

Counseling a Diverse Student Body

By Deborah Howard, Organization Development Consultant

Introduction

I am a white, Jewish, heterosexual, currently able-bodied, female, organization development consultant who has spent ten years in the recruitment and counseling field. Through both personal and work experience, my life has involved cross-cultural experiences including having lived and studied for a total of two and a half years in Japan and having a variety of work and personal relationships that have spanned racial, ethnic, religious, and other difference.

I have learned that an important starting place for understanding those who are different from me is self-awareness. Thus, to meet the needs of a diverse student population, it is beneficial not only to learn as much as possible about other cultures, but to engage in self-examination to better understand what you bring to the counseling process.

What Do You Bring to the Counseling Process?

The counseling process is a two-way street. Consequently, who the counselor is, how she approaches the process, and whatever symbolic role she plays for the individual can all impact the counseling process.

To be able to counsel students who are different than you effectively, think about the attitudes and assumptions (especially unconscious ones) you may hold. No matter how well meaning we each may be, it is impossible to come to any interpersonal interaction without cultural “filters” that influence how we perceive ourselves and others – how we perceive “reality.” Our cultural filters are created by our ethnicity, gender, racial background, life experiences, and many other variables, all of which impact our perspectives and our perceptions. These filters are so deeply embedded in our minds that we often take them for granted. We tend to see our cultural perspective as being “the” perspective, and therefore reality, rather than merely “a” perspective or one part of reality.

Differing perspectives can be the basis for misunderstandings and conflict. This makes effectively interacting and communicating with others a challenge. For example, imagine an interview taking place. The recruiter is a European-American who has been socialized to believe that direct eye contact is an important way to convey confidence, honesty, and sincerity. The applicant, on the other hand, is from a culture that views direct eye contact as impolite. During the interview, the applicant rarely makes or maintains direct eye contact with the recruiter. Viewed from the applicant’s cultural perspective, he is doing

his best to demonstrate respect. The recruiter's perspective, on the other hand, may lead her to conclude that the applicant is deceitful and/or lacks confidence.

As you can see from this example, our view of reality is often limited by our cultural assumptions, creating "blind" spots in our vision. These blind spots can result in an inability to recognize how we interpret and assign meaning to both the verbal and non-verbal communication of others. It can also cause us to discount the perspectives and strengths of those who are different in any way and/or to see the view of reality held by people from backgrounds that are different from our own.

This blindness to seeing the whole picture can be especially harmful in a counseling setting. As a counselor, if you are blind to different perspectives, it may limit your ability to empathize with and understand those who are different from yourself. It is important to recognize that biases and filters can be *managed* but *not eliminated*. Thus, when someone asserts, "I'm not biased" or "I see people as people" they usually mean well. However, even if they do not intentionally engage in prejudiced or biased thinking, they will nonetheless retain and continue to be influenced by their cultural filters.

Many of us in the helping professions pride ourselves on our ability to be perceptive, sensitive, and aware. Ironically, this self-image can be an obstacle to effective communication. Even if I "read" the situation correctly eighty percent of the time, I am still "off" at least twenty percent of the time. Thus, I have to be ever vigilant so I can learn to question whether I am correctly interpreting an interaction.

It is vital, therefore, to learn to ask the question: "Am I seeing the whole picture?" It is only by becoming aware of and recognizing the cultural and other assumptions that we take for granted that we can begin to be open to other perspectives and "realities". This is why it is necessary to continue to learn about ourselves. It is only by learning about and acknowledging our filters that we can make efforts to overcome them. Let's take the example of reviewing a student's personal marketing materials and interviewing techniques. In mainstream American culture, we are expected to highlight our strengths and achievements in cover letters, resumes, and job interviews. We may take for granted that this is "the right way." In counseling students, however, we need to recognize that while this may be what is expected in American mainstream culture, it is not a globally-accepted view. For example, in certain Asian and other cultures, highlighting your own achievements is seen as boasting and culturally inappropriate. In reviewing an Asian student's cover letter, therefore, it would be useful to keep in mind the possibility that this student may not share mainstream American assumptions regarding career-related self-promotion and might benefit from some coaching to help her understand mainstream expectations. In counseling this student, it would be important to help her find a way to adequately convey her strengths and achievements to potential employers without violating her own cultural values and norms. And, it would be essential to help the student understand the cultural differences at play without making her feel her way is "wrong."

The following are some steps you might take to increase your self awareness:

- (1) Participate in a diversity training to help you examine the cultural beliefs, assumptions, and values you hold;
- (2) Observe and pay attention to the way you make judgments about others; and
- (3) Read books and materials about different cultures so as to expand your perspective and cultural assumptions.

How Well Do You Understand and Empathize with Others?

Career Services counselors need to be aware of a myriad of issues that arise for their student constituents. All students face certain common needs – to engage in self-assessment, prepare a quality resume and cover letter, and learn networking and interviewing skills. However, a large number of students who in any way diverge from the “mainstream”, for example, students of color, women, students with disabilities, gay/bisexual/transgender/lesbian students, older students, and recent immigrants, to name a few, may face certain additional issues and obstacles.

To effectively assist students who are members of groups that are often targets of discrimination, counselors need to be able to openly and candidly discuss the realities of discrimination. This does not mean that you should always bring that topic up. In fact, some students choose to downplay these aspects of their identity. It does mean, however, that you should be open to engaging in such discussions when appropriate.

