Evaluation of psychological counseling services in higher education:
the case of the Center for Counseling and Supporting Students
of the University of Macedonia

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Abstract

This paper reports on the evaluation of the Centre for the Counseling and Supporting of Students of the University of Macedonia (CCSS) in the first academic year of its full operation, with the aim to investigate how the students who had made use of the services provided by the CCSS evaluate the procedures, the content of the counseling activities and the outcomes acquired. Therefore, our research focused on the students’ assessments of four seminars, one counseling group and the individual counseling sessions they had participated in; 103 students took part in the seminars and the counseling group evaluation and 12 evaluated the individual counseling sessions. Two inventories with open- and close-ended questions were designed for the data collection.

Results, in general, showed that participants reported a high level of satisfaction from the seminar features, such as the topics, the speakers, the organization, and the handouts. Most students were enthusiastically supporting the usefulness and the necessity of the counseling actions under evaluation. Specific conclusions were drawn for each and are discussed in the paper. The outcomes of this evaluation are expected to offer constructive feedback to those involved in providing counseling services in higher education and guide our efforts to meet the students’ needs in a more satisfactory way.

Key-words:
Counseling, higher education, evaluation, students’ self-assessment
This paper reports on the first evaluation of the Centre for the Counseling and Supporting of Students of the University of Macedonia (CCSS) which took place upon the completion of a full year in operation. The aim of the paper was to examine empirically how the students who had made use of the services provided by the CCSS evaluate the procedures, the content of the counseling activities and the outcomes acquired. The results of this evaluation are expected to be useful not only to the CCSS of the University of Macedonia, but also to the other student Counseling Centers in Greek universities as, to our knowledge, relevant evidence is scarce. Therefore, we assume that this report will offer constructive feedback to all those involved in such projects and will guide our efforts in order to meet the students’ needs in a more satisfactory way and further improve the provided counseling services. In the following pages, we will first describe the fundamental theoretical principles and the operational purposes of the CCSS and the provided services and activities. Subsequently, we will outline the aim and the methodology of the evaluation research and elaborate on the results and the conclusions drawn regarding the current operation and the continuation of the CCSS.

1. The Centre for the Counseling and Supporting of Students of the University of Macedonia

The necessity of psychological counseling in higher education has been recognized by the global psychological community as an essential factor not only for academic success, but also for students’ personal development and well-being (Rott, 2006). In Greece, however, few universities have taken action to establish and sustain a foundation (center, office or service) providing counseling to the students, mainly
because of the limited financial recourses\(^1\) (Papadioti, Damigos, Tzalla, Siafaka, & Ntoka, 1992; The first and pioneering Student Counseling Center was founded in the University of Athens in 1990, by Professor Anastasia Kalantzi–Azizi who is still the Director. Since then, she and her team have been a great source of expertise, guidance and encouragement for the foundation of counseling services in other Greek universities, such as our CCSS in the University of Macedonia, and their generous contribution is highly appreciated (Kalantzi-Azizi, 1997; Kalantzi-Azizi, Karadimas & Sotiropoulou, 2001; Kalantzi-Azizi & Malikiosi-Loizou, 1994; Kalantzi-Azizi, Rott, & Aherne, 1997).

1.1. Establishment and inner structure

After a 4-month preparation, the CCSS started its operation in January 2004. Commissioned by European Union Funds, it was originally scheduled to operate for two years, but due to efficient financial management and a short extension of the funding it has now prolonged its operation up to August 2008. After that, it is expected to be incorporated in the university organization structure and funded by the official budget of the University of Macedonia. A counseling psychologist and a secretary have been employed since the beginning of the CCSS but on a part-time basis due to limited financial recourses. Also, a number of domain-specific experts, such as doctors, nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists, have been voluntarily involved in the CCSS, providing limited counseling services to the students. The CCSS is directed by Dr. Maria Platsidou, Assistant Professor in Developmental Psychology, and supervised by a 3-member committee of academic staff.

