counseling Center are available at no cost to all regularly enrolled students at Michigan State University.

B. *Others*

The Counseling Center, in cooperation with the Continuing Education Service, provides counseling services for adults in the evening on a fee basis. Professional counselors assist adult men and women in making choices and decisions regarding career goals, educational plans, or any purposeful use of leisure time.

*Procedures for initiating counseling*

For the initial interview, counselors are available to see students almost immediately so that no appointments are necessary. This initial interview is designed to determine with the student whether the Center can provide the most appropriate help and if so, what kind of help the student is seeking, how urgently he needs this help, whether group or individual counseling might be more desirable, and so on. The function of this initial interview is to provide the student with an immediate contact with a counselor so that there is a minimum of bureaucratic red tape between the student and the counselor.

The interview also serves to provide immediate help for those issues which can be quickly and easily resolved and serves as an introduction or 'sample' of counseling for those students who need further help. Naturally, later interviews require appointments and scheduling but it is often this initial interview which provides the bridge for effective communication.

This initial interview has another important function. This is to provide for a kind of matching of the special skills and attributes of a counselor with the needs of the student. Since the number of students visiting the Counseling

Center is so large that it would be impossible for the intake counselor to continue with the students he sees for the first interview, the special needs of each student coming to the Center for the first time are reviewed (in consultation with the intake counselor) and a counselor is selected who is able to provide continuing counseling help for a given student. The overall effect of this is to provide continued counseling assistance for those students requesting such with a minimum of waiting and with attention being given to a matching of counselor skills and attributes and student needs. This system has now been in effect since 1963 and has worked out quite satisfactorily.

*Location of Counseling Center Offices*

Initially the Counseling Center was located only in the Student Services building on the campus so that all students wishing to see a counselor needed to come to a central location on campus. About five years ago the staff of the Counseling Center decided to add a number of additional offices located all over campus. Thus today, Counseling Center offices are located in several of the various residence halls of students as well as in the Health Center and in several of the colleges which comprise the university. The advantages of this decentralized approach were felt almost immediately. Many students made use of the facilities which were in close proximity to their 'on campus home', so to speak, as well as making use of the main Center and those Centers located within various colleges on campus. Some students, especially first and second year students (freshmen and sophomores) preferred to have a counselor available in an office in the same building as the location of their residence halls because the counselor was clearly visible and directly available. This is particularly so in the 'living-learning' residence halls where faculty offices and classrooms are present in addition to offices for counseling personnel. In addition this system provides a further option to students: They can see a counselor within their residence hall or, if they wish, they choose to see

a counselor located away from their living unit. As of 1969, about 40% of the counseling contacts take place outside of the main Center in the Student Services Building. The number of different students making use of the Counseling Center facilities is sizeable. In 1968-69, over 9000 different students made use of Counseling Center facilities for a total of approximately 27,000 interviews as compared to about 5000 different students (and about 14,000 interviews) in 1958-59. The present student population is about 38,000 students as compared to about 17,000 students in 1958-59. All of these activities require a sizeable staff and at present there are more than 35 fulltime counselors (clinical psychologists, counseling psychologists, social workers) on the staff of the Center.

#### *Referrals to Counseling Center Staff*

Most students request counseling on their own initiative. Some, however, need encouragement from others to seek counseling assistance. Such students may be referred by instructors, academic advisors<sup>1</sup>, residence hall staff, administrators, or fellow students. The Counseling Center suggests that the referrer should recommend counseling to the student on the basis of the problem as the student sees it. When a student states, 'Professor X thinks I need counseling about my lack of motivation', but gives no indication he perceives this as a problem, counseling may get off to a slow start. This emphasis upon making referrals does not mean, of course, that the faculty member should refrain from discussing his views of the situation with the student. It does suggest, however, the value of trying to understand the student's way of looking at himself and recommending counseling on this basis.

While the usual referral of a student to the Counseling Center is a general one, that is, the student is encouraged to make use of the services of the Center, the faculty member is free to recommend to a student that he see a particular counselor. In those cases, the faculty member or the student can contact the counselor directly to see when he will be available for the initial interview.

