

WHERE HAVE ALL THE COUNSELORS GONE?

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Introduction

I had an opportunity recently to visit with a faculty counselor who commented on the idea that the majority of community college counselors were hired during the 1960s and early part of the 70's, and that after 30 years of service, a vast majority of these professionals are nearing retirement. He also shared concern for the current trend in higher education which suggests that colleges are opting not to fill these faculty positions, and instead, are hiring academic advisors and doing away with counseling departments all together. Contemplating this juxtaposition, he came to a startling conclusion – community college counseling may end up in the annals of higher education as the only one-generation career.

In the Beginning

Imagine most any fall during the 1960s and 1970s, where, in the American landscape, community colleges were popping up everywhere. It was an era of unprecedented growth for this new kid on the block—this enthusiastic newcomer to higher education. Not unlike today, community colleges offered opportunities for higher learning to first generation students who were both unfamiliar with and unprepared for it. They offered courses in academic transfer and courses in vocational training. In fact, in many ways, the community college of that era looked very much like it does today. Its mission announced a desire to serve all potential students, especially those not traditionally served by the university system. It was there to provide an opportunity that only a few decades before was reserved for a privileged group of Americans who always knew they would go to college and who were academically, psychologically and financially prepared for it.

Clad in a mini skirt or a fringed suede jacket, a student passed through the open doors of these new institutions, seeking advice not just about courses, but about life. They were on a journey of discovery and often the first stop along the way was the

Counseling Center. Here, professional counselors helped to identify the many possibilities that could form and shape the student's future. These professionals were trained to deal with people's personal and interpersonal problems and to assist students in making career decisions. They would have spent two years after their bachelor's degree earning a professional degree in counseling, studying human behavior, personality theories, communication processes, deviant behavior, and other theories relevant to counseling. Like the students sitting in their offices, they were also new to the institutions and their passion for their jobs helped to create an institutional culture of vitality and compassion. These were the professional counselors of the community college. And during the 70s, they were a valued commodity, with a significant number of individuals hired to serve each campus. In fact, at some new colleges, counselors represented the first group of employees to be recruited and hired. There was a belief among presidents and chancellors that if you wanted to get at the key to student success, you had to first meet the emotional and psychological needs of the students.

The Academic Advisor

Today, if you were to seek advice when you first walk onto a community college you would most likely stumble upon a much different scene. Almost undoubtedly, you would come face-to-face with a member of the new breed of the student service team, the academic advisor. This person probably has a bachelor's degree instead of a master's degree and maybe less than that. Almost certainly they have had little or no formal training in therapeutic problem-solving or human relations. They are there to answer course- and discipline-specific questions posed by students and prospective students, questions such as, "What courses should I take to major in history?" or, "Is my test score good enough to get into college algebra"? It is true that most advisors can answer these questions with little difficulty. They are professionals who have a skilled eye toward educational planning, helping students navigate educational systems on a daily basis. It is the other more important questions that give them pause. How does an advisor who is trained in the more technical aspect of student support respond to a student question such as, "What should I do with my life" or "How can I continue school when my husband wants me to stay home with the kids?"

Perhaps at some point in time during the 1980s or 1990s a small crack occurred in the administration's planning process. Perhaps it was one of those years when the college failed to exceed its enrollment projections and had to replace a retiring counselor with a temporary advisor – hoping, of course, that once funding improved, the counseling position could be reinstated. However, the crack was never filled, more advisors were hired, and the gap between what a student really needed on a personal and emotional level and what he or she got, grew wider and wider.

In most community colleges, advisors help students by answering such questions as which courses to take or when to register for a particular course; they assist students with registering for classes, dropping classes, and completing degree plans. On the other hand, counselors help students by asking students why they are attending college and what they want to do with the rest of their life. More importantly, they help identify social, personal and psychological barriers that may prevent students from succeeding. They represent a safe haven for the students, where confidential information can be exchanged. It would seem difficult to expect an advisor to listen to a student voice a serious complaint about a faculty member, and then assume that this individual has the authority to take any action.