It is also essential that counselors provide students with access (through panels, networking programs, mentoring programs, etc.) to practicing attorneys who have faced/face the same or similar issues who can have frank discussions with students about the consequences of the various choices they can make. Counselors cannot be expected to anticipate all the issues that face their various student constituents. They can, however, provide a safe space for students to think and talk about various issues and review their options in a nonjudgmental setting that will enable them to make educated, informed choices.

For example, students of color need to know that they can discuss with a counselor the realities of systemic racism. Systemic racism is the unfair distribution of resources, benefits, and opportunities based on people’s race and/or color. It often results in unacknowledged and unexamined privileges for those of us who are white (e.g., being viewed and treated as an individual, assumed to be competent until proven otherwise, etc.), and disadvantages for those of us who are not (e.g., viewed as a representative of one’s racial/ethnic group, assumed to be incompetent until proven otherwise, etc.). The dearth of partners of color in large law firms across the nation is but one manifestation of the continued challenge our society faces related to race. Thus, when considering their employment options, students of color may want to take into account the fact that few large law firms are yet able to provide environments that enable most attorneys of color to feel welcomed, supported, and able to reach their full potential. Some graduates of color choose to enter large law firms and find ways to navigate in an environment in which there is not a critical mass of attorneys of color. Others choose alternative

employment options including opening their own practices in order to have independence and not feel pressured to “assimilate” into mainstream law firm culture. Effective counseling must provide students of color with adequate information about and a place to discuss these realities and options to enable them to make informed choices.

As another example, students with learning disabilities can benefit from help considering how their particular disability may impact their career choices. Encourage students with learning disabilities to find out as much as possible about their particular disability and then ensure that they are aware of the demands of specific positions so they can make appropriate career choices. For instance, certain learning disabilities make it difficult to process information quickly. It would be important for students with that kind of disability to understand that litigation often requires on-the-spot information processing and meeting short deadlines.

The Importance of Physical Space: How Welcoming and Inclusive is Your Office?

The first job of a Career Services Office is to be seen as an office that is welcoming of all students, rather than serving the needs of only those students who fit a certain profile. In examining whether you are able to effectively counsel all your students, it is important to think about whether all students are likely to see your office as welcoming and inclusive of their needs, concerns, and social identities.

Examine and reflect on the numerous ways that your office presents itself to students. What is the composition of your staff? Does it reflect the diversity of the population you serve? What kind of artwork is on your walls? What magazines and books are on display? Do your office’s bulletin board, newsletters, email communications, flyers, and events speak to the varied needs of your student population? A useful way to assess how your office presents itself would be to examine it in depth using the varied “lens” of each of your student constituent groups. Thus, using the lens of students of color, how welcoming is your office? Are any members of your staff people of color? Do your resources include information about bar associations for attorneys of color? Does your mentor program include and/or designate mentors who are attorneys of color? Do you have any panels, programs, or events that focus on the particular issues and needs of students/attorneys of color? Using the lens of students who are disabled, how accessible is your office physically? Can a student who is in a wheelchair enter your office and access counselors and written resources easily? Does your office have any materials, articles, or books among its resources that focus on or relate to the specific needs of students who are disabled?

Some of the efforts I engaged in to try to create a welcoming environment when I was Director of Career Services at New York Law School included:

- (1) taking diversity into account in all staff hiring decisions;
- (2) creating certain targeted resources including a list of bar associations for students of color, a collection of articles of interest to students of color, a collection of articles of interest to students who are gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender, etc; and

- (3) developing an alumni mentor program for students and alumni of color.

What Kind of Outreach Efforts Does Your Office Engage In?

Consider the kinds of outreach efforts your office engages in currently. For students who are not part of the “mainstream” to feel welcome, you may need to engage in some proactive outreach efforts. Your outreach efforts should begin with the orientation process. Involvement in this process offers your office the opportunity to establish a reputation as being accessible, proactive, and receptive to the needs and concerns of your diverse student body. You can even offer to make a presentation at orientation events that may be sponsored by certain student organizations such as the Latino Law Students Association (LLSA).

Throughout the students’ tenure at your law school, it would be beneficial to reach out to as many students as possible to find out whether or not your office is meeting their needs. You can approach various student organizations and constituencies (i.e., the Black Law Students Association, the Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Lesbian Students Association, second career/older students, etc.) to let them know that your office is interested in being able to meet their needs and would like to hear from them regarding how you are doing and how you might be doing better. You could accomplish this by asking to attend one of the group’s meetings to discuss the services your office provides and allow the group to ask you questions and provide their feedback.

It is also important that you and your staff demonstrate through your actions that meeting the needs of students of color and other students who are not part of the “mainstream” is a priority for your office. Included in the outreach efforts my office engaged in were:

- (1) co-sponsoring panels and events with various student organizations - for example, co-sponsoring a panel with the Asian American Law Students Association that highlighted successful Asian-American attorneys;
- (2) attending and helping to organize events such as the Black Law Students Association (BLSA) National Job Fair and the Lesbians and Gay Men in the Law Conference; and
- (3) developing an annual “Clerkship Opportunities for Students of Color” event at which federal judges from the Second Circuit were invited to network with all students of color from law schools in the Second Circuit.

Conclusion

Being able effectively to counsel a diverse student body is an ongoing process of: (1) learning about yourself; (2) learning about your students and the realities they face; (3) working to ensure that your office is welcoming and inclusive; and (4) engaging in proactive outreach efforts.