Should a referrer wish to discuss a referral prior to recommending counseling to a student and the staff member is not familiar with any member of the Counseling Center staff, he is free to contact the assistant director for counseling services who is available for such consultations.

#### *What to expect of the Counselor*

Counseling usually begins with the counselor encouraging the student to talk freely about his concerns. The counselor listens, tries to understand empathically, sometimes attempts to clarify, and usually by the end of the first interview discusses with the student possible ways the Center may be of assistance. Past this point, no general description is possible since counseling varies with the student's situation and his readiness for assistance.

The counseling interview has a definite atmosphere which usually has real meaning for the student. This atmosphere, ideally, is one of warmth and psychological freedom enabling the student to bring to the interview all relevant material, even though at times may be embarrassing or uncomfortable or even painful. The student who comes to the Center with the expectation that an outside agency is going to solve his problems, freeing him from all responsibility in the matter, is usually disappointed. The process of thinking through the problem with the counselor is a more accurate description of the counseling experience. By providing appropriate professional assistance, the counselor endeavors to promote the student's becoming a more insightful and self-directing person. He avoids pat answers (seldom available, in any case) since these fail to mobilize the student's own resources and tend to encourage dependency and immaturity.

Counseling may be supplemented by the student's taking tests as a means of increasing his understanding of his interests, academic abilities, special aptitudes or personality characteristics. Since students at times attribute almost magical powers to tests, it must be emphasized that tests alone provide no answers. The informa-

tion which they furnish must be integrated with many considerations in arriving at decisions.

Counselors often refer students who are in the process of making decisions regarding educational and career plans to the Center's Occupational Library and to faculty members in departments to learn more about educational requirements and occupational opportunities of specific fields of studies.

Finally Counseling Center staff members have occasion to call to student's attention the services of other persons or agencies such as academic advisors, Dean's office, residence hall personnel, the Health Center and hospital and the Placement Office<sup>2</sup>.

#### *Other functions of the Counseling Center*

##### *a. Research*

In addition to these activities the Counseling Center is engaged in improving the effectiveness of the Center's various activities by adding to the basic knowledge in the behavioral sciences.

Research on student characteristics is also conducted in association with various departments of the university.

##### *b. Testing services*

The testing office, which is an integral part of the Center offers a complete testing service. A student who desires aptitude tests, interest inventories or other testing arranges for these by seeing a counselor to determine whether tests are likely to be helpful and if so, to select appropriate tests. The testing Office then administers and scores the tests and returns them to the counselor to interpret the tests to the student.

In addition to individual testing for students, the testing service includes group testing programs for undergraduate admissions and for scholarship awards, admission testing for graduate and professional schools and consultation services to departments of the University and to business and industry.

##### *c. Summer orientation program*

All students admitted to the university are invited

(in groups of 200 or so) to a three day visit in the summer prior to their enrollment in the fall. The purpose of this visit is to acquaint them with the university, to plan their program for the fall and to answer questions the students have regarding their future education in the university. It also serves as an introduction to the services of the Counseling Center. Each student who attends the orientation program may have an individual interview with a counselor if the student wishes. The Counseling Center administers, staffs, and supervises this counseling and assists with other phases of the program. The Center's Testing Office administers the orientation tests, and members of the Counseling Center staff conduct the group test interpretation sessions.

These tests are administered after the student has been admitted to the university and consist of ability and special aptitude tests designed to give the student more information about his particular abilities and aptitudes in comparison to other students who have also been admitted to the university.

#### *Philosophical implications*

The reader of this article will have sensed some of the cultural implications inherent in the description of the functioning of this Counseling Center. Let me elaborate briefly on some of these:

##### *1. The student's willingness to seek help and to discuss his concerns openly*

In the opinion of this writer, one of the particular characteristics of the American college student is his willingness to seek counseling and to talk openly about many of his concerns not only in terms of vocational and educational concerns but also from a personal viewpoint.

Having talked to many foreign students in the United States, I am impressed by their surprise at how ready American students seem to be to discuss their personal lives with them even though the acquaintance may be somewhat limited. Let me emphasize that I am talking primarily about the 'normal' student and I am not

limiting these observations to the student with more complex emotional or psychological problems.

