
A Study on Innovative Approaches to the Work of University Student Counsellors in the New Era: A Dual Perspective on Role Transformation and Competency Reconstruction

Yuli Liu, Zhiyi Liu, Jiadi Jiang

Yantai Nanshan University, Yantai 265706, Shandong, China

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Abstract: Student counsellors, as the backbone of ideological and political education for university students, are responsible for fostering virtue through education. However, with the integration of ‘Internet+Education’ and changes in Generation Z students, their work faces challenges like ambiguous role definitions, insufficient technological empowerment and occupational burnout. Based on research at S Vocational College and other institutions, this study analyzes the practical challenges of student counsellor work in the new era. From the perspectives of role transformation and competency restructuring, it proposes pathways such as constructing a ‘professionalisation + digitalisation’ competency matrix, refining a ‘dual-track’ career development system, and innovating a ‘segmented’ student development model. It argues that new-era student counsellors should shift from “administrative managers” to “professional educators” and enhance capabilities in mission-driven leadership, regulatory safeguards, emotional connection, and team collaboration. This will drive the development of the student counsellor workforce towards greater specialisation, professionalisation and expertise.

Keywords: university student counsellors; role transformation; competency restructuring; career development; innovative pathways

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1. Introduction

Education is of national importance and a Party priority. University counsellors, as direct implementers of students’ ideological and political education, are crucial for ‘nurturing talent for the Party and the nation’. In the new era, higher education is transforming from ‘massification’ to ‘precision’. The generational features of students, the rapid tech-environment evolution, and upgraded educational requirements pose unprecedented challenges to counsellors’ work.

A survey by the Ministry of Education’s Ideological and Political Work Department shows that 72% of counsellors spend 9.6 hours a day on administrative tasks on average, only 28% have systematic psychological-crisis-intervention training, and 65% suffer from moderate or severe occupational burnout. These figures indicate a significant gap between new-era demands on counsellors and the current situation, calling for urgent systemic reform.

Current academic research on student-counsellor work focuses on three dimensions: tracing role and responsibility

evolution from institutional development, exploring professional competence improvement from capacity building, and investigating new working models from practical innovation. However, existing research mainly gives single-dimension improvement recommendations, lacking a systematic diagnosis of challenges and integrated solutions.

This study, taking S Vocational College as the main research subject and using the experience of many universities, combines literature analysis and empirical research to systematically examine new-era challenges for student counsellors. It proposes innovative pathways from role transformation and capacity restructuring, aiming to offer theoretical support and practical guidance for the development of the student-counsellor workforce in higher education.

2. A Realistic Assessment of the Work of University Counsellors in the New Era

2.1. The Complex Challenges of Role Transformation

University counsellors are required to fulfil multiple roles simultaneously, including those of manager, service provider, educator and mental health counsellor. In practice, this multifaceted nature of the role often leads to the awkward situation of ‘knowing a little about everything but mastering nothing’. Research indicates that among counsellors at S Vocational College, only 35% have received systematic mental health training. This skills gap leaves counsellors struggling to cope with students’ increasingly complex psychological needs^[3].

A deeper issue lies in the conflict of responsibilities. The boundaries of authority and accountability between the Student Affairs Office and the constituent colleges are blurred, resulting in counsellors having to submit duplicate documentation to multiple departments. Take the tasks of ‘academic early warning’ and ‘psychological intervention’ as examples: counsellors must liaise with five departments—the Student Affairs Office, the secondary colleges, the Mental Health Centre, the Academic Affairs Office, and the Logistics Office—with administrative tasks accounting for as much as 60% of their time. This ‘bureaucratic division of labour’ model traps counsellors in a reactive role, making it difficult for them to focus their energy on their core mission of student development.

