

# **Role Reconstruction and Professionalization of College Counselors**

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## **Abstract:**

As organizers, executors and mentors, college counselors are in charge of the ideological and political education in college as well as the daily management of students. The national guidance documents have pictured the development clue for the role of college counselors, which has undergone a transfer from “single role”, “dual roles”, “multiple roles” to “core multiple roles”. Since the role of college counselors has the basic attributes of politics, education and management, such multiple attributes bring about the multiple roles of college counselors. Due to the overlapping of multiple roles, college counselors often face conflict between and within such roles in practice. To resolve the role conflict, a path of professionalization is explored and established, which is based on the principle of “core roles as basis, main roles as expertise, achieving complementary development”.

**Keywords:** counselor; role definition; basic attributes; role conflict; professionalization

Counselors are organizers, executors, and mentors, who are in charge of the ideological and political education in college and the daily management of students, and they play a vital role in the cultivation of college students. Jiang Nanxiang, president of Tsinghua University in 1953, asked the Ministry of Education for instructions to implement the political instructor system in Tsinghua University. The proposal was approved. In 1965, the Ministry of Education promulgated the “Regulations on the Work of Political Counselors for College Students”, stating that “the main task of counselors is to guide students’ political learning and political activities, and to be a political guide for college students.” It made a clear definition of the status, role, job nature, tasks, and treatment of college political counselors in the form of laws and regulations. The nature and identity of political counselors as ideological and political workers for students was further confirmed. In 1987, the CPC Central Committee’s “Decision on Improving and Strengthening Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities” pointed out that the full-time staff engaged in ideological and political work for students are the integral part of the teaching team, and should be included in the teacher establishment and the teacher appointment system should also be implemented. In December 1995, the former State Education Commission promulgated the “Outline of Moral Education in Chinese Higher Education Institutions (Trial)”, which held that the counselors belonged to full-time ideological and political education personnel, and put forward new requirements of “moral education teachers” for counselors. This meant that counselors were given dual roles as both political workers and teachers.

After entering the new century, the situation at home and abroad has undergone profound changes, and ideological and political education of college students is facing new opportunities and challenges. In 2000, the “Opinions on Further Strengthening the Establishment of College Students Ideological and Political Education Work Team” was issued, positioning the role of counselors as “organizers and mentors of college students in ideological and political education”[1]. In 2004, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Ideological and Political Education of College Students.” This document states that “the main body of the ideological and political education work team is the school party and government cadres, the Communist Youth League cadres, teachers of ideological and political theory courses, teachers of philosophy and social science courses, counselors and class teachers..... We must adhere to the correct political direction, underline the ideological and moral cultivation, enhance the sense of social responsibility, and become mentors and guides for college students for their healthy growth.”[2] At this time, the reference to “political counselor” has been replaced by “counselor”, and the role of the counselor has also transferred from an ideological and political educator to an educator whose main task is students’ growth and talents’ cultivation. In 2005, the Ministry of Education promulgated the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Counselors and Class Teachers Team in Colleges and Universities”, reiterating that “the counselor is the backbone of colleges and universities to engage in the moral education, carry out ideological and political education, and guide the healthy development of college students.”[3]

In 2006, the Ministry of Education Order No. 24, “Regulations on the Construction of Counselors Team in Higher Education Institutions”, was issued. “Counselors are the important part of the teaching and management team of colleges and universities, and have the dual roles of teachers and cadres. Counselors are the backbones of the ideological and political education for college students. They are organizers, executors, and mentors, who are in charge of the ideological and political education in college and the daily management of students. Counselors should strive to become students’ life mentors and intimate friends.” The definition of the role of college counselors stated in this document had been quoted until the Order No. 43 was issued by the Ministry of Education in 2007. The difference between the two statements is that Order No. 43 made clear descriptions of the main responsibilities of the counselor, among which the most prominent one was “ideological education and value guidance”. Meanwhile, nine tasks such as party building, learning atmosphere construction, daily affairs management, etc. were enumerated in detail.

After sorting out the guidance documents, it is easy to find out that the counselor system has undergone significant changes in more than half a century since its birth. In terms of the roles of the college counselor, it have transferred from “single role”, “dual roles”, “multiple roles” to “core multiple roles”. As the scope of the counselor’s work and responsibilities extend, we need to be sober-minded in clarifying the multiple role of the counselor and remain true to the original aspiration of the counselor.

### **Analysis of Basic Attributes of the Role of the Counselor**

As for the understanding the role of the counselor, we can make the following analysis of his basic attributes.

