

## Research

---

# Students' Perceptions of Need for Personal Counseling Services in Community Colleges

Atticia P. Bundy

James M. Benshoff

*Although the need for personal counseling services is on the rise across college campuses in the United States, many community colleges do not offer personal counseling services on campus. Instead, community college counseling services focus primarily on academic and career advising. The purpose of this study was to survey community college students in North Carolina to determine their interest in and need for a personal counseling center on campus. Participants were 134 men and 202 women, 18-68 years of age. Of the participants, 70% indicated that having a personal counseling center on campus would be "very helpful" or "helpful." Results are discussed, and recommendations are made for college counselors working in community college settings.*

The role of the community college counselor has changed since its beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s (Callan, 1997; Carroll & Tarasuk, 1991; Helfgot, 1995; Levine, 1997; Pulliams, 1990). In the early history of community colleges, counselors and faculty played the role of in loco parentis and provided personal, career, and social support for students (Pulliams, 1990). In the 1970s and 1980s, the counselor's role shifted to that of academic advisor and career counselor in response to dramatically increased enrollments—174% between 1969 and 1994 (Callan, 1997; Helfgot, 1995). Over the past decade, community college counselors' functions have expanded into roles as diverse (and nearly as large) as the student populations they serve (Callan, 1997; Carroll & Tarasuk, 1991; Cvancara, 1997; Helfgot, 1995).

As members of student services staffs, community college counselors are now involved in student testing, admissions and registration services, recruiting, teaching, consultation, and other responsibilities in addition to career

---

*Atticia P. Bundy is a former community college counselor and currently a doctoral student in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, North Carolina. James M. Benshoff is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The authors thank Anne S. Powers for her contributions to this study as well as the North Carolina Community College System for assistance in contacting their community colleges. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Atticia P. Bundy, Counseling and Educational Development, 224B Curry Building, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27402 (e-mail: [apbundy@uncg.edu](mailto:apbundy@uncg.edu)).*

counseling and academic advising (Carroll & Tarasuk, 1991; Cvancara, 1997). Unfortunately, this diversity in responsibility can lead to role confusion and lack of time to work with students who have personal problems beyond the scope of a 15-minute "booster session" (Carroll & Tarasuk, 1991; Cvancara 1997; Helfgot, 1995). For example, one community college counselor often is responsible for 1,000 or more students (Cvancara, 1997). Students who have issues other than academic-related problems (e.g., depression, drug and alcohol use, marital or relationship issues, lack of self-confidence) often are referred out to professionals in the local community (Cvancara, 1997).

Although referring students with personal concerns to counseling resources in the community may seem like an efficient use of existing resources, these referrals become useless when students are unwilling or unable to follow through with them. Although no studies were found that examined rates of follow-through on referrals specifically among community college students, researchers and practitioners in the helping professions have acknowledged that less than a third of potential clients follow through with referrals, and, of those who do, most do not return for a second session (Conti, 1971; J. S. Hinkle, personal communication, October 31, 1996).

In addition, the availability of quality and affordable counseling services off campus may be limited in many communities. One community college counselor stated that a professional to whom she referred a student had less experience than she did (Cvancara, 1997). Busy students who work and come to campus only to attend classes may not find it practical or affordable to pay to see a professional counselor, social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist in the local community. In more rural areas often served by community colleges, students may need to drive considerable distances to find appropriate mental health services. Moreover, the stigma that often is associated with seeking counseling may be lessened if students can see a community college counselor who is part of the student services staff at their institution.

In considering the need for personal counseling at the community college level, it is important to consider the characteristics of the community college student. As the demographics of students attending institutions of higher education change, many more students do not fit the stereotype—or the characteristics—of the traditional 18–22-year-old learner. Community college students fit definitions of "nontraditional students" in many ways. The average age of community college students is 29 years, with 36% age 30 or older. Nearly half (47%) are employed 35 hours or more, in addition to attending school either full- or part-time. Of students attending institutions of higher education in the United States, 46% of African Americans, 55% of Hispanics, 46% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 55% of Native Americans attend community colleges; 40% are from homes with an annual income of less than \$30,000. More than half (58%) of these students are women, and most (64%) attend part-time (American Association of Community Colleges, 1999; Callan, 1997). Community colleges by definition serve the population

living in and around their immediate communities; thus, student characteristics can vary considerably according to geographic location (Callan, 1997).

