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## Essential Counseling Knowledge and Skills to Prepare Student Affairs Staff to Promote Emotional Wellbeing and to Intervene With Students in Distress

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### Abstract

The focus on helping students transform their lives has emerged as part of the mission of many colleges and universities. Campus-based student affairs personnel contribute to this endeavor through their efforts to create a campus ecology conducive to supporting and promoting well-being and by their engagement with students in their time of need. These two types of involvement with students necessitate that graduate studies programs in student affairs educate future student affairs professionals in the knowledge base and, at times, the skill base essential to being effective in both population-focused and individual assistance. This article delineates several aspects of the counseling and health promotion knowledge base and related competencies students should acquire during their graduate program in student affairs. It divides the knowledge and skill base into activities that are primarily growth and prevention oriented and those that are focused on helping students resolve existing challenges commonly encountered during enrollment in college.

Establishing curriculum standards for graduate training of future student affairs professionals is a daunting task because the field of student affairs is both broad and substantially specialized. Further complicating the training mission for future practitioners is the need to train them in creating and implementing population-focused preventative programs, as well as conducting individual interventions with specific students. While an institutional job description might seem to confine a person's activity to only one of the two types of intervention, the reality is that the boundaries between these two types of intervention are permeable and fluid, such as when student affairs personnel who work with training and supporting student leaders come into contact with someone who is in distress. This article describes the important foundational counseling and health promotion knowledge students should obtain during their graduate studies in student affairs and the essential counseling competencies that need to be acquired in order to successfully intervene with both individuals and populations of students. The counseling and health promotion knowledge and skills

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proposed herein are based on the notion that student affairs professionals have a dual mission: They not only deal with student distress and crises, they are also critical contributors to establishing an environment that is robust with opportunity to help students transform their sense-of-self to become more resilient and less self-defeating and to establish an enduring sense of wellbeing.

The reality of student's lives is that many of them really could benefit from transformation because some of them enter college with preexisting vulnerabilities and mental health struggles, others encounter distressing circumstances and events during attendance, and almost all of them are entering a collegiate environment that has higher performance demands both academically and interpersonally than their previous one. According to a recent survey of counseling center directors (Mistler, Reetz, Krylowicz, & Barr, 2012), 21% of counseling center clients present with severe mental health issues. Among college students surveyed in 2014 (American College Health Association, 2014), students reported having considerable distress over the past year: 86% felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, 59% felt very lonely, 33% felt so depressed it was difficult to function, 37% felt overwhelming anger, 8% seriously considered suicide, and 1% had attempted suicide. Additionally, only 12% of students said they had enough sleep to feel rested in the morning for six or more days a week, 22% of students had not engaged in even moderate aerobic exercise over the past week, and only 40% of students reported that they felt "very safe" during the nighttime on their campus.

Based on these results, we are not surprised that student affairs staff would spend much of their time helping students manage their distress and, at times, crises. What is abundantly clear from the distress levels students experience, however, is that campus counseling resources, even factoring in the assistance from other campus personnel, are unlikely to be scaled-up to the level necessary to address the magnitude of distress through the use of individual counseling methodology. The current attempts to help students in distress through better identification, referral, and treatment of them on a one-to-one basis, while important, is only part of the solution to student wellbeing.

Individual counseling services must be augmented with population-focused preventative efforts. Such population-oriented efforts require a basic shift in perspective of the intervener, one that involves changing focus from the individual to the characteristics of the ecology in which that person is embedded and how those environmental qualities either enhance growth and transformation or contribute to distress and decline. Ecological and proactive prevention efforts are major tools used to reduce the incidence within the student body of encountering unproductive stressors and trauma-inducing events that sap resilience and unnecessarily erode students' sense of well-being. We propose that knowledge about two major types of population-focused prevention is essential for student affairs professionals: ecological and proactive prevention.

### **Foundational Counseling and Wellness Promotion Knowledge Essential to Involvement in Ecological Prevention Activities**

Student affairs professionals have a long and strong history of helping develop pro-growth ecological conditions in which positive development can unfold and negative behaviors and events are minimized. Knowledge of the principles and change methodology associated with ecological prevention campaigns should be an essential feature of graduate training programs in student affairs. The fundamental goals of ecological prevention interventions are to adjust or change aspects of the physical and constructed environment to increase their contributions to emotional well-being and to modify or eliminate environmental facets that erode well-being. To accomplish this task, institutions of higher education typically use

community-wide organizational change efforts that are commonly directed at the constructed environment. The *constructed environment* is defined as the ecology created through the use of institutional legislative and policy-making authority, through ways institutional resources and assets are distributed, and through ways institutional systems and procedures impact the social, cultural, and interpersonal world in which students, faculty, and staff are surrounded, as well as the lifestyle choices they make that impact well-being.

