

## **THE COUNSELING ROLE OF THE CAMPUS MINISTER**

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Twenty years is a long time! For twenty years I listened to, talked to, joked with, cried with, rejoiced with, planned with, challenged, threatened, and generally loved college students. What a trip! Some days it felt like a "long day's journey into night," but most of the time it was a frolic along the "yellow brick road."

I'll never forget the phone call from the dean of the college asking me to consider the position as Director of Religious Activities at my Alma Mater. I was a pastor and had thought that pastoring would be what I would stay with for the rest of my days. I remembered, however, how much my BSU and college days had shaped my life, how many crucial decisions I had made, and how many significant people I had met. I began thinking how nice it would be to go back to that hallowed and familiar place and give some student what another BSU director had given me. I decided to go, thinking I would stay for a couple of years, but I "got captured" and stayed twenty. I look back with few regrets. What an exciting group of people to work with, how flexible and ready to try new things, how intense and serious about so many issues, yet how immature and irresponsible at times, how willing to look at the Christian faith through different eyes and accept challenges to missions in strange and different places! What a self-conscious and introspective group! So fragile, yet so strong. Yes, it was quite a trip!

Those of you, my friends, who are still there on the campus and you who have come since I left, I wish I could say enough to

ministry is there.

My assignment is to talk to you about counseling college students. I will not use much technical language with you. You know all of that. You can read the books and you have had a lot of course work. I want to talk to you from my guts--or my heart, and maybe a little from my head. I will use the generic "he" for convenience, realizing there are many female ministers on the campuses.

I know one thing for sure--there is no way that you can walk in and out among college students and not be a counselor. Just as someone has written, "You can't not communicate, you will communicate in some fashion;" you can't not be a counselor if you are a campus minister. What kind of counselor will depend on your skills and your caring. You can be a caring, skillful, sensitive, attentive person of God to those students of yours, or you may communicate insensitivity, cool detachment, narcissistic selfishness, sarcasm, or busy-ness. You will be a counselor in some form or fashion.

A student once told me that he had spend the last several weeks looking over the campus--in the dorm and the student center--searching for someone who could handle his problem and would take it seriously. He didn't want anyone to condemn him or treat him and his problem lightly. I believe that happens frequently. Students check out other students; students check out professors; students check out their campus minister to see if someone will take them and their concerns and handle them with care. They often carry around "fragile freight."

Most are not desperate, but to them their concerns are important because they are theirs. You possibly have heard similar problems from other students, but they want you to handle their "freight" as personally as if it were your very own.

### **YOUR UNIQUE PLACE**

The campus minister, no matter what his title, has a unique role on campus. In the eyes of students he is not so heavy a part of the administrative staff that he is too far removed from the pulse of the students, but at the same time he is not one of the students. He represents a comfortable "in-

between" which allows the student the closeness yet the distance for a meaningful relationship.

You, as campus minister, may see yourself wearing several hats and meaning many things to different students. To some you may be a father figure; to others, a big brother. To many, you may be a minister like their minister at home (this may be helpful or harmful). To others, you may be seen as an activities director, busily going about your job getting everything organized. To some, you may simply be a combination of all or several of the above. How you see yourself, whether minister or cheer leader, will help to determine how they see you and choose to relate to you. Your self concept is yet another issue for another article.

But at the risk of sounding trite, I will make this observation: it seems to me that a college student wants his campus minister to be more than anything else, a real friend. Let me be clear. I do not mean that you have to be their "buddy" or "one of the boys." Nothing turns a student off quicker than some adult who is seeking to get his own emotional empty places filled through student relationships. This adult may appear to need relationships so badly that he overruns his own ego boundaries and comes across as an emotional vacuum cleaner. What is offered as friendship turns out to be emotional dependency.

1. A real friend to students is one who has his own emotional self intact, is whole and complete, has a healthy self love, and has a relationship with his marriage mate that is meaningful, fulfilling, and growing. If not married, he gets his emotional needs met in meaningful adult relationships. If he doesn't come across as needing students, they can enjoy relating to him in a comfortable and appropriate manner. They do not feel consumed by the relationship.

2. Also, a real friend doesn't mind "letting down his hair" and enjoying the student as a person. So many of your contacts with students are of the informal variety. You see them on campus and chat for a minute; you stop by the campus grill and drink coffee with a couple; you sit with them in the worship

committee meeting. This may be their time to check you out to see if you are a person who is approachable or one who can handle their concerns. How you treat them on that casual level will determine whether they will trust you on a deeper level.

You can grow to be sensitive enough to these casual "Oh, by the way" concerns of theirs to offer a more specific time and place where the two of you can discuss the matter more thoroughly. This movement from the informal, casual setting to a more formal, structured setting allows for more privacy and concentration and lets the student know that you do take him seriously. You can make this transition by simply saying, "I know this deserves more time than we can give it right now. Why don't we set a time when you can come by my office and talk further about it. What time would be good for you?"

