

Difficulties in Heart-to-Heart Talks by Counselors in Higher Vocational Colleges and Pathways to Improve Their Effectiveness

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Abstract: Heart-to-heart talk serves as a fundamental educational carrier for counselors in higher vocational colleges to implement the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, conduct ideological guidance, ease students' psychological pressure and resolve conflicts hindering their growth. Compared with students in general undergraduate universities, students in higher vocational colleges are characterized by weak academic foundation, prominent career anxiety, insufficient self-management ability and high reliance on the internet. The heart-to-heart talks conducted by counselors are confronted with multiple practical obstacles including heavy administrative workload, rigid communication modes, insufficient professional psychological capabilities, incomplete closed-loop procedures, inadequate targeted digital intervention and the absence of long-term education mechanisms. Problems such as formalized talks, superficial communication and fragmented follow-up support prevail widely. Based on authoritative literature retrievable on CNKI, Wanfang and Weipu, this paper systematically sorts out six major dilemmas of heart-to-heart talks for counselors in higher vocational colleges. Integrating psychological counseling theories, closed-loop management logic and digital intelligent education ideas, it constructs an effectiveness improvement system adapted to the learning characteristics of vocational college students from five dimensions: professional capability empowerment, full-process closed-loop management, precise digital early warning, multi-stakeholder collaborative education and long-term institutional guarantee. This research provides theoretical support and operable schemes for standardized, in-depth and sustainable implementation of heart-to-heart talks in higher vocational colleges.

Keywords: higher vocational colleges; counselors; heart-to-heart talks; practical dilemmas; educational effectiveness

1.Introduction

Heart-to-heart talk is the most direct working approach for counselors to get close to students, grasp their ideological dynamics and address various growth challenges involving academics, psychology, interpersonal communication and employment. It constitutes a core responsibility clearly stipulated in Regulations on the Construction of Counselor Teams in Institutions of Higher Education. Wang Xun pointed out that heart-to-heart talks carry unique educational value. As a key path to implement individualized teaching, enhance the affinity of ideological and political education and achieve full coverage of ideological guidance for students, they play an irreplaceable role in shaping the values of young students^[1].

With continuous expansion of higher vocational education, post-2000 generations have become the main student group in vocational colleges. Faced with pressures from skill assessments, fierce employment competition, low self-identity and isolation in online social interactions, students raise higher requirements on the professionalism, personalization and timeliness of heart-to-heart talks.

Nevertheless, frontline practice indicates that heart-to-heart talks in most higher vocational colleges are merely carried out to fulfill assessment indicators, failing to touch students' inner genuine demands and greatly weakening educational outcomes. Liu Xiao and Zhang Lei summarized common problems of heart-to-heart talks in universities, including

randomness, hysteresis, indoctrination tendency, and emphasis on written records rather than post-talk review. Such drawbacks become more prominent in higher vocational colleges due to unbalanced student-counselor ratios and complicated student problems^[3]. From the perspective of professional psychological counseling, Yuan Yuan and Gao Min analyzed that most counselors lack systematic training in psychological communication skills. When coping with students' emotional distress and psychological crises, they can only provide superficial persuasion instead of digging out root causes, which directly limits the depth of communication^[2].

Although some colleges have established archives for heart-to-heart talks, they lack a complete chain covering pre-talk investigation, professional guidance during communication and post-talk follow-up evaluation, making long-term educational effects hard to achieve. With the development of digital ideological education, digital intelligence opens new avenues for targeted heart-to-heart talks. How to tackle longstanding drawbacks of traditional talks via data early warning and online communication channels has become a vital issue for counselors in higher vocational colleges in the new era. Based on existing research findings, considering the school-running features of vocational colleges and student characteristics, clarifying practical dilemmas of heart-to-heart talks and building replicable, operable improvement pathways bears important practical value.

2. Multiple Dilemmas of Heart-to-Heart Talks in Higher Vocational Colleges

2.1 Structural Dilemma: Overloaded Administrative Work Fragmenting Time for In-depth Talks

Counselors in higher vocational colleges undertake dozens of administrative tasks including scholarship and financial aid evaluation, dormitory management, safety inspection, practical training administration, employment statistics and document submission, forming a working pattern described as “numerous tasks converging onto one person”. In most higher vocational colleges, the student-counselor ratio far exceeds the standard of 1:200. A single counselor manages 200 to 400 students, and continuous time for in-depth communication is split by various administrative affairs.

Research by Deng Yantao et al. shows that administrative workload leads to obvious delay of heart-to-heart talks. Counselors mostly take remedial action only after students fail courses, violate disciplines or suffer emotional breakdowns, while preventive regular talks targeting freshmen adaptation, academic early warning and career planning are severely insufficient^[4]. Surveys conducted by Liu Xiao and Zhang Lei reveal that many counselors merely complete the required number of talks each semester. Conversations are dominated by brief inquiries and signature filing without sufficient time for empathetic listening and in-depth communication, fundamentally lowering talk quality^[3].

