

## POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN PRACTICE: FOSTERING MENTAL WELLNESS AMONG UNIVERSITY COUNSELORS

Fang Yuan<sup>1</sup>

### Article Info

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### Abstract

This research delves into the underexplored realm of college counselors' mental health, shedding light on a crucial aspect of higher education. While major universities have made commendable strides in prioritizing mental health education for college students and accumulating substantial research in this domain, there exists a conspicuous dearth of attention directed towards the mental well-being of college counselors. This lacuna is especially concerning given the pivotal role counselors play in nurturing the emotional and psychological growth of students.

This study addresses this gap by examining the mental health of college counselors, shedding light on the unique challenges and pressures they face in their roles. We investigate the turnover rate among counseling professionals, recognizing it as a tangible indicator of the strains and difficulties they encounter, often prompting some to opt out of the counseling profession altogether. Additionally, we delve into the experiences of counselors who choose to remain in their positions, unveiling the internal conflicts that can substantially dampen their work enthusiasm and overall life satisfaction.

Furthermore, this research acknowledges the complex interplay of various factors in shaping the psychological well-being of college counselors. It is evident that these dedicated professionals, exposed to the emotional needs of students, inevitably grapple with their own psychological issues. Therefore, it is imperative to prioritize the mental health concerns of college counselors, recognizing that addressing these issues not only benefits the counselors themselves but also enhances their ability to provide effective support to students.

<sup>1</sup> Guangzhou Huashang College, Guangzhou, China

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing attention on the mental health education of college. Major universities have prioritized the work of mental health education for college students, and have made numerous research achievements in this field. The government has also issued regulations and documents. However, there has been little focus on the mental health of college counselors. Scholars have conducted limited research on the mental health of college counselors, and colleges and universities have not given sufficient attention to the mental health of counselors. The turnover rate among counseling professionals reflects to some extent the pressures they face, leading them to choose to leave the counseling profession. Some counselors who remain in their positions experience internal conflicts, which significantly affect their work enthusiasm and life satisfaction. Under the influence of various factors, they inevitably develop certain psychological issues. Therefore, their mental health problems must be given high attention.

## 2. The Application Value of Positive Psychology in the Mental Health of University Counselors

During times of social transition, societies undergo comprehensive reforms that bring about both opportunities and challenges. As these reforms introduce additional sources of stress, university counselors have experienced varying degrees of mental health issues. Positive psychology focuses on highlighting individuals' inherent strengths, studying positive psychological qualities, and harnessing human potential. Therefore, by applying positive psychology principles to the mental health of counselors, their perspectives on problem-solving can undergo a qualitative transformation, resulting in shift in emotions and an increase in positive affect. Consequently, this facilitates a smoother execution their work.

## 3. Current Status of Mental Health among University Counselors

### 3.1 Emotions Prone to Anxiety

Anxiety is an intense feeling of tension and unease that individuals experience when facing significant events that they are unsure how to handle. It represents a heavy psychological burden. <sup>[1]</sup>University counselors face anxiety arising from multiple factors. Firstly, the diverse roles they play contribute to their anxiety. Counselors often encounter different expectations from various roles they fulfill. Balancing the role of a manager and a trusted friend to students can create conflicts, making it challenging to strike a balance between these two roles. Secondly, anxiety arises from the skills and competencies counselors possess. They are required to have knowledge in fields such as education and psychology, yet, in reality, many lack expertise in these areas, making it difficult for them to achieve optimal results in their work. Lastly, anxiety stems from the low social status of counselors. Within the school setting, counselors occupy the lower rungs of the hierarchy, handling numerous tasks without receiving sufficient recognition from superiors, leading to uncertainties about their future and generating anxiety.

