

THE ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS REGARDING COUNSELING SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

Student Counseling is very important to the well being of the students. The purpose of this research is to investigate students' attitudes and perceptions regarding counseling services offered to help them to adjust to academic and social demands at tertiary level.

A qualitative study was done through semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires. A representative sample was drawn from the 1500 students at the institutions. The analyzed data indicated that the students in this study were relatively optimistic about seeking counseling and about the positive effect of counseling offered. It is however recommended that the counselor should be more available for emergencies – which implicated more staff and better advertisement of the services available.

1. INTRODUCTION

Student Counseling in general has been a supportive tool to a lot of students who are first entering tertiary education and those who are returning as part-time and working students. Literature about student counseling as a profession is well documented, but the evaluation of this profession by its primary receivers, i.e. students has not received much attention.

Earwaker (1992) postulates that many students who attend tertiary education are faced with a lot of problems that they try to deal with independently. These problems range from ordinary troubles of daily living (e.g. physical health, accommodation, emotional problems, etc.) to a further set of problems associated with student life (e.g. academic difficulties, study problems, course choice and career decisions). Rana (2000) therefore pointed out that counseling should be available at all times to most students and that there is a need at times for brief and concise interventions. She further pointed out that counselors are faced with scenarios where students come for help at the last minute before exams and this reflects the entirely ambivalent attitude of many students to their need for help. It is therefore very important to investigate student's attitude towards counseling and the outcome thereof.

2. THE NATURE OF STUDENT COUNSELING

In considering what student counseling entails, Ta it (1995, p.236), said that each institution has a unique task and no general schemes can be drawn up on an international or even national basis. The work of a higher education student counselor should be seen to comprise of two main functions. The first is individualized formal counseling and the other institutional work.

In brief the nature of personal counseling according to Beneke (1999) can be summarized as follows: preventive, developmental, diagnostic, supportive, problem-solving, therapeutic, referral and collaborative. The institutional work includes: resource creation and management, policy development and adjustment, academic interaction and collaboration, teamwork and networking. Although this guidelines provide a good measure of starting an investigation, it should be noted that each individual institution needs to review its policy regarding counseling by asking the students who are the recipients of these services about what should be improved and what is it that they prefer, which is not included in the counseling service delivery.

It is therefore important that the demands that the higher education sector might require from the student in terms of emotional development should be balanced against what the counseling set up can provide (Rana, 2000). The current restructuring of the higher education system in South Africa needs institutions to look at cutting down costs and this has also impacted on the student support services in such a manner that it at times leads to ineffectively and inefficient address of the most pressing issues of the students.

3. TYPICAL STUDENT PROBLEMS

A survey done among students in American institutions of higher learning indicated that students have noted stress as the number one impediment to academic life (American College Health Association, 2003). Although this study was done in America, this finding proves to hold true to South Africa as well, because the number of cases reported at most counseling services in South Africa also point to this finding. Flisher, De Beer & Bokhorst (2002) in their study with University of Cape Town students also alluded that stress is the key issue that brings people to counseling at that institution.

The American College Health Association (2003) found in their survey the following as the top 10 indicators to academic performance: stress, cold, flu, sleep difficulties, concern for family or friend, relationship difficulties, depression, anxiety, internet use, sinus infection, death of family or friend and alcohol abuse.

4. NON-USE OF COUNSELING SERVICES

Students are a highly sensitive group to do counseling with and care should be taken to make sure that they do not perceive counseling to mean failure on their part. Flisher, De Beer & Bokhorst (2002) noted that only a small proportion of university students suffering from mental health problems receive counseling services. This indicates that in general students perceive going for counseling to be admission of failure to deal with their problems.

Flisher, De Beer & Bokhorst (2002) indicated the following as reasons for non-use of counseling services by students with mental health problems:

- a) Low expectations of benefiting from counseling;
- b) A negative attitude to the counseling service;
- c) An absence of information about the existence of the service or the services it could provide;

- d) A disbelief that their problems were sufficiently important to explore with a counselor;
- e) Concerns about confidentiality;
- f) A fear of being uncomfortable or awkward in the counseling situation, and
- g) A belief that it is better to solve one's own problems without relying on a professional person (p.299-300).

Accordingly, research was conducted to investigate the attitude of the CUT, Welkom Campus' students towards counseling.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was deemed most useful for this study. The approach affords research participants an opportunity to define their own perceptions and feelings about the counseling services.

For the sake of this research data has been collected through using interviews and questionnaires. A representative sample of full-time and part-time students studying at the CUT Welkom Campus was drawn. Students were volunteers in the study and confidentiality was respected. Most students were blacks, the average age of the sample was 22, 56% were female and 44% male students. Most participants lived at home.

The procedure used in capturing data for this study was done through collecting all returned questionnaires and documenting all responses given by the students to get a general idea of what they think about counseling. In the case of the interview with the student counselor the data was captured by writing down what the counselor said during the interview. The procedure for editing data that was given entailed revisiting all the documents from the respondents and rechecking them so that a qualitative analysis was well done.