2.2 Communication Dilemma: One-way Indoctrination Hampering Mutual Trust Between Teachers and Students

Traditional heart-to-heart talks have solidified into an indoctrination mode where counselors preach and students receive passively, conflicting with the demand for individualized and equal communication among contemporary vocational college students. Wang Xun proposed that equal dialogue lies at the core of heart-to-heart talks. If counselors stick to administrative authority and presuppose standard answers to problems, students will easily develop psychological resistance^[1].

Students in higher vocational colleges generally suffer from academic frustration and career inferiority. Confronted with one-way critical communication from counselors, they tend to close their minds, showing superficial compliance while hiding real troubles. Some counselors tend to judge students based on personal experience, rush to deny negative emotions and offer solutions without empathy. In addition, post-2000 students prefer online expression yet feel restrained in offline socializing. The single offline talk channel fails to accommodate their communication preferences, and inadequate construction of online communication channels further widens communication gaps.

2.3 Professional Competence Dilemma: Insufficient Psychological Communication Skills Leading to Superficial Problem Handling

Heart-to-heart talks integrate ideological guidance and psychological counseling, requiring counselors to master basic skills in psychological consultation, emotion recognition and

crisis intervention. However, obvious shortcomings exist in professional support for counselor teams in higher vocational colleges. Yuan Yuan and Gao Min indicated that most counselors have not systematically studied psychological counseling theories. Lacking skills such as empathy, open-ended questioning and solution-focused therapy, they can only offer superficial persuasion when students struggle with anxiety, interpersonal conflicts, family trauma, mild depression and other complicated psychological troubles, unable to identify root causes^[2].

Some counselors cannot distinguish general ideological confusion from psychological crises and fall into two extremes: over-intervening and attempting to resolve mental illnesses solely through talks, or evading psychological problems and simply referring students to the psychological counseling center without transitional layered guidance. Meanwhile, higher vocational colleges lack regular special training on heart-to-heart talks. Counselors work relying on personal experience without standardized and differentiated conversation frameworks and disposal schemes, making individualized teaching difficult for different student groups.

2.4 Institutional Procedure Dilemma: Absence of Full Closed-loop Management, Lacking Post-talk Follow-up and Evaluation

The lack of closed-loop mechanisms constitutes the core institutional cause for formalized heart-to-heart talks. Chen Xi argued that in-depth heart-to-heart talks must form a closed-loop system of “talk – follow-up – feedback – adjustment”. Nevertheless, most higher vocational colleges only retain written records of talks without establishing a complete working chain^[6].

Before conversations, there is no pre-investigation of student profiles and problem backgrounds; counselors conduct aimless and casual communication. After talks, documents are simply filed without forming problem lists, support plans and follow-up schedules. Without hierarchical return visits, similar problems recur among students, and talks only treat symptoms rather than root causes. The evaluation system shows clear directional bias: colleges assess work performance merely by the number of talks and completeness of files, ignoring practical indicators including emotional improvement, academic progress and conflict resolution. This encourages formalized talks that prioritize quantity over quality and prevents sustainable educational outcomes.

2.5 Digital Dilemma: Siloed Data Restricting Precise Early Warning and Online Intervention

Digital intelligent empowerment represents a crucial transformation direction for heart-to-heart talks in the new era, yet prominent weaknesses exist in smart ideological education construction within higher vocational colleges. Li Zihao pointed out that data from academic affairs, psychological assessments, dormitory attendance, campus consumption and online student behavior are isolated in most colleges, forming information silos. Counselors cannot capture abnormal signals such as continuous absence, sharp grade decline and irregular rest schedules in advance and can only intervene passively after incidents break out^[5].

Integrated intelligent platforms for heart-to-heart talks are unavailable, and recording, risk identification and online

counseling all rely on manual work with low efficiency. Insufficient anonymous online communication channels deprive introverted, sensitive students suffering from mental stigma of secure outlets to share troubles, making targeted nurturing hard to realize. Digital tools are limited to basic online chatting; natural language processing and student portrait models are not adopted for automatic risk early warning, so the educational value of digital technology remains underdeveloped.

