



AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH FOR STUDENT COUNSELING AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL: AN EMPIRICAL EXPERIENCE FROM UOB

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This work will address a cultural problem related to the receptiveness of the concept of counseling by Lebanese students. It will highlight a notable general attitude among youth in Lebanon leading to constant refusal, resistance and “lutte” against such professional help. An alternative technique adopted by the counseling center at the University of Balamand will be detailed. The work will emphasize the implementation of an active approach in networking and gaining the trust of the student body, hence to activate the counseling center. Supportive statistical information over the last four years will also be presented.

Keywords: Counselling, Mentorship.

Introduction

Counselling is generally defined to be an advice or support offered to people in order to help them understand, deal with, and overcome their problems. The counselor's main role is to direct the person to reveal his worries, help him understand his problems and revise his options for solving them. The counselor's primary goal would then be to orient the individual toward opportunities that can best guarantee fulfillment of his personal ambitions. Over the years, 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. Furthermore it has become a requirement by most academic accreditation entities. As defined earlier the service is built on personal trust and unlike any other academic service it involves a personal factor of a very high degree. Its operation is by structure mostly of a passive nature which makes it highly challenging when it comes to student outreach.

Literature Review

In the United States school the counseling profession was originated at the beginning of the 20th century as a vocational guidance movement. It was informally disseminated in language classes where teachers were encouraged to design their courses so to relate to career interest, develop

students' personalities and avoid behavioral problems (Brewer, 1918). The profession developed over the years to become more operational so to provide comprehensive school counselling programs that address three basic domains: academic development, career development and personal /social development (ASCA, August 20, 2012). Few decades later, after World War II, the service filtered into universities. Administrators recognized the need to create what they called "*Talk Shops*" at the time, in order to share experiences and discuss student welfare. In 1950 the association of College Counseling Center Directors (CCCD) was established, the service developed thereafter to become more systemized with one main objective: provide mental health and other services within a university or college environment (The George Washington University Counseling Center, 2008). In the UK, school counseling was implemented in the 1950s. Ever since, there has been a growing interest and a growing activity in initiatives designed to cater for the emotional needs of pupils in schools in many forms and through diverse programs (Baginsky, 2004).

The Educational System in Lebanon

In 2002 the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Lebanon adopted a change of curriculum across the schooling system nationwide. The new curriculum emphasized the shift from *Teaching to Learning*, from *Inputs to Outcomes*, from *Remote Learning to Integrated Learning*. The main aim was to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to *Learning and Problem Solving* throughout the Lebanese curriculum (MOE, 2001). Unfortunately the change did not incorporate school counseling and hence the service is not yet mandatory in the Lebanese schooling system. Nevertheless, in the last 40 years, there have been calls for the development of school counseling services in Lebanon (Bsat-Juma, 1994; Nassif, 1960; Saigh, 1984; Theodory, 1982) cited in (Abdo, Alamuddin, & Mukallid, 2010). The need for school counseling is partly attributed to the inevitable psychological consequences of ongoing rapid social change, including the political instability of Lebanon (Moracco, 1978; Saigh, 1984; Soitman, 1986) cited in (Abdo, Alamuddin, & Mukallid, 2010). Ever since, advancements in the area were slow to develop and most of the progress was only observed in the area of career guidance.

It is believed and highly recommended that the MOE should establish a policy to integrate school counseling into the Lebanese educational system at all levels (Abdo, Alamuddin, & Mukallid, 2010).

The Counseling Center at UOB

The University of Balamand, established the Counseling Center (CC) in the year 2001 with the following mission statement: "The Counseling Center at the University of Balamand is committed to providing a broad range of high quality services that address the social, educational and emotional development needs of its students. It will constantly seek to ensure that every student benefits from the university experience in order to discover the better person in him." The center acts as a support unit for the student body. It provides services that address social, educational and emotional development needs of its students (UOB, 2001).

