

October 2019

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Recommended Citation

Barish, S. (2019). Residence Program Counseling. *JADARA*, 16(3). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jadara/vol16/iss3/8>

RESIDENCE PROGRAM COUNSELING

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. . . A student takes a knife from the cafeteria at dinner and threatens to kill another student if he doesn't stop teasing him.

. . . At a dorm meeting discussing plans for a Christmas party, a student walks out without saying a word, goes into the dorm office, and breaks into tears.

. . . One night, two roomates who have been friends all year are found in a violent fistfight.

The above incidents took place at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (M.S.S.D.), but similar stories could be told by dorm staff at any residential school. The purpose of this paper is to explain the benefits to a residential school of employing full-time, professional counselors in their residence halls and to describe M.S.S.D.'s use of Residence Program Counselors (R.P.C.s).

Public high schools have guidance counselors to help students deal with academic, vocational, and personal problems or decisions. Secondary schools for the deaf, both residential and day programs, employ counselors for the same reasons. However, even in residential schools, counselors traditionally work during the school day.

A residential setting is, by nature, a source of conflicts and stresses for students. They are separated from home and family, given almost no privacy, subjected to stronger and more constant peer pressure, etc. The need for counseling in a residential school, therefore, is greater than in a day program. Also, the extra problems that occur usually happen at night. It is after school lets out that the student's time is less structured, presenting more choices. More choices provide more opportunity to warn, but also create more stresses.

Those evening hours are, therefore, an

important time to have counseling available. In each of the examples cited at the beginning of the paper, a counselor was available to work with the students "on the spot". In these and many other instances, counseling can be much more effective than if there must be a delay till the next day, or even later.

All dorms do have staff and supervision at all times. Then why cannot the dorm supervisors meet the counseling needs of the students in the dorms? There are several reasons.

First, dorm supervisors are already assigned a whole list of other duties and responsibilities. These include enforcing dorm rules, checking on building maintenance needs, planning recreational and educational programs, making phone calls to parents, general supervision of student behavior, etc. Student-to-staff ratios are high and dorm supervisors tend to have little "free time".

A second reason is that supervisors are not trained as counselors. Their experience is in supervision and planning. The front line supervisor's job is an entry level position in the social service field. Head supervisors are the staff with the most experience and training.

There is a final and equally important reason that is often overlooked. Even for experienced dorm supervisors trained in counseling there is an inherent conflict between counseling and supervision. The supervisor must enforce dorm rules. A dorm counselor, working on the same confidential basis, as a school counselor, need not have that responsibility.

An example will help to illustrate this point. Imagine a student with a problem of marijuana dependence, but who wants to

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stop. The dorm staff must enforce the rule, with its attendant punishments, against marijuana. The student will be reluctant, to say the least, to talk with a dorm supervisor about the problem. Even if that student is working with a school counselor, the times of greatest temptation will be after school. At the time counseling could be most effective, a counselor is not present.

A dorm supervisor may feel frustrated by the same situation. The supervisor may see that student enter the dorm every night with red eyes and note changes in behavior. The supervisor may be reasonably sure that the student is smoking, but then has to decide if he should try to catch the student, ignore the situation, or make a referral. A formal referral to a school counselor based only on conjecture (however accurate) is an awkward one both to make and to receive. Consulting and alerting the dorm counselor on an informal basis would be more likely to produce results. The counselor could observe the behavior, then approach the student about the subject without the threat of punishment.

It was to solve this role conflict that dorm staff faced that M.S.S.D. set up two equal faculty positions in each dorm, an R. P. C. and a Team Leader. The faculty positions are equal in salary and status to teaching and counseling faculty in the school. The Team Leader's responsibilities are similar to those of a head dorm supervisor in other residential schools. He is responsible for managing the dorm, making major disciplinary decisions, planning the overall dorm educational and recreational program, and supervising the resident assistants (the front line staff). The R. P. C. is responsible for counseling.

Since students also have an assigned school counselor, the R. P. C.s focus their work on the problems of everyday dorm life, whereas school counselors concentrate more on the academic and vocational areas. There is not, however, a rigid separation. Some students feel more comfortable with one counselor or the other and that choice is respected. The school counselor and the R. P. C. meet regularly to plan, share appropriate information, and avoid duplication of effort.

Though the R. P. C.s are primarily responsible for individual and small group counseling, they have also taken on many other valuable functions. They have provided in-service workshops for other dorm staff, helped train Student Leadership Program students in peer counseling, helped organize a Parent Weekend, been members of committees drafting a school wide sex policy and residence program curriculum, provided consultation to school and dorm personnel, maintained a liaison between the school and the residence program, etc. At other schools counselors should take on the responsibilities that would help meet the needs of those individual programs.

A word of caution is in order, however, for other schools that plan to assign counselors to their residence halls. The key to a successful program is teamwork. It is very easy for the counselor to be seen as the "good guy" in the dorm as opposed to the "mean" dorm supervisors. A residence program counselor must always keep this in mind and take steps to prevent it. Students should clearly understand the role of each staff member.

If everyone works together, the other dorm staff will know what to expect from the counselors. Questions like: *Can the R. P. C. open the laundry room for a student? Will the R. P. C. help break up a fight in an emergency? Will the R. P. C. criticize a student for using foul language?* are important to clarify before the year starts. Counselors will have knowledge of students breaking rules that he should not share with the other dorm staff and will hear complaints about them from students. The supervisors must be made aware that this will happen and not feel threatened by it.

It has been M. S. S. D.'s experience that these potential conflicts can be avoided. Residence Program Counselors have become important members of the team in each dormitory. Students have taken advantage of the expanded counseling services. Other residential schools should investigate the feasibility of adding counselors to their own dormitory staffs.