

## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: THE IMPACT OF AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS ON STUDENTS' CONCERNS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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This work is a reflection on the role of the Counseling Center (CC) at University level in addressing issues of common interest to youth. It is particularly researching the impact and effectiveness of awareness campaigns when addressed to youth (18-22 years old) as a receptive end. The paper will detail two awareness campaigns initiated by the Counseling Center at the University of Balamand. The first campaign entitled “*UOB recycles*” aims at spreading environmental awareness. “*UOB recycles*” was structured and implemented over a period of three years during which UOB students were fully involved in designing and implementing the campaign within the University as well as in the community. University students were the actual campaign managers and played the role of mentors to high school students of a younger age. The “*UOB recycles*” campaign adopted therefore an indirect approach to reach youth and pass its message across. The second campaign entitled “*Drugs Will Cost You More than Money*” was designed to address University students about drug abuse in a direct way. It was designed over a period of two years in which students were perceived as passive audience. A major function of the campaign was designed and implemented by the Office of Students Affairs in collaboration with specialists in the field. The paper will present a comparative study between the two campaigns. The impact of each campaign on students will be highlighted. The results of conducted focus groups adopting the Delphi methodology will be included. The paper aims to reflect on the challenges faced when disseminating any message to youth at this critical age.

**Keywords:** Awareness campaigns, Counselling, Direct approach, Indirect approach, Active recipient, Passive recipient.

### Background

Over the last decades, counseling has developed to become an integral part in education among other specialized services. Counseling centers at this time became a clear entity in academic institutions aiming to support students ever since their early years. The service is now seen as an essential educational obligation toward students at both the individual and group level. Unlike any other academic service it involves a personal factor of a very high degree and is built on mutual trust between the counsellor and the student. Its operation is by structure mostly of a passive nature which makes it highly challenging when it comes to student outreach. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that Lebanese students do not refer to counseling centers seeking help easily. The service is often confused with psychotherapy and hence accompanied by a cautious attitude (Jadayel& Iaaly, 2013).

The Counseling Center (CC) at University of Balamand aims to act as a support unit for the student body and to provide services that address their social, educational and emotional development needs (UOB, 2001).

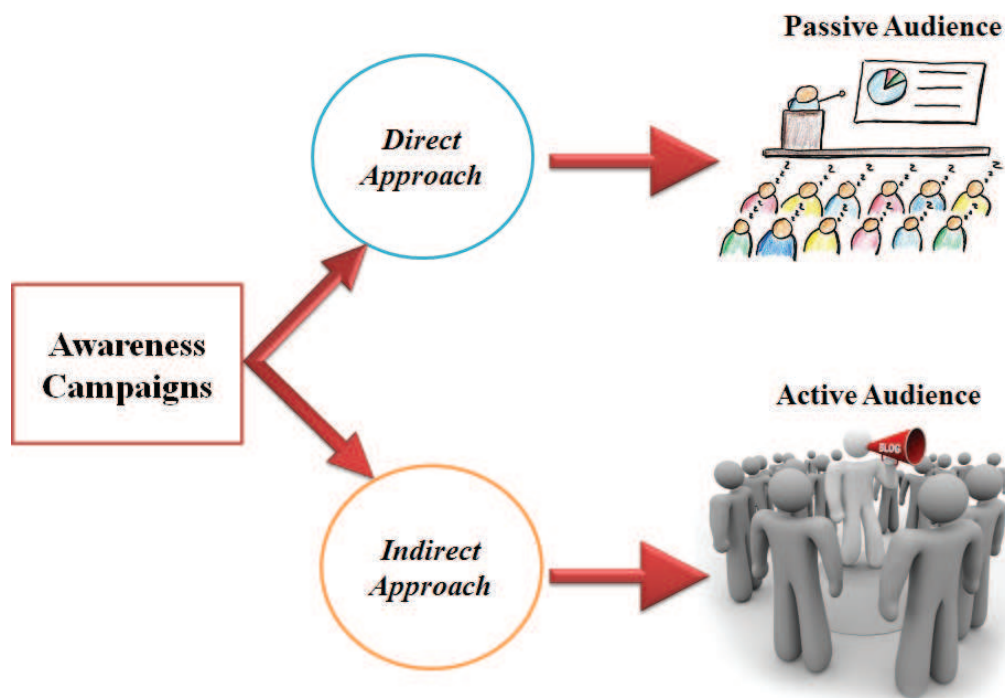
Realizing the sensibility of the service, over the last 4 years the Counseling Center has adopted an alternative approach to student counseling by developing a strategic plan aiming to optimize student outreach. The core of the plan was to shift to an active action in student counseling rather than passive support and reactive service. The center therefore aimed to address issues of common interest to the community and outreach students as a group and therefore initiate guidance and support on selected topics (Jadayel& Iaaly, 2013). Consequently, initiating, planning and implementing university wide awareness campaigns have become a main role of the center.

