

The Factors and Practices of The Competence of Counselors in Higher Vocational Colleges

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Abstract

Improving the competency of counselors in higher vocational colleges is critical for fostering student success and aligning educational practices with evolving industry demands. This study examines the factors and practices of the competence of counselors in higher vocational colleges. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing surveys and interviews with students, counselors and administrators. The findings indicate a moderate level of competence of counselors in higher colleges along communication skill, psychological support, career guidance, crisis intervention and multicultural competence. Key factors affecting the level of competency of counselors are professional development and training, institutional support, workload and counselor-student ratios, collaboration with other departments, and opportunities for reflection and experience. practices identified include tailoring communication techniques to individual students, maintaining confidentiality and ethical standards, collaborating with other departments, utilizing technology for counseling, demonstrating cultural sensitivity, proactively engaging with students, and participating in continuous professional development.

Keywords

Competence of Counselors, Higher Vocational Colleges, communication skill, psychological support, career guidance, crisis intervention, multi-cultural competence.

1. Introduction

Improving the competency of counselors in higher vocational colleges is critical for fostering student success and aligning educational practices with evolving industry demands. Counselors serve as pivotal figures in bridging the gap between students' academic and career aspirations, necessitating targeted professional development and institutional support. Despite being moderately competent in areas like communication, crisis intervention, and multicultural awareness, gaps remain that hinder optimal performance. Addressing these challenges through tailored training programs, enhanced collaboration across departments, and increased access to resources can significantly elevate counseling services. Such efforts not only contribute to students' personal and professional growth but also enhance the overall quality of vocational education.

2. Research Questions

The study aims to determine the following:

What is the level of competence of counselors in higher colleges along

- a. communication skill
- b. psychological support

- c. career guidance
 - d. crisis intervention
 - e. multi-cultural competence?
2. What are the factors affecting the level of competency of counselors in higher colleges?
 3. What are the best practices of counselors in higher colleges?

3. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. The study begins with a quantitative phase, where structured surveys and questionnaires are distributed to a representative sample of counselors to assess their competency levels in areas such as communication skills, psychological support, career guidance, crisis intervention, and multicultural competence. The results from this phase will inform the subsequent qualitative phase, where semi-structured interviews with counselors, administrators, and other key stakeholders will explore the underlying factors influencing competency and identify best practices.

4. Population and Locale of The Study

The respondents for this study consisted of the students from three schools in Hebei Province, students who have experiences in counseling will be taken as respondents therefore, the study made use of purposive sampling. The respondents are from three vocational colleges in Shijiazhuang City, Hebei Province, China which are Zhengding Advanced Normal College of Hebei, Shijiazhuang Preschool Teachers College, Shijiazhuang Information Engineering Vocational College.

The key informants for the research were representatives from counselors, teachers, students and administrators. Counselors are teachers with at least three years of experience. The administrators are the leaders who responsible for both student management and instructor management from each school. Saturation method was applied. A total number of 12 were gotten. Thematic analysis was used to treat the collected information.

5. Results and Discussions

This section presents and analyzes the factors and practices that affecting the level of competency of counselors in higher colleges along communication skill, psychological support, career guidance crisis intervention and multi-cultural competence.

Table 1. Summary Table of Level of Competence of Counselors in Higher College

Variable	Mean	Interpretation
Communication Skill	2.91	Moderately Competent
Career Guidance	2.90	Moderately Competent
Psychological Support	2.89	Moderately Competent
Crisis Intervention	2.89	Moderately Competent
Multi-Cultural Competence	2.88	Moderately Competent
Overall	2.89	Moderately Competent

Communication skills stand out as the strongest competency, with a mean score of 2.91. This reflects counselors' ability to establish interpersonal connections and adapt their communication styles to meet diverse student needs. However, the score also points to

potential barriers in building deeper rapport, particularly in multicultural or linguistically diverse contexts. Effective communication is critical for fostering trust and encouraging student engagement. In vocational education, where students often face academic and career transitions, communication provides clarity and emotional support.