Reengineering of the constructed ecology is designed to elevate the collective functioning of current and future populations that may inhabit it. Ecological changes made one year self-renew and, thereby, continue to provide beneficial assistance to students that enroll in subsequent years, making these changes an economical form of prevention and allows those interventions to persistently raise the overall level of functioning of the student body into the future. Frohlich and Potvin (1999) stated that when many people lower their risk, even a little, the total benefit for the population is larger than if a few people at high risk experience a large reduction. This finding is consistent with the notion that groups of individuals function collectively and, as such, are affected by the average functioning of individuals around them.

What is being called for here is to help student affairs graduate students develop foundational knowledge as well as an understanding of the change dynamics necessary for leadership in institutional efforts to promote a pro-growth ecology. We characterize such an environment as one in which well-being and personal transformation can emerge with greater frequency and stability, while minimizing unproductive episodes of distress. In particular, we propose that graduate education programs in student affairs expand on their established history of contributing to ecological prevention campaigns by promoting foundational knowledge in the following areas. First, aid graduate students to acquire a thorough understanding of the duration, timing, and change methodology associated with ecological prevention campaigns. Many ecological change efforts, such as the reduction of racism on campus, require long-term institutional commitments and are often implemented over decades because they are typically directed at problems or issues that may have no ultimate solution but rather require continuous management. Second, students should obtain foundational knowledge about how governmental entities and colleges utilize legislative authority, policy-making powers, and systems modifications as elements of a comprehensive change strategy to improve ecological contributions to well-being (e.g., medical amnesty programs, anti-discrimination policies, first-year student learning communities, interpersonal violence reduction programs). Third, students should have an understanding of the primary targets of ecological change, including the following five key targets: reducing facets of the ecology that create unproductive distress, such as policies that may favor certain groups of students over others; decreasing the prevalence of stressors capable of stimulating posttraumatic stress reactions that can create long lasting vulnerabilities to physical and emotional wellbeing, such as interpersonal violence; building recovery support programs to prevent relapse of disorders with high relapse rates such as substance abuse, depression, eating disorders, and suicidality; diminishing the prevalence and prominence of socially destructive stressors to the point that they no longer freely circulate within the population without being challenged by its members, such as racism or date rape; and infusing the environment with opportunities for students to develop a positive sense of belongingness, meaningfulness, and self-efficacy.

### **Foundational Counseling and Psychoeducational Knowledge Essential to Effective Involvement in Proactive Prevention**

Regardless of how successful ecological prevention interventions are, campuses require a second wave of population oriented prevention programming to reduce the incidence of adverse events any student might

encounter and to safeguard students who enter our institutions with preexisting vulnerabilities to the deleterious effects of stressors. Proactive prevention interventions are designed to boost protective factors that support development and mitigate risk factors that degrade development. They are considered a second wave because they often are built upon earlier-implemented ecological prevention interventions and serve to reinforce the impact of those efforts to promote a positive, growth-enhancing environment.

While proactive prevention programs are often linked to ecological change campaigns, they differ from ecological prevention interventions in several important ways. First, they are population specific and must be reapplied each year as the student body changes. Second, they are generally directed at specific subpopulations of the larger student body, such as first-year orientation programs, first-year student learning communities, and new student alcohol education requirements. Third, they rely on different change methodology. Unlike ecological change endeavors that primarily rely on legislation, policy changes, and systems interventions, proactive prevention almost exclusively utilizes psychoeducational programming of varying degrees of complexity, duration, and assumptions about students' readiness for change.

The need for proactive prevention programs is often rooted in diathesis-stress or differential susceptibility theory, which posits that people vary in how aspects of their environment or events they encounter impact their well-being. People with preexisting vulnerabilities to stressors are seen as generally having higher risk for an adverse outcome. Therefore, the overarching goals of proactive prevention programs are to reduce the prevalence of events students might encounter that can add to long-lasting increases in vulnerability to future stressors and to decrease the likelihood that already vulnerable individuals will intersect with some preventable trauma inducing encounter.

