Counseling Centers On the Net:
The University at Buffalo and the Counseling Center Village

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Over the past decade, University and College counseling centers began taking significant steps toward using the internet as a means of providing services to students.These efforts to use the internet have largely been insular, however, with each counseling center creating internet-based resources in isolation from the efforts of colleagues at other centers. This isolation of different efforts has been unfortunate, not to mention ironic, given the fact that the internet was originally created to permit the sharing of information across geographical distances, and that the internet's ability to allow such sharing remains its defining feature. The internet provides us with an incredible technology that counseling centers have just begun to tap.

In this document, I will describe the development of several internet resources designed for counseling center professionals and for university and college students that have capitalized on the interconnectivity of the internet.

Early Efforts

The use of computer technology was not a new idea for university and college counseling centers. In the early 1980's Cornell University created *Dear Uncle Ezra*, a computerized Ann Landers-like computer bulletin board, which included many postings related to mental health issues. Sponsored by the Dean of Students Office, and based on the initial work of then Assistant Dean of Students, Jerry Feist, *Uncle Ezra* was extremely successful with over 2000 hits per month, and that just for the local Cornell campus. *Uncle Ezra* is still in existence, and can now be reached via the web at https://askezra.cornell.edu/. Similar resources exist at Columbia University(http://www.cc.columbia.edu/cu/healthwise), and at Duke University (http://h-devil-www.mc.duke.edu/h-devil/) [no longer on-line. An archive of the site is available at www.archive.org].

In the late 1980's the Counseling Center at Eastern Michigan University went on-line with a computerized conference system, with discussions for students led by a staff member of the Counseling Center. In the early 1990's Ball State University's Counseling Center had an on-line resource of menu-driven information on a VTX computer system, similar to *Uncle Ezra* at Cornell. The Ball State system, called *Concerned Charlie*, has moved to the web and can now be found at http://cms.bsu.edu/campuslife/counselingcenter/concernedcharlie.

SUNY Buffalo Counseling Center home page

In 1993 I created an on-line internet resource for the SUNY Buffalo Counseling Center. The initial impetus for the creation of this system was purely pragmatic: our Center produced numerous self-help brochures, the distribution of which was limited to handing them out at workshops and mailing them periodically to different campus offices. There were a lot of students who never saw these brochures.

Using the then dominant technology (and precursor to the World Wide Web) *gopher*, I created a virtual self-help center that anyone could access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, freely and anonymously. The gopher site served two purposes at that time: the dissemination of 1) general information about our Center (hours, location, etc.), and 2) self-help information. Now users could access every brochure that our Center produced whenever they wanted. We were one of the first counseling centers to go on-line in this way.

As time passed, we added additional material such as schedules of events, workshop outlines and handouts, and links to other internet resources. The information was structured in a hierarchical list, organized by topic. The interface was purely text-based: very plain and very simple:

UB Counseling Center Gopher Site, October 1994

Counseling Center

1. *About the Counseling Center*
2. *What is Counseling?*
3. *What is Group Counseling, and is it for me?*
4. *Adjusting to life at UB*
5. *Stress and Anxiety/**
6. *Relationships/*
7. *Alcohol and Drugs/*
8. *Overcoming Depression, and Preventing Suicide/*
9. *Coping with Death & Grief/*
10. *Health, Diet, Body Image/*
11. *Miscellaneous stuff (quotes, poems…you never know!)/*
12. *Recommended Readings on various topics/*
13. *Workshops/*
14. *Links to Psychology resources on the internet/*

*Selections ending with a "/" indicate that there were submenus below that selection.

Jim Gerland, SUNY Buffalo Computing Center, was instrumental in teaching me about the technology I needed to use to realize this project. I learned an important lesson at that point: You do not need to know everything about the technology to successfully use it, you just need to know someone who does. Through the years, I have returned to Jim and others in his office (Brandon Plewe, Ross Winston) for assistance with the technical side of web development. Their help has been invaluable.

Response to this gopher site was dramatic. Within one year usage leapt from 20 hits/month to over 300. (As of this writing, the current web version of this site receives over 2000 hits/month).

The SUNY Buffalo Counseling Center gopher site quickly made the transition to a full-fledged world wide web site in 1994-95. This allowed for the hyperlinking of documents, the use of graphics, and a vastly improved overall visual appeal. (You can view an archived version of the 1996 version of this website at www.archive.org). As the site has evolved, we've managed to win several awards and accolades, such as the SUNY Faculty Senate Outstanding Student Life award in 1997 (see this screen capture from the UB Counseling Center website, circa 2000).

It became clear quite early that such a resource as our gopher site also could be invaluable to others beyond UB. Indeed, even from the first months our gopher site was being accessed from users all over the world. The idea of a decentralized internet site emerged, a resource that could minimize the tendency of counseling center professionals to recreate the wheel. The question that arose was "What if we could create an internet site that was built on the best of what counseling centers around the country had to offer – a single site that consisted of links to resources located at many and diverse centers?"

