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Student Counseling System in Sri Lankan Universities – Suggestions for Improvement

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Abstract:

This study was aimed at suggesting improvements to the existing system of student counseling in Sri Lankan universities. Data was collected by survey of students of the university system in order to identify the common types of problems they have as university students and to assess the extent to which those are addressed by the existing counseling service. Once identified suggestions for modifications are suggested. Counselors must be introduced to the students and also must be trained to help students, further a job description must be issued with every appointment letter emphasizing their responsibility. A counseling system based on the concept of "Admirable friendship" is suggested.

Keywords: Student counseling, Admirable friendship

1. Introduction and Significance of the Study

Counseling in general is a process through which a counselor or a therapist helps a client understand the cause for their problems and guides them through helping to make good life decisions. Counseling at universities can be two-fold one is academic counseling and other is personal counseling.

The university grants commission of Sri Lanka calls applications for university entrance from the eligible students and allocates around 20,000 students to the fifteen state funded universities on an annual basis. Universities accept students according to their capacity and the specializations available. For example, University of Sri Jayewardenepura accommodates on average around 10500 students annually to the four faculties.

The student population consists of students from all over the country belonging to different ethnic groups, religions and social classes. Majority of the students have to live away from their homes boarded themselves in hostels maintained by the university or private lodging offered by the neighborhood houses. Some of the students are separated from their parents for the first time in their lives.

Very few have the privilege of staying at their homes with their parents and family during their university life.

Many students become stressed, mentally imbalanced and unstable due to social and economic problems due to lack of life experiences, and adapting to unfamiliar environs.

As a consequence, some may suffer from fear, loneliness and anxiety; some may lose self confidence, motivation and happiness. They become helpless and unable to solve problems in life.

When they do not have anybody to share their feelings and thoughts they naturally become isolated or neglected from society which would adversely affect their personal lives as well as their academic activities. Due to negative attitudes and poor personalities some students find it hard to make friends leading to isolation and loneliness.

This is reflected in the annual failure rate being an average 3% after the first four years of the degree programs. And no records exist to compute the number of dropouts as a student is allowed a period of seven years to complete a four-year degree, and until that period lapses without the student reaching graduation the authorities cannot count that student as a dropout.

A well-established student counseling system does not exist in most of the universities and the need for such system is not properly recognized by the authorities, and the researcher was not able to find any literature regarding the topic. Hence arises the need to study the existing system and suggest improvements.

2. Method of Study

Sri Lanka has fourteen national universities and out of those University of Sri Jayewardenepura is the largest in terms of the student population. Some faculties of Sri Jayewardenepura are larger than some universities. Hence, the concentration on Sri Jayewardenepura as the focus of this study.

The main method of data collection for this study is "survey". The data was collected by the researcher while working as a lecturer and a student counselor during 2014 and 2015, for the new entrants of the university. The method of sampling was snowballing where sample participants were introduced by fellow students. Use of any statistical sampling method and consequently, statistical analysis was prevented due to the fact that students' reluctance to be identified as having problems that needed counseling.

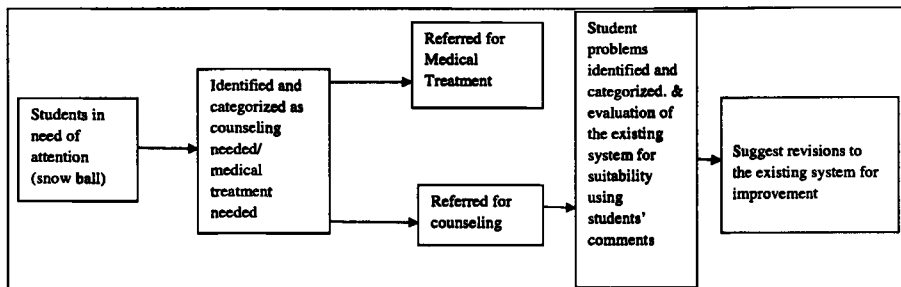


Figure 1

3. Common Types of Problems Faced by the Students

Survey of students' problems revealed that there were many common problems faced by university students regardless of the university they study.

- Fear of language skills, exam fear, presentation fear
- General stress and anxiety
- Depression
- Difficulties related to relationships
- Food habits mismatch
- Parental separation and loss of loved ones
- Homesickness and loneliness
- Low self esteem and lack of self confidence
- Managing the changes in the living environment
- Difficulties in making important life decisions
- Traumatic experiences including assault and abuse
- Problems in addiction to alcohol and drugs
- Issues related to sex and sexuality
- Self injury
- Suicidal thoughts
- Anger management
- Worries about appearance

A properly implemented system of counseling can be of immense help from the side of the effected students to bring them back to their normal lives helping them lead a fruitful and enjoyable university life.

4. Counseling in Universities

Student Counseling falls under the Academic and Students affairs Unit of the university. Every university has a Director – Students Affairs (Academic), and there are student counselors representing each faculty under the director who are nominated by the faculties depending on the need. In addition, many student counselor positions are created (duration – one year) at the intake of a new batch of students who are supposed to be vigilant on ragging of freshers by their seniors.

Awareness among students about the counseling facilities available at universities is very low, and in the majority of cases students have turned to their friends or to the lecturers /heads of the respective departments, dean of the respective faculty when the problem is related to an academic matter. When it is not possible for them to settle their problems on their own, some would abandon studies and leave university and depending on the nature and gravity of the problem some would attempt to commit suicide, physically harm another student or a group of students. Repercussions are that they leave the university career without obtaining the knowledge and qualifications required by a graduate resulting in waste of the government resources. Further, there are students who are addicted to habits like smoking and consuming alcohol with proper counseling can be helped to avoid such habits.