2.2. Practical Challenges in Technology-Enabled Work

Technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence are reshaping the student management ecosystem in higher education, yet the technological literacy of the counsellor workforce has become a bottleneck constraining efficiency gains. Insufficient tool adaptability is another prominent issue—existing systems primarily focus on administrative processing functions, lacking personalised modules such as mental health early warning and behavioural anomaly detection. The essence of the technology-enabled work dilemma lies in the mismatch between ‘people and tools’. On the one hand, counsellors lack systematic training in digital skills, making it difficult for them to effectively utilise data to identify student needs; on the other hand, technology developers have a limited understanding of counsellors’ working contexts, resulting in product designs that deviate from actual requirements. This dual deficiency leads to a situation where technology’s potential to empower counsellors’ work is all talk and no action.

2.3. The Widespread Crisis of Occupational Burnout

A survey based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory revealed that 65% of counsellors suffer from emotional exhaustion, with the primary contributing factors being ‘overload of administrative tasks’ (48%) and ‘lack of feedback on achievements’ (32%). In a survey conducted at S Vocational College, 85% of counsellors reported that administrative tasks accounted for over 70% of their workload, whilst only 15% of their energy was devoted to guiding students’ individual development^[4].

The deep-rooted cause of occupational burnout lies in the ‘de-professionalisation’ of the work content. Counsellors’ time is consumed by a vast amount of repetitive, procedural tasks, leaving little room for theoretical research or in-depth reflection on student work. This leads to a path dependency where work is conducted ‘by rote’. Over time, counsellors’ work has come to exhibit characteristics of arbitrariness, ad-hoc nature and delayed response, making it difficult to demonstrate professional value.

2.4. Significant Challenges Posed by Generational Differences Among Students

University students of the ‘Generation Z’ cohort are digital natives, and their methods of information gathering, social habits and value systems differ significantly from previous generations. There is a trend towards psychological issues emerging at an earlier age and becoming more concealed. The “Report on the Development of Mental Health among Chinese University Students (2023)” reveals that 40.2% of university students suffer from emotional distress such as anxiety and depression, 68% of respondents experience persistent pressure due to ‘peer competition’, and only 12.3% of students actively seek professional help when facing psychological distress. These figures serve as a stark warning that the traditional ‘wait-and-see’ approach to mental health support is no longer adequate to meet current needs ^[5].

3. Theoretical Framework for Innovation in Student Counsellor Work

3.1. Role Transformation: From ‘Administrative’ to ‘Professional’

The expectations placed on student counsellors in the new era essentially require them to make a role transition from ‘administrative managers’ to ‘professional educators’. This transformation encompasses three dimensions: firstly, a shift in value orientation, whereby counsellors should not merely be ‘administrative staff’, but rather ‘guides’ for students’ ideological concerns, ‘advisors’ for academic development, and ‘caregivers’ for students’ daily lives and psychological well-being; secondly, a reshaping of their competency structure, requiring the development of a comprehensive system of capabilities encompassing ideological and political literacy, psychological knowledge, career planning, and crisis intervention skills; and thirdly, a revolution in working methods, shifting from experience-driven to data-driven approaches, and from reactive responses to proactive anticipation.

3.2. Competency Reconstruction: Dual-Drive Model of “Professionalisation + Technological Expertise”

Professional competence and technical competence are the two pillars of the counsellor’s competency framework in the new era. Professional competence pertains to the depth of educational work—including a solid grounding in ideological and political education theory, psychological crisis intervention skills, and career planning guidance capabilities; technical competence pertains to the effectiveness of educational work—including data analysis and interpretation skills, the ability to apply online ideological and political education tools, and proficiency in operating intelligent management platforms.

“Professionalisation + Technologicalisation” is not a simple superimposition of competencies, but rather a pursuit of deep integration. Professionalism serves as the ‘steering wheel’ for technological application—where technological tools support educational objectives rather than replacing human judgement; technological proficiency acts as the ‘accelerator’ for professional competence—where data-driven empowerment frees counsellors from administrative burdens, allowing them to focus their energy on high-value educational activities. This dual-drive competency model provides clear directional guidance for the professional development of counsellors.

