

Research on the Methods and Strategies of Heart-to-Heart Conversation of University Counselors in the New Era

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Abstract: Heart-to-Heart conversations represent a primary mode of operation for counselors in higher education. They serve as a crucial means for counselors to fulfill their fundamental mission of cultivating virtue and character, reinforcing ideological and theoretical education, and guiding values among university students. These conversations play a pivotal role in establishing positive teacher-student relationships and stand as essential indicators for assessing the capabilities and dedication of academic counselors. In the context of the new era, academic counselors must closely align with the changing ideologies and behaviors of the “Z-generation”. By adopting the perspective of “Comprehensive Nurturing”, emphasizing education for all, throughout the entire process, and in all dimensions, they should explore innovative approaches and strategies in heart-to-heart conversations. This exploration aims to better guide the thoughts and behaviors of university students, empowering them to become competent individuals capable of shouldering the responsibilities of national rejuvenation in this new era.

1. Introduction

Heart-to-heart conversations constitute an exemplary tradition in our party’s ideological and political education efforts. As early as the Yan’an era, Mao Zedong referred to heart-to-heart conversations as the most meticulous form of propaganda and mobilization. Simultaneously, he not only actively advocated for “heart-to-heart conversations” but also served as an outstanding practitioner, leaving behind numerous vivid and exemplary cases of heart-to-heart discussions. Xi president pointed out at the National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Higher Education Institutions: “Ideological and political work in universities is essentially a process of resolving doubts. On a macro level, it involves answering the questions of whom to educate, what kind of individuals to nurture, and how to nurture them. On a micro level, it is a process of guiding students in understanding where to exert efforts in life, whom to care for, how to be sincere, and what kind of individuals to become.” [1] Heart-to-heart conversations serve as a crucial carrier and pathway for counselors to carry out ideological and political work, and the first baseline requirement in the Ministry of Education’s Professional Competence Standards for University

Counselors for counselors engaging in ideological and political work is the ability to “collect basic student information through daily observation, heart-to-heart conversations and other means, understand students’ ideological dynamics and provide timely education and guidance on issues that students care about.” For counselors, heart-to-heart conversations are the most direct means to understand students’ situations, address their pain points, and enter their inner worlds. For students, these conversations serve as the breakthrough, release, and outlet for the perplexities in their thoughts, the difficulties in their studies, and the pains in their lives. Elevating the quality and effectiveness of heart-to-heart conversations between counselors and university students contributes to enhancing the credibility of ideological and political work in universities among students, as well as improving the precision and effectiveness of such efforts.

2. The Significance and Value of Heart-to-Heart Conversations by University Counselors in the New Era

2.1. Heart-to-heart conversations: fundamental requirement for university counselors in fulfilling duties in the new era.

In 1952, the Ministry of Education issued the Directive on the Targeted Pilot Implementation of Political Work Systems in Higher Education Institutions, clearly stating that the fundamental goal of establishing the political counselor system was to strengthen political leadership, engage in the ideological construction of Marxism-Leninism, and lay a solid political foundation for the national higher education system. Despite the continuous expansion of the content and responsibilities of counselor work over more than sixty years of development, the initial intention remains unchanged. In March 2014, the Ministry of Education issued the Professional Competence Standards for University Counselors (Interim), explicitly requiring university counselors to collect basic student information, understand students’ ideological dynamics through daily observation, heart-to-heart conversations, and questionnaire surveys. Faced with the group of university students characterized by “active thinking, agile minds, innovative ideas, broad interests, enthusiasm for exploring the unknown, quick acceptance of new things, strong subject consciousness, and active participation consciousness, with a strong desire for life development,” heart-to-heart conversations are the most direct means of understanding students’ thoughts and an efficient method of ideological guidance [2]. Regular conversations not only demonstrate counselors’ continuous care and support for students but also enhance the precision of motivation and guidance.

2.2. Conducting effective heart-to-heart conversations: enhancing the precision of ideological and political work in the new era.

