CHALLENGES TO THE COUNSELLOR IN A CHANGING WORLD – THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES IN UNIVERSITIES ON THE CONCEPTS OF STUDENT COUNSELLING

GERHART ROTT
Bergische Universität – Gesamthochschule Wuppertal

Abstract

This article will first consider in a systematic way how student counselling is related to change. In doing so it will refer to the development of student counselling in Germany. Formulating the thesis that ‘student counsellors find themselves symptomatically confronted with changes which hint at deeper challenges than those they have known before,’ it will then explore ‘new dimensions of change’ in universities and show how they may be linked with impulses and answers given by counselling and psychotherapy. Finally it will take a look at the professionalization of student counselling in the light of those changes.

A) Student counselling and its relation to social change

The following article is based on some of the ideas presented in a paper to the Second Anglo-German Conference on Guidance and Counselling, University of London 25-28 September 1984. The conference was concerned with ‘The contribution of Guidance and Counselling at a time of economic difficulty’ and specifically with the ways student counselling adapts to social change.

Student counselling in various ways has always been involved in social change: it instigates change, works in a place of change, and is itself subject to change.

1. Student counsellors as agents of change

In their daily work student counsellors are by definition engaged in processes which aim at accomplishing personal and/or institutional change. Providing for a student new or additional information about the formal and informal rules of higher education, about ways to succeed in his or her chosen subject or about job perspectives, the student counsellor offers students an opportunity to rethink their
assumptions about personal relations to the surrounding world. In helping students to come to terms emotionally with examination failure, difficulties in organizing work, or difficulties in personal relations, the counsellor necessarily supports cognitive and emotional change. And finally, if counsellors support students in developing purposeful action aimed at resolving their specific problem or problems, they are again involved in interventions with processes of change. In fact, students come to us because they are looking for personal change or because they are confronted with new demands in their personal environment and want to maintain their stability in the face of those changes.

2. The university as an institution of change

Not only counsellors, however, but the institution they are working in, the university, is itself engaged in generating change; this is indeed one of its fundamental principles. First it has to bring about change in the scientific knowledge of the world, and secondly — like all educational institutions from the family upwards — it has to bring about some kind of personal development on the part of the students. For the interpretation of the world, which is the business of science, is human interpretation and this necessarily has personal implications. The nexus between these two is obviously a subtle one and far too complex to be determined here. But we may presume that the university, whether consciously or unconsciously, acknowledges the connection between what it teaches and the person who is taught.

It is well known how difficult it is to analyze what students learn at an university. The long history of research on this topic, after the American Howard. S. Becker (1972) first put the question in this way in 1964, gives some indication of the complexity of the changes which take place in a student in the course of his or her education. Whatever the origins of these changes, the student counsellor is involved with those processes of educational change, not simply at an abstract theoretical level, however valid that may be, but as concrete manifestations of personal development.

3. Student counselling as a result of social change

This twofold principle of change in the university as an institution leaves aside the question how the university itself is responding to change in the world (in many ways the university seems more rigid and more ossified than its image might lead one to presume). Student counselling unquestionably is involved in these changes. In fact, one might say that student counselling is a child of social change. In the Federal Republic of Germany the development of student counselling was closely