

# An Empirical Investigation and Enhancement Pathways for the Quality and Competence of University counselors in the Context of Professionalization

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of the in-depth advancement of professionalization reform for University counselors, their quality and competence levels directly influence the effectiveness of implementing the fundamental task of cultivating virtue and nurturing talent. Based on a historical review and theoretical framework construction, this study systematically analyzes the current landscape of quality and competence development through an empirical survey of counselors. The survey reveals that while counselors generally meet the basic competency requirements, there is a notable gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Their core competencies exhibit a structural imbalance, characterized by strong daily management skills but weak psychological and online ideological and political education capabilities. Expert competencies, particularly in research innovation and precision ideological and political education, are generally at a low level. Based on these empirical findings, this paper constructs a collaborative enhancement pathway from four dimensions: “institutional guidance—strengthening core competencies—optimizing support and safeguards—cultivating individual consciousness,” aiming to provide practical references for promoting the professional and vocational development of the counselor team.

**Keywords:** University counselors; professionalization; quality and competence; empirical research; enhancement

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## 1. Introduction

University counselors are the backbone of ideological and political education for college students, and their quality and competence directly determine the effectiveness of addressing the fundamental question of “what kind of people to cultivate, how to cultivate them, and for whom to cultivate them” in higher education. The “Regulations on the Construction of Counselor Teams in General Higher Education,” revised in 2017, explicitly outlines nine major responsibilities for counselors in a dedicated chapter, positioning them as the “backbone of ideological and political education.” In 2020, the “Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of a Ideological and Political Work System in Higher Education,” jointly issued by eight departments including the Ministry of Education, further emphasized the need to “continuously enhance the quality, competence, and professionalism of the ideological and political work team.” However, with the popularization of higher education and the diversification of student needs, counselors are generally facing challenges such as administrative tasks encroaching on professional development, a competence structure that lags behind

student needs, and unclear career paths affecting stability. In the context of professionalization, enhancing the quality and competence of counselors has become crucial for fulfilling the fundamental task of fostering virtue and nurturing talent.

## **2. An Empirical Investigation on the Quality and Competence of University counselors in the Context of Professionalization**

### **2.1. Historical Review: The Evolutionary Logic of Competence Requirements**

The development of quality and competence requirements for University counselors is closely linked to national strategies, higher education reforms, and the characteristics of student populations, displaying distinct stage-by-stage evolutionary features: (1) Foundational Period (1953 to the 1980s): Centered on political guidance, in the early days of New China, to strengthen political and ideological leadership over college students, Tsinghua University pioneered the establishment of a political counselor system in 1953. The core responsibilities of counselors during this phase focused on students' political and ideological work, with competence requirements emphasizing a firm political stance and basic organizational management experience, yet lacking a systematic standard. (2) Standardization Period (1980 to 2000): Expansion of responsibilities and gradual emergence of competence requirements. As the scale of higher education expanded, counselors' responsibilities extended into areas such as daily management, rewards and punishments, and merit evaluations. At this time, competence requirements focused on educational management skills and communication and coordination abilities, but overall, they still relied heavily on experiential transmission, with a low degree of professionalization. (3) Development Period (2004 to 2016): Initial emergence of professional orientation. The "Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Education for College Students" (Zhong Fa [2004] No. 16) issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, along with the "Regulations on the Construction of Counselor Teams in Ordinary Higher Education" in 2006, clearly defined counselors as "organizers and implementers of ideological and political education." Competence requirements extended into emerging fields such as mental health education, career planning guidance, and online ideological and political education. However, issues such as the phenomenon of "emphasizing utilization over cultivation" and vague career development paths remained prominent. (4) The Deepening Phase (2017 to Present): During this stage, there has been a comprehensive advancement in professionalization. The newly revised "Regulations on the Construction of Counselor Teams in General Higher Education" in 2017 systematically elaborated on the nine major job responsibilities of counselors, emphasizing the development of "specialization and professionalization," the reform of "holistic education involving all staff, education throughout the entire process, and education in all aspects, and requiring counselors to possess cross-disciplinary collaborative capabilities and precise ideological and political innovation abilities. During this phase, the standards for counselors' quality and capabilities have tended towards a composite nature.

