COUNSELING IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BACKGROUND
As the mission and role of the community college has evolved and expanded so too has the mission and role of counseling. Counselors of the 1960s and 1970s lived the human potential movement where their work focused on the personal, career and social development of mostly traditionally aged students. Counselors often provided group interactions and classroom experiences. Students decided their own educational fate and were allowed to enroll in whatever courses they wanted; the student’s right to fail was supported as a learning experience (Helfgot, 1995; Pulliams, 1990).

Economic challenges and the realities of a growing student population led to changes in the 1970s and 1980s. Counselors began to focus more on helping students develop clear academic and career plans and less on students' personal and social development. During this time, a student's "right to fail" was challenged by the student's "right to succeed". As a result, colleges implemented testing and course placement requirements, and counselors were called upon to support student achievement and serve as "institutional agents" in helping students achieve goals the institution had defined for them (Helfgot, 1995).

CURRENT PRACTICES
The 1990s and early 2000s brought larger numbers of students with increasingly diverse backgrounds, challenges and needs (Helfgot & Culp, 2005). Today's students live in an uncertain world where achieving higher education has fewer guarantees for long-term success. They often have limited knowledge about careers and difficulty establishing realistic career goals. They are likely to be academically or financially underprepared for college. Most are juggling work and family responsibilities and many receive little support from home.

For many students, a world of uncertainty and complex personal challenge leads to stress and difficulty attaining academic success. Students participating in the 2003 National College Health Assessment included the following in the “top 10 impediments to academic performance”: stress, sleep difficulties, concern regarding family/friend, relationship difficulties, depression/anxiety, death of family/friend, and alcohol use (ACHA, 2004). Student stress and mental health difficulties impact student learning and student experience in negative ways, creating challenges for faculty in the classroom (Sandeen, 2004).

Student need for personal counseling at the community college has increased (Gerathy, 1997; Cvancara, 1997; Humphrey, Kitchens, & Patrick, 2000). Some students are dealing with serious mental health issues; however, most are dealing with ordinary stresses that overwhelm them (Gerathy, 1997). Learning to manage ordinary stress can make a positive difference in learning and in the quality of the rest of life.

While community college counselors are uniquely qualified to assist increasing numbers of students with stress and mental health issues, many question how community colleges - and counselors - will meet this current challenge. Counselors and counseling services continue to be called upon to do more to meet the needs of students, generally without the addition of staff.

Counselors continue to play multiple roles, with little consistency regarding their roles across or even within institutions. They voice concern that their roles have become diffused and that they are spread too thin. Some fear that soon they may be unable to meet the critical counseling needs of students and express an interest in charting a more focused course for the future. Helfgot (1995) agreed, saying "community college counseling needs redefinition, or at least reaffirmation of its purpose and role" (p. 46).

RECOMMENDATIONS
Recommendation 1. Community college leaders and counselors should reaffirm or redefine the role counselors play in the learning and development of students by focusing on critical roles in three key areas: direct service to students, institutional support, and assessment and continuous improvement.

Student development professionals and their community colleges should direct services to students to:

- Assess individual student needs to determine appropriate intervention
- Teach skills for critical thinking/decision making and life choices/planning
- Teach skills for career exploration and career decision making
- Guide students in establishing or clarifying education and career goals
- Teach skills in developing healthy relationships
- Support students with emotional issues that impact their success in college
- Guide students through managing life transitions

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- Support students with emotional issues that impact their success in college
- Guide students through managing life transitions
• Build student self-efficacy by helping them confidently navigate the college environment
• Assist students in using resources internal and external to the college
• Assess and diagnose individual student’s barriers to learning and teaching strategies to manage and overcome those barriers

Student development professionals and their community colleges should offer institutional support to:
• Consult and collaborate with faculty and staff regarding individual learner issues, student stress and mental health, group processing, and conflict resolution
• Communicate student needs to campus community
• Respond to emotional crises on campus
• Collaborate with health instructors and health services departments to provide information on healthy lifestyles, and stress management
• Collaborate with academic advising to ensure an integrated approach to educational and career planning
• Create linkages with service professionals in the community including psychologists and psychiatrists

