Building an Online Community of Practice for Career Counselors in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, rapid changes in employment conditions have resulted in increasingly diverse career trajectories, necessitating that university-based career counselors possess a broader knowledge base and greater adaptability. However, the traditional emphasis on confidentiality in career counseling, combined with the growing prevalence of online counseling, has limited opportunities for mutual learning among counselors. This study investigates Communities of Practice (CoPs) as an effective mechanism for fostering peer learning, accumulating shared knowledge, and disseminating this knowledge within institutions and the broader society. Using a case study of a CoP developed in a university setting to support collaborative learning among career counselors, this study analyzes the entire process—from inception to dissolution—through the framework of the five developmental stages articulated by Wenger et al. (2002). The findings indicate that the CoP not only contributed to the professional development of individual counselors but also produced notable institutional outcomes by externalizing their tacit knowledge and compiling it into a counseling casebook. This casebook facilitated extensive knowledge sharing and enhanced the visibility and perceived value of career counseling within the university environment.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, rapid transformations in the labor market have led to increased uncertainty and diversification of career trajectories. Consequently, it has become essential for career counselors in higher education to develop a more extensive knowledge base and adaptive strategies to effectively address the complex and emerging needs of students. Traditionally, career counseling has been characterized as a highly individualized practice, typically conducted through confidential one-on-one sessions. While this model protects student privacy, it may inadvertently foster professional isolation among counselors. Furthermore, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to online counseling, leading to a decline in informal dialogue and organic knowledge sharing—an issue of considerable concern. In response to these challenges, we established an online Community of Practice (CoP) as a professional learning community to re-establish connections, facilitate mutual support, and promote collective learning among career counselors. This paper elucidates the establishment and evolution of this community and examines how mutual learning among career counselors within the framework of a CoP contributes not only to individual professional development but also to broader organizational impact.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this project is grounded in the concept of CoPs, as articulated by Lave and Wenger (1998). CoPs are defined as "a group of people who have an interest or passion in something and who learn how to do it better by interacting regularly" (Wenger et al., 2002). Prior research has identified three primary advantages of CoPs in facilitating professional development, particularly in fields such as education and counseling. First, CoPs promote collaboration and reduce professional isolation by providing safe, collegial environments conducive to peer exchange (Ko et al., 2023; Patton et al., 2017). Second, CoPs facilitate knowledge sharing and translation. Engagement with diverse professionals encourages reflective practice and the co-construction of practical insights (Barry et al., 2017). Third, CoPs contribute to sustainable development by enabling members to collaboratively address recurring challenges (Sherer et al., 2003). Collectively, these features underscore the potential of CoPs to support not only individual growth but also institutional learning and innovation.

CoPs typically progress through five developmental stages over time: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation (Wenger et al., 2002). These stages illustrate the natural evolution of a CoP from initial interest to sustained transformation. Although our community was first established in a more informal and organic manner, it ultimately followed a process analogous to this model.

CASE OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The case study was conducted at a mid-sized national university in Japan. Participants in the CoP included an average of seven career counselors, two to three administrative staff members from the career center, and one faculty representative. Participation in the CoP was voluntary, and the initiative was founded on principles of inclusivity, psychological safety, and peer-based learning. A pilot meeting was held in September 2020, followed by regular monthly meetings conducted via Microsoft Teams from November 2020 to June 2023. Each session lasted approximately 90 min and typically involved agenda sharing, structured case discussions, and reflective practices. This study employed a practice-based action research methodology, incorporating the collection and thematic analysis of meeting notes, recordings, and feedback forms.

RESULTS

This section delineates the development and transformation of our community in alignment with the five developmental stages of CoPs.

Phase 1: Potential—During this initial phase, we conducted an interview survey in 2019 to ascertain the needs of career counselors, which revealed a strong demand for improved communication and peer support. A pivotal moment occurred in September 2020 when we organized a trial session with a select group of counselors. Feedback from this session was overwhelmingly positive, with participants expressing strong interest in continuing such gatherings.

Phase 2: Coalescing—This phase commenced with the launch of monthly online meetings in November 2020. Initially, these meetings consisted primarily of top-down updates and informational briefings from the university, focusing more on information dissemination than on interaction or idea exchange. However,

beginning in March 2021, we introduced structured case discussions in which members shared and reflected on actual student cases they had encountered. This transition fostered increased peer learning grounded in real experiences and marked a notable advancement in the establishment of a shared practice.

Phase 3: Maturing—During this phase, our structured case discussions became more consistent and focused. Over time, counselors began to identify common challenges in student support, including issues faced by students with developmental disabilities, international students, and those pursuing public service, among others. As recurring topics emerged, we began documenting insights derived from our discussions. To preserve valuable ideas, we consolidated them into a shared knowledge base. This process ultimately culminated in the creation of a counseling casebook—a tangible outcome that encapsulates the group's collective learning.

Phase 4: Stewardship—In this phase, we continued developing the counseling casebook for faculty. However, over time, the case discussions began to feel somewhat routine. To address this challenge, we introduced two initiatives to maintain group engagement: first, we enhanced the client record system to support its practical application; second, we conducted a workshop focused on digital career support. These initiatives effectively sustained community engagement and prepared us to address emerging needs.

Phase 5: Transformation—In 2022, we disseminated the counseling casebook to faculty members at our university. This reflective approach within the community began to influence student advising practices across the institution. Concurrently, the expertise of the counselors gained increased recognition within the university. Although our regular meetings concluded in June 2023, the community has remained active through a Microsoft Teams group chat, and we plan to convene future sessions as needed to discuss specific cases or emerging issues.

DISCUSSION

The initiative produced multifaceted outcomes across individual, group, and institutional levels. At the individual level, the CoP helped alleviate the emotional burden associated with challenging counseling cases by providing a sense of psychological support. Furthermore, for less experienced counselors, the community facilitated valuable learning opportunities. At the group level, the exchange of knowledge regarding complex counseling cases enabled the community to articulate guiding principles for ethical and student-centered advising. Although the development of the casebook was a time-intensive process, it served not only as a practical resource for daily operations but also as a symbol of the community's achievements through sustained collaboration. At the institutional level, by making the community's insights accessible to a broader audience, the CoP contributed to increased institutional recognition of counseling as a specialized and evidence-informed practice. Additionally, the casebook functioned as a resource for faculty and staff involved in student advising, thereby improving the quality of advising beyond the career center. In this way, the CoP extended its impact by promoting a more integrated and collaborative approach to student support within the university.

However, several challenges and areas for reflection emerged that warrant consideration for future improvement. First, while some members actively engaged in

discussions, others were reluctant to share their perspectives. This hesitation may have stemmed in part from the difficulties associated with discussing counseling cases while maintaining client confidentiality. To address this concern, we developed a submission format that allowed members to present cases using only minimal, non-identifying information. Second, considerable time and effort were required to organize our ideas and articulate cases and corresponding responses in a manner comprehensible to individuals without specialized knowledge in counseling. Finally, it is necessary to monitor the ongoing use of the counseling casebook we developed. Moving forward, we aim to continue exploring these challenges through further research and practical engagement, with the objective of enhancing support for sustainable, peer-based learning communities.

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