## Literature Review

This research differentiates between a direct and an indirect approach in designing awareness campaigns. A direct approach is one which perceives recipients as passive audience. The direct approach delivers information and passes a particular message in a forthright and direct way to the target group. It does not incorporate the engagement of the recipients in the schema of the campaign (Mabachi, 2008).

An indirect approach consists of partnering with the recipients in the schema of the campaign in its various stages. The aim is to convince the recipients indirectly about a particular cause, adopt it and come up with a mutual plan to disseminate a particular message. This approach depends on engaging the recipients in the core of the campaign. Such an approach, when successful, provides the recipients with a mature understanding of the cause and therefore allows them to accept the message smoothly and defend it. In this case we refer to the recipients as active audience.

Figure 1 symbolizes a visual representation of both the direct and indirect approach for conducting awareness campaigns leading to either passive or active audience.



**Figure 1.** Awareness Campaign Design / Direct Vs Indirect Approach

## Briefing and Objective

The work reflects on the challenges faced when disseminating any message to youth (aged 18-22). Its main objective is to emphasize the importance of active participation of youth in awareness campaign; this is achieved through partnering with, and engaging them in planning the designated awareness campaign. The active participation develops a sense of connection and commitment between the youth and the cause addressed by the campaign. This way the campaign become efficacious and does not lead to counter effective results (Collins, 2012).

To assess the effectiveness of the active and passive awareness campaign, a comparative study is conducted between two campaigns initiated by the CC at UOB.

The first campaign entitled “*UOB recycles*” aims at spreading environmental awareness. “*UOB recycles*” adopted an active approach through indirect awareness schema to reach youth and pass its message across. It was structured and implemented over a period of three years during which UOB students were fully involved in designing and implementing the campaign within the University as well as in the community. The second campaign entitled “*Drugs Will Cost You More than Money*” was designed to address drug abuse in a direct way. It was designed over a period of two years in which students were perceived as passive audience in some of its functions. Some parts of the campaign were designed and implemented by the Office of Students Affairs in collaboration with specialists in the field with minimal input from the student body.

The impact of each campaign will be highlighted additionally a modified plan for the second campaign will be presented based on focus groups results adopting the Delphi methodology.

## Designing Awareness Campaigns at University Level

The Counseling Center adopts an interactive technique in designing and implementing awareness campaigns. The methodology followed consists of partnering with active students for designing, advertising, and implementing the campaign. It is believed that in order to optimize student outreach, there is a need to move from the traditional stereotype of a student counselor who is basically passive, receptive, reactive, and stays in a cut off setting, to a more dynamic counselor who provokes and attracts students, one who is rather active, capable of speaking the students’ language and one who shares their worries. The counselor is then perceived as the leader of a support team who is always present, active and part of the University community (Jadayel & Iaaly, 2013).

