



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Educating the Whole Student: Bridging the Counselor/Class Divide

As college instructors, we spend a lot of time before each semester preparing the academic content for the class. The last few weeks of my summer are routinely spent updating syllabi, researching authors, reading texts, and going through class materials. While this content is important, we should also remember that we are not teaching empty classrooms or making instructional videos. We interact with actual people who have complicated and full lives. The academic performance of my students is heavily impacted by non-academic factors. Recent studies have shown that personal factors and circumstances are more important indicators of academic success than ability level. In short, if students are stressed or sick or tired before they come to class, they will still be stressed or sick or tired inside of class. No matter how much I strive to create an effective learning environment in my classroom, I can't completely remove students from the other factors in their lives. As a result, in order to best serve my students, I need to keep the *entire* student in mind. One of the most effective ways of doing this has been to partner with my institution's counselors to break down the classroom/counselor divide. Intentionally introducing students to counselors and integrating them into my class improves the mental health and the academic success of my students.

In order to conscientiously integrate counselors into the class, I first needed to shift my own paradigm about my role as an instructor, and then reconsider my course design. Rather than seeing myself as just an imparter of wisdom—an expert in the field who transmits information to a new generation of potential experts—I needed to see myself as a coach—a trusted leader who helps students develop skills and discover knowledge. My subject area knowledge is important, but it's only important if I can effectively help students learn. If I am going to be a coach rather than a removed imparter, then I must know my students. Just as a basketball coach must know each player's strengths and weaknesses in order to best lead their team to victory, I need to give my students opportunities to communicate. I need to recognize when students need more support than I can offer, or when it would be more appropriate for them to speak with one of the counselors.

I also need to recognize that I am part of a team. I am there to help students succeed along with the counselors, tutors, librarians, and other staff members at our college. I don't have to know all of the details of a student's life

in order to recognize behavior that could be indicative of a wide range of problems and then refer them to the appropriate staff member. With community college freshmen in particular, many students will need the support that a counselor can provide. At my institution, for example, 25 percent of students do not receive any financial assistance from their families, and a significant proportion of students test below college levels. These students need good teachers, but they also ask for help "adulthood" or facing non-academic challenges. Shifting my mindset to that of a coach helps me to work closely with our counselors to help students gain the academic confidence and academic skills they need.

In order to facilitate this mode of teaching and learning, I incorporated interaction with the counseling office into my assignment design. During the first week of classes, for example, I give my freshman students a scavenger hunt to complete. This hunt sends new students around campus to find resources that will help them over the course of the semester. Destinations include the tutoring center, my office, and the counselor's office. Because this assignment requires students to actually introduce themselves to one of the counselors, I discussed the assignment and its timing with the counselors before handing it out. Luckily, the counselors were amenable to the idea. Forcing students to introduce themselves to the counselors in a low-pressure, fairly impersonal situation helped to deconstruct the divide between the classroom and the counselors. Having already met the counselors, students were much more likely to return to their office later in the semester. On the other hand, students who skipped this early assignment were less likely to visit the counselors, even if they had a need to do so later in the semester.

In previous semesters, I included counselors in the beginning of the semester classroom visits. Counselors, librarians, tutors, and club leaders visited the classroom to give a brief introduction about their services. This method took up class time without significantly increasing the likelihood of students using these services. However, sending students to the counselors to interact one-on-one has proven highly effective at establishing campus connections early in the semester.

In addition to this early assignment, I conferred with the counselors about the major projects for my freshmen classes. We discussed which assignments could be triggering, challenging, or particularly stressful for students, then we planned for contingencies. Like many classes across a range of disciplines, my courses often cover difficult and controversial topics. For some of these potentially emotional

class periods, I prearranged for the counselors to visit the classroom. They sat with students in the room. This seems most effective when students are given time to work in small groups, with myself and the counselors rotating between the groups so that they have the counselors for emotional support and the instructor for cognitive support. In these situations, counselors do not have teaching responsibilities; they are present to help moderate and support potentially difficult conversations. However, when appropriate, I have invited counselors to co-teach mini-lessons with me or to moderate discussions related to their areas of expertise. For example, when my literature classes cover psychoanalytical theory, the counselors often supplement my lecture and join in the class conversations by applying the theory to a short text. When students are familiar with counselors from classroom discussions, it is far less intimidating for them to actually go to the counseling center. This may seem vague, touchy-feely, or unsustainable on a wider level, but this model works, sustains academic rigor, and actually increases academic success.