6. RESULTS

The results on questions specifically dealing with how students view counseling are as follow:

Question 23 - deals with how students think counseling should be provided at their campus:

- 60% of the sample regarded the provision of counseling services to be done by the student counselor;
- 25% feels that they should consult the student assistant or tutor for counseling.

Question 24 – asks students what they will do when in need of Counseling:

- 71% of students feel that they will contact a peer helper or somebody
- 20% will consult the student counselor.

The question on how likely are students to go for counseling if they have a problem creates the following responses:

- 44% very likely
- 18% likely
- 52% unlikely
- 25% very unlikely

Question 26 was about what problem will let them go for counseling and has the following results:

- Depression 38%
- Examination Anxiety 25%
- Stress 19%
- Other problems 18%

Question 27 was about student's attitudes towards the positive outcome of counseling:

- 45% very good
- 30% good
- 8% not so good
- 7% bad

Question 30 evaluates student's willingness to take part in projects attached to the student-counseling department:

- 73% indicate that they are positive

Question 33 ask about possible improvements the students wanted and the results were the following:

- The counseling department should provide the student with information brochures about the kind of services they offer on campus.
- The counseling service should look at teaching students about how to be a successful student by teaching them better studying skills.
- There should be more workshops by the student-counseling department to teach them job-hunting skills and how to approach job interviews.
- The student counseling should also organize employment or career exhibition workshops with prospective employers.

Question 34 rating the factors on how important they are for students to attend counseling:

- Severity of the problem was rated high on the scale (44%)
- Concern for the future was rated second on the scale (30%)
- Difficulty in schoolwork was rate third best (14%)
- Desire for help (6%) and

- Need for support (5%)

7. DISCUSSION

From the data that was given and analyzed it appears that the students in this study were relatively optimistic as a group about the counseling services. The following students seek more help: females, first years, students between 18 □ 24, from Economic and Management Faculty, undergraduates, those that need financial assistance and foreign students.

8. SHORTCOMINGS OF STUDY

There are several limitations to this study. Generalization of the findings is limited by both the nature of the inquiry and by the geographical restrictions of the sample. It must be mentioned that what applies to this particular campus might not be the true reflection of the trends happening in other higher education institutions of this country.

Qualitative interviewing provides rich data and participant's perceptions of a given condition; however it limits the findings to comparable contexts and comparable participants. Because the study involved self-administered questionnaire by students, the respondents may not have expressed their actual beliefs and opinions as the questionnaire was long and demanded a lot of tasks to complete. The other issue is the interview with the counselor which might have been flawed by the fact that it was done on short notice and this could have affected the quality of the answers given.

While the researcher took precautions to avoid bias, it is possible that bias did exist due to the fact that the researcher is also a student and therefore the questions could be biased towards the advantage of students' opinion. It must also be borne in mind that data was collected with the researcher indirectly taking part as an observer.

9. CONCLUSION

Student Counseling should not be something external to the higher education institution's teaching and research functions. In other words it is not an exogenous to the traditional roles and functions of the higher education institutions. Rather it is an essential and integral part of the trade of the institution, the student and the counselor.

The success of student counseling services rest on the co-operation between management, students and the student counselor.

It is estimated that an average higher education student in his/her student life grows emotional and academically through dealing with several life crises stages. Typical problems included stress, homesickness, financial worries, anxiety, depression, study problems, relationship difficulties, etc. Students also are not so willing to seek help because they feel they should be able to solve their own problems and also due to a lack of knowledge about the counseling services available.

In this study the students were relatively positive about the counseling services, although 25% doesn't know what are offered on campus.

As a result indicated that more knowledge about the counseling services rendered on Campus must be given to students. The counselor must also be more available for emergencies, which implicate that more staff is needed in order to serve the students needs better. The counseling department must constantly strive to be informed of the unique service it is required to provide for the students.

It is hoped that this research has proved some changes in the way researchers will view evaluation of counseling offered at higher institutions by getting feedback from its primary users who are the students.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations reflected here are extracted from the findings in this investigation.

Firstly, for the student-counseling department, the recommendations are as follows:

- The student-counseling department should consult with and actively employ the services of the Public Relations Department in the internal marketing of its services to the staff and student alike.
- The counseling department must constantly strive to be informed of the unique service it is required to provide for the students.
- The counselor should be more available for emergencies, which mean that there should be more than one counselor at this institution in order to serve the needs of the students better.

Secondly, in terms of the institutional recommendations there should be enough funding, staffing, technology and networking powers to help the counseling service.

Thirdly, for the part of research recommendations, the following should be done:

- A survey of students counseling practices worldwide would provide valuable insights about these fields.
- Students' needs and evaluation of counseling provided should be reviewed.
- Students' counseling department should actively participate in projects where the perceptions and patterns of student behaviour are researched or entertained.
- It is hoped that this research has probed some changes in the way the researcher will view how to evaluate counseling offered at higher institutions by getting feedback from its primary users who are the students.

11. REREFERENCE LIST

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