### 3.2 Psychological Fatigue Resulting from Prolonged High-Stress States

University counselors are entrusted with nine major responsibilities, one of which involves managing unforeseen events. However, many counselors transition directly into their roles after graduating from college, lacking awareness and adequate training to handle crisis situations effectively. This knowledge gap, coupled with the absence of proper training mechanisms in some universities, can lead to significant psychological trauma for counselors when faced with unexpected emergencies. Additionally, counselors typically prioritize providing focused support to students who require special attention, necessitating continuous monitoring of their progress and immediate intervention in critical situations. It is important to note that students who become the primary focus of psychological support often originate from troubled families, further complicating the counselor's role. Moreover, counselors experience additional psychological burdens due to concerns about not being able to reach the scene of a crisis promptly. Although counselors' contact information is made available to all students, it is not uncommon for students to call counselors even in non-crisis situations, adding to their psychological workload and contributing to mental fatigue. Addressing these

challenges is crucial to alleviate counselors' psychological burden, prevent burnout, and foster a more proactive approach to their work. Further research and the establishment of comprehensive training programs are needed to equip counselors with the necessary skills to navigate crisis situations efficiently.

### **3.3 Challenges Hindering the Effectiveness and Motivation of University Counselors**

The work of university counselors is highly demanding and complex, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness through quantitative measures. This lack of clear evaluation criteria directly hampers the professional development of counselors. On one hand, there is no differentiation among counselors within the same department regardless of the quantity or quality of their work, which significantly undermines their motivation. On the other hand, compared to other positions, the scope of a counselor's responsibilities is too broad, preventing them from deepening their expertise in a specific field. Consequently, counselors often find themselves on the fringes between teaching and administrative duties, leading to a sense of frustration. Furthermore, students and parents may perceive counselors as having ample free time, which can result in unreasonable demands being placed upon them. Such misconceptions further contribute to counselors feeling undervalued and demotivated in their work. Addressing these challenges requires establishing clear evaluation criteria that recognize the contributions of counselors and the importance of their role. Moreover, fostering a better understanding among students, parents, and the wider community regarding the value and complexity of a counselor's work is essential.

### **3.4 Interdepartmental Role Ambiguity and Conflict in University Counseling: An Analysis of Emotional Strain and Friction**

Throughout history, university counselors have been characterized by their diverse roles, boundary-less responsibilities, and heavy workload. They are tasked with various duties such as ideological education, psychological counseling, financial aid administration, and career guidance. Operating at the intersection of multiple departments, including the Student Union, Academic Affairs Office, Student Affairs Office, and Admissions and Career Services Office, counselors function within a comprehensive evaluation system while assuming multiple roles in education, management, and service provision. This complex landscape has led to a collective bias in understanding their contributions: any tasks involving student interaction become the responsibility of counselors, reducing their role to that of mere foot soldiers serving the broader educational agenda and performing administrative duties for various functional departments.

When each department perceives only student-related tasks as relevant to counselors, it inevitably results in an excessive workload for counselors, leading to interpersonal conflicts. Consequently, counselors find themselves trapped in a cycle of anger and resentment, exacerbated by a lack of recognition from leadership. This intensifies negative emotions and further exacerbates conflicts between counselors and their superiors.<sup>[2]</sup> To alleviate these challenges, it is crucial to establish clear lines of responsibility and redefine the counselor's role within the university structure. This can be achieved through effective communication, collaborative efforts among departments, and an appreciation of the unique contributions counselors make to the educational environment. Addressing role ambiguity and emotional strain will foster a more harmonious and productive working environment for both counselors and university staff.

### **3.5 The Impact of Job Stress on Sleep, Diet, and Negative Problem Perception among University Counselors**

The relentless demands of their profession expose university counselors to significant job-related stress, leading to limited opportunities for respite. Consequently, some counselors experience suboptimal health conditions, including mild sleep disorders and poor appetite, which in turn negatively affect their work performance. Over time, such burdensome circumstances push a portion of counselors to consider leaving their positions, either by seeking alternative roles within the institution or resigning altogether, as a means of liberating themselves from this high-pressure environment. Addressing the impact of job stress on counselors'

overall well-being is essential for both individuals and the universities they serve. It is crucial to create a supportive and nurturing work environment that recognizes the importance of self-care. Institutions can provide resources for stress management, wellness programs, and professional development opportunities to enhance counselors' resilience and job satisfaction. By fostering a positive work-life balance and prioritizing mental and physical health, universities can retain experienced counselors and promote their overall effectiveness in supporting student success.