In particular, we propose that graduate education programs in student affairs should provide their students the foundational knowledge essential to construct and implement proactive prevention interventions to targeted subpopulations of the student body. First, curricula should include promotion of a basic understanding of the theories of both the stress-diathesis model and differential susceptibility hypothesis. Second, curricula should involve an understanding of readiness for change models, such as the stages of change model proposed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983). Third, curricula should outline the required knowledge about the various modalities to instruct students in how to deliver psychoeducational population-focused programs, in particular, when such delivery should consist of self-assessments either online or in-person formats and when to employ passive, active, or interactive programming, such as brochures, workshops, peer theater approaches, classroom modules, or specially tailored credit-bearing courses. Fourth, curricula should help students understand how the foundation for the success of proactive prevention programs is facilitated by some prior use of ecological change methodology, such as institutionally crafted legislation or use of policy-making authority. Last, curricula should be grounded in a research methodology whereby student affairs staff can measure the results of their interventions.

### **Foundational Counseling Knowledge and Skills Central to Helping Students Address Needs and Personal Distress**

Regardless of how successful ecological and proactive prevention interventions are, a third wave of more individually tailored interventions is required to address problems, challenges, and vulnerabilities that arise or are aggravated during a student's enrollment in college. Shifting to the foundational knowledge and skills needed to effectively intervene one-on-one with students, we propose that when student affairs professionals intervene with students, they should attempt to do so with the goal of helping students operate

at their optimal level with the least intervention necessary. This section of the article will review foundational counseling knowledge and advisory skills needed for one-on-one interventions, highlighting skills informed by a counseling perspective and distinguishing between working with students in distress and those in crisis.

### **Distinguishing Between a Student in Distress vs. Crisis**

Student experiences with distress and crisis can often be distinguished by the nature of the events that drive the student reaction. In general, distress tends to develop over time and is typically preceded by unsuccessful attempts by students to manage the build-up of stressors in their life. With students in distress, intervention focuses on helping them activate their own sources of resiliency and encouraging growth without doing more than is needed for the student. Those working with distressed students can often help them the most by letting them sit with some distress, refrain from managing their lives for them, and help them reconnect with their internal and community resources to return to self-sufficiency. Crisis states, however, are more often triggered by an overwhelming or traumatic event that propels students into situations where their coping skills are insufficient to enable them to manage their circumstances. Students in crises may not be competent to immediately manage their affairs, and there is often a concern for their safety or well-being. Crisis situations require more intensive care and directive intervention, as well as referral to a mental health professional.

More important than distinguishing between distress and crisis, as it is not always clear, is understanding that students experience stress on a continuum from low levels of stress through high levels of distress, including suicidal crisis. Those seeking to intervene with students must start with solid interview skills to determine where on this continuum of stress, distress, and suicidality their students lie, including the potential risk of self-harm and the likelihood the students will regain their ability to cope in time to manage their current situation.

### **Intervening with Students in Distress**

Many of the counseling interventions in which non-mental health specialist student affairs professionals engage fall within the domain of helping distressed students. For instance, they help stabilize students by providing support and giving suggestions such as the need to sleep, eat, and exercise, helping students communicate needs more effectively, and working with students to think through the problems facing them. They also encourage broader help seeking as they shepherd the person through the troubling event and help the student develop skills and access resources to improve his or her ability to cope. This role assumed by non-mental health specialist student affairs professionals is unique on campus. These professionals are different than licensed mental health providers in that they are often not fully trained or certified to engage in mental health counseling, and yet they more frequently intervene on a deeper, more complex level than other staff on campus, such as advisors and faculty.

To intervene effectively in the lives of distressed students, graduate programs in student affairs must provide their graduate students with a basic understanding of the principles associated with several prominent counseling theories and attain a cluster of skills related to the overall process of counseling students on an individual basis. At the heart of the counseling process is a set of counseling interview skills crucial to guiding the self-discovery process and developing a clear understanding of students' sources of distress as well as their available resources to cope with their circumstances. Many professional counselors

operate from a belief central to humanist theory that their clients are experts on themselves and the counselor is an expert in helping them navigate the various elements of the self-discovery and change process. Students do not engage counselors as blank slates ready to be enlightened. They come with experiences, knowledge, and skills that hold considerable sway on how they see their world and what they may perceive as their potential responses to their situation (see Swanbrow Becker & Drum, 2015, for an illustration of how students' prior experiences impact campus interventions). Positive intervention starts with developing a thorough awareness of the students' understanding of their problems, their attempts to solve them, their internal and interpersonal resources, and their goals.

