

University Counselors and Student Interactions: Strategies and Challenges of Heart-to-Heart Conversations

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Abstract: This paper thoroughly examines the critical role of university counselors in heart-to-heart conversations and analyzes the main challenges and strategies in current practices. The paper initially highlights the significance of these conversations in consolidating the Party's grassroots foundation among college students, advancing the goal of moral education in universities, and promoting the self-growth and duty fulfillment of counselors. Subsequently, the paper identifies several issues in the practice of these conversations, including the lack of support from professional knowledge and theory, deficiencies in language communication skills, the monotony of conversational settings, passivity in conversations, and the lack of sustained attention and follow-up. In response to these issues, a series of solutions are proposed, such as enhancing professional theoretical literacy, strengthening language communication skills, choosing appropriate conversational environments, increasing the proactivity of conversations, and maintaining continuous attention. This research not only provides practical guidance for university counselors but also offers profound insights for higher education administrators and policy-makers, emphasizing the strategic importance of these dialogues in the educational landscape.

In the realm of contemporary higher education, the heart-to-heart conversations between university counselors and college students have emerged as a topic of significant importance. These conversations transcend traditional academic guidance, delving deeper into personal growth and emotional support. The interaction between counselors and students is not merely about the transfer of information and knowledge, but also plays a crucial role in shaping campus culture and fostering the comprehensive development of students. Exploring the motives, methods, and impacts of these interactions not only reveals the diversity of student needs, but also reflects the challenges and opportunities faced by the educational system in adapting to these needs.

1. The Importance of Heart-to-Heart Conversations

1.1. Consolidating the Mass Foundation of the Communist Party of China among University Students

The “Constitution of the Communist Party of China” explicitly states that the Party’s greatest political advantage lies in its close connection with the masses. In 1948, Mao Zedong mentioned in his *Talks with the Editors of the Jin Sui Daily* that “For over two decades, our Party has been working with the masses every day, and in recent years, it has been advocating the mass line daily”[1]. “The Party’s mass line is not only our fundamental political guideline but also our basic organizational principle”[2]. “We must work with the masses face to face, heart to heart, genuinely and earnestly, keeping their welfare close to our hearts, providing timely help, and earnestly solving the issues that concern them the most, the immediate problems that trouble them, and the urgent issues they are anxious about”[3]. The *2021 National Education Development Statistics Bulletin* shows that the total number of university students in various higher education institutions in China is 44.3 million[4], indicating that the young university student group has become an important mass force for the Party. Counselors show sincere care and support for students in their heart-to-heart conversations with young university students. This care not only alleviates students’ psychological stress and anxiety but also positively influences the Party’s image. As members of the Communist Party, their support and concern help students realize that the Party is a political organization that listens to and cares about people’s livelihood, thereby strengthening the Party’s mass base among university students. In their interactions with students, counselors not only provide academic assistance but also strive to convey the Party’s education policies and related measures. By propagating national and Party policies, they guide students to deeply understand the Party’s policies and enable them to recognize the Party’s focus on education, science and technology, and employment. This effectively strengthens students’ identification with and sense of belonging to the Party. Furthermore, through in-depth communication and interaction, counselors also help students improve their interpersonal relationships and social skills. These interactions not only deepen students’ understanding of the nature and values of the Party organization but also emphasize the solidarity and mutual assistance among Party members. Counselors, through their own actions, demonstrate this quality to students, helping them grasp the Party’s organizational principles, and encouraging them to actively participate in social activities and volunteer services, thus solidifying the Party’s mass base among university students.

1.2. Facilitating the Achievement of Moral Education Goals in Universities

Universities bear the mission of educating people for the Party and cultivating talents for the country. As Xi president mentioned at the National Education Conference, “We must adhere to the fundamental task of fostering character and civic virtue,” and “integrate moral education into all aspects of ideological and moral education, cultural and knowledge education, and social practice education”[5]. The university stage is a crucial period for students to accumulate cultural knowledge, clarify personal ideals and beliefs, and enhance their overall quality. During this stage, students begin to form and solidify their worldviews, outlooks on life, and value systems, while also facing numerous challenges, including ideological confusion, academic difficulties, and life issues. The growth of university students requires not only learning from professional courses and accumulating experience from social practice but also needs people who can face-to-face, sincerely, and practically help them solve problems in thought, study, and life. The heart-to-heart conversation activities conducted by counselors are a beneficial supplement to university education. By continuously improving the quality and effectiveness of these conversations, they help address

students' ideological, academic, and life issues in a targeted manner, thereby supporting universities in achieving the goal of cultivating talents with both moral integrity and professional competence.

