



# Build a Better Relationship With Your Counseling Center Director

## Develop Protocols, Improve Your Effectiveness

BY JAMIE DAVIDSON

**M**any senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) find themselves under increasing pressure, both internally and externally, to address the safety of students on campus. Times like these can stress the best of relationships between an SSAO and his or her counseling center director.

As a former counseling center director and a current assistant vice president to whom the counseling center director reports, my perspective reflects both sides of effective working relationships between these two campus leaders. A strong relationship between the chief mental health officer and the SSAO can make or break the readiness of a campus to respond to students in crisis. Before a crisis occurs, SSAOs should take necessary steps to strengthen their relationships with counseling center directors.

### Identify Expectations in Advance

The midst of a crisis is not the time for an SSAO and a counseling center director to be at loggerheads over the management of a student. The era of counseling centers as isolated silos is over. SSAOs need to thoroughly understand how the counseling center operates on both a philosophical and practical level.

Counseling centers traditionally support the academic mission of an institution through three broad roles: developmental and clinical counseling services; education and prevention programs; and consultation and outreach to the campus community. The variety of services and programs offered generally varies according to the resources of the counseling center and the service priorities of colleges and universities. However, the recent spotlight has been on the crisis response, prevention, and threat assessment role of counseling centers.

On a practical level, exactly what should an SSAO know? Try discussing the following questions with your counseling center director: How do you handle acutely distressed students? What are the roles for various officials on campus when an at-



risk student has been identified? Who takes the lead role? What action do you take if you determine that a student represents a danger to the campus community? What are the procedures for involuntary hospitalizations? Under what circumstances will you contact or notify parents? When and how do you involve campus police? How do you follow up with students after a crisis? This list is not exhaustive, but it is a good start. A great resource for both SSAOs and counseling center directors is the Framework for Developing Institutional Protocols for the Acutely Distressed or Suicidal College Student by The JED Foundation (<http://www.jedfoundation.org/framework.php>). If your university has not already developed a comprehensive set of protocols for assisting students in crisis, formalizing those protocols must become a priority.

### Get Comfortable with Confidentiality

Confidentiality can be a bitter pill to swallow for many SSAOs who are used to being in the know on issues involving students. Keep in mind that counseling center directors, at times, find themselves in the awkward positions of being ethically and legally bound to withhold student information from their vice presidents. Living with confidentiality can be frustrating and stressful for both parties.

An important first step for SSAOs is to recognize the significance of confidentiality. A patient's right to privacy and a mental health provider's responsibility to maintain confidentiality is firmly rooted in state and federal laws and professional ethics for good reason. An assurance of confidentiality is understandably essential in a student's decision to seek help at a counseling center. One can imagine the chilling effect that the weakening of privacy could have on campuses. The ability of counseling center staff to enhance student's academic functioning, decrease potential disruptions, positively impact retention, and maintain a safe campus would be negatively impacted if personal information was freely shared. A very powerful incentive for counseling center directors to protect confidentiality is that they are the individuals who are usually sued or who lose their licenses when confidentiality is breached.

Confidentiality is not absolute, and this is often a source of confusion. The numerous exceptions to privacy that are found in FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), and state laws can be contradictory. Just because FERPA or HIPAA may allow an exception to confidentiality does not guarantee that state law will recognize that exception. Confidentiality statutes differ greatly from state to state. An innovative approach to addressing confidentiality as part of an at-risk student protocol used at a university in one state may not be feasible in another state depending on the language in state privacy regulations. The inconsistencies across state regulations may perplex the savviest SSAO. However, an SSAO must remember that there is an individual on staff with a strong working knowledge of confidentiality—the counseling center director.

Wise SSAOs have learned to ask hypothetical questions that

don't require a director to break confidentiality. "How do you typically treat a student with a severe eating disorder?" is much easier for a counseling center director to answer than "What is the counseling center doing to help student X?" Again, written protocols provide a roadmap for SSAOs to understand the process for treating students in distress, and they can minimize the temptation to ask questions that violate confidentiality.

### Establish a Sense of Mutual Appreciation

A productive working relationship depends on how effectively SSAOs and counseling center directors understand the unique responsibilities and abilities of one another. Each individual brings strengths and weaknesses into the working relationship. Appreciation develops over time when each party comes to value the contributions made by the other in reaching a shared goal: providing the best services possible for students.