It is clear that many students can benefit from personal counseling services (Helfgot, 1995). The new nontraditional student must balance work, family, and other responsibilities with schoolwork. In fact, college may not be the most important task for nontraditional students (Levine, 1997). The complex and multifaceted lives led by many community college students may overwhelm them at times, resulting in a greater need for more personal counseling in the college setting as cited by Geraghty (1997). Levine noted that "students are coming to college more damaged psychologically than in the past, owing to family, sexual, drug, eating, and other disorders" (p. 9).

Research has shown that in both 4- and 2-year college settings, the number of students seeking personal counseling services is increasing (Cvancara, 1997; Geraghty, 1997; Helfgot, 1995). Surprisingly, as both numbers of students and need for counselors increase, funding for counseling services in community colleges is decreasing (Carroll & Tarasuk, 1991; Cvancara, 1997; Helfgot, 1995; Pulliams, 1990). Several options for alleviating this problem have been suggested (e.g., Carroll & Tarasuk, 1991; Cvancara, 1997; Helfgot, 1995; Pulliams, 1990), from using technology to expand the tools in a counselor's tool box to hiring paraprofessionals in place of professional counselors to provide basic services. Cvancara noted that a graduate degree is not essential to do the academic advising that is a major responsibility of many community college counselors.

Another way to increase counseling services is for professional counselors to suggest that community college administrators view counseling as one approach to increasing student retention. When students are unable to receive the support they need on campus, they may drop out or withdraw to attend another college. One study (Mathiasen, 1984), which surveyed several directors of universities regarding student needs, found that students most often requested greater availability of career and personal counseling services. Similarly, a study examining student satisfaction reported that students were unhappy with the academic advising services counselors provided at their community college (Henricksen, 1995b). Specifically, students believed they were receiving inconsistent information from counselors related to college transfer courses. These findings may be due in part to the fact that counselors often are stretched too thin professionally, finding it difficult to keep up with the many roles, responsibilities, and multiple areas of knowledge and expertise required of them. Community college counselors simply cannot be "all things to all people" (Carroll & Tarasuk, 1991, p. 34).

A comprehensive literature review revealed few published research studies that addressed personal counseling services in community colleges, and none were found that examined these students' perceptions of and interest in personal counseling services. The purpose of the current study was to examine students' perceptions of personal counseling services at commu-

nity colleges in North Carolina. This study also investigated differences in responses by age, sex, ethnicity, relationship status, program of study, and reason for attending college. Personal counseling services were defined as individual or group counseling for interpersonal relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, and individual coping and adjustment issues.

For purposes of this study, personal counseling did not include academic advising or counseling received in a career center because these services are generally more available at community colleges. Because several researchers and practitioners have shown that the need for personal counseling services is on the rise in 2- and 4-year colleges (Carroll & Tarasuk, 1991; Cvancara, 1997; Geraghty, 1997; Helfgot, 1995; Pulliams, 1990), it was predicted that students would rate having a personal counseling center on campus as being very helpful. In addition, it was hypothesized that women would be more likely to respond in favor of having a personal counseling center on campus than would men.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 336 community college students between 18 and 68 years of age; 134 (40%) were men and 202 (60%) were women. Sixty-nine percent described themselves as Caucasian/White, 23% African American/Black, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/American Indian, and 2% Hispanic. These statistics accurately reflect the North Carolina Community College System data for 1998–1999. Participation in this study was voluntary, with participants solicited from required freshman study skills classes in the second half of a fall semester. Study skills classes were chosen because a variety of students in differing programs attending full- or part-time are often required to enroll in them in this community college system.