Career guidance, with a mean score of 2.90, reflects counselors' competency in equipping students with career-related information and preparing them for employment. This includes assisting with job placements, application preparation, and providing insights into current labor market trends. However, gaps in providing personalized career advice to meet the unique aspirations of students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, remain evident.

Psychological support scored 2.89, indicating that counselors are moderately competent in addressing students' mental health needs. While they maintain confidentiality and ethical standards, challenges persist in creating a safe and trusting environments for all students. Psychological support is vital for fostering resilience and well-being, especially in vocational settings where students face stress related to academic and career pressures.

Crisis intervention also scored 2.89, highlighting that counselors demonstrate moderate competency in handling emergencies. While they manage crises with composure and maintain confidentiality, there are gaps in their ability to provide timely and culturally sensitive interventions. Crisis management is critical for ensuring students' safety and well-being, as delays or inadequate responses can escalate issues.

Multi-cultural competence received the lowest score of 2.88, reflecting challenges in addressing the needs of a diverse student population. This includes understanding cultural nuances, integrating multicultural perspectives into counseling practices, and overcoming biases.

In summary, the findings reveal that counselors are moderately competent across all areas, with communication skills being the strongest and multicultural competence requiring the most improvement.

Table 2. Factors Affecting the Level of Competency of Counselors in Higher Colleges

Theme	Frequency	Sample Responses
Professional Development and Training	5	Counselor 1: "Without regular training sessions, it's difficult to stay updated with the latest counseling techniques and technologies."
Institutional Support	5	Teacher 2: "The support counselors get from the institution, especially in terms of collaboration with other departments, is crucial."
Workload and Counselor-Student Ratio	3	Counselor 3: "With too many students, it's hard to give each one the attention they need, and that limits how effectively I can help them."
Collaboration with Other Departments	2	Administrator 2: "When there's smooth communication between teachers and counselors, it helps them address student issues more effectively."
Experience and Reflection	2	Student 1: "Counselors who regularly reflect on their practices are able to improve their skills and offer better support."

1. Professional Development and Training

Professional development and training were frequently cited by key informants, with a frequency of 5. Regular and up-to-date training opportunities are crucial for counselors to stay

informed about the latest counseling strategies and techniques. Competency-based education theory highlights that continuous professional development is necessary to meet the evolving needs of students, especially in the context of multicultural counseling and mental health support.

Administrator 1 shared, "Providing regular professional development opportunities for counselors is essential. We've seen that those who attend training regularly are more competent in addressing students' diverse needs." This demonstrates the real-world necessity of ongoing training, as supported by Rahmawati et al. (2021), who stress that experiential learning and hands-on training enhance the competencies of counselors. When counselors do not receive adequate professional development, their ability to support students effectively can be significantly limited.

2. Institutional Support

Institutional support was another highly mentioned factor, with a frequency of 5. This includes both the resources provided to counselors and the overall administrative support that allows them to perform their roles effectively. Social cognitive theory supports the idea that counselors who receive institutional backing are more confident and effective in their roles because they have access to the tools and collaborative opportunities needed for growth.

Counselor 2 emphasized, "Institutional support is essential. When the administration provides resources like access to digital tools and gives us the time for reflective practices, it positively impacts my ability to improve my skills and offer better support to students." This real-world example illustrates how the right resources and support enable counselors to maintain and improve their competencies. According to Gonzalez-Voller et al. (2020), institutional backing not only provides counselors with the materials they need but also encourages them to pursue continuous professional development.

3. Workload and Counselor-Student Ratio

The workload and counselor-student ratio are another significant theme, with a frequency of 3. A high number of students per counselor can prevent counselors from dedicating enough time to each individual student, which can reduce the overall quality of counseling services.

Teacher 3 shared, "Workload is a significant factor. Counselors with fewer students seem more engaged and can offer more tailored advice, compared to those who are overloaded with too many students." This reflects a real-world challenge where counselors, particularly in vocational settings, are often responsible for large caseloads, limiting their ability to provide personalized guidance. Mollen and Ridley (2021) emphasize that maintaining a manageable workload is crucial to ensuring that counselors can engage deeply with their students, especially in times of crisis or when students need individual attention.