The first step in the helping process lies in understanding the student's core issues and developing rapport. Schein (2009) noted that,

at the beginning of any helping relationship, and throughout its life, what is crucial is not the content of the client's problem or the helper's expertise, but the communication process that will enable both to figure out what is actually needed. (p. 66)

Helpers must understand the interpersonal dynamics students face of "being one down" by asking for help, and the helper must work to equalize the relationship in a supportive, giving, and ego-enhancing way (Schein, 2009). Those trained in conducting individual counseling sessions quickly learn that clients will often test the waters by sharing some information with their helper but withhold the core, more vulnerable information until trust is built.

The second step of the helping process is to utilize a collaborative process with the client to arrive at a mutual understanding of the problem at hand and to reach an understanding of the interventions needed. For instance, do the students have clear academic or career goals? Do they have clear goals but lack the understanding of the potential impact of current behaviors on those goals? Do the students need help increasing their self-esteem or self-compassion to help them cope with stress better? Do the students need specific skills, such as time management or communication skills to help them function more effectively? Do the students need social support to help them connect with resources, friends, and attach to a group with shared interests? More often than not, the answers to these questions are not clear-cut as, for instance, there may be aspects of students that may influence them to succeed in school academically while other aspects drive them to connect socially in ways that may hurt their academics. A skilled student affairs professional will help elicit these competing urges and help students balance their desires.

As the student's core problems and personal resources for resolving those problems become clear, and an effective collaborative alliance has been established, counseling skills becomes the third crucial component of the helping relationship. For example, training in the principles of cognitive-behavioral theory (see Beck, 2011) would help student affairs staff understand the influence of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors on students' view of themselves, others, and their futures. Additionally, fundamental knowledge and competence in the use of motivational interviewing (see Miller & Rollnick, 2012) provide a means to successfully shift from understanding the students' concerns and establishing goals, to moving toward supporting the students' ability to take action. Becoming knowledgeable about the principles of motivational interviewing provides helpers with an understanding that students face ambivalence when confronting change. Helping students understand that their ambivalence to make changes reflects the presence of competing motivations can pave the way to fuller participation by the students in the change process. An effective, lasting change process entails helping students explore their reasons to change or not change and learning to take steps to improve their lives, often by testing out new ways of behaving.

## Intervening with Students in Crisis

A crisis state is often stimulated by some seismic personal event or awareness and marked by unsuccessful efforts to mitigate or terminate the crisis experience. Crises states are typically accompanied by feelings of being overwhelmed and a high sense of personal misery. Research on college students reveals that suicidal students tend to turn to people already in their life, notably their peers and family for support, rather than initially pursue mental health counseling (Drum, Brownson, Burton Denmark, & Smith, 2009).

Since the work of student affairs professional staff brings them into contact with students in distress and crisis more frequently than other college personnel, they are often sought out for advice and counsel when students are feeling overwhelmed. Also, student affairs staff may not always trust students will attend counseling once they leave the counselor's office. For these situations, student affairs staff requires a higher level of skill to move to the next level of intervention by learning to engage students in crisis in dialogue. Graduate education programs in student affairs must therefore provide basic counseling knowledge regarding how to identify when a student is in crisis, recognize warning signs indicating that risk of self-harm may be imminent, and teach best practice methods for making successful referrals. To prepare student affairs professionals for this role, they must improve their inquiry skills to better engage students, crisis stabilization skills to help restart the student's ability to cope and reduce risk for harm, and motivational interviewing skills to engage the student in a change process.

## Conclusion

Significant challenges confront emerging student affairs staff as the campus landscape continues to change. A major challenge lies in how to promote student mental health when insufficient numbers of counseling staff professionals are available to provide individualized mental health services for the ever increasing need for student mental health care. To create campuses that help students thrive, student affairs professionals must be well prepared to engage in population-focused prevention work, as well as trained to intervene individually with students. Since some elements of the foundational knowledge and skills described in this article are already a focus of graduate education programs in student affairs, what we are proposing is to draw the elements together and supplement them as necessary in two dedicated courses. One would focus on building counseling knowledge and skills to support one-to-one intervention, and the other would be designed to build knowledge and skills to further population-focused prevention. The development of curricula informed from a counseling and emotional well-being perspective will prepare graduate students in student affairs to step confidently into their roles as agents of change on campus.

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