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Guidance and Counseling in Community Colleges

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Career Preparation Issues

Provision of guidance and counseling services in any institution is complex but is especially difficult in community colleges. The sheer variety of students in community colleges is challenge enough, since older students with some experience in the labor force and seeking to change careers need different services from those required by traditional-age students coming from high schools (Healy & Reilly, 1989). Many are first-generation college students, with little information from their families about progress through higher education. Many are recent immigrants, unfamiliar with the education and employment options in this country.

Career Choice

Many individuals entering community colleges appear to be undecided students or “experimenters.” They may understand that further education is necessary for upward mobility, but are unsure about what occupation they want to enter and unclear about the relationship between schooling and their aspirations. Older students wanting to change careers may enter college without any particular goal in mind, on the assumption that something will turn up with more promise than their current job.

Career-Education Alignment

Some students seem to have “misaligned ambitions” (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). They have high aspirations, but their schooling has been unrelated to their nominal goals; thus, they find themselves without the science or math for technical occupations, or without the basic verbal and mathematical skills necessary for postsecondary education. For these students, the task is to reconcile their schooling with their ambitions—preferably not, as many have charged, by counselors simply telling them to moderate their ambitions, but rather by counselors encouraging them to enhance their schooling in ways consistent with their ambitions.

Experimenters who never discover what they want to do are likely to drift, take unrelated courses, and finally drop out. Students with misaligned ambitions drop out as they slowly come to realize that achieving their goals will require more schooling, over longer periods of time, than they are prepared for. Some faculty say that the presence of so many students without clear goals makes their teaching jobs all the harder. As one mentioned, “I have some people who want to take the class for information, and don’t intend to do any of the work” (Grubb & Associates, 1999, p. 5). Students milling around with no purpose, classes with too many students unready to learn the content, and high rates of non-completion—these *might* be the result of a failure to provide adequate guidance and counseling.

Appropriateness of Services

Despite their apparent importance, guidance and counseling have often been surrounded by controversy. Clark (1960) blamed counselors for moderating the ambitions of students with low levels of academic skills and then directing them toward vocational programs. Advocates for low-income and minority students often charge that counselors treat such students as incapable, view their ambitions as unrealistic, and steer them toward lower-status programs and shorter certificate programs. (Advocates then recommend countervailing measures; for example, the Puente program in California has been explicitly designed to replace counselors thought to be hostile to Latino students with more supportive Latino counselors and mentors from the community.)

Within community colleges, guidance and counseling often appear to be peripheral and relatively isolated. Occupational faculty often charge that counselors direct students toward academic programs without knowing about the employment and transfer benefits of occupational alternatives. Similarly, those trying to establish new and innovative programs often complain that counselors are either ignorant of or hostile to their efforts. Finally, students themselves seem to have low opinions of guidance and counseling. Baker’s (1998) survey of students in four colleges revealed that satisfaction was much lower for student services than for other dimensions of the colleges (including instruction, which ranked the highest). The quality of career planning and placement services was rated even lower than other student services.

What is Known About Guidance and Counseling?

Unfortunately, given the importance of guidance and counseling, there has been relatively little research, either by individuals concerned with community colleges or by those who examine guidance and counseling issues. For example, the standard bibliography on community colleges, Cohen and Brawer (1989), has only four pages about guidance and counseling. And the most comprehensive review of career guidance and counseling, Herr and Cramer (1992), has only one citation on community college research. While a few individuals in specific colleges may know a great deal about the availability of guidance and counseling services locally, the lack of research makes it difficult to generalize to community colleges across the country.

Amount of Resources

Nonetheless, a variety of issues has emerged. One of the most obvious involves the level of *resources*. Keim (1989) surveyed colleges across the country, and determined an average student-counselor ratio of 951:1 (calculated in terms of full-time counselors and students). This ratio is even higher than in high schools, where ratios of 500:1 to 700:1 are common. Keim's survey also found that a majority of counselors were men (63 percent) and white (85 percent); thus, if there are special issues in counseling black and Latino students for which counselors who share their culture would be helpful, or if women seeking to improve their occupations or to enter the labor market after childrearing have special needs which female counselors might best meet, community colleges may not be adequately staffed.