2.6 Collaborative Education Dilemma: Isolated Individual Work and Absence of Long-term Multi-party Linkage Mechanisms

Growth challenges facing vocational college students involve academics, psychology, family and career. Problems can hardly be thoroughly resolved relying solely on individual counselors, yet internal and external collaborative mechanisms are generally incomplete. Internally, information cannot be smoothly shared between counselors, professional teachers, psychological consultants and dorm administrators. Failures in practical training and abnormal classroom performance cannot trigger coordinated support for students. Home-school cooperation is limited to notifications at the end of semesters, lacking regular joint talks for students facing parent-child conflicts, financial hardship and psychological risks. Externally, links with medical institutions, enterprises and communities are not established, leaving students troubled by employment anxiety or severe psychological disorders without professional external support. Deng Yantao et al. found that inadequate coordination restricts intervention strength, resulting in recurring complicated student problems and obstructing the construction of an all-round supporting network^[4].

3. Multi-dimensional Pathways to Improve the Effectiveness of Counselors' Heart-to-Heart Talks

Based on existing literature and the characteristics of higher vocational education and student groups, this paper constructs a systematic improvement framework covering professional competence, closed-loop procedures, digital empowerment, collaborative networks and long-term institutions to address the six dilemmas above.

3.1 Professional Empowerment of Teams: Integrating Psychological Counseling Technology and Building Hierarchical Training Systems

First, introduce professional communication approaches from psychological counseling and rebuild equal communication logic. Following the integration idea proposed by Yuan Yuan and Gao Min, incorporate empathetic listening, motivational interviewing and Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) into standard heart-to-heart talk procedures, abandoning indoctrinated expression. A four-layer communication framework is adopted: restate emotions – empathic acceptance – explore personal resources – jointly formulate solutions^[2]. Counselors should reduce judgmental language, respect students' negative emotions such as career inferiority

and academic frustration, avoid arbitrary denial of cognitive bias, and build a safe and trusting communication atmosphere. Clarify the boundary between ideological guidance and psychological counseling: counselors are positioned to listen, conduct preliminary risk identification and make hierarchical referrals instead of undertaking psychotherapy. Students with problems exceeding counselors' capacity shall be transferred to the university psychological center promptly.

Second, establish regular hierarchical special training mechanisms. In accordance with the skill improvement path proposed by Wang Xun, organize scenario simulation, case review and exchange salons on excellent talks on a regular basis^[1]. Provide introductory training covering basic communication and risk identification for novice counselors and advanced training on in-depth psychological counseling and crisis intervention for senior counselors. Launch cross-college case exchanges and compile standardized conversation outlines for typical scenarios including practical training pressure, employment anxiety and dormitory conflicts to realize differentiated and professional communication.

Third, optimize the student-counselor ratio and implement administrative workload reduction. Appropriately distribute administrative tasks and streamline redundant reports and documents. Build peer support teams consisting of class psychological committee members and dormitory information officers to undertake daily status inquiries, freeing counselors with continuous time for preventive and in-depth heart-to-heart talks.

3.2 Full-process Closed-loop Management: Establish Standardized "Pre-talk – During-talk – Post-talk" Working Chains

Adopting the closed-loop management mechanism for in-depth heart-to-heart talks proposed by Chen Xi, construct a PDCA cyclic full-process system to avoid ineffective talks^[6].

Pre-talk precise investigation and adequate preparation. Integrate basic student data involving academics, psychology, family background, practical training and attendance to build dynamic student profiles, classified into general attention, key attention and psychological crisis three-level archives. Sort out problem backgrounds following the 6W1H principle and define core communication objectives. Design targeted outlines for freshmen adaptation, skill assessment anxiety, career confusion and disciplinary rectification to eliminate aimless random talks. Select communication scenarios flexibly: dormitories, campus paths and anonymous online channels for minor issues; independent private offices for disciplinary matters and psychological crises to lower students' defensiveness.

Professional guidance during communication with integrated online and offline channels. Adhere to "listen more, preach less" and reserve sufficient space for students to express themselves. Prioritize text communication via WeChat or dedicated mini-programs for socially anxious and sensitive

students to offer emotional buffers. Conduct face-to-face talks for severe conflicts and crisis disposal to capture implicit emotional signals from body language and facial expressions. Strictly implement confidentiality principles: protect student privacy except under circumstances involving psychological crises or threats to personal safety, consolidating mutual trust between teachers and students.

Three-tier post-talk follow-up and effectiveness evaluation mechanism. Generate problem lists, support measure lists and follow-up schedules after each talk. Implement hierarchical return visits: short-term follow-up within 3 days, medium-term review after 3 weeks and long-term tracking lasting 3 months. Conduct weekly routine follow-up for mild dormitory conflicts and temporary academic weariness; key follow-up every three days for moderate academic anxiety and practical training early warning; daily dynamic monitoring for severe psychological crises. Reform assessment orientation: take follow-up outcomes, student behavioral improvement, crisis resolution rate and student satisfaction on talks as core assessment indicators, lower the weight of simple talk quantity, and form a closed-loop management system of “evaluation – adjustment – optimization”.