3. Another characteristic of a real friend is that he is also able to make time available when the student really needs to talk about more serious matters. Most students welcome that concern from their campus minister friend who cares enough about them to give them some of his time. If their problem deserves more than just one counseling session, you can call the session to a close and set up another time in a few days when they can return. Counselors often make brief "home work" assignments between sessions. Suggestions such as "Why don't you write down what you feel your options are right now and bring them with you next week when you come back;" or, "You have mentioned several areas of concern in your life. Between now and the time you come back, why don't you decide on the one you would like to work on first."

4. One last characteristic of a real friend may sound a little contradictory. If you are going to be a real friend, you will have to learn to establish time and place boundaries for yourself as well as for the student with whom you are talking. There are students who are so emotionally starved that if you show them a little attention they will "camp on your doorstep" every day. For the growth of this student, you need to set limits on the frequency and length of his visit. You can express to the student that you have other things that must be taken care of

or other students that also need your time. When he comes into your office to talk, you can announce at the beginning of the conversation, "I can only talk for about fifteen minutes," and at the end of that time, you can announce that the time is up and you must get on with something else. For conversations that may call for continuation, you may schedule them on another day.

Setting limits on students is not cruel; it is educational. It is a necessary lesson in life for them. Setting limits on yourself is also a part of your growth. You cannot always be available to everybody at any time. It is all right and even necessary for your sanity to structure your own schedule and not let students interfere at their discretion.

### **PROBLEM AREAS**

The needs and problems of college students are many. A check-list of student problems would include minor personal adjustment problems to deep psychological emotional difficulties. Various check-lists of problems have been developed and administered to students. Some of these lists include as many as thirty-five items. These would include the major areas of educational and vocational concerns; relational concerns including parents, roommates, friends, lovers, etc.; moral and religious concerns; emotional and psychological problems. Many of these are minor concerns, but many of these are critical, life changing concerns. Many can be treated with a band-aid. Some do require psychological major surgery.

The three areas that students brought most to my office were:

1. separation issues relating to parents,
2. relational issues connected with roommate problems, sexual concerns, and dating difficulties and
3. spiritual issues, i.e. doubts, faith, and God.

I cannot go into great detail about how to counsel students in these three areas, but I would like to offer some suggestions and resource material.

1. Separation issues arise during all four years of a student's college tenure, not just during the initial "first time

away from home" period of the freshman year. Cutting the apron strings of emotional dependency is a process, not an event. It begins during those first months, but continues gradually until the young adult college student can step out of those hallowed corridors of academic learning into the world of independent adult responsibility with the blessing of his parents, and the skills to make clear and responsible adult choices.

I observed that both students and their parents have to be involved in the cutting loose process. Parents need to let loose gradually and the student needs to assume more responsibility slowly. It is less painful if both are aware of their part of the process.

Since you will rarely get a chance to talk with parents about their part, you are left primarily with talking to the student when he comes with his concerns. I observed that students often send double messages to their parents. On the one hand they may be saying verbally, "Quit holding on to me and let me be independent," while saying with their actions, "But finance me through it all and bail me out when I need you." This is the double bind in which students and parents find themselves. I often said to students, "Your parents will begin to trust you more as you learn to become more trustworthy. Trust is not a gift, it is earned through actions of trustworthiness." This is a long, hard process of learning for the student, but one that you can firmly and lovingly help them to make. It is certainly more complicated sometimes than I have presented, and you as campus minister will develop your own skills in this area. A book that I have found helpful is Cutting Loose by Howard M. Halpern.

2. Relationships are a primary area of concern for all college students and are often the source of much joy and pain. The campus minister will spend a vast amount of his time listening to complaints from students who feel they are not included in certain groups and from those who are having trouble with a girlfriend, boyfriend, or a roommate. Sometimes simply a sympathetic ear is all that is needed. Often, a few

words of advice or some teaching is called for. Most of the time the student can take the sympathetic ear and words of advice and work out his own solution to his problem. He learns from the pain and difficulty how to do it differently the next time. Some students simply have few social skills and seem to never learn from their experiences.

I observed that I could be most helpful to the largest number of students in relationship issues by using two methods in addition to personal counseling. These are through the organizing of Family groups and through seminars and mini-classes. Family groups of ten to fifteen students would meet each week under the care of a student dad or mom to discuss concerns, study the Bible, talk about pertinent issues and simply be together. We organized between twenty to twenty-five of these groups and met the need to "belong" for many students. The students thought this was the best thing we had going in BSU.

