

## **Counseling Issues in Higher Education: Life issues *can* disrupt the academic process.**

### **A survey of faculty perceptions.**

The recent surge in mental health needs on campus is interfering with the academic mission of the university and student affairs professionals need to work closely with the faculty to better understand and serve this student population. Discussing learning disabilities and mental health issues with a disparate assortment of university professors was an educating experience (on both sides of the desk) and there is no doubt that we all have a great deal to learn. Faculty and staff need to be alert to student counseling issues and be prepared to provide information about campus resources. Early intervention may prevent personal issues from escalating and may help keep the student in school. Although the observations discussed in this paper are based on a very limited sample, I now have a much better understanding of the struggles the faculty encounter due to students with counseling issues. I interviewed professors from widely diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, with varied perceptions and knowledge about counseling issues, and mixed preparation for their role in educating students with needs outside the mainstream. I believe that the misconceptions and lack of awareness regarding the effect of student mental health issues on academics and can be overcome by strengthening the partnership between student affairs and the academic staff.

Eight professors participated in my survey on faculty perceptions of mental health issues. Six participants are from engineering or physical science disciplines and two hail from the social sciences; their ages ranged from 37 to 59 years, with from five to 32 years of university teaching experience. Their average class size was around 85 students, with classes as small as 25 and larger classes nearing 300. Both the liberal arts professors are involved in student clubs or student chapters of professional organizations, with only one engineering professor regularly

involved in student activities outside the classroom. The engineering and physical science professors had widely divergent responses to the survey, with the two interviewees from Europe and the Middle East, somewhat shocked about the whole topic of counseling issues. They were both educated in, and first taught at, institutions that did not have any student affairs functions. For them, the university is only about academics and research because in their formative experiences, students attended college for academics but conducted the rest of their life away from school. Both of these gentlemen stated that our discussions increased their awareness of the potential struggles that may plague students. The geography and psychology professors had fairly similar responses to the survey and were more aware of the current mental health crisis in higher education and were generally more accommodating to distressed students than the engineering and physical science faculty. The disparity between survey responses among my sample seemed to stem from a lack of awareness, rather than indifference, so I believe that education is the key to better serving this population.

I expanded my survey (see Appendix 1) beyond the three core questions from the Backels and Wheeler article and added questions about preparedness to respond to a student crisis, did the respondent have close friends or family members that struggled with any of these counseling issues, had they personally assisted distressed students in the past and how frequently counseling issues was the topic of discussion at departmental meetings. Although each survey and interview produced different results, there were distinct similarities within various subgroups of the sample. The two females were keenly aware of the impact on academics caused by relationship problems, eating disorders, and sexual identity concerns; they had referred many more students to counseling than the male faculty had referred in total. Only one professor had never observed or assisted a student with personal issues. The two social science professors expressed more

liberal attitudes about extending deadlines for distressed students and were far more likely to contact their distressed students between class meetings, offering encouragement and checking on their well-being. The four professors with college-attending children of their own were more aware of the non-academic growth that occurs during young adulthood and thankful that student affairs professionals regularly helped nurture and guide students with their complex lives.

Two of the three professors over the age of fifty were fairly clueless about the range and extent of the counseling issues facing students and wondered how they would know a student was dealing with a particular issue. Two professors said they comply with Disabled Student Program requests for accommodations, but only *volunteered* flexibility with assignments to students with a death in the family or to students with obvious physical illnesses or injuries. There was a resounding lack of flexibility for students with test anxiety, with seven professors expressing a ‘study harder and get over it’ attitude. All respondents agreed that class size greatly impacts the faculty’s ability to know the student as an individual rather than just knowing of the student as an ID number in a grade book and heartily agreed that educating the graduate students teaching the much smaller discussion and laboratory sections was vital. Five respondents suspected that many of their students ‘wasted too much time playing video games’, but the concept of video game addiction was new to each of them. They were impressed that our counseling center has psychologists specifically trained on ‘addictive’ behaviors.

