



Academic counselling in higher education: scope and challenges. “The academic counselling program at the Tuxtla Language School”

Ana María Elisa Díaz de la Garza
María Eugenia Serrano Vila
Escuela de Lenguas Tuxtla
Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas.

ABSTRACT

The present paper explores how academic counselling is being handled at the Tuxtla Language School of the Autonomous University of Chiapas, since its initiation in 2002 as a compulsory service to provide students in state universities in Mexico with a support network. It will also explore how this program has developed throughout the years and the perceptions of both the student population which receives this service as well as those of counsellors. Finally, it concludes with the current status of teacher-training for academic counselling at our school.

Note: In our mother tongue there is no word to accurately translate the terms “*Tutorías*” and “*Tutores*”, hence we have decided to use the terms *Academic Counsellors* and *Counselling* in their place.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, Mexican University Education is facing a variety of challenges due to the fact that there is an increasing demand for quality college education at the same time that the educational budget is now more limited than ever. (Solana 1999:9) Recently, most universities in Mexico are undergoing accreditation quality assessment studies by the *CIEES (Comités Interinstitucionales de Evaluación de la Educación Superior: Interinstitutional Evaluation Committees)*. One of the requisites for achieving accreditation and thus being able to receive funds includes implementing academic counselling programs.

These programs are potential vehicles for monitoring trainees’ development, program quality and ensuring that the professional preparation of student teachers



is responsive to the evolving needs of society. (After Ayers 1988, Holste and Matthews 1993, in Delaney 1995:2).

It has been shown that students who are provided with academic counsellors are more likely to stay in college and graduate. A counsellor helps to promote trainees' growth and development, and assists students in assessing their interests and abilities, examining their educational goals, and developing short-term and long-range plans to meet their objectives. Counsellors provide information on general education and major requirements, clarify policies and procedures, discuss educational and career options, monitor academic progress, and direct students to other resources when necessary.

Both students and counsellors must assume equal responsibility in the counselling process.

Students' responsibilities include:

- Being familiar with degree programs and requirements at the university;
- Seeking out answers to their questions;
- Developing self-awareness;
- Keeping scheduled appointments;
- Following through on advisors' recommendations;
- Accepting ultimate responsibility for their decisions; and
- Making use of all resources on campus.

Counsellor responsibilities include:

- Developing a purposeful relationship with advisees.
- Being knowledgeable about university and departmental requirements, policies and procedures;
- Providing contact information and posted office hours
- Keeping appointments or calling if it is necessary to change or cancel an appointment
- Providing a respectful, supportive atmosphere
- Addressing significant issues



- Monitoring progress toward educational/career goals
- Listening and helping develop a realistic plan-of-action to meet student goals
- Referring students when attitudinal, attendance, or personal problems require intervention by other professionals.
- Being familiar with university resources and special services in order to make appropriate referrals; and
- Maintaining confidentiality.

Thus, academic counsellors provide a support network to guide students throughout their college experience.

BACKGROUND

1. THE LEI/TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM

The *LEI (Licenciatura en Enseñanza del Inglés: B. Ed. in ELT)* was opened in January 1999 at the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH) to train potential EFL Teachers. Most student-teachers attend seven hours of instruction on a daily basis and will have obtained 350 credits upon completion of the current eight semester study plan ('98 Study Plan).

Many student-teachers in our study program have admitted that they often feel overwhelmed and unsure of themselves because of the wide range of demands on their time and skills once they begin college. As a result, it is essential and necessary to provide students with a support system.

The Tuxtla Language School (ELT) began its counselling program in 2002 as a result of the implementation of new national policies established by ANUIES. According to ANUIES (2001), "This activity was implemented to help transform the quality of education at a national level for tertiary education with the aim of achieving quality instruction."

Once ANUIES had recommended these requirements a Teacher Training Workshop was organized in 2002 to help ease full time teachers into the process. Many teachers at the ELT joined the sessions in an effort to fulfil the UNACH's



interest concerning these new policies and thus provide this service to comply with government recommendations.

In the following section we shall explore our counselling experience at the Tuxtla Language School.

