

Quality Control in College Counseling Services A Team Approach

BY GERALD COLVIN AND CATHY LONG

College counseling centers are increasingly facing demands for accountability. As higher education costs continue to increase, pressure will also increase for them to account for how and why they conduct certain activities.

Counseling in the college setting must include sound evaluation procedures, success/failure information regarding the selection of services and methods, and more efficient and effective operations.¹ This, in turn, will generate feedback for revising goals and objectives, recognizing trends in "customer" usage, and identifying services that need improvement.

Obstacles to Evaluation in Student Services

However, student affairs professionals are likely to encounter a number of obstacles as they attempt to develop meaningful accountability procedures. For one thing, the evaluative process itself is "value-loaded, frequently with direct implications for funding, staffing, campus facilities, promotions, and status."² This is how departments compete with other institutional units for finite resources. Unfortunately, this catapults evaluation strategies into the political arena.

A second obstacle results from the way many student-affairs departments were initially established. A counseling program may have been created by allocating money, hiring and assigning staff, and presenting the counseling-center staff with a list of duties and potential "clients." Problems and crises are often resolved without adequate time to align solutions with the primary goals of the institution. Such programs naturally

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will have ill-defined objectives, making the evaluation of their services less likely to reflect the true level of their effectiveness.

Finally, student service workers often think their functions are not measurable.³ They thus confuse accountability with research. And they either view research as an activity beyond their capabilities, or worse, as an undertaking whose outcome is inconsequential to their daily activities. In either case, they feel reluctant to conduct evaluations.

Consequently, student service decisions are frequently made too quickly, and without consulting those most involved.⁴ The net effect, argues Kuh, is that organized anarchy is more often than not the modus operandi of student affairs offices. Kuh⁵ also claims that this unfortunate style of decision-making is common throughout higher education.

How College Counseling Has Evolved

A major shift in the philosophy and delivery of counseling services began about 25 years ago. Prior to 1970, most university counseling centers operated out of a direct-service model limited to placement connections and individual psychotherapy.⁶ Many of today's centers, however, stress the developmental model and offer a wide range of informational services directed toward students as they are.

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A growing disenchantment with the clinical orientation led the counseling profession to a major philosophical overhaul in the early 1970s. Guidelines developed by the International Association of Counseling Services (IACS) emphasized the delivery of both remedial and developmental services.⁷ Later papers proposed outreach models that moved counselors beyond the constraints of the therapeutic orientation into all aspects of campus life.⁸ This required changes in the purpose, direction, and method of intervention, further expanding the counselor's role into

preventive and developmental areas. This is the orientation most chosen today.

Common Evaluation Approaches

Most counseling centers already collect data on outcomes, opinions, and numbers. Entering, second-year, and exit surveys invite students to give their views about an array of student services. Counselors keep daily records of the number and types of client contacts. User reports are now available through several computer-based career search software, e.g., the DISCOVER career guidance and information system.

Four Qualitative Evaluation Strategies

Stage⁹ recommends using non-restrictive measures for assessing student affairs programs. Many centers are already developing and utilizing unobtrusive measures: strategies for recording and reviewing the number and nature of pamphlets taken from their office, intake files regarding the reasons for and sequence of student visits, the demand level for transfer catalogs to four-year institutions, and counseling and committee loads. Some centers explore ways to determine the quality of counseling services through such "data" as client diaries and journals.

Most college counseling centers should probably employ four evaluation

techniques: (1) team review, (2) shared case-study analyses, (3) a survey method, and (4) focus-group feedback. These processes are described below.

Team review. This process involves the periodic examination by the counseling staff of a counselor's current approach with a specific counselee, in light of the student's problems. With proper direction, this sharing among the professional staff in session provides opportunity for ongoing team guidance. They should ask the following questions: Are the student's primary needs being met? Do the counselor's methods and techniques hold promise of success? What is the prognosis for counselee recovery and/or remediation? The answers to these and other appropriate questions should be summarized in writing and filed in a secure place in the coordinator's office.

This approach does not seek to ridicule or sabotage, but rather explores ways to deliver more effective counseling services. Every semester, the counselors each present before the total staff one or more current counseling experiences that they have chosen. A specific report form similar to the one in Figure 1 may be employed. The completed form—with team observations included—should become a part of each counselor's permanent file.

Case presentation approach. McAuliffe¹⁰ recommends the case presentation approach (CPA) to enhance supervision and issues management. One counselor presents a single case, in detail, during each session and encourages questioning and discussion. This review, McAuliffe says, provides an opportunity not only for ongoing counselor cognitive and affective development, but also for networking among service providers.

In the CPA strategy recommended here, however, each counselor completes one case study each academic year for a counselee with whom she or he has had at least three personal counseling sessions. Because of the personal background information needed, this study may require the cooperation of the counselee. Besides the current problem(s) of the counselee, the counselor will often cover pertinent childhood and family background, school success, phys-

ical status, peer relationships, marital adjustment, and career development.

Measuring behavioral outcomes may require some kind of analysis following the termination of the counseling relationship. The counseling staff as a whole can help to appraise the data collected in order to verify the effectiveness of counseling.