Xi president pointed out that in order to carry out ideological and political work effectively in universities, we must adapt to circumstances, progress with the times, and innovate according to the situation. It is crucial to continue using effective methods, improve outdated ones, and explore new approaches. Heart-to-heart conversations, being the most effective means of communication, represent both an established and effective method. The primary target audience for these conversations is the Z-generation (born between 1995 and 2009), also known as the internet generation, a demographic significantly influenced by technological products such as the internet, instant messaging, text messaging, MP3 players, smartphones, and tablets. Growing up in a digitized and information-driven environment, the Z-generation exhibits characteristics such as personalized value pursuits, autonomous learning styles, networked entertainment lifestyles, rational approaches to life, and pragmatic life ideals. On March 18, 2019, Xi president emphasized during the Symposium with Teachers of Ideological and Political Theory Courses that the

adolescent stage is the “jointing and heading period” of life, requiring careful guidance and cultivation.[2] It is especially crucial for counselors to conduct targeted education and guidance during the critical period of talent cultivation in university students. Inadequate implementation of the heart-to-heart conversation system can easily result in counselors becoming disconnected from students and reality, significantly compromising the effectiveness of ideological and political work. Only through continuous heart-to-heart conversations and in-depth exchanges with students can counselors accurately grasp the new characteristics and patterns of students and, in turn, follow the laws of their growth, thereby enhancing the targeted nature of ideological and political work.

2.3. Elevating strategies in heart-to-heart conversations: a key initiative to advance the professionalization of counselors.

The counselor team receives high attention from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and holds a dual identity as both administrators and educators. This dual identity establishes a solid foundation for the counselors’ dual-line promotion and imposes multiple requirements on the professionalization and specialization of the counseling profession.[3] Executing effective heart-to-heart conversations is a pivotal measure for counselors to lead values. Distinguishing itself from knowledge transmission in the classroom and casual chats in daily life, heart-to-heart conversations involve a goal-oriented approach to ideological guidance. It can be said that conducting heart-to-heart conversations is a highly demanding skill, necessitating counselors to possess a solid theoretical foundation, extensive practical experience, and proficiency in various disciplines such as the party’s policies, ideological and political education, educational science, management, and psychology. Accurately understanding the requirements, principles, and methods of heart-to-heart conversations, translating them into the professional essence of counseling, establishing quality assessment standards for these conversations, all contribute to promoting the professionalization and specialization of counselors.

3. Challenges in Heart-to-Heart Conversations for University Counselors in the New Era

3.1. Insufficient targeted focus in heart-to-heart conversations.

Xi president emphasized the need to integrate addressing ideological issues with resolving practical problems and to engage in efforts that resonate with people, warm their hearts, and stabilize their emotions. On one hand, while the majority of counselors recognize the role of heart-to-heart conversations in addressing students’ ideological issues, practical implementation often lacks systematic planning and purpose. Counselors may lack a clear plan for heart-to-heart conversation initiatives, not specifying when and with which category of students these conversations should occur. Instead, they might engage in conversations spontaneously or in response to immediate circumstances, without a comprehensive understanding of the educational patterns at different stages and levels of students’ development. On the other hand, the selection of occasions for routine heart-to-heart conversations often lacks careful consideration. Regardless of the type of student or the nature of the problem, counselors may frequently choose their office as the venue for these conversations, overlooking the privacy or personal experiences of some students. Simultaneously, a significant number of universities fail to effectively translate the requirements for counselors to conduct heart-to-heart conversations into practical guidelines. For instance, some counselors conduct these conversations without prior planning, neglecting to emphasize process documentation. There is often a lack of follow-up and feedback collection after the conversation, resulting in a fragmented and discontinuous approach. This not only hinders counselors from gaining in-depth insights into students but also impedes the enhancement of their own professional

capabilities.