The Counseling Center Directory

Beginning in 1994 I began regularly searching the internet for home pages and gopher sites created by university and college counseling centers. Rather quickly this developed into the creation of an on-line directory of these sites. As stated in the introductory text of the original Directory, "the sharing of resources such as those listed in this document can be invaluable – we can combine our efforts to provide much more effective services to students (and others) than if we each work separately. We can examine what our colleagues are doing elsewhere and learn from them. The resources we make available locally will be all the more effective if we stay aware of what our colleagues are doing nationally." Originally consisting of only a handful of counseling center sites, this directory now contains over 250 sites and continues to grow weekly. In 1996 the database of sites in the Directory was growing so large so quickly that the Directory was entirely redesigned to allow easy submission of new sites and the searching and customized reporting of the existing sites. *(The Directory was deactivated July 2017 and is no longer available. It has become easier to use google to locate a school's counseling center website).*

The Next Step

In 1994 I also began contemplating the idea of creating a list of answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) based on the discussions that were occurring on the AUCCCD (Association of University and College Counseling Center Directors) listserv. I also proposed via several professional counseling center listservs creating a catalog of on-line resources created by counseling centers:

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From: David Gilles-Thomas
Subject: CC's on the internet
To: outreach@toe.towson.edu (Counseling Center Outreach List)
Date: Thu, 20 Oct 1994

Greetings all. The more I talk to colleagues around the country, the more I hear about
Counseling Centers that are using the internet in various ways. Here at UB we have set up a
collection of documents on our gopher server covering a variety of mental health topics. My
guess is there are a lot of other centers doing things with the internet as well. It seems
to me we should let each other know about our efforts.

So, if no one else is already doing this, I'd be willing to compile and maintain a list of
resources on the net that are set up by Counseling Centers. If your site has something that
you would like others to know about, send me the information. I'll compile the information
I receive and post it back on to this mailing list. This includes gophers, hypertext sites,
ftp sites, muds/moos, and mailing lists.

Please email me directly.
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The enormity of such projects slowed things down for some time and so the viability of an AUCCCD FAQ list or a general counseling center resource list faded. In 1996-97, however, the idea of an even larger project emerged. Bob Hsiung, M.D., of the University of Chicago, had just created the Virtual Pamphlet Collection (Hsiung, 1997), a web site that has become wildly popular for counseling center professionals. Bob had managed to collect in a single web site a massive list of links to self help pamphlets and brochures that counseling centers already had on line. It was like our own Center's on-line self-help brochure collection, but on a grand scale. Bob and I had been in touch for some time by now, and we had been sharing suggestions and resources on our different internet projects. In fact, in 1995 Bob had taken an early gopher version of my Counseling Center Directory and created a simple web version to show me what was possible with a hypertext

document. Our thoughts for the development of the web were quite consistent and complimentary. In the months just prior to Bob's announcement of the Virtual Pamphlet Collection, I had actually been working on the design of essentially the same resource, unaware of Bob's project. (I, of course, fired off an email to Bob, chastising him for scooping me with his Virtual Pamphlet Collection!).

What this illustrated to me at that point was how ripe the time was for using the internet for professional purposes. Counseling center professionals were beginning to recognize just how powerful the inter in internet was.

The Counseling Center Village

The time seemed right to return to my original idea of a large-scale resource for counseling center professionals, but perhaps on even a larger scale than originally contemplated – some sort of "meta web-site." The Counseling Center Directory was a large-scale project but was only a listing of counseling center web addresses with brief descriptions and of limited scope. The Virtual Pamphlet Collection was also large-scale, but focused on only one thing: virtual pamphlets and brochures. The internet could provide much more in the way of collaboration and resource sharing for professionals.

The day to day demands of my work could have delayed the further development of a meta web-site forever, but in 1996 Wendy Settle of Notre Dame's Counseling Center learned of my interests and contacted me offering to collaborate. It was in large part because of her enthusiasm that this project was jump-started and moved forward. We spent several days designing the initial home-page for a "meta web site" for counseling center professionals. Although many of the links at that point were dead-ends, the site served its purpose of being a "proof of concept" – a proposal.

The phrase "meta web-site" was pretty ugly and cumbersome, and so I played around with different names. I finally settled on the "Counseling Center Village" to capture the idea that because a village is made up of a lot of homes, this web site would be made up of links to a lot of homepages.

