

SEASONS OF A COUNSELOR'S LIFE: CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL STAFF IN COUNSELING CENTERS

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Since the end of World War II, college and university counseling centers have been fertile ground for the career paths of psychologists, counselors, and social workers. With an early focus on vocational testing and then broadening to include mental health issues, counseling centers have been perceived as an attractive work setting for new professionals and experienced staff alike. In spite of this, relatively little attention has been devoted to the career development of professional staff within college and university counseling centers with a few exceptions (Wachowiak, Bauer, and Simono, 1979; Baron, Sekel, and Scott, 1984; Phelps, 1992; and Parham, 1992).

This article will highlight a developmental framework that lends itself to exploring and promoting the identity of counseling center professional staff. Similar to what Dean and Meadows (1995) stated, this article will focus on professional identity, rather than the specific job function or title of "college counselor." It is the authors' goal to present you with a way of thinking about the professional development of a college counselor, to address some of the major issues that interact with this process, and suggest ways to promote and enhance staff commitment and development within this environment.

While there have been a number of theories proposed over the years that address career development as well as adult personality development, it would be too cumbersome to address those within the scope of this article. However, three different theories have significantly shaped the authors' thinking about counselors' career development. These theories include Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of motivation and job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966), Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (Super, 1957), and Levinson's theory of adult development (Levinson et al, 1978). The authors encourage the reader to go to the original publications to learn more about each of their views.

A MODEL OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT WITHIN COUNSELING CENTERS

We would like to take this opportunity to offer a new model of career development; a synthesized view of other's writings and observations coupled with the authors' own experiences with counseling center colleagues across the country. In this model, you will start with a new professional entering a counseling center position for the first time and conclude as a person is wrapping up their professional career as a counseling center staff person. It should be emphasized that optimal professional development of counselors is a long, slow, and erratic process (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Often, there is a critical incident followed by slow change. Some of the issues may be age-dependent...being affected by the age in which one enters graduate school. However, rather than emphasizing age as the primary factor for the developmental stages, emphasis should be placed on length of time in the position, regardless of age. In addition, it should be noted that while there may be individual variation across stages with regard to timing and experience, the authors believe that the sequencing of stages remains fixed across settings and staff.

Stage 1: Young Guns (new professionals)

As mentioned earlier, counseling centers have historically been an attractive work setting for new professionals. There are a number of reasons why such a setting is seen as such a viable and rewarding position. Wachowiak, Bauer, and Simono (1979) point out that counseling center positions were attractive because it offered an opportunity to remain in the academic nest, where you have the status of a full-time academic without the intense publish or perish pressure of an academic position. Phelps (1992) highlights the variety of counseling center activities and the autonomy in carrying out job responsibilities as other major aspects of this work.

During the first five years as a new professional, these *young guns* are typically highly energetic and motivated to put

into practice all the applied learning acquired through graduate school. They are often idealistic with their view of the world, of counseling, and of work in higher education. As found with Levinson's early adulthood stage, there is a tendency to want to keep his/her career options open. *Young guns* may pursue a variety of professional opportunities including a joint appointment in the academic department, establishing a small private practice, or even becoming involved in other aspects of University functioning (e.g., committee work).

Not surprisingly, young guns encounter a number of issues, both professional and personal. Some professional issues that they struggle with include 1) competence, 2) licensing and credentialing, 3) ethical and legal concerns, and 4) heavy reliance on external expertise to do therapy. Personal concerns that *young guns* might struggle with include 1) need for recognition, 2) balancing work and personal life, 3) financial strain, and 4) race/ethnic/gender issues (Parham, 1992).

Often, this is a period of tremendous transition for *young guns* because they are moving from a graduate student role to one of a peer and colleague. What is particularly helpful for this group is the opportunity to be mentored by a more seasoned colleague. These mentors can help *young guns* harness and focus their energies as they work to create new outreach programming, develop new projects, and try on a variety of roles. Expecting this group to make firm career commitments or even extended commitments to specific projects is often unproductive (Levine, 1987). Furthermore, Levine comments that offering *young guns* leadership positions can be developmentally problematic - as leadership is customarily defined. One reason is that it is not easy nor does it feel safe for *young gun* leaders to express doubts and uncertainties in this position.

This period typically lasts about 4-6 years. Recent research (Wachowiak & Simono, 1996) suggests that this period may be lengthening. It is during this time that they are collecting data about what work environments and settings and activities best fit with their "dream." After they have collected this information, they transition into the next stage.

Stage 2: Crossroad Counselors

We refer to counselors in the next stage as "*crossroad counselors*." It is during this time that professional staff in college counseling centers are faced with a decision...do they opt to become a lifelong counseling center staffperson or do they pursue another setting such as an academic department or private practice? This period is often traversed after a person has worked in a counseling center for 6-10 years.

As one enters this stage, there is an initial questioning of whether to remain in counseling centers. In fact, this questioning is the key characteristic of *crossroad counselors*. They engage in a fair amount of reflection of what has transpired over the early years in the counseling center.

Questions they begin to ask include:

- Is this the right setting for me?
- Am I getting my needs met through this kind of work?
- Is there anything better out there?
- How does fit in with my long-term life plans and work plans?

The infamous "seven-year itch" can also happen as a counseling center professional, wondering if the grass is greener on the other side. One reason why this "itch" becomes so pronounced is that the glass ceiling, through a very short career ladder, becomes painfully obvious. Generally, there is little room for advancement within a counseling center environment. If Herzberg (1966) and Levinson (1978) are correct in their assumptions, one can anticipate that people who are motivated to achieve and grow will be frustrated by this short career ladder. The choice that lies before a *crossroad counselor* is whether the benefits of working in a counseling center outweigh the disadvantages of remaining in the system. As they engage in this personal reflection, their professional identity becomes better defined.