\(^1\) Unfortunately, some of the universities had to close their psychological counseling center some time after its establishment, because of lack of funding (e.g., the Democritus University of Thrace, Efthimiou, 1999).
1.2. Psychological counseling actions of the CCSS

When we first started to formulate the services of the CCSS our aim was to cover a wide range of requirements we assumed the young students would have. Post-adolescence is indisputably a crucial period for the individual; beginning university studies may trigger a series of potential quite stressful changes (i.e., leaving home, connecting with a new social group, choosing a major, etc.) that can activate the beginning of new or the reinforcement of underlying social, psychological and educational problems (Anderson & Fleming, 1986; Kissas & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1997; Malikiosi–Loizos, 1989). As Kalantzi–Azizi (1997) has put it, the primary objective of counseling in universities should be “to provide support in order to help students overcome easily and timely the difficulties of adjustment with regard to the new educational system and make them find out new effective ways of solving post pubertal problems” (p. 54). Guided by the above considerations, the intervention provided by the CCSS is carried out through three main actions.

Our prime goal was to provide preventive counseling; therefore, a series of seminars are offered to the students on a wide variety of subjects addressed to their mental and physical well-being (Godbey & Courage, 1994). There is no doubt that many psycho-social problems affect students’ academic life and constitute a threat to their learning progress (Whitmann, Spendlove & Clark, 1984). A range of factors - including leaving home for the first time, having to manage their own finance and make new friends, dealing with issues such as self-identity, sexual behavior, making important life decisions - lead students to experience distress at the university (Greenberg, 1981). Feeling distressed, students may experience procrastination, lack of concentration and exam stress (Kalantzi-Azizi & Chatzidimou, 1996; Karadimas & Kalantzi-Azizi, 2004). To help them cope with all these, the CCSS offers a variety of
seminars or workshops aiming at the improvement of study and life skills (Deppreuw, 1996; Kalantzi-Azizi, et al., 2001). Up to the present, 42 seminars have been conducted, each one attended by approximately 35 students. As we noticed, the most appealing topics to the students concern interpersonal relationships, developing assertiveness, dealing with loneliness, building self-esteem, improving social skills, adjusting to academic life, stress and anger management, panic disorder, psychosomatics, sexuality, health and diet, cigarette and alcohol addiction.

In addition to the seminars, students are called to participate in counseling groups in which they can work on a deeper exploration and further development of their personal characteristics. Six groups have been conducted so far; each one lasted six to seven sessions and was attended by 10-12 students. The most engaging themes concerned self-awareness and self-esteem.

In terms of individual counseling sessions, the CCSS provides short-term supportive counseling for a maximum of 15 sessions. Up to now 93 students have taken part in individual counseling and 604 hours of counseling sessions have been conducted (with a mean of about 7 sessions per student). The demographic characteristics of our “clients” can provide useful information for drawing conclusions about the student population that potentially may seek individual counseling in the future; therefore, they will be briefly described: according to our data, 74% of the students who received individual counseling were females and 26% males. In relation to level of studies, 87% were undergraduate (20-25 years old) and 13% were postgraduate students (26-30 years of age). An interesting point relates to the specific time in their studies the students visit the CCSS for the first time: the majority of the students (52%) paid their first visit to the CCSS when they were in the third year of their studies, while 17,5% came when they were in their fifth year. It
seems that the freshmen do not know much of the psychological counseling services provided or they have not yet realized in what way these services can help them overcome the difficulties they encounter in their academic life and studies. The third year and senior students differ from the freshmen in their specific concerns and in the way they deal with them. They recognize that their personal problems may hamper their educational progress and seek for possible solutions through counseling. Finally, the most common reasons students resort to counseling concern emotional and social issues such as problems with their partner or their family; less frequent are problems related to anxiety, depression, self-esteem, sexual issues, and study problems or learning difficulties.

The intervention actions undertaken by the CCSS work in a complementary, holistic way. Usually, the open seminars stimulate students to seek individual counseling, where they are able to identify their problems, explore the sources and finally cope with them. When suggested, they can participate in a workshop with the aim of learning how to deal with the educational difficulties that usually arise form and coexist with these problems. The intervention is further assisted with the counseling groups where students are encouraged to interact with other participants and develop social and communication skills. We have noticed that the participation in the seminars and/or the counseling groups is a vehicle for the students to get familiarized with the CCSS and then seek individual counseling. It must be noted that familiarization is important for our work with the students; as most of them are studying in financial, business, accounting and information technology disciplines, they are not at ease with psychological issues and counseling procedures at least in their academic context.
1.3. Integration of the disabled students

