

A Study on the Pertinence and Effectiveness of College Counselors' Heart-to-Heart Talks with Students

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Abstract: As the most direct responsible person for ideological and political work in universities, the college counselor's one of the most important jobs is to have heart-to-heart talks with students. Smoothly conducting the heart-to-heart talk work and building a communication bridge between counselors and students helps with students' ideological education, cultivating their self-cultivation and self-management abilities. In this process, controlling the pertinence and effectiveness of heart-to-heart talks plays an extremely crucial role and significance, which will also have a pivotal impact on students' growth and future development.

Key words: College Counselors; Heart-to-Heart Talks; Pertinence; Effectiveness

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1. Introduction

In the "Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Education for College Students" released in 2004, the State Council clearly stated that colleges and universities should attach importance to and actively carry out heart-to-heart talks, and that such talks must be combined with current realities to enhance their effectiveness. In the "Standards for the Professional Competence of College Counselors" released ten years later, it was clearly stipulated that college counselors should be classified into three levels: junior, intermediate, and senior, with each level corresponding to a progressively higher level of professional competence. The document also pointed out that college counselors can gain a deeper understanding of students' physical and mental health and their current work and life situations through daily positive interactions with students, careful observation during these interactions, and targeted one-on-one heart-to-heart talks, as well as group questionnaires, etc. Based on this understanding, they can formulate reliable and effective solutions to help college students better face their studies and lives, as well as the difficulties and setbacks they encounter. In 2016, the "Opinions" further supplemented innovative requirements for ideological work among college students, demanding that college counselors maintain higher levels of innovation, build stronger trust with students, increase interaction frequency, and provide more targeted solutions when addressing problems^[1].

However, in the actual implementation of heart-to-heart talks, college counselors generally face the following issues: a lack of understanding of students' physical and mental conditions, leading to frequent misunderstandings; focusing on the form of conversations rather than the essence of heart-to-heart talks; having a strong sense of identity and always positioning themselves as teachers, which often causes severe psychological pressure on students during heart-to-heart talks. This not only has no benefit for the results of heart-to-heart talks but may even have very serious and negative impacts. Therefore, college counselors need to adopt a wider range of methods and approaches to achieve the targeted and effective implementation of heart-to-heart talks.

2. The Current Situation and Existing Problems of Heart-to-Heart Talks

Heart-to-heart talks can play a positive guiding role for students in specific areas such as learning and growth, lifestyle, making friends, and employment. However, there are still some common problems in the heart-to-heart talks between counselors and students in higher education institutions at present:

2.1. Lack of Psychological Knowledge

When conducting heart-to-heart talk education, most counselors do not have systematic psychological knowledge. They cannot accurately grasp the psychological state and emotional changes of students, and thus cannot form good interaction with them during the conversation. They also find it difficult to provide detailed psychological counseling. When encountering students with relatively serious problems, the majority of counselors feel at a loss and can only offer superficial advice[2]. Heart-to-heart talks involve students' privacy. Some schools and educational institutions may not be able to guarantee students' privacy rights, posing a risk of leaking students' personal information and secrets. This not only causes unnecessary trouble and losses for students but also affects the reputation and image of educational institutions.

2.2. Predominantly Preachy

When conducting heart-to-heart talks, some counselors merely inquire about and evaluate students' situations, providing simple persuasion and education. Their ultimate goal is to record the time, place, people involved, and the matter at hand - that is, to do the work merely to avoid responsibility. They fail to "understand" students' inner world and true thoughts, neglect their emotional fluctuations, and may even cause students' aversion. However, students cannot express their feelings directly, which seriously affects the educational effect that heart-to-heart talks should have.

2.3. Formalistic and Ineffective

Overall, counselors manage a large number of students with complex compositions, sometimes spanning different grades and majors. They have many daily tasks to handle and face significant pressure. As a result, some counselors merely go through the motions. Before having heart-to-heart talks with students, they sometimes find it difficult to make adequate preparations and do not have a deep understanding of students' situations. They cannot empathize with students and fully consider their opinions and ideas. There is a clear tendency towards empiricism. Many counselors still understand student work as merely "managing students." In today's era when college students have a strong sense of self, if heart-to-heart talks merely rely on past experience, counselors may have a "standard answer" and "solution" in mind before the talk even begins. This makes it difficult for them to truly put themselves in students' shoes during the conversation, reducing its effectiveness and making it difficult to be targeted. Heart-to-heart talks then become a mere formality, turning what should be a "subjective question" into an "objective one"[3].