### **2.2. Theoretical Exploration: Composition of Core Competencies and Influencing Factors**

Based on the "Professional Competency Standards for Counselors in Higher Education (Provisional)" issued by the Ministry of Education, which specifies that counselors must possess the professional qualities of being "politically strong, professionally skilled, disciplined, and upright in conduct," these qualities can be translated into capabilities at three levels: foundational capabilities to ensure baseline standards, core capabilities to facilitate job performance, and expert capabilities to set benchmarks, all progressively pointing towards the fundamental task of fostering virtue and nurturing talent. The first level—foundational capabilities—specifically encompass political literacy, professional ethics, and physical and mental well-being. Political literacy not only demands a firm political stance but also requires political judgment, political comprehension, and political execution. This necessitates counselors to proactively study and comprehend the essence of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and subsequent plenary sessions, as well as the history of the Party and the country, enabling them to accurately discern political risks in online public opinion and translate Party theories into educational language that students can understand. Professional ethics emphasize the importance of being a

role model, requiring counselors not only to manage students but also to guide them in life, strictly adhering to professional ethics red lines and maintaining consistency between words and deeds. Physical and mental well-being require counselors to possess the qualities and capabilities to withstand “high intensity and high pressure.” The second level—core competencies, which represent the fundamental skills required for counselors to carry out daily ideological and political education, student management, and service guidance, directly addressing the question of “whether they are capable of performing their duties.” This requires counselors to possess abilities in ideological and political education, daily management, mental health education, career planning guidance, and online ideological and political education. The third level—expertise, specifically encompasses research and innovation capabilities, cross-disciplinary collaboration abilities, and precision ideological and political education skills<sup>[1]</sup>. The aspects of “innovative research, cross-domain collaboration, and precision ideological and political education” outlined in the Standards necessitate that counselors further develop their research and innovation capabilities, cross-disciplinary collaboration abilities, and precision ideological and political education skills.

The factors influencing the quality and capabilities of counselors encompass individual characteristics, organizational environment, and institutional support. Individual characteristics determine the starting point and development potential of a counselor’s abilities, primarily including intrinsic qualities, growth experiences, and self-reflection. The organizational environment provides counselors with resource platforms and atmospheres, directly impacting the speed at which their quality and capabilities develop. It is crucial whether schools prioritize ideological and political work, foster a cultural atmosphere for counselors, provide team support, and invest more resources to enable counselors to translate theory into practice. Institutional support primarily guides counselors’ ability enhancement through incentives and constraints, serving as a fundamental guarantee that requires the collaboration of evaluation systems, training mechanisms, and promotion pathways to achieve.

### **3. Empirical Research on the Quality and Capabilities of University counselors in the Context of Professionalization**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

##### **3.1.1. Research Subjects and Sample Selection**

This study focuses on the current state of quality and competence among University counselors within the context of professionalization. It selects in-service counselors from 10 universities within the province as the research subjects, encompassing both key institutions and local general undergraduate colleges to account for the work characteristics and competence requirements of counselors across different tiers of institutions. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, with 327 valid questionnaires returned, yielding an effective response rate of 93.4%. The sample information is as follows:

Gender: 38.2% male, 61.8% female;

Age: Under 25 years old accounts for 12.5%, 26-30 years old accounts for 38.9%, 31-35 years old accounts for 32.1%, and 36 years old and above accounts for 16.5%;

Educational Background: Undergraduate degree accounts for 15.3%, master’s degree accounts for 78.6%, and doctoral degree accounts for 6.1%;

Professional Background: Related majors such as ideological and political education, pedagogy, and psychology account for 42.2%, while other majors (e.g., management, science and engineering) account for 57.8%;

Years of Service: 1-3 years account for 41.3%, 4-6 years account for 30.6%, and 7 years and above account for 28.1%.

