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A PROFESSIONAL DECENTRALIZED APPROACH
TO COUNSELLING
(AN EXPERIMENT IN COUNSELLOR VISIBILITY)

ABSTRACT: A decentralized approach to counselling was initiated at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology following an examination of the effectiveness of our previous centralized approach. A counsellor was strategically located in the mainstream of student and staff movement. It was expected that this re-location would reduce instructor/counsellor barriers to counselling. The intent, in such an approach, was to place counselling in an "educational model" where the counsellor was located and integrated into the scene of action as contrasted to the usual "medical model" where the student/staff must seek out the counsellor at some distant point. In the centralized approach students/staff often attach a stigma to counselling. Delay in seeking assistance results because counselling is perceived as a last resort rather than as a resource.

The presentation gives a description of the NAIT setting, an outline of the general objectives, the elements and rationale of the concept, evaluation of decentralization, a decentralization area and a summary.

The Northern Alberta Institute of Technology is located on a thirty-one acre campus close to downtown Edmonton. The main campus buildings have a floor area of over 1,000,000 square feet. The original buildings were completed in 1963, with major additions in 1965, 1968, and 1973.

The 1973-74 enrolment of 9,000 consisted of 4,000 Technology, Industrial, Business, and Vocational students for 55 programs as well as 5,000 Apprenticeship students in 27 trade-training areas. In addition, approximately 10,000 adults were registered in credit and general interest courses through the Continuing Education Division.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES OF DECENTRALIZATION

In September 1971, consideration was given to the effectiveness of our centralized approach to counselling. It was decided to explore the possibility of employing a decentralized approach. This entailed locating a counsellor in a strategic area, close to students and staff traffic patterns, thereby attempting to reduce instructor and student barriers to counselling.

The objectives in such an approach, were to place counselling in an "educational model" which, in turn, would allow:

1. for the reduction of the distance between the counsellor and students as well as the distance between the counsellor and staff. It was anticipated that greater utilization would be made of the counselling office.

2. for the increase in counsellor visibility, hopefully removing some of the intangible concerns associated with counselling.

3. the counselling office to become a center of activity involving both students and staff in the area. The students and staff would be able to better understand and appreciate the responsibilities of a counsellor.

4. the counsellor to actively become involved in the role of consultant with staff and administration.

5. the counsellor to become an agent of influence and/or change through very concrete, overt actions.

These factors became the central focus for launching the project.

THE ELEMENTS AND RATIONALE

1. The cooperation and support of the administration were actively sought. It should be noted that it was extremely important to receive acceptance of the project at all levels, including the first-line instructors.

2. The Business Administration Department was selected for a number of reasons. One important reason was that the counsellor selected had spent a year previously teaching in the Department and was well accepted. However, the counsellor resigned after three months to accept an administrative position at another institution. During the transitional period, the new counsellor had to develop lines of communication and gain the confidence of the staff. After a short period, both the staff and the counsellor had developed confidence and respect for each other.

3. The provision of a suitable office in the mainstream of student and staff traffic patterns was the next challenge. Because office space was at a premium, it was decided to use a newly decorated storage room located adjacent to the Business Administration offices. Again, some concern was expressed that the students might see this location as another "arm" of the administrative staff. However, our fear proved groundless after evaluation of a student questionnaire administered at the end of the year.

4. The counsellor responsibility was limited to three business programs, namely, Accounting and Financial Administration, Administrative Management, and Marketing Administration, in order to establish a student-counsellor ratio of approximately 450:1. The limitation was also established to allow for staff and students to develop a closer identification with the counsellor.

5. To publicize the counsellor's presence, book marks describing the service available were distributed when the counsellor met each class. Attendance at staff meetings and informal gatherings at coffee helped the counsellor to get acquainted with the staff. An open-door policy for appointments was arranged.

6. Specific short-term objectives were developed for the first year, until some experience could be gained with the project. These objectives were evaluated every three months to assess their effectiveness and determine the direction(s) which should be pursued by the counselling office. Over-all and specific objectives have now been written. Some of the over-all objectives include:

A. to counsel students on an individual and/or group basis involving educational, vocational, socio-personal, and financial concerns.

B. to offer sessions on general study habits as the need arises and/or coordinate and participate in a study program for students conducted by staff. The second method appears most successful because the instructor describes specific techniques which are important for his/her course.

C. to actively participate in seminars and panels regarding résumés, job interviewing techniques, and orientation of new students.

D. to conduct individual and/or group testing as required.

E. to maintain an adequate record system for all clients.

F. to contact designated city high schools for the purpose of informing prospective students of the programs offered in the Business Administration Department.

G. to maintain open lines of communication with all instructional staff in the area.

H. to attend and participate in staff meetings scheduled by the Central Counselling office and/or the Business Administration Department.