Student development professionals and their community colleges should undertake assessment and continuous improvement to:
• Continuously assess student needs to inform the institution and develop appropriate programs and services
• Articulate to the campus community the core roles and relevance of counseling in positively impacting student learning, student development and student success
• Clarify and assess intended outcomes of each of the core roles defined
• Conduct ongoing comprehensive program review and improvement according to the core roles established by the institution and external standards including those defined by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS)
• Participate in ongoing professional development

**Recommendation 2.** Community college leaders should require that staff identified as counselors possess the necessary education and skills to meet current and future counseling needs of students including:

- Master’s degree with professional counseling concentration
- Ability to understand students with diverse backgrounds and experiences and provide them with the skills needed for success in a multicultural environment
- Ability to help students conduct realistic self-appraisal
- Ability to intervene in crisis situations including assessing students for hospitalization or referral to an outside agency
- Ability to use emerging technologies to enhance and expand services for both on-campus and distance students
- Ability to apply student development, career development and learning theory, supplemented with clinical information
- Current knowledge of legal and ethical issues related to counseling
- Excellent interpersonal communication and presentation skills

To meet the needs of current and future students, the role of community college counselors and counseling services needs to be reaffirmed or redefined. Reaffirmation, or redefinition, requires community college leaders and counselors across the country to come together at the local level - to have informed and open discussions regarding the needs of their students and agree on how professionally trained counselors can best meet them. Now is the time.

**Recommendation 3.** Community college leaders and counseling departments should work together to overcome challenges and barriers that could negatively impact the future of community college counseling, including high demand for academic...
advising, limited resources, and limitations of faculty contractual agreements.

Student development professionals and their community colleges should address the high demand for academic advising as follows:

- Community college leaders need to recognize that students have critical needs for both academic advising and counseling. Ideally, colleges should meet student needs by providing both professional advisors and professional counselors, each group providing a distinctly different service.

- Colleges should achieve a balance of counselors providing both advising and counseling by assessing students’ needs, prioritizing resources, utilizing technology to provide information, and organizing staff, particularly when professional advisors are not an option. These institutions should also consider involving instructional faculty in advising.

Student development professionals and their community colleges should address limited resources as follows:

- The needs of today’s students call for an institutional commitment to allocating necessary resources to provide sufficient numbers of counselors and comprehensive counseling services.

- Community college leaders should develop a full understanding of what colleges risk when counseling services are cut, either in part or in whole. Not having counselors available who are uniquely trained to address the special needs of students and the campus community can put students and the institution at risk.

- It is especially critical that community college leaders and counselors work together to meet the needs of students in times of budgetary limitations.

- Counselors should implement new modes of providing services that reach larger numbers of students including group counseling, workshops and seminars, counseling-related course instruction, and consultation with faculty and staff that meet students’ classroom needs.

Student development professionals and their community colleges should address limitations of faculty contractual agreements as follows:

- Community college leaders should find the needed financial resources and be creative with contractual arrangements so that counselors employed on 9-month faculty contracts are able to provide services outside the academic year. Thus, community colleges recognize the importance of offering comprehensive counseling services throughout the entire calendar year.

Recommendation 4. Counseling departments should engage the services of a consulting psychologist or psychiatrist to address the therapeutic needs of students including:

- Consulting with counselors.
- Assisting and referring students.

Recommendation 5. The NCSD should be a catalyst to identify or develop a national organization to enhance recognition of the profession of community college counseling including:

- Encouraging development of local and state organizations for community college counselors.
- Providing leadership for development of a national connection through collaboration with other organizations like the American College Counselors Association or Association of College and University Counseling Center Directors.
- Encouraging graduate programs in counseling to include course work and internships that focus on community college counseling.
- Recognizing exemplary counseling programs.
- Collecting and disseminating information and providing recommendations regarding counseling in the community college.

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Over the past 30 years, the role of community college counselors has expanded to be as diverse as the students they serve. This ever-expanding role, combined with increased numbers of students and decreased numbers of counselors, has resulted in role diffusion and concerns that community colleges are no longer able to meet the true counseling needs of students. This is happening at the same time the number of students coming to college with personal challenges including stress and mental health issues is increasing. In order to meet the needs of current and future students, the role of community college counselors and counseling services needs to be reaffirmed or redefined. Reaffirmation, or redefinition, requires community college leaders and counselors across the country to come together at the local level to have informed and open discussions regarding the needs of their students and agree on how professionally trained counselors can best meet them. Now is the time.