**Table 1.** Basic Information Statistics of Survey Sample (N=327)

Variable	Category	Sample Size (n)	Proportion (%)
Gender	Male	125	38.2
	Female	202	61.8
Age (years)	≤25	41	12.5
	26-30	127	38.9
	31-35	105	32.1
	≥36	54	16.5
Highest Degree	Bachelor's	50	15.3
	Master's	257	78.6
	Doctoral	20	6.1
Academic Background	Ideological & Political Education / Pedagogy / Psychology	138	42.2
	Others (e.g., Management, STEM)	189	57.8
Years of Service	1-3	135	41.3
	4-6	100	30.6
	≥7	92	28.1

### 3.1.2. Research Tools

Based on the “Occupational Competency Standards for University counselors (Provisional)” issued by the Ministry of Education and the academic consensus on the competencies of University counselors, the “Questionnaire on the Current Competency Status of University counselors” was developed. The questionnaire includes 5 items on basic competencies, 20 items on core competencies, and 8 items on expert competencies. A Likert 5-point scale was used (1 = “strongly disagree” → 5 = “strongly agree”), with higher scores indicating stronger corresponding competencies; open-ended questions were also included to collect qualitative feedback. SPSS 26.0 software was employed to conduct difference analysis and correlation analysis on the questionnaire data.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Scores for Each Dimension of Counselors' Competencies

Competency Dimension	Number of Items	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Score Rate (M/5)
Basic Competency	5	3.82	0.61	76.4%
Core Competency	20	3.51	0.72	70.2%
Expert Competency	8	3.19	0.81	63.8%

The average score rate for basic competencies (76.4%) was relatively high, followed by core competencies (70.2%), and expert competencies had the lowest score rate (63.8%). This indicates that the competency structure of counselors forms a “pyramid” shape, with significant deficiencies in the development of higher-order competencies.

**Table 3.** Difference Analysis of Expert Competency Scores Among Counselors with Different Tenures

Years of Service	Sample Size (n)	Mean Score (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	F-value	P-value
1-3 years	135	3.15	0.87	12.436	0.000
4-6 years	100	3.52	0.91		
7 years and above	92	3.78	0.85		

$p < 0.001$ , indicating a highly significant difference.

**Table 4.** Correlation Matrix Among Dimensions of Counselors' Competencies

Competency Dimension	Basic Competency	Core Competency	Expert Competency
Basic Competency	1	0.723	0.581
Core Competency	0.723	1	0.694
Expert Competency	0.581	0.694	1

$p < 0.001$ , Basic competencies and core competencies exhibited the strongest correlation ( $r = 0.723$ ), suggesting that solid foundational skills are crucial for enhancing practical abilities; core competencies and expert competencies showed a moderate correlation ( $r = 0.694$ ), indicating that professional development requires progressive advancement.

## 3.2. Survey Results

### 3.2.1. Basic Competencies: Political literacy meets standards but suffers from a disconnect between learning and application, with varying levels of professional identity

92.1% of counselors can accurately understand and implement the Party's educational policies, and 88.3% of counselors actively study the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (at least once a month). However, only 65.2% can translate theoretical learning outcomes into specific cases or methods for daily education. The issue of disconnect between learning and application is more pronounced among counselors with shorter tenure; only 58.7% of counselors with 1-3 years of service can make such translations, while 72.3% of those with  $\geq 5$  years of service can. In terms of professional ethics, 5.7% of counselors respect students' privacy, and 91.3% of counselors treat each student fairly, demonstrating good professional ethical performance. However, there is a significant difference in professional identity—counselors with tenure  $< 3$  years score only  $3.82 \pm 0.61$  (indicating "relative agreement"), primarily complaining that administrative tasks occupy time that could be spent on professional development; counselors with tenure  $> 5$  years score  $4.31 \pm 0.53$  (indicating "strong agreement"), believing that long-term companionship with students has provided them with a sense of value.