For SSAOs, start forging that relationship by communicating the responsibilities and challenges you face. Counseling center directors, especially individuals new to the position, may not fully understand the SSAO role. Help them understand the big picture on campus, including the political realities that all SSAOs must manage. I still remember my surprise years ago when I began to understand the magnitude of demands that my vice president faced from the president, university regents, parents, and staff. This understanding helped me to better serve and support my SSAO on a professional and personal level.

It also is important for SSAOs to understand the unique challenges faced by counseling center directors, including greater numbers of students seeking counseling with more severe problems than in the past; pressure for more information sharing from parents, SSAOs, and other campus officials; balancing the needs and rights of the individual (treatment, support, and confidentiality) with those of the campus community (minimizing disruptions, risk management, and safety); greater concerns about liability and litigation; increasing requests for consultation from faculty members who are increasingly sensitized to possible signs of mental health problems; the difficulty of finding community referrals for students requiring long-term treatment; and staff burnout. This onslaught of demands comes at a time of zero growth or shrinking budgets for many directors.

### A Challenging Time

Clearly this is a challenging time to serve as a university or college counseling center director. It is also true that the work of counseling centers is more important than ever to ensure success for new generations of college students. Counseling center directors need advocacy from their SSAOs at the highest level to make student mental health needs priorities on today's campuses.

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## Address Students Issues Collaboratively

BY KATE MUELLER

At Orange Coast College (OCC), the Student Health Center encompasses both medical and psychological services. Given the prevalence of mental health issues on campuses nationwide, it is not surprising that counseling is the service in greatest demand at the center.

In many cases, students seek counseling on their own. In other cases, faculty and staff refer students to the center and even walk them to the office when appropriate. Faculty and staff remain informed about the health center and its counseling services through a variety of approaches, including new faculty orientations, the faculty handbook, academic division meetings, and classroom presentations.

Unfortunately, there are many situations in which counseling must be mandated. How effectively those situations are handled often is related to the strength of the working relationship between the dean of students and the director of the counseling center.

### Understand Respective Roles

Both the dean of students and the director of the counseling center must appreciate their respective roles and responsibilities. Both administrators must understand the federal and state privacy laws that guide actions and decisions related to students with mental health problems. It is most helpful if the dean of students provides an overview for health center staff on how student conduct cases are handled from a student affairs perspective. The health center director should, in turn, detail the processes and methods to facilitate sharing information about a student-patient.

At OCC, the Student Health Center staff designed a release form that can be utilized for a variety of situations. For instance, the release can be used when a student gives permission to the health center to communicate and share information about his or her counseling, whether for verifying appointments, obtaining progress updates about the student's counseling, or confirming with a counselor that the student is fit to enroll at the college. The dean of students has adapted the health center's release form so that when counseling is mandated and information is needed about the student's progress, permission is obtained up front to discuss the case with other parties, including the health center staff. There are also instances when permission is obtained to discuss the student with outside medical professionals, parents, guardians, or attorneys.

In the Winter 2008 issue of *Leadership Exchange*, OCC detailed its threat assessment model. This model evolved from the

relationship between the dean of students and the director of the health center. The dean and director had already been consulting with one another regarding numerous cases and the following questions raised by the dean of students provided a starting point: What is the waiting period for an appointment with a counselor? If the counseling need is deemed urgent, can the student gain access to a counselor immediately? What, specifically, would the health center like to see in a release form to help ensure that the dean can be informed once the student meets with a counselor?

### Meet Together with Students

As situations develop with students in which mental health issues are apparent or suspected, the dean of students often invites the director of the health center to sit in on meetings with the student. Meetings are arranged once the dean of students receives a report of a student's inappropriate or disconcerting behavior and mental health issues are suspected. Together the dean of students and health center director begin conducting student assessments to ascertain student issues and needs. The meeting is initially approached as a conversation rather than a confrontation to avoid escalating a potentially dangerous situation. The dean and director explain why they are meeting with the student and engage the student in answering a number of questions: Do you have family living nearby? Roommates? Friends on or off campus? What do you like to do outside of class? How are your classes going? How are you feeling? The discussion builds rapport and offers insight into the student's attitude and state of mind. The student is asked to recreate the particular statement and/or behavior that prompted the initial concern and may have alarmed individuals on campus.

