Student counselling in Canadian universities

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Abstract. Counselling in Canadian universities has been influenced by: (1) the growing diversity of the student population, (2) cutbacks in university funding, and (3) an increased need for accountability. The authors call for more descriptive research to detail the diverse counselling programs that are available across the country as well as more outcome research to assess the effectiveness of the services that are currently provided. Economic and global challenges represent an opportunity for university counselling services to contribute human services by remaining relevant to students and accountable within the larger societal context.

The context of Canada

There is a Mohawk Indian saying that people do not make the land, it is the land that makes the people. Few nations have been so profoundly formed by the forces of nature as Canada. With its rugged terrain, climatic extremes and tremendous magnitude (4,600 \times 5,500 \text{ km}\text{ area}), Canada has the world's largest coastline (244,000 \text{ km}). Less than 10\% of the land mass is settled. Only one province (Prince Edward Island) is completely occupied. The majority of Canadian people (60\%) reside on or near the United States border.

The Canadian economy is the seventh largest among the Western industrialised nations in terms of total output of goods and services. In 1992 the Gross Domestic Product of Canada amounted to 687 billion dollars. On a per capita basis, this yielded Canadians the second-highest incomes in the world after the US Americans. There has been a steady shift in the economy away from goods towards more emphasis on services. In 1960, 5 out of 10 Canadians worked in the service industry. This has now increased to 7 out of 10 (Canada Year Book, 1994).

The university system within Canadian society

A Canadian publication, University Affairs (May, 1995), recently noted the following trends in Canadian post-secondary institutions, namely, the growth of new learning technologies such as video conferencing, the growing diversity in student populations, cutbacks in university funding, and an increased need for accountability. Canada's large national and provincial debt is respon-
sible for the significant cutbacks in funding provided to colleges and universities. Although reduced funding has led to shrinking resources and services, post secondary student enrolment continues to increase. Increased immigration and the realisation by many Canadians of the importance of post-secondary education have contributed to a larger and more diverse student population. Canadian universities are struggling to respond to these societal changes.

In 1990, Canada had the highest rate of population growth in the industrialised world (1.5%). Canada’s population has multiplied eight fold in the 128 years since Confederation. The 1991 population census indicated 27.3 million people. This growth has been assisted by immigration. In 1991, 186,000 more people entered Canada than left. Approximately 50,000 international students are studying in Canada in any one year.

Seventy one percent of the Canadian population indicate one ethnic origin, while 29% report multiple ethnic ancestry. Canada’s university population reflects this diversity as it continues to welcome students from both economically advantaged and disadvantaged countries.

The counselling system in Canadian universities

In recognition of the variation in the delivery of counselling services that exist between the more than 300 post-secondary institutions in Canada, as well as the dearth of literature describing the patterns of student counselling within these institutions, the authors have chosen to provide examples based on the experience of what we hope is a typical Canadian university. The institution we have selected is a medium sized university located in western Canada (student enrolment is approximately 15,000). Information was obtained by conducting detailed interviews with one of the senior counselling psychologists who works at the university counselling centre.

Goals

Conger, Hiebert and Hong-Farrell (1995) state that the primary function of a college counselling centre is to serve its clients. This goal is similar to that made by the counselling psychologist in our sample counselling centre who states: “We are there to support our institution and the students’ ability to maximise it”. Post-secondary counsellors are being asked by their institutions to serve the students by enabling them to get the most out of their education. This goal reflects a shifting philosophy in Canadian post secondary counselling. The goal is no longer one of providing extensive personal therapy for life change, but to provide students with a level of assistance necessary to facilitate optimal learning.