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COUNSELLING IN A MANITOBA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

ABSTRACT: This article presents a personal view of counselling in Manitoba's largest community college. From an experiential background as teacher and counsellor of both adolescents and adults, the author examines the "training" philosophy of the community college, the historical antecedents of this philosophy, and the implications for the community college student and student personnel worker. The role of the college counsellor as a guidance worker or counsellor is also discussed. Related to this question is the apparent lowering of educational and professional qualifications for college counselling as a consequence of a guidance oriented system.

A suggestion is made for the need of a national association of community college counsellors and for a publication to improve communication and awareness among student personnel workers related to the needs, practices, and concerns experienced in college counselling in Canada.

Rather than attempt to describe the counselling scene in the three community colleges in our Province, this article will be limited to my observations concerning Red River Community College, where I have been employed as a counsellor since January, 1972. This limitation is necessary because the communication links between our colleges are not as yet strong enough to warrant making any comments on the activities of my colleagues elsewhere in the province.

A brief thumbnail sketch of my own education and experience may be helpful to the reader so that my necessarily subjective comments may be put in a proper perspective. I had five years experience teaching in public high schools and four years counselling experience in an adult high school before joining the Counselling Service at Red River. I hold an M.Ed. in Counselling from the University of Manitoba.

The first observation I would make concerning community college counselling is related to my background. Coming from an "educational" experience in public schools to what, in my opinion, can be fairly described as a "training" experience in a community college, required considerable adjustment. Red River was originally a vocational institute specializing in trades-training. It evolved with the addition of business, applied arts, teacher education, and medically based programmes into a community college in 1969. The training philosophy to which I referred is a legacy of that evolution.

Training is, of course, in itself not an evil, for clearly the increasing acceptance of the college in our community as a viable alternative to university education is quite apparent. The problem, in my view, is that a training philosophy implies certain expectations of the student (and student personnel worker) which run counter to the prevailing educational philosophy of today's public-school system. The most salient characteristics of training are the following expectations: the student should come equipped with a level of academic preparation that the college deems necessary; the student must achieve standards set by the institution in response to the expectations of prospective employers; the student will not exercise much choice of subjects since the institution has pre-determined what the student needs to know; and the student must progress at a rate determined by the institution.

The consequence of these expectations is fairly predictable. Today's youth, emerging from an educational system which emphasizes a developmental approach to learning and the learner, finds the relative inflexibility of the community college something of a shock. To be sure, students who do graduate find their services eagerly sought by employers. However, far too many fail to graduate and, while it would be grossly unfair to lay all the blame at the feet of the institution, the feeling persists that far too great a waste of human potential results from the inability and/or reluctance to adapt the system to its most vital ingredient — the student.

Another inescapable observation of college counselling is related to the role and function of the college counsellor. Again, the historical antecedents of the present college determine much of the expectations of the college counsellor. As the college evolved from a vocational institute, it is not surprising to find the counsellor's role more closely tied to a "guidance" orientation. I have argued elsewhere (School Counsellors of Manitoba publication, March-April, 1973) for an attempt at dichotomizing these functions. For the present, suffice it to say that I see guidance as a didactic, information-transmitting function, and counselling as a decision-making, conflict-resolving function.

Although it has been argued that this distinction is too arbitrary and unworkable, it is my contention that experienced and qualified personnel have little difficulty identifying their various activities as guidance or counselling.

The consequences of a guidance approach to student services includes an expectation to perform the following tasks as "counselling" activities: high-school career and educational talks; tours of the college; admissions testing for applicants lacking required educational prerequisites; and provision of service to prospective applicants as well as enrolled students. The latter expectation is deceptively acceptable until one realizes that the demands for "off the street" counselling can be so time-consuming that the counsellor can quickly find himself in the position of having precious little time left for the needs of enrolled students. It would not seem too unworkable to allocate student personnel workers on either a guidance-counselling, or on an inside-outside, basis.

Another consequence of a guidance philosophy of student personnel service is perhaps more serious. In Manitoba, we seem to be experiencing the phenomenon of a lowering of educational requirements for student personnel workers. This would seem understandable when one considers the predicament of administrators faced with the spectre of accountability. When they examine the visible practices of a guidance worker, they are hard pressed to justify graduate training at the master's level and beyond as a requirement for the job. Since counselling — individual or group — is essentially closed to outside scrutiny, it is quite difficult to convince administrators that graduate education in counselling can equip the practitioner with skills well beyond those attained at the bachelor's level. Therefore, there is subtle and real pressure on the counsellor to demonstrate in public what he claims he can do in private. This leads the counsellor into what are essentially guidance activities in an attempt to establish his competence and credibility. What may be undesirable about this is that the counsellor may undertake activities which at times are not compatible with his experience, education, or competence, and which in fact may involve him in activities which are highly inefficient in that he is receiving a professional salary to carry out activities which could be handled by a paraprofessional.

Having expressed some observations and concerns regarding college counselling, it is perhaps incumbent upon me to present some suggestions which hopefully might help remedy the situation. Paramount in my consideration is the need for a national association of community college counsellors, either as an independent organization, or affiliated with an existing organization such as the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association. Unless my own situation is very atypical of college counselling, there are significant differences between our roles and those of the public-school and university counsellors. These differences should warrant the creation of an organization which would direct its energies to the issues and concerns of college counsellors. Related to this is the need for a publication for college counsellors, hopefully dealing with the "live" issues facing us and not

overly concerned with the publication of scholarly treatises, important as they may be. At the 1973 CGCA convention in Winnipeg, the matter of a national association was proposed at one session and it was enthusiastically endorsed by all concerned. Perhaps we are all waiting for some energetic soul to start things rolling.

In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to CGCA for the opportunity to present a personal view of counselling at Red River Community College. I am eagerly looking forward to reading of others' experiences in community colleges elsewhere in Canada.

RESUME: Cet article présente un point de vue personnel de la situation du counseling dans le collège communautaire le plus important du Manitoba. En se basant sur son expérience d'enseignant et de conseiller auprès d'adolescents et d'adultes, l'auteur examine la philosophie de la formation du collège communautaire, les antécédents historiques de cette philosophie et les implications qu'on peut en tirer pour l'étudiant et ceux qui traitent avec lui. L'auteur discute aussi du rôle du conseiller dans ce contexte. Cette question est reliée à la diminution apparente des qualifications nécessaires à la pratique du counselling, diminution consécutive à un système centré sur l'orientation.

L'auteur souligne le besoin de créer une association nationale des conseillers oeuvrant dans les collèges communautaires. Il suggère de même la création d'une publication qui permettrait d'échanger et de rendre plus conscients des besoins, des pratiques et des préoccupations des collèges communautaires ceux qui ont charge des services auprès des étudiants.