Type of Counseling and Services

Another dimension is the *variety of services*. A college may have a counseling center, a transfer center, a career center, and still other centers for low-income or minority students and for disabled students. Some colleges provide courses, seminars, and workshops ranging from a few hours to an entire school year. The topics can include understanding the labor market and occupational alternatives, identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, developing decision-making skills, and practicing aspects of job finding (such as seminars on preparing resumes). Other colleges offer internships or co-operative education programs that provide students with more direct experiences in the labor market. There is no evidence that any of these activities is more effective than any other (Herr & Cramer, 1992). There is, however, a consensus that colleges should provide a complete range of services to meet a variety of needs.

In addition, the resources for any one service may vary widely. For example, deVries (1998) found that two community colleges in Wyoming had Level I career

centers, defined as having little more than a collection of materials; four had Level II centers, staffed by a part-time counselor and conducting limited workshops; and four had Level III centers, with trained career counselors providing a range of assessments, inventories, workshops, job placement, and ties to community networks. Therefore, what it means to have a center and to provide a particular service may vary widely from college to college.

There is also a *variety of types of counseling*. Based on Keim's survey and the research by Coll and House (1992), counselors spend a majority of their time on academic or college counseling—advising students about the courses and credits required for various credentials and for transfer. They spend slightly less time on personal counseling, on issues such as health, substance abuse, and family problems. Finally, both surveys indicate that they spend much less time—roughly half as much as on academic counseling—on career counseling. The relative lack of time for career counseling means that experimenters, or those with “misaligned ambitions,” may receive much less attention than students with relatively clear goals.

Organization and Timing of Services

The advantages and disadvantages of providing many types of services distributed through many different offices and programs, rather than offering them in a centralized program, are not clear. Providing guidance and counseling in many forms is sometimes promoted as a way of meeting the different needs of different students; the standard recommendation to provide a complete range of services implies that specific services might be appropriate in certain situations or for particular students. While duplication and redundancy may be one way to ensure that more students find their way to this service, it may be confusing for students to face such options.

It is not clear how the many types of services are articulated with one another: an individual student may need career counseling and academic counseling and personal counseling—in different offices, with individuals of varying types of qualifications. One way to organize counseling is to follow the caseworker method, with one counselor working with a student throughout his or her college career to guarantee continuity. However, with few exceptions, there has been a much greater reliance on drop-in counseling, an approach almost guaranteeing that continuity cannot take place.

Furthermore, the *timing* of services may be important, but it has not been extensively examined. A reasonable hypothesis is that many colleges place greater emphasis on transfer, and on counseling and other services related to transfer, than on services when students enter college and are considering their options. If this is true, it might constitute an inequity, focusing services on students with clear educational goals—who are also more likely to be white and middle

class—rather than on students with unsettled educational and occupational plans.

Counseling Strategies

There are also substantially different *conceptual approaches* to the task of guidance. By far the most common approach to career counseling has been the so-called trait-and-factor approach, in which counselors help students uncover their own preferences, personality traits, and strengths, and then provide them with information about the occupations most suited to their interests and abilities. Indeed, providing information is clearly the dominant approach to counseling in this country.

However, to make use of information, students need to be able to judge it, and to distinguish well-intentioned but inaccurate information (from friends, for example) from misleading information (from proprietary schools, for example) from accurate but unhelpful information (from statewide surveys of labor markets, for example). They need to be able to weigh present and future possibilities and the trade-offs among them. They must consider a wide range of alternatives including some, like formal schooling itself, which may have treated them badly in the past and which they may not be able to consider dispassionately and rationally. Decision-making is a multi-faceted competence in its own right, one that is increasingly necessary in a complex economy of shifting occupations—but one which conventional guidance and counseling do not address.

Thus, more substantial experiences—semester-long courses, internships or co-op placements, service and experiential learning—may be necessary. Counselors in this tradition often stress the need for a more “holistic” approach: never pretending that information alone is enough, they use a variety of strategies to lead students to understand themselves, their capacities, and the alternatives in much deeper ways.