2. ACADEMIC COUNSELLING AT THE TUXTLA LANGUAGE SCHOOL

In compliance with the General Regulations for the Institutional Academic Advising Program (Reglamento General del Programa Institucional de Tutorías) the Tuxtla Language School first began offering individual face to face counselling sessions between counsellors and students.

In the beginning only new students who enrolled in 2002 were assigned a counsellor from the faculty to help guide them through their college experience in the LEI. Since then all new alumni have been provided with this service which begins in first semester and continues until trainees have completed our entire study program. Counsellors are usually selected at random but if for any reason there does not seem to be “a good fit” between the trainer and trainee they may be reassigned upon request.

Each semester at our university counsellors hand in their advising schedules to the Academic Counselling Coordination (Coordinación de Tutorías) to provide trainees with information about when they are free to provide this service. Schedules vary according to each teacher trainer’s class schedule and may range from at least two sessions a semester, lasting a minimum of 15 minutes each, to more, depending on the trainee’s needs.

Five years ago the possibility of selecting *Big Brothers* or *Big Sisters* from trainees in advanced semesters of the LEI program to “adopt” new trainees who were experiencing difficulties adjusting to the college experience with the aim of providing additional peer support throughout the Teacher Training program was brought up at a meeting. However, this has yet to become a reality due to lack of support from some of the faculty. As a result, the present counselling program consists of the Coordinator of the program and the advisors who are usually full-time teachers.



Thus, the Tuxtla Language School has a Counselling Program which was implemented with the aim of fostering the success of our Teacher Training Program by:

- Monitoring academic affectiveness
- Improving the quality of the teaching/learning process
- Addressing the drop-out rate
- Improving the services offered to students
- Improving communication between Advisors/Advisees/Teacher Trainers/School Administration

LEI Counselling Program Specific Objectives:

- To aid Teacher Trainers and provide continuous professional development concerning this process.
- To offer continuous counselling sessions throughout the college experience to all LEI students.
- To identify trainees who are prone to failing subjects or who may possibly drop out in an effort to provide them with additional support.
- To offer courses and conferences suitable for addressing trainees' needs.

Tuxtla Language School Strategies:

- Continue to offer courses and conferences for continuous professional development.
- Organize periodic meetings to offer continuous academic advisement feedback.
- Consciousness raising activities for both Teacher Trainers and Trainees concerning the importance of academic counselling.
- Provide information concerning university resources, special services and courses to all members of the university community.
- Encourage trainees to take advantage of all the support services which the university offers to ensure their academic success.



Academic Goals:

- Lower the failure and drop out rate
- Help familiarize students with available university resources.
- Provide guidance on how trainees may improve the learning process
- Encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning

3. CURRENT ACADEMIC COUNSELLING SERVICES AVAILABLE AT THE TUXTLA LANGUAGE SCHOOL

As of this writing all enrolled students are provided with academic counsellors: 214 who are enrolled in the LEI program and 48 from the B. Ed. in French Language Teaching (LEF) which opened in 2006. Currently twenty-one full time teachers are assigned between 15 to 17 students each per semester and three part-time teachers who attend to the needs of one student each.

4. LEI TRAINEES VIEW OF THE CURRENT ACADEMIC COUNSELLING SERVICES AVAILABLE AT THE TUXTLA LANGUAGE SCHOOL

After having provided counselling for a five year period a decision was made to evaluate the success of the academic advising program at our school. In December 2006 the Coordinator of the program decided to survey student teachers from the LEI to conduct a follow up study. Thus, the coordinator of the program adapted a questionnaire recommended by ANUIES (2001) for this purpose. This instrument was analyzed by the LEI faculty who offered suggestions for adapting it to our context and needs.

The objective of the evaluation was to: **Evaluate students' perceptions concerning the student counselling program at our school.**

The evaluation was conducted by Professors Ma. Elizabeth Moreno Gloggnier and Antonieta Cal y Mayor Turnbull. It took into consideration two major issues:

1. Evaluation of the Advisors (9 closed questions)

2. Effectiveness of the academic counselling program (6 closed questions)

159 students from all groups in the LEI program answered the questionnaires (70% of the population).