In October 2004 the CCSS launched a project aiming at the integration of the disabled students in the academic (educational and social) life of the university. Currently, approximately 388 disabled students are enrolled at the University of Macedonia; however, only a small number of them have regular attendance and attain academic success. It seems that disabled students can hardly overcome difficulties related to the accessibility, lack of proper facilities, interpretation of sign language and social isolation. Very often these hindrances result to the discontinuance of their studies (Kalantzi-Azizi & Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou, 1995; Kostaridou-Efklides, 2002; Sofianidou, Mpakomitrou & Kalantzi-Azizi, 2005). One way to help the disabled students integrate is to organize a peer counseling project. Linked to this suggestion, our idea at the CCSS was to motivate undergraduate students help their disabled classmate students. Upon our call, a surprisingly large number of students were recruited from all the departments of the university and received adequate training about how to communicate and assist their fellow disabled students in the best possible way. So each of the disabled students was paired with a volunteer student who, according to his/her skills and training would serve as an interpreter of sign language, facilitate accessibility and communication with the academic staff and secretariat, provide study material, promote participation, friendship and social integration. This model of integration has been successfully used in other universities (Kalantzi-Azizi, 1997, 2003; Kostaridou-Efklides, 2003).

2. Evaluation of the psychological counseling

Previous experience from the global higher education community has shown that the psychological counseling centers provide useful services to the students (e.g.,
Solberg, Ritsmab, Davisa, Tatac & Jolly, 1994). Furthermore, advances in theoretical thinking accompanied by specialized research have been noted in this domain (Figge, Kaiphas, Knigge-Illner & Rott, 1997). Actually, student counseling is knowledge that is developed in practice and creates the so called “practical psychology” (Louw, 1992). Louw uses this term to underline the importance of “on-the-job experience”. At the same time, psychologists, counselors and other experts who are engaged in student counseling need to be aware of the appropriateness, effectiveness and helpfulness of their job (Smith, 2000; Rott, 1997). Therefore, the evaluation of the operation and the outcomes of the provided counseling services is an important step in measuring the effectiveness of our work with the students.

Furthermore, in the context of universities with a financial, business and technological orientation such as the University of Macedonia, this evaluation is expected to empower the value and the contribution of a psychological counseling center and challenge the university authorities to consider its adequate financial support. As it has been noted, it is an unfortunate but common phenomenon that in some Greek universities the counseling centers are struggling to remain open due to limited funding (Kalantzi-Azizi, 1997; Kalantzi-Azizi & Malikiosi-Loizos, 1994).

3. Aim of present study

Although the important role of psychological counseling for the students’ personal growth and academic success has been sufficiently supported (Rott, 1997; Smith, 2000; Solberg et al., 1994), evaluation of the counseling services is limited, at least among the Greek universities. Most of the published evaluations of the university counseling centers usually report on data related to the epidemiological characteristics of the students who have visited them, their common problems, etc.
In this study we aimed at investigating the students’ assessments of the counseling services provided by all the actions of the CCSS in the first academic year of its full operation (2004-2005). Thus, our research focused on the students’ evaluation of four seminars (“I am a man, I am a woman”, “How do I choose my mate”, “Violence and abuse within interpersonal relations” and “Sexuality and sexual health: myths and problems”), one counseling group (“Getting to know myself, this great stranger”) and the individual counseling sessions.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Two groups of students took part in this study; the first consisted of 105 students who were asked to evaluate the seminars and the counseling group. In this group, 23 (21.9%) were males and 78 (74.3%) were females, while 4 individuals did not report their gender. The second group consisted of 12 students (four males and eight females) who were asked to evaluate the individual counseling sessions they participated in. All participants were undergraduate students in the eight departments of the University of Macedonia.

4.2. Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were designed for the data collection. The first aimed at the evaluation of the seminars and the counseling group and included 14 questions, 12 close-ended and 2 open-ended. The second aimed at the evaluation of the individual...
counseling sessions and included 7 close-ended questions. The students were asked to fill in the respective questionnaire right after they had participated in a psychological counseling action.

5. Results

5.1. Evaluation of the seminars and the counseling group

In the next pages, the questions and the descriptive statistics of the data collected by the first questionnaire will be presented. First the students were asked to report the number of the seminars of the CCSS they had attended so far; the majority of them (83 students, 79%) reported that they had attended 1-3 seminars; 11 students (10,5%) had attended 3-6 seminars; 4 students (3,8%) had attended 6-10 seminars (Figure 1).