### “UOB recycles”- Environmental Awareness: The Indirect approach/ Active Recipient

Recycling by definition is the act of processing used or abandoned materials for use in creating new products (Jadayel etc, 2011). Essentially, it is an attitude, a behavior that all citizens should develop and adopt as waste management is primarily a personal initiative in the absence of a global policy at the national level. While this awareness behavior in Lebanon is on the rise, more efforts are yet to be expended before it becomes effective. Educational institutions, NGOs and Municipalities may then provide proper framework for such an operation and hence play a major role in spreading this culture. In a country like Lebanon, the problem is managerial in as much as it is environmental. It is realized that in the absence of a general plan for recycling, efforts should be directed in two dimensions: (1) spreading environmental awareness and (2) setting an action plan for managing the process of recycling in general (Jadayel etc. , 2011).

“UOB recycles” is a moderate initiative that aims at spreading environmental awareness at the University and in its surrounding. The campaign was designed over a period of three years and consisted of two main activities:

- An environmental day organized at the beginning of the academic year.
- A thematic competition between teams from various schools aiming to spread awareness in their respective communities.

The backbones of the campaign design and implementation were students. They were perceived as potential managers, powerful evaluators, and most influential messengers in the society. They were entrusted in spreading awareness of the 3 R Culture on campus and in the community (Jadayel & Iaaly, 2011). Accordingly they connected to the cause and adopted it. University students formed cells with specific tasks: they planned, organized, gathered data, disseminated information, designed a webpage and projected the campaign on social media. Our students believed in the cause and acted as mentors to younger students at schools they shared their experiences with the younger teams, provided personal and technical support when needed and guided them throughout the year. The campaign was a great success over the designed period of implementation. Furthermore the impact of the campaign in the region is highly satisfying. We now are partners with many schools located in North Lebanon. Furthermore the project was very quick to gain the interest of the civil community and it overgrew to involve 400 partners from various sectors (municipalities, hospitals, restaurants, bookshops, supermarkets, households...).

It is believed that the Counseling Center succeeded in gaining the trust of the student body on this particular project. Furthermore collaboration was established to sustain the campaign and transform it into an independent project currently headed by students.

### **“Drugs Cost You More than Money” - Drug Awareness: The Direct approach/Passive Recipient**

“Drugs Cost You More Than Money” is another initiative at the University of Balamand that aims at spreading drug abuse awareness in its community. The topic is sensitive, critical and universal among this age group. The Lebanese law for narcotics states clearly that all narcotics (including hash) are illegal. During the last year, 3% of the arrests related to drug abuse, were university students. This percentage has been on the increase over the last few years which calls for more efforts towards awareness related to drug abuse among University and high school students. Furthermore, it is worth noting that our students believe that the Lebanese drug enforcement law is outdated. While the act is regarded strictly illegal by the Internal Security Forces, students perceive it as an adventure, interesting pleasurable experience and in extreme cases a peer pressure act.

Accordingly “Drugs Cost You More Than Money” was another initiative by the CC at the University of Balamand aiming at raising awareness related to drug abuse at this particular age. The “Drugs Cost You More Than Money” campaign started with a preparatory phase, in which students were highly engaged. The CC contacted a group of active students who adopted the cause and effectively designed a campaign over a period of two years consisting of two main activities to be repeated every year.

- An outdoor fair which was a student based event promoting healthy lifestyle.
- A panel which consisted of a forum of specialist from different fields addressing the students about drug abuse.

The Outdoor fair function proved to be highly successful all clubs and societies adopted the cause and came up with creative ideas, showed full commitment and were highly influential to their peers on campus as well as to high school students who were visiting the fair.

On the other hand, the panel discussion function didn't prove to be successful. In principle the panel aimed to address the students about drug abuse from various point of views (legal, social, medical, etc...). The idea was suggested by students themselves at the preparatory stage of the campaign. Moreover they suggested bringing in visitors and friends for testimonials and sharing experiences. As administrators we were extra cautious about any unmonitored participation or open discussion on such a sensitive topic. Consequently we took full control, perceived students as passive audience in this particular activity, and didn't engage them in the organization of this function. While there was high participation at the outdoor fair function, very few students showed up at the panel discussion session. Students therefore didn't connect to this activity and simply didn't participate. It was soon realized that the campaign was weak in that function and did not reach its objective.