4. Collaboration with Other Departments

Collaboration with other departments appeared as an important theme with a frequency of 2. Working effectively with other staff and departments ensures that students receive comprehensive support, addressing both their academic and emotional needs.

Teacher 2 noted, "The support counselors get from the institution, especially in terms of collaboration with other departments, is crucial." This response highlights the real-life necessity of teamwork between departments, particularly in vocational settings where students may need support from various staff members, such as teachers, career advisors, and mental health counselors. Hu and Guan (2008) suggest that successful collaboration between departments enhances the overall quality of student services, creating a more holistic approach to addressing students' academic and personal challenges.

5. Experience and Reflection

Experience and reflection emerged as a theme with a frequency of 2. Counselors who have significant experience and regularly engage in reflective practices are better equipped to support students and improve their own competencies over time.

Counselor 1 stated, "Experience in handling diverse student populations is key. Reflecting on past cases helps me refine my counseling methods, especially when addressing multicultural issues." This real-world insight aligns with transformative learning theory, which underscores the importance of critical reflection in professional development. Lambie and Stickl Haugen (2021) also emphasize that regular reflection on counseling practices can lead to improved outcomes, as counselors become more aware of the specific needs of their students.

In summary, the study identified several key themes. These include professional development and training, which is crucial for counselors to stay updated with the latest techniques; institutional support, which provides the necessary resources and backing to maintain competencies; workload and counselor-student ratio, which impacts the quality of personalized attention; collaboration with other departments, ensuring comprehensive student support; and experience and reflection, where ongoing self-assessment helps refine counseling skills. These factors collectively influence the overall effectiveness of counselors in vocational settings.

Table 3. The Best Practices of Counselors in Higher Colleges

Theme	Freq	Sample Responses
Tailored Communication Techniques	3	Counselor 1: "One of the best practices I use is tailoring my communication to fit the needs of each student."
Confidentiality and Ethical Standards	3	Student 2: "The counselors that are really helpful are the ones who respect my confidentiality. It feels safer to talk to them."
Collaboration with Other Departments	3	Teacher 1: "Counselors who collaborate with teachers and other departments can offer better support to students."
Use of Technology for Counseling	3	Teacher 2: "The counselors I see using technology and online platforms to reach students are able to engage with a wider range of students."
Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity	2	Teacher 3: "Cultural sensitivity is a best practice. Counselors who understand and respect the cultural backgrounds of students are more effective."
Proactive Student Engagement	2	Student 1: "I think the best counselors are those who reach out to students, especially when they know someone is struggling but not seeking help."
Professional Development and Training	2	Administrator 3: "We encourage our counselors to continuously engage in professional development. It's one of the best practices."

1. Tailored Communication Techniques

Tailoring communication to fit the individual needs of students is one of the most widely acknowledged best practices among counselors. By adjusting their approach to suit the unique backgrounds, experiences, and challenges of each student, counselors can build stronger relationships and provide more effective support.

As Counselor 1 explained, "One of the best practices I use is tailoring my communication to fit the needs of each student." This reflects a personalized approach, which aligns with Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2022), emphasizing the importance of meeting students' needs for autonomy and competence. Tailored communication helps students feel understood and supported, particularly in vocational settings where students face both academic and career-related pressures.

2. Confidentiality and Ethical Standards

Maintaining confidentiality and adhering to ethical standards is another critical best practice. Students are more likely to open up and seek help when they feel that their privacy is respected, creating a trusting and secure environment for counseling.

Student 2 noted, "The counselors that are really helpful are the ones who respect my confidentiality. It feels safer to talk to them." This highlights the importance of ethical behavior in building trust. According to the American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2010), maintaining confidentiality is fundamental in counseling practice, and when students feel safe, they are more likely to engage in meaningful discussions about their challenges.