Figures 1 & 2

When they were asked if they were at all hesitant the first time they participated in a CCSS seminar, most of the students reported that they either felt not hesitant at all (70 students, 66,7%) or that they felt just a little (20 students, 19%); few said they felt quite hesitant (11 students, 10,5%), while only one student (1%) was very hesitant (Figure 2).

Subsequently, the students were asked to evaluate the adequacy of the persons who delivered the seminars; most students (70 individuals, 66,7%) judged it as very good, 31 students (29,5%) as just good and only three students (2,9%) as moderate (Figure 3). When they were asked if the seminars satisfactorily met their expectations, 46 students (43,8%) said they were very satisfied, 53 students (50,5%) reported a
moderate degree of satisfaction, while three students (2.9%) reported a low degree of satisfaction (see Figure 4).

Then the students were asked to evaluate how useful they thought that the seminars will be in improving their interpersonal relations; 54 students (51.4%) thought they will be very useful, 40 students (38.1%) thought they will be moderately useful, while 9 students (8.6%) answered that whatever they gained from the seminars will be a little useful in their interpersonal relations (Figure 5).

In addition, they were asked if they think that such seminars are necessary for their psychological and academic growth; the overwhelming majority (81 students, 77.1%) thought they are highly necessary and 23 students (21.9%) though they are fairly necessary (Figure 6).

Finally, as regards the topics of the seminars and counseling groups the students would like to attend in the future, the most popular topics (according to their self-reports) referred to emotional problems, difficulties in personal relations, personal-psychological problems, sexual and psycho-physical problems (Figure 7).

5. 2. Evaluation of the individual counseling sessions

Students who had participated in the individual counseling sessions were asked to evaluate them in regard to various features. Twelve students were tested who
varied in the number of sessions they had so far; in general, five students (41.7%) reported they had 3-10 sessions, while seven students (58.3%) reported they had more than 10 sessions (Figure 8). Regarding their feeling of hesitancy in their first session, six students (50%) reported no such feeling, four (33.3%) said they felt a little hesitant and two (16.7%) said they felt fairly or very hesitant (Figure 9).

Figures 8 & 9

When the students were asked to evaluate how much the individual counseling helped them deal with their personal problems, the answer was remarkable: all students (100%) reported that the individual counseling helped them cope with their personal problems to a great extent. Then, they were asked to evaluate how much individual counseling helped them improve their academic life; six students (50%) said it was greatly helpful, three (25%) said it was moderately helpful, while only one (8.3%) said that it was a little helpful in developing their academic life (Figure 10). In regard to their evaluation of how much the individual counseling helped them improve their social skills, most students (7 individuals, 58.3%) reported a great degree of improvement, three students (25%) reported a moderate degree of improvement and only one said the individual counseling did not contribute at all to the improvement of his social skills (Figure 11).

Figures 10, 11 & 12

Finally, the students were asked to assess any improvement in their behavior and/or emotion management as a result of the individual counseling sessions they
attended. The majority of them (10 students, 83.3%) reported a great improvement, while two students (16.7%) reported a moderate improvement as a result of the individual counseling they got (Figure 12).

6. Discussion

Since the decade of '90, the Greek Universities progressively became aware of the need to provide psychological counseling to the students as a measure to prevent problems or facilitate their coping with struggles and difficulties. Soon the need for evaluation of the provided services and the feedback for their improvement arose. However, up to this day, the (published) evaluation of the university counseling services is limited, at least among the Greek universities.

This research aimed at investigating the students’ assessments of the counseling services provided by all the actions of the CCSS in the first academic year of its full operation (2004-2005). Specifically, the students were asked to evaluate four seminars, one counseling group and the individual counseling sessions they had participated in.

In summary, regarding the seminars and the counseling group, our results showed that a quite large number of students are “regular attendees”, that is, they participate in almost all the activities of the CCSS. Also, it seems that another large number of students are attracted by the specific topics and they occasionally attend some of our activities. In general, the students reported a high level of satisfaction from the seminar features, such as the topics, the speakers, the organization, the handouts, etc. As it concerns the usefulness of the counseling action, most students stated that whatever they gained from the seminars and the counseling group would be useful for their interpersonal relations and they valued this psychological
counseling action as necessary. Students were found to be mostly interested in attending seminars related to emotional problems, difficulties in relations, personal-psychological problems, sexual and psycho-physical difficulties.