### **Procedure**

An e-mail message was sent to all 59 North Carolina community colleges through the North Carolina Community Colleges System office in Raleigh. Fifteen community colleges indicated an interest in participating in the research project, with 10 schools agreeing to administer instruments to students (not all schools were offering a semester-long study skills class, and others had class sizes that were too small to get an accurate sample of the school population). Surveys were mailed to counselors at participating community colleges with instructions to administer them to students in study skills classes (two colleges used freshman-level English classes because study skills classes had already ended for the semester) in order to achieve a more diverse sample of students. Seven of 10 colleges returned completed sets of surveys, for an overall return rate of 34%. Among the seven schools that

returned surveys, the return rate was 38%. The three schools that did not return surveys offered to administer them during the next semester, which was beyond the time frame for this study. Surveys were scanned by computer and imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

## Instrumentation

The survey used in this study consisted of two parts: (a) demographic questions (e.g., race, relationship status, program of study, reasons for attending college) and (b) five questions that required students to use a 5-point Likert-type scale to rate their perceptions of the helpfulness of personal counseling services, the likelihood they would visit a personal counseling center or attend counseling groups, and the desirability of having a same-sex or same-age counselor. One question simply asked if there was a personal counseling center at their college. Scannable answer forms were used for the survey to ensure greater expediency and accuracy of data entry.

## RESULTS

Results of SPSS analyses on both tests of the hypotheses were significant. The first test analyzed the frequency of responses on Item 6, which asked on a scale from A to E (A = *Very helpful*, E = *Not helpful at all*) would it be helpful to have a personal counseling center at your college? An analysis of observed values showed that 44% of respondents indicated having a personal counseling center on campus would be very helpful. In addition, 26% of participants reported that having a personal counseling center on campus would be helpful. Overall, 70% of community college students indicated that having a personal counseling center on campus would be very helpful or helpful, with 25% reporting that they were uncertain.

A chi-square cross tab was used to compare participants' sex with their responses on Item 6. At an alpha level of .05 (4,  $p = .006$ ), perceived helpfulness of personal counseling services was found to be dependent on sex. Women (46%) more often than men (24%) indicated having a personal counseling center on campus would be very helpful or helpful. This finding supported the second hypothesis of the study.

Several other chi-square crosstabs were performed to determine possible relationships between age, program of study, relationship status, or reasons for enrolling in college and responses to the five questions related to personal counseling services. Although none of the tests produced significant findings at the .05 alpha level, several interesting trends emerged. Students who were White (46%), single (43%), college transfer (36%), and seeking a degree to obtain a job (30%) were found to be more likely than other groups to report that having a personal counseling center on campus would be very helpful or helpful.

In addition, 34 % of participants who reported that having a personal counseling center would be very helpful or helpful ("pro-counseling center") also indicated that they would very likely or likely visit such a center. Twenty-five percent of pro-counseling-center participants, however, were uncertain whether they would actually use a personal counseling center. Similarly, of pro-counseling-center participants, 24 % reported that they would very likely or likely attend counseling groups or workshops, whereas 21 % indicated that they were uncertain whether they would attend workshops or groups. Finally, when asked whether having a counselor of the same gender was important, women (28 %) more than men (9 %) reported that it was very important or important to have a same-sex counselor.

## DISCUSSION

A diverse group of students from seven community colleges in North Carolina indicated that having a personal counseling center on campus would be very helpful or helpful. Many of these students also reported that they would be likely to (or might) visit such a center. Currently, none of the seven community colleges surveyed has a personal counseling center. When asked, counselors at each of the seven schools reported that they offered academic and career counseling and referred personal counseling cases out into the community when possible.

Participants responded similarly when asked if they would attend workshops or counseling groups on campus. Practitioners may find these responses typical of community college students, who are often hesitant to attend extracurricular activities (e.g., workshops or groups) even though they may request them or express interest in them. These findings suggest, however, that with information, encouragement, and availability of services, many community college students would likely seek personal counseling on campus or attend counseling groups or workshops.

Overall, students did not indicate a significant preference for having a counselor of either the same age or the same gender. However, more women than men indicated that it would be helpful to have a counselor of the same sex. There were no significant findings related to age of students.

## LIMITATIONS

There were some limitations to this study. First, surveying a larger population of students would provide a more representative sample of each community college as well as of the overall community college population. This study captured the responses of primarily White, single, and college transfer students. Second, it would have been interesting to survey second-year students or community college graduates who may have more experience and familiarity with counseling services. Third, many community colleges (including all schools that participated in this study) currently do not have



counseling centers; therefore, students may not have a complete understanding of what a personal counseling center could offer them as adults.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGE COUNSELORS

In the process of contacting community college counselors and administrators, we discovered that most agreed that having a personal counseling center on campus would be helpful. A major concern of counselors, however, was the challenge of finding sources of funding for this additional service. Results of this study suggest that there is a need for personal counseling services at community colleges. It is hoped that findings such as these will help to convince administrators to investigate the need for personal counseling services on their own campuses and to consider allocating funding to add more counselors that provide these services to day and evening students.