3.3. Ecological Restructuring: Building a Collaborative Network for ‘Three-Dimensional Education’

Student counsellors are not isolated agents of education, but rather key nodes within the “Three-Pronged Education” network. The construction of this network requires synergy across three dimensions: firstly, vertical integration, establishing a four-tiered linkage mechanism spanning “university – faculty – class – dormitory” to ensure educational resources reach the grassroots level; secondly, horizontal collaboration, promoting regular communication between student counsellors and diverse stakeholders such as subject teachers, ideological and political education instructors, counsellors, and parents; thirdly, technological support, involving the development of a digital platform that integrates ideological guidance, academic support, lifestyle services and psychological counselling, thereby achieving precision in identifying needs and matching resources.

4. Practical Pathways for Innovation in Student Counsellor Work

4.1. Mission-Driven: Guiding the Direction through the ‘Four-Pronged’ Approach

Innovation in student counsellor work should return to the educational intent and be mission-driven. Practical exploration at China University of Petroleum (East China) shows the ‘Four-Pronged’ approach helps new counsellors overcome uncertainty and grow from novice to expert.

Carrying out duties with a sense of mission offers directional guidance. Counsellors must recognize education’s fundamental questions, internalize the mission of “nurturing talent for the Party and the nation” as their professional development’s driving force, and integrate socialist core values into student education and management.

Carrying out duties according to regulations is a fundamental safeguard. Mastering regulations is a prerequisite for counsellors to work efficiently, like the ‘Regulations on the Administration of Students in General Higher Education Institutions’. The student handbook, registration management measures, and reward-punishment rules are the fundamental guidelines for counsellors. In key matters like student awards, financial aid, and disciplinary proceedings, strict standards and procedures must be followed to ensure openness, transparency, and equal treatment.

Performing duties with empathy is the core value. Education is a heart-to-heart exchange, and empathy is essential. ‘Empathy’ and ‘active listening’ are key skills for counsellors. When students seek help, counsellors should be patient listeners and empathetic, making students feel respected. A kind word or act can light up a student’s confused mind.

Leading a team in fulfilling duties is the guarantee of effectiveness. Student affairs are numerous, and relying on a single counsellor is not sustainable. Cultivating capable student leaders can improve work efficiency and coverage. Counsellors should focus on the selection, cultivation, and deployment of students. 4. Enhance student counsellors’ abilities: Through regular training, work meetings and individual guidance, enhance student leaders’ ideological awareness, responsibility and professional competence.

4.2. Competency Progression: Establish a ‘Three-Tier’ Professional Competency Matrix.

The professional development of student counsellors is a continuous process. Based on the ‘three-tier’ model, it can be divided into three levels: foundational, core and advanced competencies.

Foundational competencies are the basis, including ideological-political education and policy interpretation. Strengthen theoretical foundations via ‘red practice workshops’ and policy theory study. Core competencies focus on mental-health intervention and crisis management. Introduce professional training like CBT to improve practical ability. Extended competencies cover future educational trends, such as big data analysis and online ideological-political education tools, helping counsellors mine student behavior data for targeted development. The “Three-Tier, Six-Step” development roadmap is proposed. The “Morning Star” Master Counsellor Studio at Guizhou University offers a practical way for counsellor competency progression. It divides counsellor development into three tiers (entry-level, intermediate, advanced) and six stages: exploration, practice, advocacy, research, innovation, and breakthrough. In the exploration stage, counsellors “study, ask questions and reflect” to adapt to roles. In the practice stage, they strengthen self-assessment and self-regulation for professional identity. In the advocacy stage, they work on four dimensions: expanding knowledge, discussing policy and theory, promoting theories, and refining techniques. In the research stage, they shift to a research-and-theory-based approach. In the innovation stage, they build an innovation ecosystem through multidisciplinary integration and team building. In the breakthrough stage, they benchmark against provincial-level master educators and apply to establish studios.