### 3.2.2. Core Competencies: Structural imbalance, with weaknesses in psychological and online ideological and political education capabilities

The average score for core competencies is  $3.92 \pm 0.45$  (out of 5 points), with "daily management" (such as Party and League class construction, rewards and punishments, and evaluations) scoring the highest ( $4.15 \pm 0.40$ ) due to its traditional responsibilities and relatively fixed operational procedures; "mental health education" scores the lowest ( $3.61 \pm 0.52$ ), with only 58.3% of counselors having received systematic training; "online ideological and political education" scores slightly higher but still low ( $3.72 \pm 0.48$ ), with 72.1% of counselors "mainly relying on school official platforms to forward content, lacking original interactive design." The influence of professional background is prominent, with counselors majoring in psychology/education scoring significantly higher in mental health education ( $4.05 \pm 0.42$ ) and ideological and political education ( $4.20 \pm 0.38$ ) compared to those from other majors ( $3.45 \pm 0.55$  and  $3.90 \pm 0.45$ , respectively,  $p < 0.01$ ). The longer the tenure, the stronger the core competencies (correlation coefficient with scores  $r = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### 3.2.3. Expertise Capabilities: Lacking in Research Innovation and Precision-based Ideological and Political Education

Only 31.2% of counselors have presided over or participated in ideological and political projects at or above the school level in the past three years, and 28.4% of counselors can design personalized education plans for different student groups, such as those with academic difficulties, psychological crises, or from ethnic minorities. 68.9% of counselors report a lack of training in research methods, and 72.3% are unable to engage in academic research due to administrative tasks. There

is a severe shortage of precision-based ideological and political education practices, with only 19.3% of counselors able to accurately identify student needs and develop intervention strategies through big data or daily observations, while 41.7% still adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. In terms of cross-departmental collaboration, 65.7% of counselors mainly rely on personal relationships to promote coordination with the career guidance center and psychological counseling office, lacking institutionalized cooperation mechanisms.

#### **3.2.4. Organizational Environment: Inadequate Training Effectiveness and Limited Career Development Pathways**

85.6% of counselors receive training at least once a year, but the training content is mainly focused on “policy interpretation (42.1%)” and “daily management practices (38.7%)”, with low proportions of training in core competency areas such as “mental health topics (15.2%)” and “online ideological and political education techniques (12.9%)”. The primary training format is “one-way lectures (67.3%)”, with practical exercises accounting for only 21.8%. Less than 30% of counselors report “significant improvement in capabilities” after training. Only 41.2% of counselors are satisfied with the “promotion/job transfer channels”, and 29.5% believe there is a “clear career ceiling (up to deputy section level)”. Among young counselors (with  $\leq 5$  years of service), 43.7% have “considered transferring to administrative or teaching positions”, primarily due to “lack of professional growth opportunities and long-term incentives”.

## **4. Suggestions for enhancing the quality and capabilities of university counselors in the context of professionalization**

### **4.1. Institutional Guidance: Improve the professional development system**

Enhance the professional development system for counselors through institutional guidance, optimizing career development paths and refining job responsibility lists. Establish a tiered career ladder, constructing a three-level career development framework for new counselors (1-3 years), key counselors (3-5 years), and expert counselors (over 5 years), with clear core competencies and job boundaries defined for each level<sup>[2]</sup>. Meanwhile, facilitate multiple development channels by setting up bidirectional transfer pathways to “ideological and political education teachers” and “party and government administrative positions” under the premise of ensuring the stability of the counselor team. For qualified expert counselors, priority should be given to recommending transfers to teaching positions in ideological and political education courses or management positions such as deputy party secretaries of faculties or departments, thereby addressing the “career dead-end” dilemma. Refining job responsibility lists ensures that counselors focus on their primary responsibilities and avoid overextending themselves. By clarifying through systems the affairs in which counselors should not be involved, such as administrative secretarial work, financial statements, and logistics and materials management, their work focus is strictly defined within a certain scope, concentrating on primary responsibilities such as “ideological and political education, student development guidance, and crisis event handling,” ensuring that over 80% of their working hours are dedicated to serving students’ growth. For tasks related to the construction of Party and League classes, rewards and punishments evaluations, and daily class affairs, a “Counselor Work Practice Manual” can be compiled to clarify the quality and standards of key processes, reducing the pressure on counselors’ professional development.