I. to act as a consultant to the staff and administration.

J. to conduct research as the need arises.

7. A professionally trained counsellor was employed in this position. Emphasis was placed on the direct responsibility of the counsellor to the Central Counselling office. The counsellor must not allow himself/herself to be "possessed" by the area. Continuity of the counselling function must be maintained throughout the institution.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

The program was evaluated at the end of each year. Some comments made by the department head and staff were:

1. Location of the counsellor has facilitated access for students. This has built more student-counsellor rapport.

2. Decentralization has helped to remove the instructor-counsellor barrier. The contact with instructors has helped to identify the counsellor as one of the group.

3. Being in close contact with staff has assisted the counsellor to:

A. understand the programs and program changes in greater detail, and consequently, she is able to provide better academic counselling.

B. understand the students by having greater access to student files and information gained from the staff advisor.

C. solicit the cooperation of the staff to assist in the counsellor's endeavors.

4. Closer liaison between counsellor and staff advisors has resulted in more timely service to the students.

5. Greater diagnostic and preventive types of counselling are possible.

6. A decentralized testing program can be easily implemented.

7. Involvement of the counsellor in programs such as orientation and study habits is more readily achieved.

The counsellor involved felt that decentralization:

1. gives a closer and more personal working relationship with students.

2. enables the counsellor to become more familiar with the curriculum and the general atmosphere of the area which, in turn, aids the counsellor to become more knowledgeable and empathic.

3. allows the counsellor to have a closer and more personal contact with the staff, thus facilitating the liaison function.

The feelings of the students as indicated on a questionnaire were also positive.

DIFFICULTIES IN DEVELOPING THE DECENTRALIZATION CONCEPT

1. It was difficult to locate good office space in the main traffic stream because the Business Administration Department is situated on four floors in the tower building.

2. Another difficulty was the provision of secretarial services. Secretarial assistance is provided by the secretaries in the decentralized area staff office and the Central Counselling office. Appointment sheets are put on the counsellor's door for the students to mark appointments and thus avoid interruptions for the counsellor. The student can use any notation he/she desires.

3. The counsellor felt isolated for a time. However, as the counsellor became more involved in the area this feeling disappeared. Communications between the Central Counselling office and the decentralized areas, as well as among decentralized areas, must flow freely. This communication is assisted by regular staff meetings, circulation of appropriate information, and meetings of the decentralized counsellors and the Head of the Student Counselling Center.

4. At the present time, the students do not have a choice of counsellors in the area. If the student wishes, he/she can be referred to the Central Counselling office.

5. At the end of the first year, the computer students were included in the counsellor's area because they were allowed to take electives in the other three programs and vice versa. This has resulted in the student-counsellor ratio rising above an acceptable level. However, we would hope to reduce this ratio as new counselling staff are employed.

As a result of this initial endorsement of the decentralization concept, approval was readily given by the Administration for a second decentralization pilot project in the Engineering Sciences Department. The project was also given full endorsement after the one-year trial period. Two more decentralized areas are being established as soon as office space becomes available.

SUMMARY

In our experience, the decentralized approach more effectively coordinates the work of the counsellor, instructional staff, and administration. Through an atmosphere of good liaison, this team approach focuses more readily upon the needs of the students and their possible solutions. Emphasis, now, is placed upon diagnostic and preventive counselling rather than crisis counselling.

With this greater counsellor visibility, the responsibilities of the counsellor are more readily understood and appreciated. As an accepted and valued member of this team, the counsellor is now in a better position to make important contributions in departmental decisions, particularly those which affect the students.

One may suggest that such an approach will be more expensive. However, the writer feels the gain in the quality of counselling is more than worth the additional expenditure of funds.

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RESUME: A la suite d'un examen de l'efficacité de l'approche centralisée des services de counseling au Northern Alberta Institute of Technology on a initié une approche décentralisée. On a fait en sorte qu'un conseiller soit immédiatement présent dans la vie courante des étudiants et du personnel. On s'attendait ce que cette stratégie réduise les barrières au counseling. L'intention sous-jacente de cette approche était de situer le counseling à l'intérieur d'un modèle éducationnel par opposition au modèle médical habituel dans lequel l'étudiant ou le professeur doit parcourir une certaine distance pour rencontrer le conseiller. L'approche centralisée amène souvent les étudiants et le personnel à percevoir le recours à un conseiller comme quelque chose de stigmatisant. On retarde d'avoir recours au conseiller parce qu'il est perçu comme la dernière personne à consulter et non comme une personne-ressource.

On fait la description de l'organisation du NAIT, on trace l'esquisse de ses principaux objectifs et le rationnel de l'étude.