1.3. Heart-to-Heart Conversations as an Essential Path for Counselors' Self-Development

Heart-to-heart conversations are not only a vital part of a counselor's responsibilities but also a key pathway for their self-growth. Effective heart-to-heart conversations require counselors to possess solid theoretical knowledge, good personal qualities, and excellent work abilities. To this end, they must thoroughly understand the student's background before the conversation, clarify the objectives of the talk, anticipate possible scenarios, and prepare corresponding solutions.[6] During the conversation, counselors should use appropriate communication skills to encourage students to share their problems and thoughts candidly, while providing effective guidance and solutions. After each conversation, counselors should promptly review their work, summarizing experiences and identifying areas for improvement, thus preparing for the success of the next conversation. This entire process represents not only a significant challenge for counselors but also an effective pathway for their self-development.

1.4. Heart-to-Heart Conversations: Essential for Implementing Ideological and Political Education and Fulfilling Counselors' Job Responsibilities

In 2017, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in Universities under the New Circumstances*, which called for universities to closely align with students' realities and establish a comprehensive heart-to-heart conversation system. In the same year, the Ministry of Education issued the *Regulations on the Construction of Counselor Teams in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions*, mandating that university counselors regularly conduct heart-to-heart activities to assist students in developing good moral qualities.[7] Thus, it is evident that heart-to-heart conversations are not only an important approach for universities to conduct ideological and political education but also an essential aspect of fulfilling the job responsibilities of counselors.

2. Challenges Faced by University Counselors in Heart-to-Heart Conversations

2.1. Lack of Theoretical Knowledge and Professional Support in Heart-to-Heart Conversations

Heart-to-heart conversations are distinct from professional course teaching on the podium and casual chats about everyday life. They involve the application of solid professional theoretical knowledge, guiding with theory, speaking with facts, and influencing with genuine emotion. It is a highly technical task. For counselors to take the initiative, control the conversation's pace, and achieve desired outcomes in heart-to-heart conversations, a rich foundation in professional theoretical knowledge is indispensable. Although counselors undergo specialized pre-job training for teachers and counselor education, as well as periodic learning and training, these are infrequent and lack a clear focus compared to the reality of tight work schedules and heavy tasks. As a result, most young counselors rely on their abilities and experience, reducing the efficiency and effectiveness of heart-to-heart conversations. Moreover, from a professional background perspective, most counselors are not educated in ideological and political education, lacking systematic knowledge in psychology and pedagogy. In terms of job content, counselors are responsible for ideological and theoretical education, value leadership, party and class construction,

academic ethos building, and managing student affairs, among other duties, leaving them little time and energy for systematic theoretical study. From the perspective of the stability of the counselor team, counselors often switch to administrative or professional teaching positions after a certain period, with little long-term consideration for professionalization, vocationalization, and expertise in counseling. These factors affect counselors' acquisition of professional theoretical knowledge and the effectiveness of conversations. Gaining and improving professional theoretical knowledge is not an overnight achievement but requires cumulative learning and consolidation. Therefore, to effectively enhance heart-to-heart conversation skills, it is essential to focus on strengthening educational, psychological, and sociological theoretical knowledge in daily work.

2.2. Lack of Language Communication Skills in Heart-to-Heart Conversations

Heart-to-heart conversations rely on language for effective communication. Studies show that different communication styles can lead to vastly different outcomes, even with students of similar backgrounds and personalities. A common characteristic of newly appointed counselors is their high educational qualifications and political status as members of the Communist Party. However, their communication abilities vary. Some counselors may lack extensive experience in communicating with diverse personality types before their appointment, leading to feelings of constraint, nervousness, and confusion when suddenly faced with emergency situations requiring heart-to-heart conversations with students. For instance, if a class leader reports to a counselor about a student frequently missing classes for unknown reasons, the counselor might become anxious. Acting on the principle of student concern, the counselor might hastily seek a conversation with the student without adequate preparation. Starting the conversation bluntly by asking, "Why aren't you attending classes?" can make the student reluctant to respond, leading to an awkward situation and the counselor's inability to ascertain the real reasons for the absenteeism, resulting in a failed conversation. If, instead, the counselor adopts a different approach, like offering the student a glass of water with a smile, starting the conversation with casual small talk instead of interrogating, and subtly inquiring about the student's recent situation, it might lower the student's guard, enhance trust in the counselor, and encourage the student to voluntarily reveal the specific reasons for not attending classes and seek the teacher's help. Such an approach could significantly improve the effectiveness of the heart-to-heart conversation.