The meeting location varies, depending upon the specific situation. Student records are accessed, and a class schedule is printed beforehand. If a student is in class, the dean and director may go to that class and ask the student to step out and talk. When possible, the instructor and academic dean are notified of the visit beforehand. If time does not allow for notification, the dean and director speak to the professor first, then ask to see the student outside the class. If the student is not scheduled to be in class until the next day, the dean or director calls the student and requests a meeting as soon as possible. The student must meet with the dean and director before returning to any classes, and he or she may obtain an excused absence. The campus safety office is always alerted and on call when an assessment occurs and can quickly intervene if the student becomes an immediate danger. If the student cannot be reached in a class or by phone, a certified letter is mailed to the student requiring a meeting with the dean. The student typically is directed not to attend any classes or be on campus for any reason other than the meeting until the situation can be resolved.

Over time, more student conduct cases have involved overt threats or possible harm to students. The safety of the campus then becomes a major factor in addition to the needs of the





individual student. The established and accepted threat assessment model, along with a positive relationship between student affairs and health center staff, continue to contribute to the successful treatment of students with mental health issues who raise potential and actual threats.

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## Leverage the Skills of Your Counseling Center Director

BY DONNA MUELLER

**T**he role of the counseling center in higher education varies significantly from one institution to the next, covering the spectrum from all-inclusive, comprehensive treatment services to intake and referral models.

Universally, the counseling center functions as a clearinghouse for students' concerns and plays a vital institutional role in providing a sense of support, advocacy, and connection for students. Senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) who develop ongoing working relationships with counseling center directors can stay well-informed regarding student trends and position themselves to effectively address student concerns.

The community college, much like four-year institutions, serves large, diverse, and complex student populations that require an array of well-coordinated services to support student success. The task requires meaningful collaboration across the institution to integrate academic and experiential learning. Partnerships with key institutional leaders are a vital component of effecting the change. The director of counseling, with requisite skills in student assessment, education, and systems knowledge, is in a central position to contribute to the process.

The director has a unique role within the community college organization to identify trends and environmental variables that directly affect students and to assist the SSAO in prioritizing issues. In partnership, the SSAO and the director can establish a comprehensive approach to understand the campus environment, increase students' resiliency, and promote student success.

### **Learning Reconsidered as a Guide**

*Learning Reconsidered* (NASPA, 2004) redefines learning as the integration of academic study and student development and recommends collaboration and inclusivity as a means to achieve that goal. The counseling center director plays a key role in establishing departmental goals that support *Learning*

*Reconsidered* student outcomes. *Learning Reconsidered* describes the dimensions of interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, including "realistic self-appraisal and self-understanding; personal attributes such as identity, self-esteem, confidence, ethics and integrity, spiritual awareness, personal goal setting, meaningful relationships, interdependence, collaboration, and the ability to work with people different from self"—all of which fall within the scope of the work of the counseling center. To achieve these outcomes, it is critical that counseling center staff coordinate efforts with corresponding academic coursework and educational programs to maximize student learning. Practice models, which include outreach and preventive education, contribute to student persistence and success. The transformative education process, defined as moving from information transfer to identity development, should occur in various domains both within and outside the classroom. The counseling center staff contributes to this cross-divisional collaboration by offering classroom workshops on time management, study skills, and test anxiety. The director of counseling provides the leadership and retains the ultimate responsibility to develop and implement departmental practice standards consistent with the prescribed outcomes.

Structurally, the director of counseling is positioned within the institution to integrate learning and student development through collaborative partnerships with the academic division. Effective working relationships with faculty provide additional support for classroom management issues and increase student access to services. These cooperative networks established between faculty and student affairs expand the safety net for students and limit the fragmentation of services.

Institutionally, the counseling center director has much to offer in the development of policy supportive of *Learning Reconsidered* principles. Many higher education institutions are developing quorums of cross-institutional representatives to identify new opportunities for transformational learning. Together, interdisciplinary, interdivisional groups can assess the college community as a whole, identifying and influencing multiple environmental variables affecting the college culture. The groups develop comprehensive learning communities where students can achieve their potential and have a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives. The groups' work is closely linked with broader institutional learning goals. The director of counseling is instrumental in developing a culture of collaboration and building interdisciplinary networks that supersede traditional barriers in higher education. For this reason, the director is a valued participant in long-term planning and accreditation processes that influence decisions and foster cohesion and consistency within the higher education learning environment. ■

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