#### **4. Analysis of the Causes of Mental Issues among University Counselors**

##### **4.1 The Expansion of University Counselors' Responsibilities**

Since the introduction of economic reforms and opening up, society has undergone profound changes, and educational reforms in universities have led to continuous transformations in the field of ideological and political education for college students. This expansion is evident in the ever-expanding scope of student affairs, encompassing virtually all aspects of their lives. For example, with the emergence of financially disadvantaged students, issues related to student loans have arisen. Additionally, challenges such as employment and career choices for graduates, romantic relationships among college students, and family circumstances also fall within the purview of university counselors.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, recent years have witnessed an increase in mental health issues among students as well as an expansion in university enrollments, without proportional increases in the allocation of counselors. Consequently, counselors find themselves responsible for a large number of students, leading to complexity and an increasing burden. These factors have resulted in a demanding work environment where counselors consistently operate under high levels of stress. The multifaceted nature of university counselors' roles necessitates a comprehensive understanding of their responsibilities. It is imperative to acknowledge the evolving needs of students and provide appropriate resources and support for counselors to effectively address these complex challenges. By recognizing the expanding scope of their work, universities can take steps to ensure that counselors are equipped with the necessary tools and support systems to fulfill their duties and promote the overall well-being of students.

##### **4.2 Limitations in the Career Development Prospects of Counselors**

Higher education institutions primarily focus on educational and instructional work, with limited policies concerning counselors. As a result, counselors have low status within schools and are not given due recognition, leading to restricted career development and low professional identity. Additionally, the nature of counseling work makes it challenging to quantify achievements, as their performance is not always acknowledged or rewarded, leading to a lack of motivation. Moreover, universities provide few policies that support the personal development of counselors, making it difficult for them to obtain teaching titles or opportunities to further their education. Unlike university faculty who can take time off to pursue doctoral degrees, most counselors are unable to do so, which contributes to their sense of professional confusion and limited career growth. The intense competition in society also adds pressure on young counselors in terms of finding partners, buying homes, and other life demands, further increasing their stress and causing psychological confusion.

##### **4.3 Lack of Personal Knowledge and Skills**

During the recruitment process, university counselors often have no specific professional requirements, resulting in a lack of specialization and difficulties in fulfilling the responsibilities of a counselor. Currently, most university counselors possess at least an undergraduate degree, but a significant portion of them lack knowledge in psychology and education. They are deficient in personal cultivation, knowledge level, and psychological resilience, which are essential qualities for counselors. With the development of the internet and the diverse sources of information available to college students, if their inner needs cannot be addressed by counselors, it may lead to a lack of respect towards counselors. Moreover, most counselors are recent graduates who lack necessary life experiences, making it challenging for them to handle various problems.

These factors ultimately contribute to a decreased sense of professional identity and accomplishment among university counselors and serve as additional reasons for the development of their psychological issues.

## **5. The Significance of Mental Health of University Counselors**

### **5.1 The Direct Impact of Counselors' Mental Health on the Healthy Growth of College Students**

One of the nine major responsibilities of counselors is to engage in mental health education and counseling. As college students interact with counselors on a daily basis, if counselors exhibit frequent negative emotions, it will have various repercussions on the students, leading to psychological instability and imperfect personality development. If counselors' own psychological confusion is not promptly addressed, it will also influence their perspective on issues and generate negative emotions towards students. If college students remain in a state of negative emotions for an extended period, their physical and mental well-being will struggle to reach their full potential. It is difficult to imagine how a counselor who cannot resolve their own psychological issues would be able to address students' psychological confusions. Only when counselors possess good mental resilience can they promote the cultivation of positive psychological qualities in college students.

### **5.2 The Counselors' Mental Health is Linked to Their Own Happiness**

The nature of counselors' work places them in a high-pressure environment for an extended period, making them susceptible to psychological distress and characteristics such as indifference towards students, leading to a low sense of job satisfaction. Furthermore, this psychological state can also impact their interactions with people around them, such as displaying anger and impatience when dealing with family members, thereby creating tension within the family.