This model works within my English classes at a small community college, but faculty members in any discipline on any campus can conscientiously cultivate ties with their campus counselors. We can all identify stressful topics or assignments, and we can all make more of an effort to appropriately connect students with campus resources. Even small changes, like physically walking with students to the counseling center rather than just referring them to the counselors, can make a big difference.

While this method requires instructors to focus on students as people, not just as students, it can actually maintain academic rigor. Recognizing when students would be better served by meeting with counselors shares the responsibility between students, counselors, and myself, and it reinforces my professorial role. My students meet with the counselors for a wide range of services: traditional counseling, career advising, and even sessions to cope with test anxiety. Whatever the reason for their sessions, students leave the counselor's office better prepared to learn and to succeed academically.

While I felt like this trial was successful, I wanted quantitative evidence to compare to my instincts. I pulled the numbers and compared my pass rates from the year prior to the year when I began mindfully incorporating counselors into my classroom. While there were, of course, other factors influencing success, the biggest change that I personally implemented to my curriculum was strengthening the connection to the counselors. When I looked at the numbers, I was shocked. The pass rate for my classes had increased dramatically (around 30 percent) from the previous year. This statistic is achieved when averaging the grades of my freshman students (about 150 students per academic year) from multiple sections of freshman English from the 2015-2016 academic year and comparing them to the 2014-2015 academic year. Interestingly, while the pass rate increased for the fall and spring semesters,

the gap was narrower for the spring semester than for the fall semester. My hypothesis is that by the spring semester, students who needed campus resources, such as counseling, were more likely to have already connected with them, or they had already dropped out, as my campus's enrollment drops dramatically from the fall to the spring semester. There were other factors influencing success too, such as some changes to course organization. However, as the pass rate in my classes averaged just over 30 percent higher than the previous year, it is clear to me that working with the counseling office worked. More students—especially freshmen in their crucial, first-year required classes—passed, and so they were able to move on with their academic careers. Additionally, even students who didn't actually pass the class were more likely to keep attending and earn a failing grade, rather than disappearing before the end of the semester.

When I think of the students represented by these statistics, I remember individual faces and stories. One student, for example, was in Composition 1 (freshman English) for the third time. It was easy to recognize that the student had potential, but his grades didn't reflect his actual ability. I was able to introduce this student to the counselors, who worked with him on time management and organization. The student's grade improved. Another student experienced a serious trauma during the semester. Honestly, I expected the student to drop out. However, she worked closely with the counselors, and was able to finish the semester. While not every student will need the counseling office every semester, many of my students do need support for academic and non-academic reasons.

When the counseling office on my campus administered a campuswide quiz, their data affirmed that many students fail classes and fail to graduate for non-academic reasons. Even students who are "smart enough" or who have grit can fail when faced with difficult circumstances and inadequate support. Some of the major non-academic barriers facing students on my campus include insufficient or unsafe housing, food insecurity, working full-time or multiple jobs, imposter syndrome, and insufficient academic preparation. Clearly, while I can help students with some of these issues, I cannot assist students face all of these barriers to success. This is why partnering with counselors is so crucial to my students' well-being and academic success. According to my institution, counselors break up their time among multiple roles:

Role/Responsibility	Time Allotted
Personal and academic counseling	35%
Developing community relationships	25%
Planning, developing, and implementing programs for students	20%
Providing short-term crisis intervention	10%
Providing advice and support to faculty / staff	10%

Counselors have the training, the access to appropriate resources, and the time to support my efforts in the classroom and, more importantly, support my students in a variety of capacities.

There is often a deep divide between faculty and staff on campus, but we are better able to serve our students when we bridge that divide. Partnering with the counselors, in particular, has helped me to become a better instructor, and it has significantly improved my students' ability to succeed. There are no set rules about how to achieve this goal. However, when we mindfully collaborate with counselors and incorporate them into our classrooms, we are helping to create an environment of support and success for our students, especially vulnerable freshmen.

What are your thoughts about incorporating counselors into the curriculum? Tell us in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)

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