(1) The role of the counselor has obvious political attributes. Initially, the counselor stepped onto the stage of history with the name of “political counselor”. The purpose of establishing the counselor system was to “strengthen political leadership, improve political ideological education” and “cultivate students’ political qualities.” As the scope of the counselor’s responsibilities continue to extend, his management and service functions tend to increase, but the endogenous political attributes do not change. At the end of 2016, General Secretary Xi Jinping clearly stated at the National Higher Education Institution Ideological and Political Work Conference: “China’s higher education has the important task of cultivating the socialist cause builders and successors who have the comprehensive qualities of good virtue, intelligence, physical conditions, aesthetic abilities, and labor capacities. We must adhere to the correct political direction.”[6] Our high education institutions are socialist ones with Chinese characteristics under the leadership of the Party. How can the party’s leadership be guaranteed? How can the thought guidance be realized? How can we stick to the political direction? The political education, ideological guidance, and value guidance undertaken by counselors directly affect students’ political beliefs. So the political attributes require that counselors must regard ideological and political education as the most essential task at present.

(2) The role of the counselor has educational attributes in nature. Counselors should become “life mentors” and “intimate friends” of college students. This relationship with students as both teachers and friends is an interpretation of the attributes of education. Counselors are part of the college teachers’ group. A Chinese old saying goes, “the tasks of a teacher include preaching, teaching, and problem solving”. The college counselors undertake two important tasks in addition to “preaching” and “teaching”. They should help students to understand the rules of behaving and conducting, resolve their growing pains, and educate students to promote their overall development. In addition, the educational attributes are also reflected in the transmission of social ideology, and the promotion of national ideology. “College counselors should not only explain, instill, guide and enhance certain social and cultural ideology, but also form a stable and unified educational pursuit guided by the operational mechanism of ideological and political education, with a view to adjusting, guiding and nurturing the social and cultural behaviors of students, and cultivating the talents that the society needs.”[7]

(3) The role of the counselor also has distinct management attributes. Order No. 43 of the Ministry of Education makes it clear that “management of daily affairs of students” is one of the responsibilities of counselors. Counselors need to implement policies and regulations related to college students, reflecting their responsibility of management. College student affairs such as enrollment registration, residential life, financial assistance, study guidance, psychological counseling, and employment guidance are both delicate and complicated to handle. Traditional management emphasizes more on “regulation”, and the main task of counselors will be generally considered as “managing students well”. With the increasing autonomy in modern student management, the effectiveness of traditional management methods has gradually been reduced, which cannot fully meet the needs of promoting the development of students and schools. The management attributes of the role should meet the needs of modern student affairs management in the time of reforming. The role of the counselor should be “loosely connected” with traditional management requirements, completely separated from the role of “senior nanny”, and use the professional development platform to realize the combination of group functions within the team. In this way, the college counselor can become a professional in student affairs management, and the management attributes can be optimized.

#### **(4) Role Conflict of the Counselor in Practice**

Although the documents have clear definitions of counselors’ roles, the overlapping and intersection of such definitions can make the counselors encounter role conflict, restricting their work efficiency and affecting the individual development as well as the overall team building. The so-called “role conflict” refers to the fact that “since any individual plays a role in life, he may face conflict within the role caused by different requirements of the role, or conflict between roles caused by playing multiple roles at the same time.” [8] The role conflict faced by counselors in working practice are mainly manifested in the following two aspects:

One is the conflict between roles. That is, the conflict arises when several attributes put forward the demand of performing the role. The role of the counselor is the teacher from the perspective of education, while from the political aspect, he is the backbone of the ideological and political education for college students. The behaviors and positions that such roles expect are sometimes different. For example, as an educator, he should gain the trust and respect from students and be a close friend of students. But as a manager, he need to be an executor of school policies and act in accordance with the regulations to make students obey the rules and cooperate with the authority. Thus the contradiction between the “flexibility” of an educator and the “rigidity” of a manager appears. What is more, the role of the counselor is diffused. Due to various definitions of the role, the counselor has no way to find the core definition. The value-delayed “ideological and political education” task is often placed at the bottom of the to-do list. Role conflict makes it difficult for counselors to achieve self-satisfaction and acquire a feeling of “professional accomplishment”. From the aspect of the long-term development, it is naturally difficult to attract more outstanding people to choose the profession, let alone pursuing it as a “career”.