3.3 Precise Digital Empowerment: Build Intelligent Heart-to-Heart Talk Platforms for Proactive Early Warning and Advance Intervention

Following Li Zihao's idea of digital intelligent transformation for precise education, break data silos via digitalization and shift heart-to-heart talks from passive post-incident remedy to proactive pre-incident prevention^[5].

Connect multi-source data interfaces and construct student risk early warning models. Link data platforms of academic affairs, psychological assessment, dormitory management, campus smart card and online learning systems to automatically capture risk signals such as continuous absence, sharp grade decline, frequent late return, abnormal consumption and high psychological assessment scores. Push warning lists automatically so counselors can carry out preventive talks and reduce passive crisis disposal.

Develop an integrated intelligent service platform for heart-to-heart talks. Integrate functions including anonymous online counseling, psychological self-test, intelligent file archiving, emotional keyword recognition and educational resource push, offering all-time communication channels for students unwilling to communicate offline. Apply natural language processing to identify negative emotions in texts and automatically push self-help resources on stress relief and career planning to ease counselors' one-on-one communication burden.

Assist self-guided counseling with digital tools. Launch mini-programs covering mindfulness relaxation, emotional journals and career assessment, providing self-help psychological adjustment tools for students suffering from mild anxiety and

training pressure to divert counseling demands in layers and achieve targeted lightweight intervention.

3.4 Diversified Collaborative Education: Construct a Four-party Linkage Network of University – Family – Enterprise – Medical Institution

Drawing on the long-term mechanism construction ideas for heart-to-heart talks, break isolated individual work of counselors and build an all-round collaborative education system^[4].

Intra-university collaboration: establish a monthly joint meeting mechanism for counselors, professional teachers, psychological counselors and dorm administrators to share information on students' practical training performance, classroom status and psychological conditions, and coordinate academic support, psychological counseling and life care. For students failing skill examinations, counselors cooperate with practical training instructors to conduct joint talks and formulate promotion plans to ease academic anxiety.

Home-school collaboration: build hierarchical joint talk mechanisms. Organize regular online and offline joint communication for students with financial difficulties, parent-child conflicts and high psychological risks, guide parents to lower excessive expectations on academics and employment, and coordinate family emotional relief to mitigate students' domestic pressure.

University-enterprise-medical collaboration: cooperate with partner enterprises to organize career experience and employment guidance talks to relieve vocational inferiority and career confusion among vocational students. Establish rapid referral channels with external mental health institutions for students with psychological crises, and implement coordinated university-medical intervention for students with severe emotional disorders.

3.5 Long-term Institutional Guarantee: Improve Mechanisms of Organization, Assessment and Incentives

Organizational guarantee: set up a leading group for heart-to-heart talk work led by the Student Affairs Department with participation of Academic Affairs Office, Psychological Counseling Center, Logistics Department and secondary colleges. Clarify responsibilities for data sharing and coordinated support among all departments, organize regular work conferences and coordinate standardized implementation of heart-to-heart talks.

Institutional guarantee: issue work specifications for heart-to-heart talks in higher vocational colleges, psychological crisis referral regulations and detailed rules on closed-loop follow-up management. Define communication procedures, confidentiality standards and hierarchical intervention criteria to ensure standardized operation.

Incentive guarantee: set up awards for excellent talk cases and advanced individuals in in-depth tutoring. Incorporate the effectiveness of heart-to-heart talks into annual assessment and professional title evaluation indicators for counselors. Compile excellent case collections regularly and promote the improvement of communication capabilities among all counselors via typical cases.

4. Conclusion

The formalization, superficiality and low efficiency of heart-to-heart talks by counselors in higher vocational colleges arise from overlapping factors including staffing allocation, professional capabilities, procedural mechanisms, digitalization and collaborative systems. As a core carrier to implement fostering virtue through education and ease academic and career anxiety among vocational students, heart-to-heart talks cannot be improved merely by optimizing communication skills. A five-in-one comprehensive improvement system must be constructed, consisting of professional capability empowerment, full-process closed-loop management, precise digital early warning, four-party collaborative education and long-term institutional guarantee.

Higher vocational colleges need to adapt to the characteristics of post-2000 vocational students, integrate psychological counseling technology, digital ideological education tools and closed-loop management concepts, and abandon the traditional performance-oriented mindset prioritizing indicators over actual effects. Heart-to-heart talks shall transform from task-oriented routine work to development-oriented in-depth education. Further empirical research can be carried out in the future combined with practical training and employment characteristics of higher vocational colleges to quantitatively evaluate intervention outcomes of heart-to-heart talks, continuously optimize working models suitable for vocational education, and fully exert the educational functions of heart-to-heart talks in value guidance, psychological counseling and supporting student growth.

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