Mentorship

Mentorship is a process of informal transmission of knowledge and support perceived by the receiver as relevant to work, career, professional development or academic knowhow. It refers to a personal developmental relationship which entails an informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between the mentor and the mentee. It is an ongoing relationship of learning, dialogue, and challenge. (Wikipedia).

Nowadays many academic counselling centres adopt mentoring programs in order to help students at entry level adjust to college life and connect with their university communities. Such programs have proven successful at many universities such as Seoul National University, University of California Irvine, Kings University and many others.

Briefing and Objective

During their university years, individuals are exposed to diverse aspects of life and they are expected to make choices. It is during this period that they learn about human differences and how to accept them. They face challenges, practice decision making and develop self-planning skills. In attempting to succeed academically or socially, one might experience seemingly unmanageable problems. In particular, when emotions are elevated, problems appear to be bigger than they actually are. At such times individuals might need special attention, private care and guided help. Such guidance may be addressed to the student body as a whole and it might further be initiated by the university as a precautionary step against common and expected problems faced at this particular stage (such as time management, exam anxiety, social integration, anger management, sexual harassment, drug dependency etc....).It is believed that in Lebanon particularly, there is a need to initiate and address such problems at the group level. 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. It is noted that our youth deny their problems and mostly resist any professional help that might be offered to them. The problem then suggests a new approach to the counseling service in the region.

The work will present an alternative approach adopted at the Counseling Center at the University of Balamand. It will detail a networking strategy adopted at the CC in order to gain the trust of the student body in general. Moreover a new *persona* for student counselor in Lebanon (and possibly in the region) will be presented.

Three Action Plan Implemented by the Counseling Center

At the University of Balamand, students visit the CC at an average rate of 2.5% yearly, as compared to the international rate 8-12 %. Less than 10% of those, approach the center individually. Others (more than 90%) are referred to the center by faculty or staff members.

Those numbers called for questioning the receptiveness of the concept of counseling among UOB students as well as Lebanese youth in general. Consequently it was realized that the CC should play a more effective role in the life of students at UOB. From that perspective a strategic three action plan was set in order to activate the center and optimize student outreach.

Action 1: Association with Staff and Faculty Members

Following the model of Jesse Davis (father of school guidance programs-1907), the CC approached faculty members, administrators, academic advisors, and residents directors seeking their support. The objective was to spread awareness about the service offered at the center as well as to initiate topics of common interest in language classes. The success of this affiliation was directly related to the instructor's belief in such a service at university level. The step was considered positive in some classes/ offices while it was meaningless in others. Nevertheless, it was observed that the center succeeded in reaching a larger number of students. More students started reporting their concerns and seeking professional help. It was further observed that the number of students who approached the center individually was still minimal.

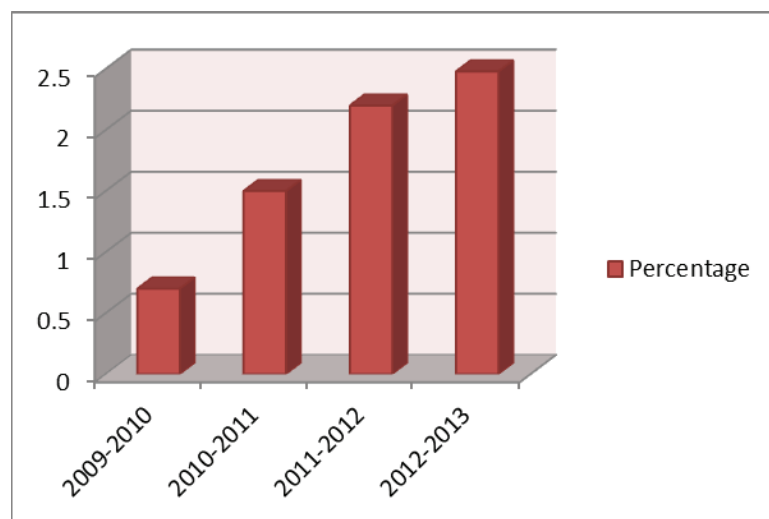


Figure 1. Percentage of Students Who Visited the CC Over The Last Four Years.