The other is the conflict within the role. This is usually “reflected as the conflict between the ideal role and the real role, mainly because the subject of the role has different understandings of the prescribed role behavior, and there is a fierce conflict within the role.” [9] Counselors often face different expectations in the work. Once college students encounter problems in academics, mental condition, employment, etc., the first person held responsible is the counselor. For students, whenever they have confusion in career planning, belief choice, and interpersonal communication, counselors are often their first choices to ask for help. In practice, counselors often want to do a good job in student affairs management, but they often lack systematic experience and can only rely on certain systems and disciplines to restrain students. They also want to improve their knowledge structure, and do a good job of value guidance, but they can not get rid of daily affairs. Meanwhile, the society puts too much expectation on counselors. It is difficult for counselors to win students’ trust because of their own demands cannot be satisfied by counselors. Counselors also feel at a loss because of the inaccurate definition of their role or because their own value cannot be fully demonstrated. “When the several roles undertaken by the counselor ask him to fulfill the expectations simultaneously, the role tension appears, which will affect the professional development of the counselor and will have a negative impact on the stability and unity of the counselors team.” [10]

### **The Path of Professionalization Building to Resolve Role Conflict**

Role conflict is inevitable in the individual’s professional development. But if it becomes a common phenomenon of a professional group, the professionalization process will be affected. As far as the construction of the counselors team is concerned, the emergence of role conflict is largely due to the fact that the overall role definition of the counselors team is equivalent to that of the individual counselor in the team. The task which should be completed by the whole team is often passed on to the individuals in the team and they are asked to accomplish it independently. In the

process of professionalization, individual development of counselors and team building should be emphasized at the same time to resolve the role conflict. Also, a professionalization path based on the principle of “core role as basis, main roles as expertise, achieving complementary development” should be established. By clarifying the roles and responsibilities of college counselors, the individual’s professional development and the functional coupling of the group are promoted, so that the counselors team can be transformed from low-level individual integration to multi-level group specialization. [11]

(1) Clarify role definition and stick to the core role.

With a deeper understanding of higher education developmental laws, the construction of college counselors team has made a great progress and the role definitions are in constant change. This development process has shaped the multiplicity of their roles.[12] In the multiple role definitions of counselors, it should be noted that no matter what practical needs or requirements of regulatory documents they are based on, the core role of college counselors is the ideological and political educator for college students. For individual counselors, the persistence of this core role should not be changed. For counselors teams, this role is the key to distinguish the job from any other professions. It is worth mentioning that, because the content, form, methods and measures of ideological and political education are stained with a strong political color and have strong political utility, many people equate ideological and political educators to “political propagandists” or “social guardians”. College counselors in the new era not only need to guide students to establish correct political positions and form social concepts, but also help them to form positive family views, life values and interpersonal communication practices, and instruct students to pursue happiness and improve their life quality. To improve the cognition and adaptability of social life, ideological and political education should be closely related to the growth of students.[13] This core role is the most important one that should be insisted during the professionalization of counselors.

(2) Deepen the cognition of role definition and locate the main roles of individuals.

Individuals in the counselors team may have different understandings of the role due to their different personalities, professional background, hobbies, etc. Some can become excellent psychological counseling experts; some may become generalists in managing student affairs; some will become researchers on students’ career development. This provides opportunities for counselors to shape their main roles. Counselors now often ignore their responsibilities because of the trivial daily work, missing the opportunities of becoming experts in a certain area. “Counselors in the new era should avoid becoming “housekeepers” and “senior nannies”. Instead, they should focus on embodying the role value and locating the work connotation by improving class management level, enhancing educational cooperation, and resolving crisis.”[14] The management department should allow counselors to have sufficient opportunities to replenish their interests in a certain area. The assessment of counselors should consider the performance of the core role as well as the growth of the main roles. Counselors should also be allowed or even encouraged to participate in workshops and other training courses, thus forming a deeper understanding of the role

definitions and finding out the main roles with personal characteristics.

(3) Reconstruct the role definition and promote the team building with joint efforts.

The professionalization of counselors depends on the cooperation of the entire team. With continuous clarification of the core role and the constant generation of the main roles, the division of work within the counselors team should be much clearer, and the traditional pattern of “one person in charge of all” should be gradually broken. Several counselors who have conformed to the main roles should work together in the same field. With positions set and responsibilities taken, each counselor should have their own specialized expertise. Through the professionalization building as well as the division of labor and collaboration, the expectations of different roles can thus be realized and a reasonable internal structure can be established, for better development of the entire team. This idea is based on the benign development of the whole team, but is ultimately implemented to meet the individual counselor’s developmental needs. In this way, counselors can perform their duties, clarify their roles, and promote the team building to a new level.

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