The completed case study report will normally be 5-10 typewritten pages in length. These reports, with staff observations attached, also become a part of each counselor's permanent file. A sample guide for case presentation adapted from McAuliffe is provided in Figure 3.¹¹

Survey Method. Counselors can also evaluate their counseling by using ques-

FIGURE 1
Team Review Report
University Counseling Center

Counselor reporting: _____

Date of the report: _____

This section to be completed by the counselor:

1. Nature of the client's concern: _____

2. Your strategy for assisting/helping the client: _____

3. Client change (behavioral or/and attitudinal) to this date in time:

This section to be completed in counsel with the counseling staff in session:

4. Additional things to consider regarding the client and his or her concerns:

5. Suggestions for alternative approaches or additional resources:

Signatures: _____

Counselor reporting

Coordinator

FIGURE 2
**Questionnaire for Effectiveness of
 Counseling and Advisement
 University Counseling Center**

Background:

1. Gender: Male Female 2. Married: Yes No
 3. Age: 4. Ethnic: White Black Other
 5. College level: Freshman Sophomore Unclassified

Questions: Circle the most correct frequency beneath items 6-9:

6. How many times did you *volunteer* for counseling?
 0 1 2-3 4-5 6-7 8-9 10+
 7. How many times were you referred to the counselor?
 0 1 2-3 4-5 6-7 8-9 10+
 8. How often did you see the counselor individually?
 0 1 2-3 4-5 6-7 8-9 10+
 9. How often did you as a member of a group see the counselor?
 0 1 2-3 4-5 6-7 8-9 10+

For items 10-19 by circle your answer on a scale of 1 to 5:

10. Has counseling been helpful to you?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 11. Did you find the counselor to be understanding?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 12. Did the counselor listen to you?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 13. Did you feel the counselor was interested in you, your feelings,
 your opinions, in you as a person?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 14. Did the counselor show respect for you and your opinions?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 15. In counseling, did you feel you could talk freely?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 16. Did counseling help you to learn anything about yourself?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 17. Did counseling bring about any change in you as a person? (Did
 it change your behavior, ideas, attitudes, or anything like that?)
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 18. Did counseling help you to blow off steam, to get things off your mind,
 to talk about things that really bugged you?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 19. Has counseling been helpful to you in personal planning?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 20. Has counseling been helpful to you in academic or career plan-
 ning?
 not at all ◀ 1 2 3 4 5 ▶ very much
 21. In three or four sentences, please tell us what you think about the
 counseling service. What are its strengths and weaknesses?
 How can it be improved?
 22. If counseling has been helpful to you, please tell us in what way it
 has been helpful. If it has not been helpful to you, please tell us
 why it hasn't.

***Student affairs profes-
 sionals are likely to
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tionnaires. However, this method is most appropriate for evaluating the *global* outcomes of counseling. Isolating meaningful concepts for student consideration will help to make the survey items objective and thereby standardize the responses. Although this method has its limitations, it can aid in identifying crucial changes in attitudes.

A questionnaire similar to the one in Figure 2 may be used to survey clients. Simple and easy to administer, it yields both quantitative and qualitative data. However, conclusions drawn from such feedback should be tempered by an awareness of the casual and limited involvement most college students have with counseling centers.

Focus groups. The focus group method involves the selection of both experts and non-experts to discuss specific issues relating to the counseling services offered—or expected—at the center. Even if members of the focus groups are unacquainted with the unique nature of a given concern, their level of ability and responsibility will often ensure a meaningful contribution. Consensus is not necessary, but the facilitator (a counselor) should take notes. These notes should later be reviewed with the whole counseling staff for suggestions and innovative ideas.

Each counselor should lead at least one focus group (with four to six members) within each two- to three-year period. The counseling staff in session should choose the topic to be discussed. The topic should have been approved by

FIGURE 3
Sample Case Presentation Format

Name of Counselor: _____ Date: _____

1. Subjective.
 - A. Why are you presenting *this* case?
 1. Do you need help in student assessment or treatment plan?
 2. Is there something to be learned by all of us?
 - B. What was the original presenting problem (or complaint) of this student?
2. Objective
 - A. Demographic information:
 1. Gender
 2. Marital status
 3. Age
 4. Ethnicity/race
 5. Religious affiliation
 6. Occupation
 7. Parents' occupation
 - B. Background information
 1. Concise description of client's unique personal history, including:
 - a. Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.
 - b. Significant events in client's life (e.g., successes, failures, traumatic experiences, chronic emotional complaints).
 2. Opportunities for observation
3. Assessment
 - A. Counseling impression
 1. Characteristic patterns of adjustment
 2. Interpersonal functioning
 3. Physical complaints
 4. Severity of psychosocial stressors
 - B. What questions remain unanswered in your mind, or in the minds of others in the group?
4. Plan
 - A. Counseling strategy (up until now)
 - B. Counseling plan for the future

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the relevant dean or vice chancellor prior to the focus group meeting. After review, the notes, minutes, member summaries, and recordings (with permission) of focus group discussions should be kept on file by the counseling director.

Conclusion

In their annual report—if not before—counseling center directors should summarize the evaluation results along with recommendations and center files

with the administrator to whom they report. These recommendations, along with planned strategies enhancing quality, will go a long way toward ensuring credibility with the college's faculty and staff. ✍

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