3.2. The process of heart-to-heart conversations involves didactic elements.

Firstly, counselors often position themselves as lecturers during heart-to-heart conversations, placing students in a passive role of receiving information. Students frequently harbor strong resistance towards engaging in heart-to-heart conversations with counselors, perceiving such interactions as only necessary when they have made mistakes and are being “summoned” by the teacher. They view these conversations as a directive from the counselor to receive education and are unlikely to initiate such discussions voluntarily. Secondly, counselors often fail to present reasoned arguments. They either issue commands brusquely or expound on superficial principles, lacking the skill to seamlessly integrate logical discourse with storytelling. Thirdly, the absence of attentive listening is another issue. Counselors frequently cast themselves as the central figures in heart-to-heart conversations, unwilling to hear students’ perspectives. This leads to a situation where students are not given ample opportunities to express themselves, fostering a phenomenon of “I know what’s best for you, just listen to me.” Consequently, counselors fail to comprehensively, objectively, and authentically understand students’ situations, and they struggle to effectively stimulate students’ enthusiasm for participating in heart-to-heart conversations. Over time, this diminishes the students’ active engagement and participation in heart-to-heart conversations. Moreover, students habitually remain constrained in the passive role of information recipients, making it challenging for counselors to conduct these conversations with efficiency and effectiveness.

3.3. Formulaic approaches in heart-to-heart conversations.

On the one hand, counselors often inadequately prepare for heart-to-heart conversations, leading to discussions that are vague, lack focus, and lack specificity and differentiation. The conversations become standardized, with a one-size-fits-all approach, resulting in an ineffective and generic outcome. On the other hand, counselors frequently fail to tailor their approach based on individual differences during the conversation. Regardless of the student or the situation, the conversation often begins with generic inquiries such as “How is your recent academic performance?” “How is your personal life?” “Do you have any family matters?” or “Are there any problems I can help you with?” This lack of in-depth exploration into different students, issues, and contexts prevents targeted intervention, hindering the resolution of actual problems faced by the students. Simultaneously, in the actual process of heart-to-heart conversations, counselors often face challenges due to a lack of theoretical guidance, insufficient experience, and inadequate preparation. As a result, they tend to employ the same educational guidance approach with different students. This one-size-fits-all method undermines the effectiveness of counselors’ heart-to-heart conversations.

4. Elevating Strategies for Heart-to-Heart Conversations of University Counselors in the New Era

Counselors play a crucial role in carrying out ideological and political work in higher education institutions. They serve as organizers, implementers, and guides in the daily management and education of university students, establishing the closest connection with students as teachers and partners. Among the various methods used by counselors to conduct ideological and political work, heart-to-heart conversations stand out as the most direct approach and method for counselors to engage with, care for, and serve students. As explicitly outlined in the Ministry of Education’s

Regulations on the Construction of University Counselor Teams in Regular Higher Education Institutions (Ministry of Education Order No. 43), counselors are required to “understand the ideological and behavioral characteristics of students, help them address specific issues related to their ideological awareness, values, academic life, career choices, and interpersonal relationships in a targeted manner... strengthen online interactive communication with students.” The ultimate goal of counselors engaging in heart-to-heart conversations is to strengthen ideological guidance for university students, assist them in resolving practical problems and difficulties, and promote their comprehensive growth and development. Furthermore, heart-to-heart conversations can be categorized into proactive and reactive types. Proactive conversations involve students approaching counselors with various issues related to their personal growth, such as career awareness, emotional challenges, academic stress, and interpersonal relationship issues. In these instances, students come to counselors with specific problems, displaying a clear intention to address those issues. Reactive conversations, on the other hand, typically occur when individual problems affecting a student’s personal interests have already emerged and are evident. In such cases, counselors take the initiative to approach students to address the identified issues, making the problem-solving process somewhat passive for the students. [4]