2.3 Monotony of Settings for Heart-to-Heart Conversations

In various universities, counselors usually choose their offices as the venue for heart-to-heart conversations with students. However, this monotonous choice of environment carries potential negative impacts. Firstly, as a public workspace, an office might lack the necessary privacy and sense of security. Students may worry about their conversations being overheard, leading to reluctance in opening up fully, which affects the counselor's accurate assessment of the student's psychological state and hinders the establishment of trust. Secondly, the formal setting of an office can make students feel tense, not conducive to creating a relaxed and candid atmosphere for conversation. Additionally, a single setting limits the diversity of conversation forms and content. Different conversation topics and student personalities might require different environments to foster better communication. Conversations in an office might inadvertently reinforce the counselor's authoritative position, which could be stressful for some students and affect their openness. Each student's situation is unique, and a singular conversation environment might not meet the individualized needs of all students. Therefore, providing diverse conversation settings, choosing suitable places flexibly based on the content of the conversation and the student's personality traits, enhancing the protection of student privacy, and reducing the sense of authority

are crucial for improving the effectiveness of conversations and better meeting student needs.

2.4. Passivity in Heart-to-Heart Conversations

In the heart-to-heart conversations between university counselors and students, there are generally two types: relationship-building and understanding-focused conversations, and problem-solving conversations aimed at providing solutions to specific issues. Given the large number of students counselors manage and the deep trust students place in them, involving various issues, counselors often have to be hands-on. This busy work environment makes it difficult for counselors to proactively identify and intervene in problems. In practice, counselors' conversations are mainly problem-solving, typically initiated after problems arise, focusing on understanding the development and process of events to educate and guide students. This approach has several negative impacts. Firstly, it may lead to the neglect of students' psychological and emotional needs. In the process of solving problems, counselors may overemphasize resolving the specific issue rather than the overall psychological development of the student. This narrow focus might overlook the importance of personalized needs and long-term mental health. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, university students are in the stage of identity exploration and role confusion; they need more than problem-solving – guidance and support are critical for forming self-identity. In this context, the proactive involvement of counselors is crucial. Limiting to post-issue problem-solving could neglect the fulfillment of personalized needs and positive impacts on psychological development. Secondly, this passive approach may not be conducive to cultivating students' ability to independently solve problems. When counselors intervene only after issues arise, students might become dependent on external help rather than learning to independently tackle challenges. In the long run, this could weaken their sense of self-efficacy and problem-solving capabilities. Furthermore, this conversation approach can lead to significant work pressure for counselors. As they handle numerous emergencies, they may struggle to effectively manage time and resources, affecting the quality of management and services for other students, leading to a decrease in students' trust and dependence on counselors. If students feel counselors only intervene after problems occur, they may be reluctant to seek help in the early stages, missing the optimal opportunity for resolution.

2.5. Lack of Ongoing Attention and Follow-up in Heart-to-Heart Conversations

One of the common issues in the practice of heart-to-heart conversations between university counselors and students is the lack of ongoing attention and follow-up. Although counselors often hope to resolve students' problems in one session, this approach is usually impractical. Research in the field of psychological counseling shows that continuous support and attention are crucial for establishing trust in counseling among students. When students feel their issues are being ignored, it can diminish their trust in counselors and their willingness to seek help in the future. For instance, a university freshman experiencing anxiety due to adjustment issues and family pressures seeks help from a counselor. If there is no continued follow-up and support after the initial conversation, the student may feel neglected, exacerbating the anxiety, and impacting academic performance and interpersonal relationships. Conversely, if the counselor regularly monitors the student's condition and continues to provide support and guidance, the student will not only better manage the current difficulties but also learn strategies to handle future challenges. Therefore, to enhance the effectiveness of heart-to-heart conversations, counselors should take proactive follow-up measures, regularly checking on students' conditions to ensure they continue to receive the necessary support and care.