I was surprised that learning disabilities was the hottest topic of the survey. Given the strong presence of the Disabled Students Program (DSP) on my campus, most professors have been asked to accommodate individual learning needs during lectures, as well as during exams. Perhaps because of these accommodation requests, most of the engineering faculty posed questions about the ability of students with learning disabilities to cope with the demands of a

career position in industry or technology. Their questions ranged from ‘what employer is going to provide time and a half to get a job done’ to ‘where is this kid going to get a job where he can work in a completely distraction free environment’ with ‘what boss is going to let an employee bring an assistant to work with them’. My heart says all people should be allowed to pursue their dreams but I also agree with the faculty sentiment that some of these students are inadvertently being set-up for failure.

During the last year, multiple engineering students with diagnosed learning disabilities or mental health issues were dismissed from the college for either an insurmountable upper division GPA deficit or failure to make appropriate progress in the major (taking more than 4 years to attain junior status). These students had each used accommodations from DSP but left college after 4 or 5 years without a degree, huge debt and without the opportunity to segue into a high paying career. What went wrong? Were these students disserved by the system? Are some students’ dreams unrealistic, and who makes that decision? Some faculty believe that accommodations for a disability or illness mask some students inability to handle university curriculum, but eventually they become overwhelmed and some are forced to leave the university worse off than when they started. The question of who belongs at the university is exacerbated by the inability of some students and/or their parents to accept the fact that the rigor of the university is not a good match for every student. Sometimes a smaller college or vocational training provides a better experience for some individuals, but some perceive that attending a university is more prestigious despite the extent of their struggles.

My related questions of ‘how well prepared are *you* to assist a distressed student’ and ‘do you have a family member or friend who has struggled with one or more of these issues’ provided more insight to the topic of awareness. The three respondents who had experience with

a relative or friend navigating mental health concerns were better informed on these issues and less surprised at the extent of the disruption that depression, relationship problems, eating disorders and sexual orientation uncertainty, can cause in an young adult's life. All three of these respondents also noted the wide range of distress many of these issues cause and that the stress of midterms and finals seemed to reduce many students' ability to cope with school and life in general. The respondents who had dealt with distressed students in the past all felt better prepared to assist future students with counseling issues and were more familiar with campus resources and the protocol for responding to distressed and distressing students. All respondents expressed concern about the varying degrees of depression and questioned how to tell when 'being sad and stressed-out' crossed over to clinical depression. My suggestion was to refer students to counseling, as only a medical professional can make, and address, that determination.

Mechanisms need to be developed for annual dialogs and training sessions on responding to students with counseling issues. Graduate students in teaching assistant positions, library and recreation staff, parking services and computer lab monitors and others in non-academic roles need to be included in these sessions, as well as the faculty. We need to be reminded to trust our gut instincts and when we sense that a student is troubled, we need to react! If anyone suspects that a student needs counseling, we need to gently approach the student and start a conversation. Some students fail to thrive at the university because they are unable to make connections with other students, with their professors and are unable or unaware of how to get help. We need to talk openly on campus about mental health issues to help de-stigmatize these conditions so that students can feel strong and empowered, rather than weak, when they seek help. We need to educate new students and their parents of the potential personal struggles that can occur during college and clearly identify how to find campus resources that can assist students with

counseling issues so that they can remain in school. We need to show students that we care about their whole education, both inside and outside the classroom.

Henry David Thoreau's statement "it is not what you look at, but what you see" reminds me that all too often college students are 'looked' at as a group rather than 'seen' as individuals. Although we can learn from generalizations about college student trends based on aggregate data, college personnel need to remember that each student is truly unique. We need to be better educated on responding to distressed and distressing students, increase our awareness of the current counseling issues facing our students and to utilize the wide selection of available campus and community resources. Counseling issues need to be addressed immediately, sensitively and individually. Psychosocial maturity and intellectual growth are intricately intertwined and the academic environment is enriched by the holistic growth of the faculty, as well as the well-rounded development of each, and every, student.