### **4.2. Core Competencies: Strengthening Cultivation through Tiered and Categorized Approaches**

Counselors are trained in tiers to match the needs of different career stages. Novice counselors focus on foundational skill training, emphasizing communication techniques, preliminary crisis event handling, and policy document interpretation, enhancing their practical abilities through a “mentor-apprentice” system and simulation exercises. Veteran counselors concentrate on deepening core competencies, receiving specialized training tailored to their individual strengths. Expert-level counselors are encouraged to focus on research and innovation, supported in applying for provincial or ministerial-level ideological and political education projects, and share their educational experiences through “workshops,” facilitating the transformation from practical experience to theoretical achievements<sup>[3]</sup>. Based on counselors’ career development

stages, categorized development directions are established: for those with backgrounds in psychology or education, their expertise in mental health education and career planning guidance is strengthened; for counselors from science and engineering disciplines, emphasis is placed on enhancing their theoretical literacy in ideological and political education and their proficiency in network technology applications. For specialized fields such as online ideological and political education, career planning, and mental health, “Counselor Workshops” will be established. Through cross-collaboration and project-based problem-solving, a group of “single-domain expert” counselors will be cultivated.

### **4.3. Support and Assurance: Optimizing the Organizational Environment**

Training counselors can enhance their comprehensive qualities, and optimizing the structure of training content is crucial. It is advisable to increase the proportion of training in core competency areas where shortcomings exist, such as mental health education, online ideological and political education techniques, and precise ideological and political strategies, while reducing the interpretation of repetitive policies<sup>[4]</sup>. Training can also incorporate various practical-oriented formats, such as case discussions, scenario simulations, and practical exercises, to improve the conversion rate of training. Universities should provide sufficient resource support, such as collaborating with experts in the field of ideological and political education from other universities, psychologists from medical institutions, and technical consultants from internet companies to establish a pool of training instructors for counselors. Additionally, developing an online learning platform and providing practical resources like mental health intervention guides and online ideological and political toolkits can support counselors’ self-directed learning. By facilitating counselors’ career development pathways, the attractiveness of the counselor profession can be enhanced. On the one hand, incentive mechanisms can be improved by incorporating core competencies and expert abilities into performance evaluations and establishing “special awards for ideological and political work.” Expert counselors can be given separate indicators for professional title evaluation, research funding support, and honorary recognition. On the other hand, responsibilities and resources should be dynamically adjusted according to the needs of counselors at different career stages to avoid one-size-fits-all management that restricts the development of counselors’ abilities.

### **4.4. Individual Self-awareness: Cultivating a Culture of Lifelong Learning**

By strengthening the professional mission of counselors, we can stimulate their endogenous motivation, evoke their individual self-awareness, and support their lifelong learning of cultural knowledge. Within universities, activities such as a counselor professional culture festival, exhibitions showcasing the stories of outstanding counselors, and student gratitude interviews can be organized to reinforce counselors’ original mission of “nurturing talent for the Party and the country,” guiding them to transition from the role of “administrative managers” to that of “guides on students’ growth paths.” Additionally, typical stories of counselors who have long adhered to their roles can be explored to enhance their sense of professional honor and value<sup>[5]</sup>. Counselors are encouraged to develop personal capacity enhancement plans based on their individual strengths and student needs, breaking down goals into specific annual actions. Meanwhile, relying on regional university alliances or national counselor professional committees, regular forums, case salons, and workshops for counselors can be organized to share experiences, promote resource sharing, and foster collaborative innovation.

## **5. Conclusion**

Advancing the professionalization and specialization of the counselor team is a strategic measure for universities in the new era to fulfill their fundamental task of fostering virtue and nurturing talent. This study, through empirical investigation, reveals the structural contradictions and bottlenecks in the current quality and capabilities of counselors. Resolving these issues cannot be achieved through a single measure but requires a coordinated effort involving system improvement, capacity enhancement, environmental optimization, and individual self-awareness. Only in this way can counselors be transformed from “administrator” into “professional guides,” thereby providing solid quality and capability support for

cultivating new talent in the new era.

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## Disclosure statement

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