2.4. Lack of Standardized Management

In some schools and educational institutions, heart-to-heart talk work lacks standardized management, resulting in inconsistent effects and quality. Some educators may lack experience and skills, making it difficult for them to effectively communicate and interact with students and provide effective guidance and advice. At the same time, there is a lack of effective feedback and evaluation mechanisms. Some heart-to-heart talk work lacks effective feedback and evaluation mechanisms, making it difficult to accurately understand the effect of the talk and students' satisfaction. Students may not receive timely feedback and assistance, leading to problems not being thoroughly resolved. At the same time, educators cannot continuously improve and enhance their work level.

3. The main contents of heart-to-heart talks

3.1. Precise Targets for Heart-to-Heart Talks

Firstly, the daily work of counselors in higher education institutions covers a wide range of areas, making it impossible to ensure one-on-one heart-to-heart talks with all students. This is practically unfeasible in actual implementation. Therefore, when conducting heart-to-heart talks, it is necessary to focus on key groups and precisely identify the targets for such talks.

(1) There is a certain group of students who may be living in unhappy families due to their parents' failed marriages, or they may be more prone to anxiety or even depression due to their own failed emotional experience.

riences, and thus treat their studies, lives, and work in a negative manner. Some may even have severely unstable emotions and show obvious hostility or aggression towards those around them. Such individuals must be regarded as key targets for heart-to-heart talks, with their physical and mental states closely monitored and their problems promptly addressed.

(2) Students with poor academic performance. This group has a distinct characteristic: they are not inherently reluctant to study from the start. Rather, it is mainly because their foundation is weaker than that of others. In an environment where the overall academic level of a higher education institution is high, their weak points in the foundation will be highlighted to the fullest extent. They often score low in exams, which leads to a loss of confidence and may further evolve into a dislike for studying, addiction to games, and other negative behaviors. For this group, counselors need to help them establish a complete study plan and urge them to study.

(3) Students from relatively poor families. Among college students, there are those from wealthy families and surely those from relatively poor ones. Such students have overcome more difficulties and studied harder to reach where they are. They may have certain feelings of inferiority or even a sense of resentment towards the rich. For this group of students, college counselors need to set an example themselves, help them establish a healthier outlook on life and values, shape their reasonable worldviews, and assist them in better integrating into the group, enabling them to gain a sense of happiness from the collective.

3.2. Approaches to Heart-to-Heart Talks

The key to enhancing the effectiveness of heart-to-heart talks lies in the flexible application of various methods:

- (1) Form Combination: Integrating one-on-one and group conversations.
- (2) Channel Innovation: Flexibly switching between online and offline.
- (3) Content Integration: Giving equal weight to emotional communication and problem-solving^[4].

4. Through scientific planning, it is possible to alleviate students' pressure while achieving personalized guidance.

(1) Make adequate preparations. Before having a heart-to-heart talk with a student, educators should make thorough preparations. This involves understanding the student's basic information, academic performance, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as clarifying the purpose and key points of the conversation and preparing any necessary materials or documents. Additionally, a suitable environment and time for the conversation should be chosen to ensure that the student feels comfortable and at ease when communicating.

(2) Build a trusting relationship. Establishing a trusting relationship is the key to successful heart-to-heart talks with students. Educators should build trust with students through regular communication, care, and assistance. This involves establishing a good relationship with students before the talk, respecting their opinions and feelings during the talk, and showing concern and providing help after the talk. Only on the basis of a trusting relationship will students be willing to communicate with educators and actively cooperate in problem-solving.

(3) Listen to students' thoughts. During heart-to-heart talks with students, educators should listen more to students' thoughts and understand their inner world. This can be achieved through open-ended questions and repeating students' words. Only when students feel that their thoughts are valued and understood will they be more willing to communicate with educators. At the same time, listening to students' thoughts is also helpful for identifying and solving problems.

5. Construction Path for the Targeted and Effective Implementation of Heart-to-Heart Talks

5.1. Enhance Professional Competence and Quality

As the leading figure in heart-to-heart talks, counselors must constantly improve their professional quality and keep pace with the times to achieve continuous progress and innovation. First of all, heart-to-heart talks are t

he most important part of the daily work of counselors in higher education institutions. How to do this part of the work well is something that all counselors in higher education institutions must carefully consider and practice. First, counselors in higher education institutions need to establish a good professional ethics, a healthy and positive outlook on life and values, and be their own life mentors. On this basis, they should extend their care to others and be responsible for the student groups they manage, act as good friends to their students, and ensure fairness and impartiality in their work, love their jobs, and respect and understand their students. In this way, they will naturally gain the recognition of students, who will be more willing to confide their needs, difficulties and setbacks to counselors and actively seek their help. Therefore, counselors in higher education institutions must first enhance their professional competence and quality, set a good example, and establish a tall and respectable image in the minds of students[5].