3. Strategies for University Counselors in Conducting Heart-to-Heart Conversations

3.1. Enhancing Professional Competence and Solidifying Theoretical Foundations

Despite the myriad of tasks university counselors often engage in their daily work, continuously enhancing theoretical knowledge and professional skills is vital for their effectiveness. First, counselors should deeply study the basic principles of Marxism, the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, Xi president's thoughts on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, and professional knowledge related to ideological and political education. Second, they should also master theories in psychology, such as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology, and Alfred Adler's individual psychology, to understand and guide students more accurately. For instance, applying humanistic psychology can help counselors better recognize student individuality, leading to more personalized guidance approaches. Third, counselors need to keep abreast of knowledge advancements; deepening theoretical understanding and improving theoretical literacy are keys to accurately grasping the core elements of heart-to-heart conversations, directly affecting the effectiveness of the conversation and the ability to solve student issues. Empirical studies show that enhanced theoretical literacy significantly improves counselors' work efficiency and the quality of student guidance. Therefore, counselors should integrate theoretical learning into the realities of their daily work, applying it in every interaction with students. In this way, counselors can not only elevate their professionalism but also better promote their career development. Fourth, it is advisable for counselors to develop a continuous self-development plan, including participating in professional seminars, online courses, regular self-reflection, and peer reviews. Fifth, exchanging and seeking guidance from experienced counselors and psychological consultants is an effective way to combine theory and practice. Through continual learning and practice, counselors can more effectively address the diverse needs of students in heart-to-heart conversations, better assist them in problem-solving, and promote their holistic development. In summary, enhancing professional theoretical literacy is not only key to improving work efficiency and effectiveness for university counselors but also an important pathway for advancing their personal career development.

3.2. Enhancing Language Communication Skills

Good communication skills are essential in establishing trust and understanding between university counselors and students. Effective communication allows counselors to better comprehend students' feelings and needs, and helps students feel listened to and understood, thereby making the heart-to-heart conversation process smoother and more productive. One way to enhance language communication skills is through case studies and role-playing, integrating theoretical learning with practical application. By examining real psychological counseling cases, counselors can gain in-depth insights into various communication scenarios and challenges, such as stress management, interpersonal conflicts, and academic pressures in students. These case analyses help counselors understand the effectiveness of different communication strategies and learn how to apply these strategies in similar situations. In role-playing activities, counselors simulate different communication scenarios, allowing them to practice and hone their skills in a risk-free environment. For example, one counselor plays a student and another a counselor, simulating a consultation process through actual dialogue. This method not only provides practical experience but also allows counselors to identify and improve their communication skills with feedback from peers or mentors. Through case studies and role-playing, counselors can practice key communication skills like active listening, asking open-ended questions, and non-verbal communication, as well as enhance their understanding and empathy for students' emotional experiences. Additionally, these activities

strengthen counselors' ability to handle complex and challenging communication situations, such as managing conflicts, expressing empathy, and providing support. Overall, case studies and role-playing offer a platform for counselors to integrate theory and practice, enabling them to communicate more effectively with students in their actual work, thereby improving the quality and effectiveness of heart-to-heart conversations. In the learning process, counselors can master techniques like avoiding rigid educational talks, engaging in casual conversations about daily life before formal discussions, showing concern for students' well-being, and inquiring about their health. These warm words and considerate details can break down students' psychological barriers and lay an emotional foundation for the subsequent conversation. Each student is a unique individual with unique thoughts. Additionally, being a listener in conversations, guiding students in self-analysis, understanding their genuine thoughts, and finding entry points for conversation and breakthroughs in issues are crucial. It's important to make the conversation content feel authentic to students, using a combination of rational arguments, praises, and criticisms. Praise and criticism aim to reinforce or curb behavior, not just as an emotional outburst. Moreover, counselors should combine their observations of students, provide guidance with specific examples, making students feel the counselor's genuine concern and assistance. In the process, learning to utilize the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal effect), also known as "expectation education," deliberately expressing belief in students' abilities and expectations for them, is essential.