4.1. Clarifying the requirements of heart-to-heart conversations.

Universities should position engaging in heart-to-heart conversations as an essential quality and skill for counselors, recognizing it as a significant reflection of counselors immersing themselves in students’ characteristics. This should be incorporated as a pivotal criterion for assessing the capabilities of counselors. Efforts should be directed towards motivating counselors to consider heart-to-heart conversations as a vital work task and systematically conduct these dialogues, ensuring at least one face-to-face interaction annually with each student under their guidance. Life guidance teachers must ensure at least one face-to-face communication each year with every student for whom they are responsible, maintaining thorough records and proper archival documentation for related tasks. Ideally, the primary mode of heart-to-heart conversations should be “one-on-one,” with considerations for “one-to-many,” “many-to-one,” or “many-to-many” in exceptional cases. While face-to-face interactions are preferable, circumstances may warrant online communication. Throughout this process, counselors must be vigilant in safeguarding students’ privacy. Discussions regarding the participants and content of conversations should strictly occur within the confines of professional responsibilities, avoiding the disclosure of specific details in public forums or materials.

4.2. Grasping the fundamental principles of heart-to-heart conversations.

Firstly, it is essential to thoroughly investigate and identify issues before engaging in heart-to-heart conversations, focusing the discussion around these issues to effectively touch the students’ hearts and address concerns proactively. Secondly, each conversation should have a specific theme, with planned and purposeful discussions aimed at gaining a deep understanding of students’ ideological, psychological, and academic situations. Thirdly, counselors should formulate an annual plan for heart-to-heart conversations, ensuring comprehensive coverage of all students under their responsibility each academic year. Fourthly, attention should be given to caring for the details of students’ daily study and life, understanding what students are thinking and aspiring to achieve. Fifthly, it is crucial to observe students with an appreciative perspective, using positive language to encourage them, with a primary focus on ideological education and spiritual influence, and lastly based on a comprehensive understanding of the basic patterns of students’ ideological situations, precise ideological and political education should be conducted, concentrating on addressing the real needs of students, such as economic difficulties, academic challenges, psychological issues, and

employment concerns.

4.3. Enhancing the competence and proficiency in heart-to-heart conversations.

Xi president has high expectations for young cadres,“ only by continuously enriching and improving oneself can one communicate effectively and connect with the youth, and only then can one possess persuasive and affable qualities toward the youth.” On one hand, universities can enhance the quality of counseling conversations by conducting training on various forms of counseling conversation techniques, related theoretical knowledge, and policy documents for counselors. Simultaneously, efforts should be made to create conditions supporting counselors in pursuing degrees in fields such as ideological and political education, psychology, management, and education, effectively strengthening their theoretical research and interpretative capabilities related to practical issues. On the other hand, counselors themselves should accelerate their learning, continually enhancing their abilities and proficiency in addressing students’ questions. Some of the questions posed by students, such as “why join the party?” and “what are the benefits of joining the party?” may seem sharp and sensitive, but often involve profound theoretical and practical issues. Clarifying and thoroughly explaining these questions is not easy, and counselors need to continually strengthen their learning to effectively address them.

4.4. Establishing an evaluation mechanism for heart-to-heart conversations.

Firstly, it is essential to institutionalize heart-to-heart conversations, considering it a crucial aspect of counselors’ primary responsibilities. Clearly defining the connection and communication between counselors and students as an indicator for daily counselor assessments is vital. Secondly, a combination of expert assessments and student feedback can be employed. This involves evaluating the effectiveness of counselors’ heart-to-heart conversation work by examining records of these conversations and assigning scores based on student satisfaction evaluations. Thirdly, quantifying counselors’ heart-to-heart conversation work into specific teaching workloads and incorporating it into the specific requirements for counselors’ rank promotion and title assessment is recommended. Fourthly, establishing an incentive mechanism for counselors’ heart-to-heart conversations is important. This can be achieved through initiatives such as counselors’ heart-to-heart conversation case competitions and the selection of outstanding cases. Recognizing exemplary cases through these means becomes a significant reference point for counselors’ awards and commendations.

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