Action 2: Association with Campus Life & Student Development Unit

In the year 2012 the counseling center associated with the Campus Life and Student Development Unit (CLSDU) at the Office of Student Affairs. The unit is considered to be the heart of the University. It coordinates the facilities, services and programs designed for extracurricular activities. The objective of this association was to network directly with active students and to gain their trust. Consequently, the CC started initiating and participating in events of common interest. All events were in an informal setting; students were comfortable attending and discussing any issue and therefore revealing their problems and inhibitions. They were there to share their worries, concerns and ideas freely. The setting provided an excellent platform to network, spread the word, and gain the trust of key students who in their turn were the proper messengers for the CC among the student body as a whole. The number of students who approached the center individually increased to 60% over the last two years.

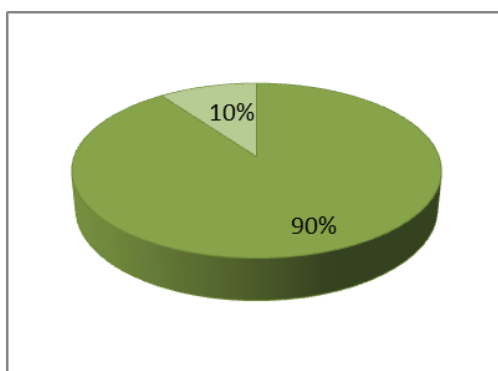


Figure 2. Percentage of Students that approached the CC Individually in 2009 – 2010.

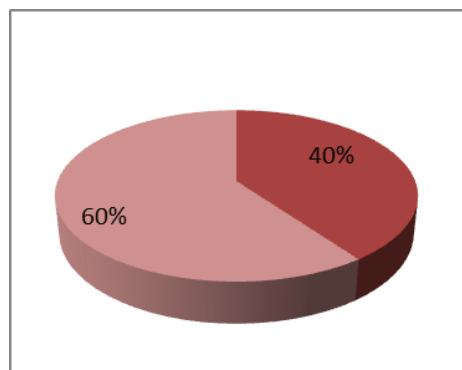


Figure 3. Percentage of Students that approached the CC Individually in 2012- 2013.

Action 3: Launching of a Mentorship Program targeting students at Entry Level

The third action in the plan focuses on students at entry level. It is well realized that the most critical year in University is the first. “University students are faced with many learning challenges but these are perhaps most acutely felt in first year where transition experiences can either make or break some students” (Johnson, 2010).

From that perspective it has been decided that first year students should be well supported while at University. Those students should be offered guidance from the first day of enrollment so to help them succeed academically and socially. For efficient follow up it was suggested that those students are assigned mentors from their respective departments who will act as their companions at the University and will direct them in all day to day operations. Mentors are chosen as dependable senior students who have been involved in student life at the University. The CC is in direct contact with the students and their mentors in order to make sure they are integrating adequately within the student body and the University community in general.

For this academic year Action 3 of the plan is only implemented through a pilot project for female students (entry level) who reside on campus (60 students). Resident assistants assume mentorship roles at a ratio of 1 per 6. The mentors’ responsibilities consist of:

- Sharing their University experience (academic and otherwise).
- Providing personal support on a daily basis to their mentees.

- Referring cases to the Counseling Center whenever noted.

This is work in progress. Results of the pilot project will be evaluated during the summer semester (Summer 2014). The project is part of a four year plan to be implemented gradually as of next academic year. The plan aims to reach all students at entry level at a rate of 1 mentor per 12 students.

In all of its three actions the plan depends to a great extent on the person of the counselor and his/her team. 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 should then be perceived as the leader of a support team who is always present, active and part of the University community.

Results and Conclusion

- The Counseling Center at UOB succeeded in promoting itself among the student body.
- Figures increased notably:

Over the past four years we noted an increase from 0.6% to 2.5% in the number of students visiting the office.

- The Counseling Center at UOB succeeded in changing the attitude and approach to the concept of counseling:

Over the last four years we noted an increase from 10% to 60% in the number of students who approach the center individually.

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