Another feature of this stage is the ever-present stress that has accumulated from overcommitment to professional activities. However, the stress can also come from a certain degree of boredom stemming from being involved in the same activities, day in and day out and the cyclical nature of counseling center work. If the *crossroad counselor* does not find ways to manage this stress through reliance on social support and scaling back of involvements, they will likely begin to experience burnout (Parham, 1992). Further, the conflict between their work and personal life becomes

more pronounced as *crossroad counselors* may begin to establish families and committed relationships.

Stage 3: The Next Generation

Counseling center professionals typically exit the second stage with making the decision to continue their work as a college counselor or leaving to pursue other professional opportunities such as private practice. If the *crossroad counselor* made the decision to remain in the counseling center setting, they then become part of the "next generation." These people have worked in the counseling center environment for about 11-16 years. As you might imagine, the *next generation* stage can be a double-edged sword. As the *next generation* professional becomes increasingly older, they may experience a shift in their relationship with students. The age differential gradually expands and many counselors often experience feelings of not being able to relate as well to traditional-aged college students (Parham, 1992).

Veteran college counselors may also experience a change in their relationships with their colleagues. While the average age of counseling center staff has increased in recent years, a significant age gap may come to exist between one professional and another. Rather than looking at this difference as a hindrance, it can become an opportunity for the *next generation* counselor to assume more supervisory roles with the *young guns* and help mentor the new professionals along. If the next generation counselor has settled into and accepted the dream of being a college counselor, they can serve as effective role models for less experienced staff.

During the *next generation* stage, there is a reexamination and reevaluation about the potential for change during the upcoming years (Wachowiak, Bauer, and Simono, 1979). This reexamination often involves a conscious decision as to whether they want to take on administrative responsibilities and positions. Unfortunately, unless the center is a mid- to large-sized center, there may not be any "official" administrative positions such as assistant or associate directors. The counseling professional may also realize that his/her chance of becoming a director of a counseling center is extremely slim. This realization may lead to a revision of the dream. If the person can clarify their priorities/values and rekindle what they are passionate about, then stabilization and revitalization are likely.

Stage 4: Seasoned Sages

For counseling center professionals who remain beyond the 16-year mark, there is a movement into the period of becoming a "seasoned sage." People who enter into this stage have displayed high commitment to the work of college counseling. However, there may be some pull to explore other options such as becoming a university administrator or leaving for private practice because of financial concerns or stress from political pressures on campus. In the early part of this stage, it is very important for these *seasoned sages* to find ways to challenge themselves and psychologically grow in their position. If this does not happen, there is a high risk of becoming stagnant and stale. This is one reason why a training program within the counseling center is particularly helpful. Introduction of new trainees into a setting helps to reenergize veteran staff as well as forcing these *seasoned sages* to stay on top of the latest professional literature and treatments.

During this period, there is intense personal and professional reflection, consciously giving time and energy to processing, alone and with others, significant life experiences. They may question whether they realized their dream and if they have live their life with integrity.

Seasoned sages also come to rely on what Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) called internal expertise. Over time, experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom replace the use of "external" sources of expertise and prescribed way of doing things. In this sense, the "seasoned" professional has their own body of knowledge that they rely on much more heavily in their work.

Another observation from this period is that as time goes on, *seasoned sages* may experience increasing professional isolation. Professional elders may gradually disappear through retirement or death. Those that remain behind often experience a sense of loss of their professional peers. Similarly, there may be feelings of isolation or inability to significantly contribute to the field in a substantial way. This could be the result of "sage-ism" in our field. Many professional associations tend to cater to the needs/issues of younger or middle-staged counselors, while ignoring the needs of *seasoned sages*.

How to Promote Retention and Enhance Professional Career Development

Now that we have seen the typical stages college counselors may go through, it is important to turn our attention to ways to promote retention and enhance the career development of counseling professionals.

A failure to successfully navigate through the various stages and negotiate their associated tasks can have significant consequences for counseling centers and their staff. If the support and resources are not available to the counselor, a lack of commitment and investment in counseling center work may result. This can happen while a person is at any stage of the process, but the reasons and causes may differ across the different periods. If a person experiences declining commitment, he/she may seriously consider other professional options including work in other settings. If we wish to retain our more seasoned, experienced staff, it will be necessary to explore ways to enhance people's investment in their work.

To conclude, the authors would like to offer some ideas for professional development opportunities that can be created within the counseling center setting. If a counseling center can provide these experiences for all staff, from the *young guns* to the *seasoned sages*, counselor career development can be enhanced and promoted. In the end, this will serve the interests of all parties including the center, the staff, the university, and, ultimately, the students with whom we work.

Activities to Promote Professional Development

- Develop a career ladder with an associated promotion and tenure document and possibly establish faculty rank
- Develop coordinator roles for various aspects of center functioning
- Promote autonomy and professional respect without micromanaging
- Formalize a mentoring program within the counseling center
- Promote professional involvement at the local, regional, or national levels
- Support flexible work schedules
- Reinforce and support the more open, accepting environments that are often found at college counseling centers to embrace different lifestyles, cultures, races, and gender
- Center needs to serve as a model of maintaining a healthy balance for its staff and students
- Enhance the professional relationships among colleagues

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