One suggestion is for community college counselors to take the initiative in surveying their students to determine needs for personal counseling services on their campuses and in advocating on behalf of students with administrators. Counselors can also distribute information about their services to demystify the counseling process itself. This approach is particularly advisable when a stigma is attached to seeking assistance of this kind. When surveys are used to determine student needs, one question may be used to find out the best way to advertise for personal counseling services. Counselors may find it helpful to work with faculty to promote a personal counseling center on campus. Faculty may be willing to advertise counseling services and to refer students who may have confided a personal problem. If funding a personal counseling center is an issue, hiring a professional counselor on a half-time basis may be a temporary solution.

Several authors have offered recommendations for counselors to use other services as a way of doing more with less, including using computer software in career counseling and academic advising; using paraprofessionals in academic advising and information dissemination; contracting with a private agency housed near the community college for personal counseling assistance; redefining the role of counselors in the community college setting; providing counseling in group settings, especially with minority and older students; providing peer counselors and student mentors; involving families in the education process; implementing theory-driven and planned (proactive) changes regarding student development; charging a small fee for certain counseling services; and documenting the use and effectiveness of counseling services (Clements, 1984; Cvancara, 1997; Helfgot, 1995; Henricksen, 1995a, 1995b; Ortiz, 1995; Pulliams 1990). In addition, community colleges might explore the varied approaches to providing personal counseling and mental health services on the campuses of 4-year colleges and universities (Helfgot, 1995). As 4-year college students are increasingly diverse, older, and nonresidential, approaches to meeting their counseling needs may have applicability to the community college setting.

## CONCLUSION

Community colleges are as diverse as the students they serve. Each community college will need to find its own answer to the issue of providing personal counseling services to its students. However, as in 4-year institutions, it makes sense to provide this service to students on campus, where it may be most convenient and accessible. Because researchers have not examined this issue previously in the community college setting, results of this study should encourage practitioners and researchers to take a closer look at counselor roles and counseling services at the community college level. If professional counselors are to have a significant role in community colleges in the new millennium, they will have to redefine their roles, initiate creative and proactive ways for allocating funding, and more effectively advocate for themselves and for students (Becherer & Becherer, 1995; Helfgot, 1995).

## REFERENCES

- American Association of Community Colleges. (1999). *National community college snapshot* [On-line]. Available: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/allaboutcc/snapshot.htm>
- Becherer, J. J., & Becherer, J. H. (1995). Programs, services, and activities: A survey of the community college landscape. *New Directions for Student Services*, 69, 63-75.
- Callan, P. M. (1997). Stewards of opportunity: America's public community colleges. *Daedalus*, 126, 95-112.
- Carroll, B. W., & Tarasuk, P. E. (1991). A new vision for student development services for the 90s. *Community College Review*, 19, 32-42.
- Clements, J. C. (1984). *Older adults: Counseling issues*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 260 363)
- Conti, A. (1971). A follow-up study of families referred to outside agencies. *Psychology in the Schools*, 8, 338-340.
- Cvancara, K. J. (1997). Counselors face the challenge of dwindling resources, greater demands, and "damaged goods." Looking for guidance on their own. *Community College Journal*, 67, 8-14.
- Geraghty, M. (1997). Campuses see steep increase in students seeking counseling. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 43, A32-A33.
- Helfgot, S. R. (1995). Counseling at the center: High tech, high touch. *New Directions for Student Services*, 69, 45-61.
- Henricksen, J. S. (1995a). *The influence of race and ethnicity on access to postsecondary education and the college experience*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 386 242)
- Henricksen, J. S. (1995b). Orientation and counseling in a California community college: Surveying the perspectives of a multicultural student population. *Community College Review*, 23, 59-74.
- Levine, A. (1997). How the academic profession is changing. *Daedalus*, 126, 1-11.
- Mathiasen, R. E. (1984). Attitudes and needs of the college student-client. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25, 274-275.
- Ortiz, A. M. (1995). Enhancing student development in community colleges. *Community College Review*, 22, 63-70.
- Pulliams, P. (1990). The emerging role of the community college counselor. Ann Arbor, Michigan: ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED 315 707)