A series of yes/no questions was also included referring to the following data:

- If they had attended a counselling session
- If they had been invited to the session by their advisor

In addition, respondents were instructed to provide the reasons why they had not attended sessions as well as to offer suggestions for improving the program. (Moreno & Cal y Mayor 2007)

5. SURVEY RESULTS: Effectiveness of the Academic Counselling Program at the Tuxtla Language School

5.1 Evaluation of Advisors

In the following section we shall explore the results of this survey concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the counsellors.

Strengths

- 65% provided a favourable response concerning personality, attitude and qualifications of the advisor.
- 85% declared that their advisors treated them with respect and kindness.
- Most trainees feel that it is easy to contact their advisor.
- 68% responded that their advisor invites them to attend sessions.
- A great number of students commented that they have been assigned an appropriate advisor.

Weaknesses

- 11% pointed out that they had not been able to contact their advisor since he/she had not been available.
- 24% mentioned that their advisor had not maintained continuous communication with them. (Perhaps due to time constraints)



- 18% commented that they felt that their counsellors were not qualified to answer academic queries, provide guidance, nor aid them in developing a relevant action plan or in helping them to implement self-study strategies.
- 25% felt that neither their academic success nor their adaptation to the University had improved as a result of this program.
- 20% indicated that they did not find the program satisfactory.
- 30% pointed out that from August/December they had not attended a single session.
- 16% admitted to not attending a session despite being invited by their advisor. This was due to either a lack of time or incompatibility in scheduling.

(Moreno & Cal y Mayor 2007)

6. COUNSELLORS' VIEW OF THE CURRENT ACADEMIC COUNSELLING SERVICES AVAILABLE AT THE TUXTLA LANGUAGE SCHOOL

After having attended countless meetings we have come to the conclusion that despite the evidence provided by the survey we still face great challenges to ensure the effectiveness of this student support program. These include the following:

- Knowledge concerning the personality of advisors/advisees to provide a “good fit” between both to ensure good chemistry between Trainer and Trainee. We feel that we must match students with advisors who will provide them with the appropriate respectful support.
- Limited scheduling for this service due to the fact that the faculty is overburdened with multiple duties which allows a limited schedule to attend to students' needs.
- Not all faculty members are knowledgeable about university and departmental requirements, policies and procedures which limits the support that they may provide trainees.



In addition, the following challenges pose a threat to the success of the program:

- Non-attendance of trainees to counselling sessions.
- Lack of appropriate areas to provide this service since trainees require privacy for orientation sessions.
- Scheduling conflicts between when advisors are free to provide this service and when students are free to attend.
- Lack of training in specialized fields which limits the support we may provide in specific situations.
- Lack of “chemistry” between the advisor and advisee.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As can be seen from this brief analysis the situation at the Tuxtla Language School regarding academic counselling is not unique.

It is a pity that due to lack of funds each training program at our school is not assigned a paid professional to attend to the support needs of the student population. In many countries trained psychologists are assigned to deal exclusively in providing students with a support network which addresses both academic and personal needs. In schools fortunate enough to have this resource overburdened faculty do not have to provide counselling in addition to their multiple responsibilities such as giving class, preparing resources, evaluating, attending meetings, being on countless committees, doing research, writing articles, attending countless professional updating courses, ... the list goes on and on. As a result, students are provided with quality attention without scheduling conflicts.

However, since this is not our case we must learn to deal with our situation as best we can. In the following section we will explore issues which we consider must be addressed as student advisors.



8. ISSUES WHICH MUST BE ADDRESSED IN STUDENT COUNSELLING

- Are we qualified to be advising students so that they may effectively accomplish their personal and professional goals?
- What is our role as advisors?
- How far should we go to help them to solve their problems?
- How much can we help them in their learning if we are not their teachers during a given semester?
- Is there enough communication between advisors and faculty to attend to specific problem solving issues as soon as possible?
- Is it ethical to interfere with our advisees' professors and request additional information regarding problem situations?
- How sure can we be that our advisee is being totally honest concerning their unique position in both personal and academic situations?
- Is fifteen minutes every month or every semester enough to explore and provide appropriate counselling per student?
- Should this support service be voluntary or mandatory?
- Should this service be provided to all students or only to those that request or require it?
- Isn't it necessary to provide all advisors with continuous professional training in this area to ensure the success of the program?

