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Counseling Centers The Nature of Our Work

By Jason A. Parcover

In recent years, demand for the services of college and university counseling centers has been higher than ever before, and with limited time and resources, many centers are struggling to meet students' increasingly complex needs. Data collected from 93 institutions between 2009 and 2015 showed that on average the growth in the number of students seeking mental health services was more than five times the growth rate of institutional enrollment (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2016). This is largely because more students are arriving on campus with preexisting, often chronic conditions. Additionally, a reduction in the stigma surrounding mental illness and its treatment has led to increased referrals and a greater student willingness to seek professional help.

Data from the 2016 National Survey of Counseling Center Directors reveal an increase in the number of students with depression and anxiety, as well as a steady, substantial increase in the rates of non-suicidal self-injury and serious suicidal ideation. There are many other concerns for which students may seek help, including interpersonal difficulties, family concerns, academic performance, social isolation, perfectionism, mood instability, body image and eating concerns, and grief and loss.

Another significant challenge counseling centers are facing is a rise in the number of students presenting in acute emotional crisis, such as self-injurious behavior, suicidal thoughts, panic or psychotic symptoms, or in the aftermath of a sexual assault. Often, students with such concerns walk in without an appointment and need to be seen immediately, requiring the attention of multiple staff members who

must work around existing appointments. These students may also require hospitalization.

On-campus counseling services affect not only students' mental and emotional health, but also their academic, personal, and professional success. A study conducted by Turner and Berry (2000) found that 20 percent of students at a single university were considering withdrawing from the university as a result of personal problems, and 70 percent reported that their personal problems were negatively affecting their academic performance. Research shows that students who receive counseling are more likely than their non-help-seeking peers to stay enrolled in school, to experience an increase in GPA, and to graduate (Schwitzer et al., 2018; Devi, Devaki, Madhavan, & Saikumar, 2013; Sharkin, 2011; Bishop, 2010). Accordingly, students across college campuses report that counseling services have helped them both to stay enrolled and to succeed in school (Florida Board of Governors, 2017; Loyola University Maryland, 2017; Turner & Berry, 2000; Bishop & Walker, 1990).

Counseling centers, like the colleges and universities within which they exist, are serving students with more diverse identities and more complex family lives than students of generations past. Today's student faces a wide array of stressors, from student loan debt and limited job prospects to the prevalence of social media and its impact on self-worth. According to data from a recent survey funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the more time adolescents spend on screen activities, the more likely they are to be unhappy. Indeed, many experts point to the growth of technology use among teens as a contributing factor in the rising rates of depres-

sive symptoms, sleep difficulties, and feelings of loneliness. While social networks provide opportunity for a strong sense of affiliation with others, a feeling of disconnection often prevails for those without numerous close connections, as they witness the seemingly ideal lives of others being portrayed online. Watching others' lives unfold from a distance is no substitute for the deep connections that emerge within the context of interpersonal relationships and may hinder the development of social skills.

Relatedly, there is a widely held belief that today's college students are less autonomous, with fewer coping skills than students of previous generations. Students today certainly have a greater variety of means at their fingertips to stay in touch with their parents after leaving home; but as Russ Federman (2010) and others have pointed out, excessive parental involvement during adolescence and young adulthood can interfere with the development of resilience, autonomy, and self-reliance, all of which are critical to navigating life stresses effectively as young adults.

It is, therefore, a primary goal of university and college counseling centers to help students build coping skills, while increasing their resilience. Counselors work to meet students where they are developmentally and challenge them to identify new ways of



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overcoming persistent barriers. Additionally, centers are tasked with implementing prevention efforts that engage the broader campus community and maintaining an array of readily available resources that increase help-seeking behavior and ensure support for students who may be struggling. Despite the many pressures contemporary students face in and outside the classroom, they have the potential to flourish, and Jesuit institutions can play a unique role in fostering their growth and development.

Ignatian Spirituality and the Counseling Process

In the midst of rising rates of student distress, Ignatian spirituality can profoundly inform the therapeutic and wellness-based work of counseling centers. The early Jesuits thought of their distinctive spirituality as a three-part process: paying attention to experience, reflecting on its meaning, and deciding to act in loving ways. These humanistic values of reflection and intentional action are consistent with the services that counseling centers seek to provide.

Conscious learning and growth begins by *choosing to pay attention* to our experience. Within the counseling relationship, students are encouraged to

MORE INFORMATION

Recommended Syllabus Statement: Stress is a normal part of a being a student. However, if personal or emotional concerns are interfering with your ability to live and learn at Loyola, please stop by the Counseling Center in Humanities 150 or call 410-617-CARE (2273). More information about the Counseling Center can be found at www.loyola.edu/counselingcenter.

Common Warning Signs of Mental Health Difficulties: Talks or writes about committing suicide; Has trouble eating or sleeping; Exhibits drastic changes in behavior; Withdraws from friends or social activities; Loses interest in school, work, or hobbies; Takes unnecessary risks; Has recently experienced serious losses; Loses interest in personal appearance; Increases alcohol or drug use; Has difficulty with concentration; Exhibits excessive worry or fear; Has prolonged feelings of sadness

FERPA regulations make it clear that disclosure to appropriate officials is valid if the information contained in the education record is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other individuals (34 CFR § 99.36). Examples - Several institutions have implemented practices that exemplify the Jesuit tradition of becoming people for and with others. Each year, **Fairfield University's** Counseling and Psychological Services partners with Campus Ministry on three large-scale outreach events, focused upon the value and preciousness of each life, a community of care, and a time for prayer and reflection. At **John Carroll University**, many students, staff, and faculty complete the Kognito At-Risk online trainings to more effectively identify, support, and refer students experiencing distress. Finally, **Loyola University Maryland** uses its Let's Talk public health campaign to educate the entire campus community on issues such as stress, healthy relationships, body pride, and suicide prevention.

examine both their intrapersonal and their interpersonal experiences, bringing greater awareness to their thoughts and emotions and helping them better understand how each impacts their choices and behavior. Ignatius believed that God is found in every living thing and connects with us directly. Our thoughts and feelings are the outlets through which God creates and sustains a unique relationship with each of us.

To connect the varied parts of our experience into a coherent whole requires *reflection*, through which we can see the patterns in our lives and grasp their significance. An important goal of counseling is to gain the freedom that comes from knowing ourselves and finding the direction that God is disclosing for our lives. Thus, therapists seek to foster an environment that promotes opportunities for discovery of one's own gifts and the future toward which they point, while helping students identify the fears and obstacles that can prevent such growth.

Ignatius suggests that love shows itself more by deeds than by words. Equipped with greater self-understanding and freedom, students can decide to *act in more loving ways*, consistent with their new self-view. In building more authentic lives, Ignatius says we must consider our relationship to the world around us and what the world needs us to do. To be human is to find our place within rela-

tionships and institutions, to take responsibility for them, and to contribute to improving them: in other words, to be people for others.

The role of college and university counseling centers is becoming increasingly important as today's students are leading more complex lives. While there is a growing challenge to meet rising demands, Ignatian principles offer a strong foundation for the services centers seek to deliver. Through the application of Jesuit values, counseling centers can help students navigate their concerns with a greater sense of autonomy, self-understanding, and respect for the welfare of others.

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