### **5.3 The Mental Health Level of Counselors Affects the Mental Health of Colleagues in Higher Education Institutions**

Counselors engage in daily communication and collaboration with various departments within the university to carry out student-related work. If their mental health is poor, their negative emotions can result in low work efficiency, burdening other departments with additional tasks. Moreover, the contagious nature of emotions can also affect the mood of staff in other departments, thus undermining the establishment of a harmonious campus environment.

## **6. Positive Psychology Analysis of the Mental Health of Higher Education Counselors**

### **6.1 Enhancing Self-Positive Emotions**

Positive emotions refer to the pleasant subjective experiences individuals have, closely related to the satisfaction of their needs. Furthermore, it has been observed that individuals' perception and practical abilities require the utilization of positive emotions to expand and establish subjective well-being.<sup>[4]</sup> In the process of their work, counselors can, on one hand, enhance their focus and improve work efficiency, which can increase their sense of achievement. On the other hand, counseling is a profession that requires compassion. By attentively listening to students' needs and providing positive guidance, counselors can greatly enhance their own sense of happiness. At the end of each day's work, reflecting on positive experiences and accumulating positive emotions can effectively alleviate work pressure. Beyond work, except for emergencies, counselors should take some time to relax, set aside work temporarily, and engage in self-renewal activities to make their second job more efficient.

### **6.2 Fully Unleashing Personal Potential**

Counselors have various responsibilities that demand high overall qualities. However, they can focus more on their areas of expertise, delve deep into these fields, and enhance their competitiveness. Communication, collaboration, and mutual assistance among colleagues are important. Some counselors may be interested in psychology and can learn more about it, taking charge of school's mental health organizations and related work. Others may excel in practical and organizational abilities, taking responsibility for student organizations



and so on. Some counselors may have meticulous and patient traits, making them excellent in office document management and organization. By engaging in work we enjoy every day, we will not feel exhausted but rather find joy in it. In the process of continuously uncovering our own potential, we also find meaning in our work.

### **6.3 Adopting a Positive Psychological Perspective**

In our work, we inevitably encounter various challenges, which is the case for any job. Whether we adopt a positive or negative attribution depends entirely on ourselves. When we approach difficulties with a positive attribution, we understand that they are temporary, and we avoid excessive emotional exhaustion. When negative emotions overwhelm us, we tend to adopt an avoidance attitude, which hinders problem-solving. By shifting our perspective, we often find that problems are not as difficult as we initially thought. For instance, in our role as counselors, we may encounter situations where students frequently skip classes. Rather than viewing it negatively and labeling the student as useless, causing ourselves negative emotions, we can consider whether they are facing personal difficulties or experiencing a temporary lack of willpower. By providing encouragement and support, we can have an unexpected impact. Approaching our work with appreciation allows us to experience the joy of success. In conclusion, adopting a positive cognitive outlook enhances our confidence and enriches our emotions.

### **6.4 Actively Building a Social Support System**

In psychology, social support refers to specific interpersonal relationships that provide individuals with a sense of being respected, cared for, and loved.<sup>[5]</sup> Despite their busy schedules, higher education counselors should actively build their own social support systems. As social creatures, when we invest time, energy, and sincerity in building relationships with others, we can receive effective support during difficult times. Parents and friends can be valuable sources of social support for us.

Communicating with them when experiencing stress can bring us clarity and help.

### **6.5 Embracing Change and Challenging Oneself Positively**

The most challenging aspect for individuals is to change themselves. When we undergo self-transformation, we discover a different perspective in approaching problems. In our work, true security comes from within ourselves. When we embrace trying new things and fearlessly embrace change, we will witness a transformed self. We should avoid labeling ourselves, as the development of things is dynamic, and so are people. By using positive language to describe ourselves, such as "I can," "I can develop better relationships with students," "My organizational skills will improve," we cultivate a mindset of curiosity about the world and a commitment to lifelong learning, enabling us to adapt fully to various situations.

## **7. Conclusion**

As mental health issues among college students continue to gain attention, we must not overlook the psychological well-being of counselors who handle these issues. The mental health of college counselors not only affects their own happiness but also impacts student growth and contributes to the creation of a harmonious campus environment. Therefore, the application of positive psychology to the mental health of college counselors is urgent. College counselors should focus on enhancing their own resilience and approach their educational work from a positive perspective.

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