The Counseling Center Village was formally announced March 21, 1997 at the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) conference in Chicago:

I'd like to share with you the Counseling Center <Village>. This project is not, however, about a physical thing — it is, rather, a concept. And it is a work very much in progress. The purpose of <the Counseling Center Village> is to capitalize on the inherent nature of the internet: interconnection. To ignore this nature we risk duplicating efforts, recreating the wheel... we miss the point of the internet: collaboration, sharing, and building on each others' strengths. The Counseling Center <Village>, then, is about the concept of interconnection across geographical distances… Wendy Settle of the University of Notre Dame and I have been working on setting up a Counseling Center Village Page—something that will bring together in one web page all of these different resources and will include materials from counseling centers all over such as:

- Treatment materials, manuals
- On-line document bank --- including Bob Hsiung's (University of Chicago) most excellent on-line Virtual Pamphlet Collection.
- Promotional material
- Generic brochures to be customized by individual schools --- essentially a psychological educational clearing-house
- Research support
- Staff development, training materials --- including Gail Hackett's (Arizona State University) on-line internship listing

(Gilles-Thomas, 1997)

The mission of the Counseling Center Village was to bring together in a single organized web site the expertise and resources of counseling center professionals across the country. The majority of the content of the Village web pages would be created by counseling centers professionals. Although links to non-counseling center sites would be included, the emphasis was on gathering together resources, information, and services created by counseling center professionals. The finalized version of the Village consisted of 10 sections, the first two already in existence:

1. The Counseling Center Directory

2. The Virtual Pamphlet Collection

3. Help.Your.Self: Award-winning psychoeducational self help web pages designed for college students.

4. Technical Assistance: Assistance on creating or improving a counseling center's web page.

5. Practice Resources: Clinical, assessment, and other practice-related resources.

6. Workshop Central: Psychoeducational workshop outlines, manuals, handouts, and other materials.

7. At The Office: Sample forms and other paperwork, policies and procedures, AUCCCD Document Bank, assessment instruments, and more.

8. Research Network: A place to exchange ideas, meet and collaborate on counseling center research.

9. Staff Development: Professional organizations, staff development program materials, presenters for various topics, job listings, licensure resources, and counseling listservs.

10. Pre-doctoral Training: Pre-doctoral internships, practica, material for seminar presentations, on-line readings, and more.

You can follow this link to view an archived version of the Village website, circa 1998.

The first task was to identify coordinators for each section of the Village. I was already responsible for the Counseling Center Directory and Bob Hsiung was responsible for the Virtual Pamphlet Collection. Wendy Settle had created the Help.Your.Self web site specifically for the Village. But that left seven other sections. A call was put out through ACPA and via email and mailings. The Village became a project sponsored by Commission VII of ACPA, bringing it a much higher profile than previously possible. Over the next few months colleagues from around the country volunteered and the Counseling Center Village Board was created. Make no mistake, these people have been the heart of the Village web project. Whatever structure I provided, these individuals are responsible for the Village being what it is.

Village Board Members

§ Jeff Brooks-Harris, jharris@hawaii.edu, Univ. of Hawaii – Manoa. Coordinator: Workshop Central

§ Patricia Doherty, pdoherty@uwsp.edu, Univ. of Wisconsin - Stevens Point.

§ David Gilles-Thomas, dgthomas@buffalo.edu, SUNY Buffalo. Coordinator: The Counseling Center Directory

§ John Hall, johhall@email.uncc.edu, University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Coordinator: Technical Assistance

§ Bob Hsiung, dr-bob@uchicago.edu, Univ. of Chicago. Coordinator: The Virtual Pamphlet Collection

§ Larry Long, long@tarleton.edu, Tarleton State Univ. Coordinator: At the Office

§ Stephen Richey-Suttles, richey@worf.udayton.edu, Univ. of Dayton. Coordinator: Practice Resources

§ Wendy Settle, wendy.h.settle.1@nd.edu, Univ. of Notre Dame. Coordinator: Help.Your.Self

The Counseling Center Village (https://ubwp.buffalo.edu/ccvillage/) has quickly become an important tool for counseling center professionals and students. The Village site, overall, received over 20,000 hits in 1998-99. This number is likely to be a significant underestimate, given the nature of web browser technology and the manner in which hit statistics are calculated. It is more accurate to simply state that the Village received at least 20,000 hits. We expect that number to continue to increase as more people become aware of the Village web site, and as the content of the Village continues to expand and improve. It has already been extremely successful in linking counseling center professionals, interested students, and others from all over the world.

It has been extraordinarily rewarding for me to be a part of this project, and to work with the extremely talented colleagues from around the country who have contributed their time to this project. I can't imagine a more rewarding professional activity than the collaboration that has been generated by this project. I look forward to the future developments that we will see in internet technology, and the applications of that technology to the work we do in university and college counseling centers.

The Future

Interactive and real-time on-line services will undoubtedly be the next hot topic for counseling centers. On-line support groups, bulletin boards, or the more controversial topic, on-line counseling itself, will all need to be addressed by counseling center professionals. It is my belief that the internet will continue to provide useful and meaningful adjuncts and alternative to the more traditional services provided by university and college counseling centers. This is an area that is growing very quickly in general, and it is important that we have some hand in its development for counseling centers (or we run the risk of it developing without us). Important groundwork needs to be done (e.g., issues such as needs assessments, confidentiality, accountability, liability, and effectiveness to name a few). But I do believe there can be a place for on-line services in the work counseling center professionals do, and that exciting new opportunities for service provision will continue to open up with these on-line technologies.

References

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