3.3 Choosing a More Suitable Environment for Heart-to-Heart Conversations

Choosing the appropriate environment for heart-to-heart conversations is crucial for university counselors, as a conducive setting can significantly influence the psychological impact of the conversation. While counselors cannot control the overall educational policies and the "macroclimate" of the school, they can create a suitable "micro-environment" within their work scope. Shared offices, often bustling and lacking privacy, are not ideal for in-depth conversations. Thus, selecting a quiet and private space can make students more at ease. For example, spare or temporarily unoccupied offices or counseling rooms are good options. According to the theory of safe spaces in psychology, a private and quiet environment facilitates better expression of inner thoughts and feelings, making students feel secure and more willing to share sensitive or personal issues. In such settings, external distractions like noise and the presence of others are minimized, helping students concentrate and engage more deeply in the conversation. A professionally arranged environment, such as appropriate lighting and comfortable seating, also enhances the counselor's authority and professionalism, increasing the student's trust and receptivity to the conversation. Suitable lighting, like medium brightness, ensures sufficient illumination without being harsh, creating a warm and inviting environment. Research in environmental psychology shows that soft lighting helps reduce stress and anxiety, promoting relaxation and comfort. Combining natural and artificial light is also a good practice, as natural light not only provides excellent illumination but also enhances mood and mental state, while controlling its intensity is important. Soft sofas rather than hard chairs can physically and psychologically relax students, making them more willing to open up. Besides traditional indoor settings, outdoor spaces are also a good choice. Ecopsychology suggests that natural environments reduce stress and anxiety, aiding relaxation. Conversations in quiet gardens or green spaces on campus can leverage nature's healing effect, facilitating more relaxed communication. Similarly, campus cafes or leisure areas are suitable for casual conversations. Social psychological research indicates that in everyday social settings, people are more likely to engage in genuine interactions. Conversations in such public spaces can reduce the stress and tension students feel, increasing their participation and positive feedback. In conclusion, when selecting an environment for heart-to-heart conversations, counselors should consider the

impact of different settings on students' psychological state and the effectiveness of the conversation. By thoughtfully choosing and arranging the conversation environment, counselors can create a safe, comfortable, and professional space for students, fostering openness and participation, and enhancing the effectiveness of the conversation. Whether choosing a quiet indoor setting, utilizing the healing power of the outdoors, or opting for relaxed social environments like campus cafes, the key is to create a space where students feel relaxed and at ease. Such an arrangement not only enhances students' trust and receptivity to the conversation but also helps reduce their psychological stress, making the conversation a more effective means of communication and counseling. Therefore, selecting and creating a suitable environment is a key aspect of improving the efficiency and quality of heart-to-heart conversations.

3.4 Enhancing Proactivity in Heart-to-Heart Conversations

Enhancing the proactivity of heart-to-heart conversations is crucial for university counselors, especially when establishing relationships with students at the initial stage. When starting with a class, counselors should actively make time for conversations with more students, rather than intervening only when students face problems. This proactive approach helps build trust with students. According to relationship-building theories in psychology, by understanding students' personalities, family backgrounds, and interpersonal relationships, counselors can more accurately predict potential future situations, thereby effectively addressing students' needs and potential issues. In this process, counselors need to collect basic information about students, such as personality traits, family environment, and social status, and also pay attention to their psychological state and personal experiences. For instance, understanding students' romantic relationships, practical experiences, and memorable events can help counselors gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' personalities and experiences. After the conversation, counselors should promptly document the details, which will be crucial for predicting future situations and providing personalized guidance. This proactive conversation approach allows counselors not only to better understand and care for each student but also to manage their energy and time more efficiently, enhancing future work productivity. For example, through informal conversations initiated with students, counselors can identify potential difficulties in students' studies or personal lives and offer early intervention and support. This proactivity not only helps address students' immediate issues but also promotes long-term personal growth and psychological health. In summary, through proactive conversations, counselors can identify and resolve student issues earlier and prevent potential difficulties, rather than reacting only when problems become apparent. This proactive work approach helps establish a more interactive, supportive, and preventative counseling environment, thereby effectively enhancing the overall quality and efficiency of the counselor's work. Through this method, counselors can gain a deeper understanding of each student, provide more personalized and targeted support, and also enhance their sensitivity and predictive ability regarding student issues, making their counseling work more efficient and effective.

3.5 Maintaining Continuous Attention

To enhance the efficiency and quality of counselors' heart-to-heart talks, universities can develop or introduce a standardized student focus system, which includes multiple modules such as student basic information, talk records, problem tracking, and resolution progress. The use of this system not only helps counselors manage and track cases more effectively but also ensures sustained attention to student issues. For example, the system can automatically remind counselors about regular revisits to specific students, aiding in tracking changes and progress in students' situations. Additionally, according to educational psychology research, establishing a lasting support

relationship plays a significant role in the long-term development of students. Therefore, setting up a regular revisit mechanism through various forms such as phone calls, emails, or face-to-face talks can further strengthen connections with students, allowing for the timely discovery and resolution of new student issues. Regular revisits should not only focus on the progress of problem-solving but also involve attention to the overall development of students, including their academic performance, mental health, and interpersonal relationships. This continuous attention approach requires counselors to adopt flexible and diverse communication and support strategies based on the different needs and preferences of students. By implementing this system and mechanism, counselors can manage talk records more systematically and understand students' needs more comprehensively, thereby improving the specificity and effectiveness of the talks and providing deeper, ongoing support to students.

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