9. REGULATIONS

At the moment no formal regulations exist at our university to enforce this procedure. Nonetheless, it is our belief that a procedure manual would be beneficial in providing a more effective support network for our trainees.



10. UP-DATING WORKSHOPS

As was already mentioned, 2002 was the year in which ANUIES implemented counselling in state universities. Ever since the first course by ANUIES there had not been any additional courses or workshops offered at the UNACH; a situation which left most teacher-counsellors adrift. Fortunately the UNACH is currently addressing this issue and in November 2007 offered the first “Encuentro Estatal de Tutorías”, where many counsellors had the opportunity to share their experiences with colleagues, attended a series of lectures from fellow teachers from the UNAM, and attended workshops such as “Conducting Interviews” and “The Use of Technology in Counselling.”

After this conference, teachers who attended the sessions decided to share their experiences and recently acquired knowledge by providing a workshop for counsellors and future counsellors in January 2008. This workshop had two main aims: to multiply what was learned and to design the Tuxtla Language School 2008-2010 Counselling Program Proposal. The proposal will soon undergo analysis by the entire counselling body.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is our belief that a support program is necessary to ensure success at the university. An advisor helps to promote students’ growth and development, and aids students in assessing their interests and abilities, exploring their educational goals, and developing short-term and long-range plans to achieve their objectives. Advisors provide information regarding LEI/LEF requirements, clarify policies and procedures, discuss trainees’ options, monitor academic progress, and direct students to other resources when necessary.

It is our belief that academic counselling is still in its infancy at the Tuxtla Language School and at the moment is still a work in progress. To be truly successful we require total commitment from the entire faculty which participates in this support program as well as the appropriate infrastructure and training to be effective advisors. If all of these conditions are met we have no doubt that our goal



as educators to ensure personal, academic and future professional success and the well being of our students will be fostered.

References

1. ANUIES. Programas Institucionales de Tutoría. Una propuesta de la ANUIES para su organización y funcionamiento en las Instituciones de Educación Superior. (Libro en línea) México. ANUIES. www.anui.es.mx consultado en Marzo 2007.
http://www.anui.es.mx/servicios/d_estrategicos/libros/lib42/000.htm
2. Delaney A. (1995) Promoting Responsive Teacher Education Through Effective Follow- Up Studies. Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Research Association. San Francisco. Available from: ERIC.
<http://searcher.eric.org/scripts/seget2.asp?db=eric&want=http://Searcher.eric.org/ericdb/ED388659.htm>. Accessed 12/Dec/06.
3. Moreno & Cal y Mayor (2007) Percepción del Programa de Tutorías por Alumnos de la Escuela de Lenguas Tuxtla-UNACH. (Documento presentado en San Cristóbal de Las Casas)
4. Programa de Tutorías de la ELT 2004-2006
5. Solana, F. (1999) (compilador) Educación en el Siglo XXI. México D.F. (co-edición Fondo Mexicano para la Educación y el Desarrollo/ Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León. México D.F.: Limusa.

Datos biográficos

Ana María Elisa Díaz de la Garza: Egresada de la Maestría en Educación de la Universidad de Exeter; docente de la Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés en la Escuela de Lenguas Tuxtla, Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, miembro del CA “**Desarrollo Profesional y Evaluación en La Enseñanza de Lenguas.**” Ha desarrollado proyectos de investigación y escrito artículos de investigación.

Contacto: amediaz57@hotmail.com

María Eugenia Serrano Vila: Docente de la Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas (UNACH) adscrita a la Escuela de Lenguas (ELT) Campus Tuxtla desde hace 19 años, ha ocupado distintos cargos académico-administrativos a lo largo de su trayectoria en la ELT como lo son Encargada de los Exámenes de Cambridge, Asesora Académica de la coordinación General de Lenguas, Coordinadora del Departamento de Lenguas, Encargada de la Dirección de la ELT, siendo el último



de ellos el de Directora de la ELT. Egresada de la Maestría en Educación de la Universidad de Exeter.

Contacto: marusvila@hotmail.com