Student Need for Counseling

Finally, there has been too little attention to *students* in community colleges and their needs for counseling. Virtually all colleges ask their students, upon applying or enrolling, what their goals are; but if students are undecided, or are experimenters, they may check the transfer box as the most socially acceptable answer, even though they have no idea what that entails. Similarly, students with “misaligned ambitions” will almost surely assert their desire to transfer, even though they may have no idea how much subsequent education (including remedial coursework) their ambitions require. Efforts to verify the validity of what students say are their goals—through interviews or sessions with counselors, for example—seem to be rare, so it is difficult to know how many students are experimenters, or have uninformed expectations, or enroll in community colleges for other

reasons (including non-vocational purposes).

The issue of student goals is further complicated by a longstanding debate about the outcomes of community colleges. As many have pointed out, completion rates in community colleges are quite low. Whether low completion rates are caused by financial or family problems, dissatisfaction with the college, attainment of goals through limited amounts of coursework, or lack of any intention of earning a credential, is a question that has never been empirically resolved. Thus the interpretation of low completion rates has depended on different assumptions of why students are enrolling in the first place, and the issue of student intentions remains murky.

In addition, there has been little analysis of *which students use guidance and counseling*, and which do not. In one college, Herndon, Kaiser, and Creamer (1996) found that white students received more counseling than black students; among white students, those in transfer majors received more than non-transfer students—which suggests either that colleges provide such services selectively or that students self-select in ways that may not be helpful to minority and occupational students. In the interviews my colleagues and I (Grubb, 1996) carried out, students with the clearest career goals did not go to see counselors because they did not need to, except perhaps to verify the completeness of their courses. But the students with the greatest trouble making decisions about their future also reported not going to counselors—partly because of limited resources and awkward schedules, and partly because they did not know what to ask. However, these conclusions are based on interviews with very few students, and have not been examined by others.

Given the students who enroll, and the variety of their backgrounds, goals, and levels of preparation, guidance and counseling seem to be among the most important supports that community colleges can provide. But these services have often been marginalized, under-funded, and under-researched, so there is much to learn about guidance and counseling in community colleges.

A Research Agenda

Many critical questions about guidance and counseling are difficult to address, particularly those about the effectiveness of different approaches. The interaction between counselor and student is normally private and cannot be researched directly. The various criticisms of counselors—that some are racist or sexist in their advice, that they are relatively ignorant about local labor markets or about new educational or occupational programs—are difficult to verify or dispute both because the counseling encounter is not observed and because students and counselors may have different perceptions. Other forms of guidance—courses and internships, for example—are more public and therefore easier to examine, but here too issues of

effectiveness are difficult to investigate.

However, a series of institutional case studies could examine how services and approaches to guidance and counseling vary, how they fit within the overall institution, what students need from guidance and counseling, and how the variation among colleges reflects other aspects—their sense of mission, for example, or their particular philosophy of education, or their understanding of who their students are.

Such case studies could examine the following kinds of questions:

- What data are available about students and their goals? Are the standard questionnaires given to students about their intentions supplemented with other forms of inquiry: interviews, for example, or initial sessions with counselors?
- What level of resources is devoted to guidance and counseling? For example, are the ratios near 1,000:1 reported by Keim (1989) prevalent?
- Do colleges provide multiple sources of counseling? Are there mechanisms to integrate such services? Do the variety of services include different forms of coursework and/or experiences outside the college, or are they limited to traditional counseling forms?
- How are the varied services coordinated, if at all, with the academic, occupational, and developmental departments? How do other instructors view or participate in guidance and counseling, if at all?
- Have counselors developed alternative approaches to the trait-and-factor model?
- How do counselors and other faculty perceive student goals, barriers, plans, and their assessments of the options they face? Are the problems of “experimenters” substantial in their colleges? Are the problems of “misaligned ambitions” serious?
- What are counselor perceptions of which students use and fail to use various services? Are existing services under- or over-utilized, and why? Do colleges collect data on the use of student services, and can these data be used to detect patterns of use—or the effects of such use on subsequent completion?

For the moment, the measure of the effectiveness of different services and different approaches in helping students achieve their goals remains elusive. But a necessary first step is to understand more clearly what community colleges do now to help their students select and effectively prepare for a fulfilling career. ❄

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