Another issue highlighted by the students is the lack of trust among students of the counselors as they seemed to be neglecting or avoiding listening to students' problems. The observation was that many academics who are appointed as counselors on part time basis for a period of one year would not want to involve themselves in student's problems as problematic students are considered violent and the belief that they can pass their stress on the counselor. Further, student who have problems are generally reluctant to meet up with a counselor and there is high tendency for them to either try to find solutions on their own or give up university education for good. This may be because counseling is still not popular in Sri Lanka, students are afraid that they will be labeled as "mentally sick" if they go for counseling.

Hence, a counseling system of the university must be systematized, and communicated to the student population in such a way that students will be motivated to see a counselor. Suggestions are proposed in order to maintain healthy academic climate to all the students which would also have an impact on the quality of the labor supply of the country which is aiming to become the miracle of Asia.

5. Problem Statement

"Lack of a systematized counseling system and trained counselors results in student's problems being un-attended making them unproductive graduates or drop outs of the system resulting in ineffective use of government resources"

6. Proposed Procedure for the University

New students come to the University for Registration for different programs. At the registration students are given a date for the official inauguration ceremony and the time table for the orientation program which runs for a period of four weeks. Introduction of counselors to the new entrants must be done during this period.

A session during the orientation program can be organized by the student welfare division, headed by the Director – student affairs, and participated by all the student counselors appointed for a particular faculty where the counselors are introduced to the students and the location of their offices and the consultation times informed to the students.

The director may present an explanation as to what is counseling, and the importance of counseling to a new student and give an assurance as to the confidentiality of the information revealed to the counselor. Building of trust is of utmost importance. A series of workshops may be organized on common student issues identified where students are encouraged to participate. Trust created via these programs may motivate students to seek help of counseling when needed

Counselors although they are appointed on part time basis must be trained in counseling skills. In most cases, we observed that a job description has not been issued to the counselors. Steps must be taken to give them a description of what is expected of them in written form.

7. Suggested Counseling Procedure

We suggest a six-step procedure based on the concept of "Admirable friendship" or "Spiritual friendship" (Kalyaana Miththa)

8. The Meaning of Admirable Friendship

"A friend, who always lends a hand, a friend both in sorrow and joy, a friend who offers good counsel, a friend who sympathizes too. One who is wise, who really have understood much, will always cherish and serve such friends, just as a good mother tends to her only child." Digha Nikaya III, 188

The six steps involved in counseling are as follows

- 1) Developing a good rapport between the counselor and the student. If the student appears to be sick a basic medical examination may be conducted in order to make sure that he /she is in good health.
If his/her physical health condition is normal, then the counselor can start treating for mental problem of the student. Trust must be built. A good communication or friendly dialog must be maintained though out. The counselor should be able to feel any type of sadness in the student and should develop the skills in explaining the student that impermanence prevails everywhere and in everything and that leads to sadness. And whatever problems that a student is going through is also impermanent and will not be there forever. The student should feel the kindness (Meththa- kindness to all beings) of the counselor towards him, and that feeling will eliminate any kind of resistance or violence against the counselor. At the end of a counseling session the counselor may help the student calm down by practicing a breathing exercise/ listening to a piece of soothing music etc. with the student. Most of the problems a student may have can be solved at this stage, because most of them want somebody who is trustworthy to listen to their problems. If the problem isn't solved at this stage the counselor may get the student to come for a second step of treatment.
- 2) Counselor must understand whether a students' mind is sick. If a student's mind is sick, he / she may not be able to look at how his/her mind works. Hence a Counselor can draw the student's attention to his body. Make him/her aware of his body movements say for example: what are the body movements when you eat something? What are the organs that move when you stand up? Help him/her little by little to feel how the body moves. Likewise letting the student look at his body counselor can come to a judgment as to how the students mind is working and about the type of illness. The counselor may encourage the student to continue the breathing exercise.

- 3) After the student develops the ability to feel his bodily movements he /she may be trained to look at his mind. If a student's mind is distorted, he may be trained to draw his attention to his feelings again. Talk about his/her likes and dislikes in food, in clothing, in his /her hobbies etc. If he can be trained to understand his feelings he/she is in the path of improving. The counselor may encourage the student to talk about his/her feelings both happy and sad.
- 4) Talk it over with the student so that he / she can bring out whatever feelings he has in his subconscious mind. This is called catharsis. A counselor may allocate a considerable time to help the student come out with all the hidden feelings in his subconscious mind. Such a discussion would reveal causes for his/her disorders and discuss same with him/her. The recovery process can start here.
- 5) At this stage the counselor must have identified the nature of the problem that the student is in. If it is an illness demanding medication, he/she must be directed for medical attention. If he /she don't need medication the counselor must help he /she identify the weakness in personality that caused the problem and help him overcome it.
- 6) Rehabilitation and socialization of the student. Give him a time table to be followed daily. Help him/her maintain oral health and cleanliness. Help him be independent economically, help him socialize.

9. Summary and Conclusions

The aim of this study is to evaluate the adequacy of the student counseling systems that prevail in Sri Lankan universities, the motivation being the above average failure rates and drop outs from degree programs.

As mentioned earlier the government funded state owned universities must make sure that the resources spent are made use of effectively and the higher education objectives of the country are achieved.

Students who come to universities from diverse backgrounds find it difficult to adjust themselves to university life and tend to end up as drop outs or unproductive graduates. Hence counseling system that addresses the students' needs must be implemented within universities.

Programs to familiarize counseling among students must be designed and implemented as a first step and we suggest that the counselors be trained in the six-step procedure based on the concept of "Admirable Friendship" or "Kalyana Miththa" in order to help students enjoy university life. We emphasize that at least all the counselors are thoroughly trained in handling the first step of this procedure.

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