4.3. Technology Empowerment: Developing Tailored Intelligent Work Tools.

The key to technology empowerment isn’t tool sophistication, but... There is an urgent need for customised upgrades of various management systems in higher education institutions, as they generally have a bias towards ‘prioritising administrative processing over educational support’. At the technology application level, two directions are worth exploring. Firstly, add a mental health early warning module to existing management systems, using AI to analyse

students' behavioural patterns like spending data, attendance records and library borrowing to identify potential - risk students for early crisis intervention. Wanxi University's practice shows that AI-powered psychological counseling bots can use relevant technologies for anthropomorphic dialogue, basic assessment and risk warnings, establishing a 'technology-driven data collection and human-led analysis' collaborative mechanism. Secondly, develop an on-campus AI virtual assistant to handle routine tasks such as scholarship enquiries, leave applications and event registrations, reducing counsellors' workload by about 30% and enabling them to focus on in-depth educational activities. Another aspect is data-driven decision-making, and Minxi Vocational and Technical College has established... an "information transmission axis" integrating ideological guidance, academic support, lifestyle services and psychological counselling. By innovating a "student request– university dispatch– team assignment– student evaluation" mechanism, it processes over 500 data entries daily, achieving a "needs identification– targeted delivery– effectiveness assessment" closed-loop management system. This model provides counsellors with data support for accurately identifying student needs and dynamically adjusting development strategies.

4.4. Collaborative Education: Building a 'Targeted' Service Network

The core of the 'targeted' education model is to break away from a 'one-size-fits-all' service approach and provide precise support for different students' diverse needs. Its implementation requires institutional innovation at three levels.

First, establish diverse practical platforms to ensure students' opportunities to excel. Traditional student leadership roles are limited. Hebei Normal University's exploration shows that a 'micro-role' system, project-based working teams and a role rotation system can broaden student participation. Specific measures include setting up short-term, flexible practical roles in classes like course group leaders, dormitory code supervisors and themed activities. First, innovate work models: use project-based recruitment for large-scale university events and pilot a 'standing committee members + rotating committee members' system for class committees to offer more development opportunities. Second, refine incentive and support mechanisms: scientifically set indicators in comprehensive quality assessments, scholarship evaluations and honours selection to recognize students' contributions, and establish a process-based recognition mechanism to enhance their sense of achievement and belonging. Third, strengthen process guidance: counsellors should establish a comprehensive guidance mechanism to understand students' difficulties, analyze causes and find solutions.

4.5. Optimising the Ecosystem: Building a 'One-Stop' Student Community.

In recent years, the "one-stop" student community has been a key direction in higher education student management reform. Its core is to bring educational resources to student life and bridge the "last mile" of student services. Practice at Wanxi University shows that it can integrate the efforts of various staff and offer "zero-distance" support for students' development.

The development of "one-stop" communities needs coordinated progress in three dimensions. Spatially, functional spaces are set up in student accommodation areas. Personnel-wise, student counsellors are promoted to be regularly present in the community. Resource-wise, educational resources inside and outside the university are integrated into the community platform.

The "Ideological and Political Education Teachers Visit Dormitories" at Sanya Aviation Tourism Vocational College is a practical example. Teachers and student counsellors collaborate. Regularly visit student dormitories, over 200 times in one semester. Through group visits and small-scale discussions, listen to students' concerns as friends, understand their needs and expectations. This bridges the teacher-student gap and enables ideological and political education to occur in daily life, shifting from "classroom indoctrination" to "life-based immersion".

5. Conclusion

This study systematically examines the practical challenges and innovative pathways for university student counsellor

work in the new era from the dual perspectives of role transformation and capability restructuring. The research indicates that counsellor work currently faces multiple challenges, including ambiguous role definitions, insufficient technological empowerment, increasing professional burnout, and significant generational differences among students. The underlying root cause lies in the structural contradiction between the ‘administrative’ work model and the ‘professional’ requirements of student development. There are three key pathways to resolving this contradiction: firstly, to lead the transformation of the counsellor’s role through the ‘Four-Pronged’ approach (carrying a mission, adhering to rules, showing empathy, and leading a team), thereby achieving a leap from ‘administrative manager’ to ‘professional educator’; secondly, to construct a ‘Three-Tier’ professional competence matrix, systematically enhancing counsellors’ professional qualities across the levels of foundational, core and extended competencies; thirdly, to optimise the educational ecosystem through a dual-drive approach of technological empowerment and collaborative education, by building intelligent work platforms and “one-stop” student communities.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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