Challenges and issues related to counselling referral in higher education – the professors’ perspectives

Steven Ng
Counsellor
A member of SMU
Diversity & Inclusion Committee
Singapore Management University

Year 2000
Vibrant city campus
10,000
Accountancy, Business, Economics, Information Systems, Law & Social Sciences
Counselling Centre

2004
4 counsellors
Undergrads, postgrads & exchange students
SMU Peer Helpers training
Self care

Pathways to RESILIENCE

PHYSICAL
- Health Wellness
- Biofeedback

INTELLECTUAL
- Goals Setting
- Problem-Solving Skills

SOCIAL
- Building Relationship
- Conflict Management

EMOTIONAL
- Managing Feelings Well
- Develop Positive thinking

Resilience
Background

A pilot project helmed by 2 SMU counsellors

No prior research conducted on perspectives of teaching faculty members regarding counselling referral in higher education

IRB approval
Literature Review

Transition

Stressors:
Financial
Academic
Employment
Relationship

(Julal, 2013)
Literature Review

Drastic outcomes:

- Psychological Performance
- Inability to progress
- Dropping out

(Bennett & Bigfoot-Sipes, 1991)
School counselling services impacted directly and vastly by educators (Nugent, 1990)

Withholding of confidential information (Bell, 2002)

Perspectives influence referrals (Beale 2003; Clark & Amatea, 2004)

Educators’ expectations (Low, 2009)
Objective of Study

Analysed input of two individual professors

Approaches, attitudes and understanding towards counselling referral of university students for their students at a university setting in Singapore.
Objective of Study

Discover challenges, gaps & affecting factors

Improvement for policy planning, process & services management

Stakeholders
Method

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

A purposive sampling: who had referred students for counselling

Semi-structured interview: 1.5 hrs
Voice recording/scribe

11 interview questions
Method

Examples:

What are your opinions or understanding towards counselling referral?

What are some of the barriers that stop or create difficulty for helping a student?

What role do you think you play in helping a student under distress?

What are some suggestions or areas that might be helpful in improving mental health/counselling support for students?
Participants

Both male full-time professors working at the same University.

T1 - more than 10 years of teaching experience

T2 - more than 20 years of experience.
Results

Three main category themes:

Knowledge

Challenges

Support
Referral Roles
Comfort Level
Encouragement
Awareness on students’ matter
Lack of knowledge
Students’ Resistance
Stigma
Lack of staff Cohesiveness
Dilemma
Awareness of support
Third party’s perspective

Thematic factors
Lack of professional knowledge on counselling

T1) Personally, I feel and think most of the colleagues don’t really know. We are not trained in this area, so we don’t really know the technique or appropriate advice in a particular situation. Most faculty staff are not aware of what to do if someone came up to them and ask for help. What information can we share? What is considered sensitive to the student? Do I share with the counsellor or Dean? Issues related to emotional or mental aspects is an area whereby I feel handicapped.

T2) I don’t have the capacity to deal with someone and simply because I don’t have the time first of all and secondly, I don’t have the expertise. I recognise I don’t have the professional expertise to deal with it. I am not an expert in the area, sometimes I don’t feel like I have the deep understanding of the illness to know best how I could deal with the person. The academic staff are a bit backward in their understanding of counselling and its importance. Sometimes, it is the people like the new hire starting their first academic career who makes mistakes that affect our reputation.”
Stigma

T1) Something that the counselling centre has been trying to do. Removing that stigma. Traditionally if you see a counsellor or psychiatrist, you are seen as having a problem. Unless the professor gains the trust or the student is very comfortable sharing, it is hard to find out about the inner feelings and students. That is why a lot of us don't even know the students are having problems.

T2) Because I come from outside of Singapore, sometimes I'm surprised about the need to keep everything hush hush. What I find challenging is that the student is not willing to be open because of the shame. I would say it is more common to encounter those that are really closed off and just not willing to reveal even the slightest of what's going on for them. The other thing is the shame that I find often associated with mental illness. The word is shame, we just feel so ashamed about the fact that I am seeing a counsellor. Why should you be ashamed of that?
Students’ resistance

- **T1)** The issue which remains unresolved is sometimes when you advise students to get help from the counsellors, they refused. Even though you can try to help and follow-up yourself but you are not trained so I feel there is a gap what you do with students that refuse to go to counsellors.

- **T2)** I would say it is more common to encounter those (students) that are really closed off and just not willing to reveal even the slightest of what’s going on for them.
Dilemmas

T1) Typically for a professor, it is very difficult to find out because a lot of students see you as someone with authority. Unless over time, you become a friend to the students and that’s where students are more willing to open up. There is a distance between a professor and the students. I want to be careful in terms of keeping my distance. Other students might perceive that the particular student is getting more attention from you as an instructor who is going to give grades. If the student is taking your course, he or she might also be concerned about how you might see him or her and whether that might affect the grades.

T2) The most challenging one is someone who seems so all alone and so independent. That’s when I realised that something might go wrong if I get too involved in the case compared to if I refer them out. Especially as a male with female students, the first thing I want to do is to make sure that you have a female colleague involved as early as possible. So again those are the things you feel bad in one sense because you really want to give the person a hug or hold them, tell them is ok but no.
Awareness of support from counselling centre

T1) The counselling services provided by the student wellness centre was one of the first things we were told as a faculty. The centre also holds a successful peer helping program. I think that should be done, we should continue to advocate that. Recently, some talks that relieve stress is helpful.

T2) In my early days as an adjunct instructor, one of my students purposely sat in a chair in the corner instead of joining the team he was assigned. After 2 weeks, I contacted the administration and checked in with the counselling services in the school after knowing about it due to this case. It was clearly a case of an individual having mental health issues and not wanting it to be known. That’s how I become aware of it and ever since, I just refer them to the counsellor there. I really value the counselling services.
Provide a third party’s perspective

T1) Perhaps the faculty may not be the best person to talk to as the student may not want to reveal the weakness in front of your professor. Someone else like a counsellor, someone more independent with the system but not part of the equilibrium system I think that is probably more effective.

T2) Having a conversation with a professional help them to be more at ease with everybody else. So that is why I really value the professional counselling services. Because I think it’s almost like you are getting a third’s party input into your life, a third party’s perspective.
Results

Differences

Helpful, valued or useful

Areas for improvement

Consideration

Suggestions
Concerned Issues

Counselling
Mental health
Guidelines
Protocols
Recommendation

- Faculty briefing
- Workshops
- Support and outreach services
- Network
- Staying relevant with trends
- Referral information
- Clarity guidelines and protocols
- Active and constant efforts
Limitation

- Small sample size
- → collect quantitative data
Thank you for your kind attention!