3. Collaboration with Other Departments

Collaboration with other departments is another best practice that enhances the effectiveness of counseling. By working with teachers, administrators, and career advisors, counselors can provide comprehensive support to students, addressing not just emotional or psychological issues but also academic and career concerns.

Teacher 1 shared, "Counselors who collaborate with teachers and other departments can offer better support to students." This reflects the need for a multidisciplinary approach in vocational colleges, where students often face challenges that span different areas of their lives. Hu and Guan (2008) highlight that collaboration is key to ensuring holistic student support, allowing counselors to tap into the expertise of other staff members to provide more well-rounded services.

4. Use of Technology for Counseling

With the increasing importance of technology in education, counselors who leverage online platforms and digital tools are able to reach a broader range of students. This is particularly beneficial for students who may be hesitant to seek face-to-face counseling or have scheduling conflicts.

As Teacher 2 pointed out, "The counselors I see using technology and online platforms to reach students are able to engage with a wider range of students." This practice is increasingly vital, especially in the context of modern educational settings, where technology plays a central role. Gonzalez-Voller et al. (2020) also stress that technology can enhance access to counseling services, making it easier for students to receive support in a flexible and convenient way.

5. Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity

Cultural sensitivity is an essential practice in counseling, especially in diverse educational environments. Counselors who are aware of and respect the cultural backgrounds of their students are more likely to provide relevant and meaningful guidance, addressing the unique challenges faced by students from different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds.

Teacher 3 mentioned, "Cultural sensitivity is a best practice. Counselors who understand and respect the cultural backgrounds of students are more effective." This aligns with Multicultural Counseling Competence, as discussed by Mollen and Ridley (2021), which emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness in counseling. By being sensitive to cultural differences, counselors can better support students and help them navigate their specific challenges.

6. Proactive Student Engagement

Proactively engaging students, especially those who are reluctant to seek help, is another important best practice. Counselors who take the initiative to reach out to students show that they care and are invested in the well-being of their students, which encourages more students to seek support when needed.

Student 1 said, "I think the best counselors are those who reach out to students, especially when they know someone is struggling but not seeking help." This practice aligns with social cognitive theory, which suggests that counselors can model positive behavior by actively engaging with students, thereby encouraging them to participate in counseling.

7. Professional Development and Training

Continuous professional development and training are essential for counselors to stay updated with the latest techniques and best practices in counseling. This ensures that counselors can provide high-quality services that meet the evolving needs of students.

Administrator 3 emphasized, "We encourage our counselors to continuously engage in professional development. It's one of the best practices." Ongoing learning is crucial for staying competent, as competency-based education theory suggests, by ensuring that counselors can keep up with new developments in mental health, crisis intervention, and career counseling. Regular training allows counselors to refine their skills and adapt to new challenges that students may face.

The best practices identified for counselors in higher vocational colleges include tailored communication techniques, maintaining confidentiality and ethical standards, and collaboration with other departments, which are all essential for providing comprehensive and effective support to students. Counselors who utilize technology for counseling and demonstrate cultural sensitivity are better equipped to meet the diverse needs of the student population. Additionally, proactive student engagement helps reach students who may be reluctant to seek help, and ongoing professional development ensures counselors stay updated with the latest techniques and strategies. These practices collectively contribute to improving the overall quality and impact of counseling services in higher education settings.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

To sum up, moderate competency reflects counselors' ability to meet essential responsibilities but indicates reliance on foundational skills. To improve the overall competence of counselors, institutions should implement regular, targeted professional development programs focused on communication skills, crisis intervention, and multicultural competence to address the specific areas where counselors were rated moderately competent. Institutions should provide additional support by balancing counselor-student ratios, offering access to modern counseling tools, and fostering stronger collaboration between counselors and other departments to enhance the effectiveness of student support. Encourage counselors to adopt proactive engagement strategies, particularly for students who may be reluctant to seek help and prioritize cultural sensitivity training to ensure that diverse student populations are effectively supported.

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