The seminars or mini-classes took many forms at different times. During special weeks on campus, we brought speakers to the campus who spoke on relational issues. At other times we planned four to six weeks of one hour-a-week classes led by some knowledgeable professor or other professional. These were well received.

The most well attended and thoroughly appreciated seminar each year was the Engaged Couples Seminar. It was publicized campus-wide and drew student participation from a wide cross section of the campus. It met one hour each week for eight weeks and covered subjects such as family finances, couple communication, conflict management, sex, birth control, faith and church issues, and personal concerns that needed discussing. Specialists and professionals were invited to lead these various interest areas.

There are many self-help relational books that are available and helpful. I have found The Friendship Factor, by Alan L. McGinnis, a helpful tool for learning. Thoroughly Married, by Dennis Guernsey, is a good marriage preparation resource.

3. As the campus minister, your image is that of a person who represents God. There is no way around that. This image allows students an easier entrance into discussing their faith and doubt issues with you. As the campus minister experiences his own "struggle of the soul," he can be there for these students who also struggle through their own questions about God, salvation, faith, and doubt. Many are asking questions for the first time in their lives. Some of their questions challenge the religious beliefs received from their parents or their home pastor. Many of their own beliefs are being challenged, and they often fear losing their whole belief system. I remember a young coed bursting into my office, closing the door, and breaking into sobs after hearing a Religious Emphasis Week speaker challenge some of her fundamental beliefs in a classroom discussion. She was afraid that if she changed one belief her whole faith castle would crumble. Providing the personal climate of understanding and acceptance allows a student the safety of trying out some of their new doubts on you, the minister. If they can see you as a fellow traveler on the journey of faith, it will be easier for them to walk through it as well.

I found that religious arguments and sparring accomplish very little, but honest questions and doubts can be seriously heard and dealt with to the best of our knowledge and ability. It is still all right to say "I really don't know the answer to your question, but I'm glad to see you on the journey of seeking."

#### **REFERRAL TEAM**

As I was anticipating becoming a campus minister, I remembered the decisions I had to make as a college student. During a four year period I had to settle on a vocation, date and marry someone, settle my religious doubts, deal with separating from my parents, and generally grow up. As I look back on the "team" of people that helped me through the journey, my campus minister was one of many members of that team. I discovered, as I returned to the campus as a campus minister, I joined a team of other professionals who were also interested in guiding the lives of students and were competent professionals in their area of discipline. I realized immediately I



didn't have to know everything about every problem. I had a wide referral system if I would use them. Finding out who and where to refer was crucial. Establishing contact with and making friends with that team was an effort that reaped great benefits. Faculty members could solve academic snags; vocational guidance counselors had tools and skills I didn't have; psychologists and psychiatrists could deal with emotional problems that I was not trained to handle; financial aid counselors could help students in their areas of expertise. This team, in turn, referred students to me if they felt I could help or the student would profit from some aspect of the campus ministry program. It was important that I nurtured and cultivated my relationship with these team members and maintained a climate of mutuality. Knowing when to refer and to whom to refer is important.

Some skill of discernment is needed to decide when it is more advantageous for you to refer a student to another member of the referral team. It is possible to refer a student to someone else and yet maintain your relationship with him. You may say, "Since this problem is a concern of yours, it is also a concern of mine. I would like for you to get the best help available. I know someone who is more knowledgeable on this subject than I, and I suggest that you discuss this with him. This is his name and telephone number. I would like to know how things progress with you and would appreciate your keeping in touch with me."

### **CONCLUSION**

I realize that if I were on a college campus today, I would be faced with many other issues than those of a few years ago. Drug and alcohol use and abuse is rampant and requires specialized knowledge and professional treatment. A campus minister would do well to study thoroughly the areas of drug and alcohol addiction, become acquainted with treatment facilities, and be aware of its effects upon family members. Your most prevalent contact may be with students who are products of alcoholic parents. A knowledge of Adult Children of Alcoholics' literature and organizations would be valuable to

you.

The pressures of competitive education has raised the stress level of a whole generation of college students. Stress management is a pervasive concern. A campus ministry program that offers an understanding of this problem and some helpful guidance would be providing a needed ministry.

A society which knows so much about sex and so little about love has affected the moral climate of every college campus. In a day when there are practically no sexual boundaries, the Christian student is often concerned and confused. A young lady related that she became pregnant and had an abortion from a relationship with the Bible study leader of her BSU. After the Tuesday Bible study they would have a coke at the grill, have sex in his car, and return to her dormitory. She said that she had very few guilt feelings because it felt so right. After all, he was the Bible leader.

I will close by wishing you "God speed" as you continue your journey, hoping that you will find Grace and Love abundant enough to overflow into the lives of the many students who call you "friend."