American students generally are willing and eager to seek counseling help with relatively little fear that seeking such help will stigmatize them as psychologically distressed or mentally unbalanced. This, then, tends to facilitate the task of the counselor in that concerns about educational and vocational planning can be integrated with the personal and psychological make-up of the counselor.

## *2. The emphasis on purposeful striving and work orientation*

Whether this is a particular characteristic of the American protestant ethic or whether this is an inherent American cultural tradition, the fact remains that American college students are oriented toward the practical application of work whether they are studying engineering or agriculture or literature or philosophy. Many of our students are partially or totally self supporting during the time they attend the university. This means that despite rather rigorous demand on their time required by their studies, they will spend time working to earn enough money to support themselves during the academic year. Many students also supplement these earnings by working part time during the school year in addition. These imply considerable demands on self reliance and independence from parental influences (and pressures).

While this provides the student with considerable freedom to choose his future career and goals, this very freedom also leads to considerable concern and some anxiety regarding the appropriateness of their choices.

For many students counseling serves as a welcome bridge between their previous more protected parental atmosphere and the development of independence as a fully functioning independent member of society.

One of the important tasks of counseling is to facilitate this developing sense of independence for the essentially 'normal' college student.

Naturally in a large university community

there will always be a certain number of students who require more intensive psychological assistance and the Counseling Center is a place where this is provided also.

## *3. The integration of functions within a University Counseling Center*

One of the important functions of a University Counseling Center is to provide an integration of many different kinds of counseling under one roof. This writer believes that the kind of work one chooses to do in life is a very personal kind of choice and is inextricably linked with one's background and prior experiences. The extent to which counseling needs to deal with background factors may vary from client to client but it is nevertheless one of the important tasks of counseling. Thus the counselor needs to be familiar not only with the world of work and with the educational possibilities which lead to work but also with impact of personality factors on the particular choice of an individual.

## *Special problems of the non-matriculated student*

Since the non-matriculated student is usually older than the young adults who matriculate at the university a number of additional problems have to be considered. For some of these students this involves a decision concerning eventual matriculation at the university and an assessment as to whether they might eventually meet the admissions standards of the university.

This is often the case for married women with young children whose husbands are no longer able to support their families or for women who wish to supplement their family income or for women whose husbands have died or in those cases where divorce has made it necessary for the wife to support the family. We find that in a considerable number of cases there are a number of personal issues which need to be resolved. At times, referral to other agencies providing more intensive personal counseling and psychotherapy is required. It is thus essential for the counselor to be aware how much help he can provide and whether brief counseling (3-5 interviews) is

sufficient to meet the needs of the individual. Thus it is essential for the counselor to have an awareness of the relationship between personality factors and the choice of career or educational and vocational plans.

There are also a number of individuals, both men and women, who become intrigued with the possibilities of further education after having taken one or two adult education courses at the university. Often these are individuals who had never considered regular study at the university either because they were not interested or because they had never believed that they could compete successfully within the university. For these indi-

viduals, counseling is helpful in the exploration of the various possibilities open to them.

Still another group of individuals consists of those who are reasonably satisfied with their present activities but are looking for ways of advancing themselves in their chosen field. Many of these individuals look toward the university as a place where they can continue their education without obtaining a university degree. Thus adult education is a way in which they can broaden their own vistas and counseling becomes a path toward greater self-fulfillment and a way whereby they can find ways of becoming more effective in their chosen fields.

#### Notes

1. Many members of the teaching faculty serve as academic advisors to students. Thus a faculty member may advise a number of students who are specializing ('majoring') in the department of which the faculty person is a member. Ideally, this enables the student to plan his academic program with someone who is familiar with the student's interests and competencies.
2. The placement office is a separate agency designed to bring students and potential employers together and to assist students in finding part time and full time employment. Thus students make use of the

placement bureau when they wish to obtain part-time employment while they are students and also when they wish assistance in finding professional employment following the conclusion of their studies. The placement bureau is also open to alumni of Michigan State University who wish to make use of the bureau's services in changing from one position to another. Thus they can make their availability known to the Placement bureau and the staff of the Placement bureau places them in contact with potential employers. There is no fee charged for this service.