The Counseling Center realized that it didn't succeed in gaining the trust of the student body in this Campaign. To identify the problem a series of focus groups with students was initiated using the Delphi

methodology. The aim from these focus groups was to evaluate and reshape the awareness campaign. Feedback and recommendations were used to alternate and modify the campaign for the coming year.

## Methodology

Using the Delphi technique, four focus groups were conducted in a meeting room at the building of student activities. We made sure to provide a pleasant environment in order to assure valuable input from participants. The focus groups averaged ten students per group and were managed by the assistant dean of student affair in the presence of the student counselor.

Each focus group started with a five minute introduction emphasizing the confidentiality of participants and their contributions. Participants were clearly informed that we are seeking input from youth to optimize outreach and plan our next drug awareness campaign effectively knowing that the first campaign did not reach its set objective.

The focus groups were divided into three phases twenty minutes each. The first phase was intended to learn about the level of accessibility of drugs. Four open ended questions were orally administered to participants opening the floor for discussion. The second phase intended to learn about the prevention measures of drugs use using seven open ended questions. Lastly, the third phase intended to learn about possible ways to help addicts quit drugs using five open ended questions.

Feedbacks and discussions were audio recorded in order to respect confidentiality and later on to be transcribed.

The transcription of the focus group audio took place at the counseling center by the executive secretary of the office of student affair under the direct supervision of the liaison officer of the counseling center who was also present in all focus groups.

## Analysis

It was realized that recipients in our campaign were more knowledgeable about drugs than expected. For example when discussing the level of accessibility of drugs, one participant stated that:

*"Drugs are very easy to get.....Definitely it is easily accessible. If I do drugs it takes me to only know one student to make a chain..... If students know one dealer they get it from him and give it to others"*

They differentiate between light drugs and hard drugs that constituted new information for us. Participants tended to perceive the consumption of light drugs as an exotic experience similar to alcohol thus justifiable. To quote:

*"Light drugs are not drugs for students just like alcohol. It is part of leisure and it is not addictive. I might take it for fun just to enjoy a night out."*

An eye opener in the reshaping of the campaign was that it should not emphasize on hard drugs. The majority of participants assured that these types of drugs are very expensive and not easily accessible. To quote:

*"Hard drugs are neither accessible nor common so it is not worth or make sense to talk about them."*

As we were discussing the issue of drug prevention, participants clarified that at this age youth care a lot about their social image and reputation. Thus addressing the social aspect such as humiliation would have a stronger impact on youth drug prevention as opposed to addressing medical consequences.

Another point that was raised is the legal consequences of drug consumption under the Lebanese Law. These two points will be taken into consideration while designing the phase 2 of the campaign. To quote:

*"Campaign on social and legal aspect.... My parents will be humiliated .... My parents are working hard for me.... My friend quit drugs after he was caught, humiliated, and saw his mother crying in jail".*



Additionally the input of the participants convinced us that the awareness campaign must adopt an indirect approach where they take control in organizing thematic activities under our supervision. A direct and informative approach to drug awareness is therefore a guaranteed failure. Some of the ideas that emerged from the focus group discussions were volunteering in rehab centers, movie screening and discussions, real life simulation of drug arrest on campus...

## Conclusion

It is to be noted that both campaigns attracted students from various discipline and had a high student outreach. The environmental campaign partnered with the student body fully and therefore adopted an indirect approach to reach youth and pass its message across accordingly the UOB recycles could sustain itself and transformed into an independent project managed by students. On the other hand Drugs Cost You More than Money had to be revisited as it could be foreseen that students will not support the cause for the second year. Whereas the planning of the Drug abuse campaign was highly promising in terms of students' responsiveness, a strong weakness was sensed upon implementation particularly in the function where they were perceived as the target rather than the partners.

The focus groups clearly revealed that a direct approach in spreading awareness to this age group is counter effective. It was realized that in this era information is accessible to youth at a very young age therefore they might be more knowledgeable about a particular topic than expected. Accordingly to pass any message successfully to this age group, it should use their language, their ideas, and adopt their approach.

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