If a student voices the same complaint to a full-time professional counselor, this individual, because he or she is usually at the same level within the organization as other faculty, has the ability to troubleshoot problems by approaching his or her colleagues about any ensuing problems, working together to resolve the issue. Of course you could consider some current systems where the advisor reports the issue to a student affairs dean who then communicates the problem to the vice president who must relay what has happened to the faculty member's department chair, who must then inform the faculty that a complaint has been recorded. Perhaps this is the problem. Some of our systems which have been modified to save money or to increase quantity rather than quality may have compromised communication. A problem that could have been handled faculty to faculty, now takes multiple layers of administration and multiple days to resolve.

It would appear that with the shift away from personal and career counseling, the concept of student advocacy is vanishing. The professional counselor serves as an

objective member of the campus community and their jobs are focused on not only listening to and assisting students, but representing them or at the very least buffering them from conflicts that may exist with their instructors.

Why have all the counselors gone?

In informal conversations with several community college counselors, it would appear that the following reasons contribute to why they seem to be slowly disappearing from the community college landscape:

- They are no longer valued
- They have exchanged their professional training in therapeutic problem-solving for data entry
- They are ignored by administration (who secretly hope they just go away)
- They are managed and supervised by someone who probably knows little about counseling and is more concerned that long lines don't form at the entrance to the center
- They are choosing to retire rather than be assigned additional duties that are really not related to their job
- They are never asked for their advice about students
- Registration times have expanded and counselors are required to work more hours, more days and see more students

Where have all our values gone?

Most any community college today has a set of value statements which are aimed at communicating how students and others will be treated. Great effort is put into developing mission statements that encompass all that institution do. But how many administrators really take the time to examine each job description? Do they know really each employee and what he or she is capable of? Are they interested in building an environment of appreciation and respect? Or, are value statements only for certain people, at certain times, in certain situations? Are they merely words on a planning document which is placed in a file cabinet where it is ushered out every ten years for reaccreditation? It would seem reasonable to expect that any president would value all the employees and would make an honest effort to know as much as possible about the extent to which an individual can and does contribute to the organization. However, it

seems that few leaders see the value of counselors beyond their ability to advise students or maybe teach a few human development courses.

Should the college bring counselors back?

The breadth and depth of the needs and concerns of today's students are staggering. It is not suggested that counselors alone solve all student problems or independently guarantee student success. Certainly advisors play a critical role as well in the educational development of students. It is just that counselors provide a unique and justified service which speaks to their professional qualifications and field of experience. They are the safety net for the unpredictable number of students who may never return to the college after registration; who drop a course because of conflicts with an instructor; or who lose their way along the way in their journey toward a degree.

Perhaps one of the greatest values a counselor brings to a community college is a skill which most likely is and has gone unnoticed by most administrators. Counselors are positioned perfectly to "see all" and to "know all" about the organization. They can see how an incident in the bookstore or the testing center can be a problem for the business office. They know which courses students want and which ones they avoid. Counselors hear about everything from parking problems to frustrations with the limited hours that the computer lab is open. And every day the knowledge and insight these individuals have about the entire college grows. They are the perfect objective observer. Simply put – they know students. Not just the transfer students, but the technical students, the continuing education students, the developmental studies students, and so on. It would therefore seem logical that an organization would often ask for their input related to systems and processes.

The counselors this author visited with found one interesting and daunting similarity. Hardly ever did administration or anyone else in the organization ask them about students. Rarely were their opinions sought out about college-wide programs and services. Sure, these individuals served on campus committees and performed the required additional duties that make up most any faculty contract. But offering advice as a committee member vs. an individual are two different beasts. The unspoken rule was that faculty counselors were not really faculty members, and that their opinions may not be that important.

So, should a college focus attention and resources on professional faculty counselors? Or does it make sense to hire more academic advisors to meet the growing demands of increased enrollment? Certainly one could make a credible case for either, and undoubtedly the answer would be commensurate with the values and the goals of the institution. In fact, there may be no right or wrong answer; however, if community college leaders truly believe in the value statements they produce, they are more likely to 1) engage in communication which demonstrates respect for the contributions of all, 2) make decisions based on student needs rather than funding shortages, and 3) recognize that first impressions matter and that the counseling center continues to be one of the first stops on a student's journey through the community college system.