As regards the individual counseling sessions, the following conclusions can be drawn from the students’ assessments: It seems that the students who took part in individual counseling dealt with rather serious personal problems, since they needed to meet with the counseling psychologist many times. Due to the fact that individual counseling is a relatively new initiative in the context of Greek Universities, especially for a university such as ours with a financial, technical and business orientation, it was expected that the majority of students would be rather hesitant. However, despite their initial hesitation, they admitted that the CCSS is a real necessity for helping them cope with their personal problems.

When the students were asked to assess the outcomes of this action of the CCSS, the results were very encouraging. All the students who participated in the individual counseling reported they received a great help for dealing with their personal problems; in other words, they looked deeper into their problem, comprehended its causes and managed to cope with it. Moreover, results indicated that the individual counseling helped students overcome the difficulties related to their studies and the organization of their life. As a result, they managed to adjust to their academic life more successfully. Also, individual counseling triggered to a great extent a series of positive changes in their behavior as well as their emotion management. Students who dealt with difficulties in communication and interpersonal relationships reported a high improvement in their social skills as a result of the individual counseling.
6.1. Conclusions

In its three years of operation, the CCSS of the University of Macedonia has launched a series of psychological counseling actions aimed at facilitating the students’ personal and academic growth and well-being. A fair number of students of all the departments of the University of Macedonia have attended the seminars and the counseling groups reporting a high degree of satisfaction with the provided services. Also, the individual counseling was proved effective to those students who dealt either with personal or with psycho-social difficulties.

The above mentioned evaluation has proven to be a useful tool for all of us who are engaged in CCSS and helped us revalue our work. The results of this research encourage us to continue and expand our actions in a more efficient way. Additionally, this evaluation empowered the value and the contribution of our psychological counseling center and challenged the university authorities to consider its adequate financial support. Of course, there is much space for further improvement of the CCSS services especially in developing more effective ways to make the CCSS known to the students even from their very first time in the university.

Finally, as it is mentioned in other surveys of a similar character, if a counseling center is to flourish or even survive, a research of students’ perceptions of and satisfaction with the provided counseling services has to be done in a regular basis to ensure that psychological counseling is responding appropriately to their needs (May, 1999). Evaluation can promote learning and development and also allow time for exploration of difficulties for practitioners who want to examine more closely the work they do and become more competent and successful (McLeod, 1999).

Taking into account the outcomes of present research, we acquired useful feedback for the measures that should be taken for the improvement of the CCSS
services. As a first priority, however, there is a need to employ in a full-time basis a counseling psychologist and a secretary so that the CCSS may work at full capacity. In addition, further cooperation with specific experts such as doctors, nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists is considered to be beneficial for both the students and the staff of the university. However, the prerequisite for these suggestions to be applied is to incorporate the CCSS in the University organization and finance its operation through the official budget of the University, since the low financial recourses reduce the effectiveness of the provided services. This is an imperative request not only for the psychological counseling center of the University of Macedonia but also for most of (if not for all) the counseling centers of the Greek universities, which are struggling to continue their operation despite their low finances.
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Figure 1

“How many seminars of the CCSS have you attended so far?”

![Pie chart showing the percentage of respondents who attended different numbers of seminars.](image)

- 1-3 seminars: 79%
- 3-6 seminars: 10%
- 6-10 seminars: 7%
- No answer: 4%

Figure 2

“Were you at all hesitant the first time that you participated in a CCSS seminar?”

![Bar chart showing the distribution of responses to the question of hesitation.](image)
Figure 3

“How do you assess the speakers’ adequacy”?

Figure 4

“Did the seminars meet adequately your expectations”? 
Figure 5

“Do you think that whatever you gained from the seminars will be useful in improving your interpersonal relations”?

Figure 6

Do you think that such seminars are necessary?
Figure 7

“What seminars (topics) would you be interested in attending in the future”? 

- Gynaecological problems
- Emotional problems
- Health problems (physical)
- Sexual problems
- Psycho-physical problems
- Addictions
- Personal-psychological problems
- Socio-economical problems
- Difficulties in relations
- Learning problems
- Adaption difficulties

0.00 1.00 2.00 3.00 4.00 5.00
Figure 8

“How many individual counseling sessions you had at the CCSS so far”? 

Figure 9

“Were you at all hesitant the first time you sought individual counseling?”
Figure 10

“How helpful was the individual counseling sessions for your academic life?”

Figure 11

“How helpful was the individual counseling sessions for improving your social skills?”
Figure 12

“Have you observed any changes in your behavior or/and your emotion management as a result of the individual counseling?”