5.2. Establishing Values Based on Students' Characteristics

Under the current thinking logic, counselors need to combine the practical needs to help students establish correct worldviews, outlooks on life and values, and obtain the desired information during heart-to-heart talks. Based on this information, they can target and narrow the distance with students. When students first enter the school, the content of heart-to-heart talks mainly focuses on "adaptation and transformation". Individualized education requires targeted analysis and implementation. In the subsequent period, attention should be paid to establishing an expanded employment development path. For newly enrolled university freshmen, a comprehensive coverage of heart-to-heart talks for all can be adopted. Although this will significantly increase the workload of counselors, it can also ensure that students can integrate into the current university life more quickly. At the same time, a good mentor-friend relationship can be established between counselors and freshmen.

5.3. Make Adequate Preparations

There are mainly three aspects that need to be well prepared. The first is to prepare in terms of knowledge. The second is to prepare for the character image. The third is to prepare a suitable environment. Regarding the preparation of knowledge, for instance, as a counselor in a higher education institution, one of the most basic job requirements is to have a certain foundation in psychology. This is one of the necessary conditions for doing student work well. A foundation in psychology enables counselors in higher education institutions to better understand the current psychological state of students and the psychological development patterns of the contemporary student population. Regarding the preparation of character image, for example, counselors also have a role as teachers, similar to subject teachers. However, while subject teachers impart knowledge, counselors mainly focus on political and ideological education. On the other hand, just as subject teachers prepare lessons in advance and check students' homework, counselors also need to make prior preparations before having heart-to-heart talks with students. This can be done by getting to know students from the perspectives of classmates' evaluations, information on QQ or WeChat Moments, Weibo posts, or archival documents. Regarding the preparation of the environment, for instance, the office naturally creates a certain amount of pressure on students, so having a talk in the office is not a wise choice. Since heart-to-heart talks usually involve sensitive and private topics, it cannot be overemphasized how important the choice of location is. Typical environments for heart-to-heart talks can be a small, narrow meeting room, the current student's dormitory, a bustling cafeteria, or a sports field, etc. When having heart-to-heart talks with students of the opposite sex, it is even more important to ensure that the environment is not closed to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

5.4. Master the Timing of Heart-to-Heart Talks

When choosing the right moment, consider both the time frame and the students' needs. From the perspective of the time frame, heart-to-heart talks should be conducted at relatively clear and significant times such as the beginning of the school year (especially for freshmen), before final exams, during the selection of scholarships and grants, the selection of outstanding members of the Communist Youth League or student leaders, during

graduation season, and when choosing a career. It is essential to have a talk with students when they receive an award, to prevent them from thinking that the work of the counselor is only aimed at "problem students" and that only those who have made mistakes will be "found" by the counselor. From the perspective of students' needs, talks should be held when significant changes occur in the student's personal life or family, when they have conflicts or differences, when they are in low spirits or under pressure, or when their academic performance declines. Additionally, special attention should be paid to key students and they should be talked to in a timely manner^[6].

6. Conclusion

Essentially, in the work content of counselors in higher education institutions, the time spent on heart-to-heart talks should be the longest. It is also the most direct and effective means for counselors in higher education institutions to carry out student management work. During heart-to-heart talks, counselors in higher education institutions can have a deeper understanding and analysis of students' study and life, psychological state, future plans, etc. They can also conduct thorough ideological education and correct wrong perceptions of students in this process. Therefore, when conducting heart-to-heart talks, counselors in higher education institutions must keep in mind: to make extensive use of various but effective communication methods, including but not limited to direct communication, indirect communication, and suggestive communication, etc., to enhance the pertinence and effectiveness of heart-to-heart talks. Each heart-to-heart talk with a student should be regarded as a deep-level communication with the student and their inner world. Fully understand the physical and psychological conditions of the student and, on this basis, guide the student to develop in a better direction. At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to adopting different heart-to-heart talk methods for different student groups, flexibly apply different working models for different situations, and enhance each student's dependence on the counselor, making them willing to confide in the counselor voluntarily. Being a good listener will definitely greatly improve the pertinence and effectiveness of heart-to-heart talks.

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