Client Views and Opinions of the Counselling Department of Canberra Institute of Technology

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a study of 65 clients of the Student Counselling Department of the Canberra Institute of Technology in May and June of 1998. These clients are a representative sample of the client group who use the Department, as found in previous studies. One a range of measures of client satisfaction, they show a very high level of approval of the service they have received. These measures include direct questioning, endorsement of various counselling elements as helpful, and a stated willingness to refer other students to the Department. When questioned about access to the Department, the physical aspects of finding the office, speaking to someone and making an appointment were all handled quite well, with only a small minority of clients suggesting that they had difficulty in finding the office. Improved signposting may help to alleviate this problem. Referrals to the Department from staff at the Institute were found to be the most frequent way in which students came to use the Department, followed by information obtained through the department’s own marketing activities in class visits and the distribution of printed material.

It would appear, then, that the Counselling Department at CIT provides a valuable and appropriate service to the Institute, enabling students to achieve their personal goals, and thus contributing to the fulfilment of the Student Services Unit Mission Statement of “Helping You Succeed”

Introduction

Background

As part of a process of ongoing improvement and maintenance of standards of client service, the Counselling Department at the Canberra Institute of Technology decided to pursue a Client Satisfaction Survey during 1998. This survey drew upon the experience of conducting a pilot survey in the latter part of 1997, the results of which were published internally in February 1998 (Canberra Institute of Technology Counselling Department, 1998b).

The Pilot Survey suggested that access to the Department’s services is achieved mainly through teacher referrals, with written marketing materials as a supplementary influence in bringing clients to the Department. Clients were apparently able to access appointments relatively easily, and appeared to be positive about their experience of counselling in the Institute. They also indicated a readiness to refer their peers to the Department.

These conclusions were necessarily tentative, given the small sample size (N = 15), and a number of flaws which became apparent in the survey instrument itself. Nevertheless, the results were consistent with a series of other evaluation measures taken at approximately the same time and which were also published internally (Canberra Institute of Technology Counselling Department, 1998a; Carroll, 1998).

Position and Make-up of the Department.

The Student Counselling Department is part of the Student Services Unit of the Institute. As well as the counselling function, Student Services includes the Student Equity Department, the Yurauna Centre, which provides services to indigenous students, the Graduate Employment Service, which was established during 1997 and is co-located with the Counselling Department on Reid campus, and the Information and Marketing Unit, which was incorporated into Student Services in early 1998.

The Department employed 3 full time and 3 part time counsellors during 1998. All counsellors are registered psychologists. A receptionist provided services to the department and the Graduate Employment Service at the Reid campus as well.
The Department operated from three offices, located on the three main campuses of the Institute, at Reid, Bruce and Southside. The full range of counselling services were also provided to the smaller campuses at Fyshwick, Weston and Watson on an on-call and/or roster basis from those central offices. The availability of this service was advertised to staff and students at those campuses. The Department also advertised its services through a range of CIT publications including CITyBeat, the Student Association Diary and Excite. There was also a roster of counsellors to receive calls by mobile telephone after hours where teachers of students were in need of that service.

**Method**

**Survey Instrument**

Drawing on the experience obtained in running the pilot survey, a revised questionnaire was prepared by staff of the Department for distribution to as many clients as possible at the conclusion of their first counselling session during the period under review. A copy of the questionnaire may be obtained from the author.

The areas addressed by the questionnaire cover a range of important areas, including demography, access, satisfaction and suggestions for improvement of the service.

It has been changed from the form used in the pilot survey in several ways. In the area of demography, it asks for the client’s course, rather than faculty of study, because several clients in the pilot did not know which faculty operated the course in which they were enrolled. This variable has been coded to show the faculty in each case. It also asks for further information about whether the client is enrolled full time or part time, and whether they are members of any of four groups with special needs.

The access questions have been amplified to seek more details about the process of obtaining an appointment and arriving for that appointment. There is also a question about which office was attended, attempting to find out if there are access problems relating to any of the three main offices of the Department. The question about number of appointments has also been re-phrased to allow numbers greater than three to be entered separately, rather than being categorised as “fourth or more”.

The satisfaction questions have been retained unchanged from the pilot survey, although an additional area has been added to the questionnaire. This is the list of elements of a counselling session, which may be marked as used and helpful, used and unhelpful or not used. The space for further comments has also been retained.

**Procedure**

The survey was implemented over the period from 1 May 1998 to 19 June 1998, which covered the last six weeks of the first semester of study. During this time, as many individual clients as possible who attended for counselling, at the end of the first counselling session within the time span, were asked to fill out a copy of the survey form. At each office a box was available for clients to place the form in, so

as to preserve anonymity as far as possible. Respondents were encouraged to place the form in the box rather than hand it to the counsellor or receptionist. Clients were not under any obligation to participate in the survey.
Participants

During the time that the survey was conducted, 167 individual clients were seen in the Counselling Department. Of these, 65 (40.1%) returned a survey form, made up of 18 males (27.7%) and 47 females (72.3%). Sixty three clients gave their age, with a range of 18 to 58 years, and a mean of 27.5 and a standard deviation of 8.9 years. The accompanying graph shows the break-up of the clients by their faculty of enrolment. Four clients did not indicate their course, and so could not be included in this graph. There were 48 full time students and 15 part time students in the sample, with two not indicating the status of their enrolment.

Clients were also asked whether they belonged to a number of special target groups for the Institute, namely Overseas Students, Disabled Students, those from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Background and those from a Non-English Speaking Background. One (1.5%) client indicated he was an Overseas Student, 13 (20.0%) that they were Disabled in some way, one (1.5%) that she was of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, and 11 (16.9%) that they were from a non-English speaking background.

Quantitative results

Access

The first question asked of clients regarding their access to the counselling service asked how they found out about the service. Six alternative answers were provided; teacher, friend, Student Association, a handout, a class visit or other. A number of clients marked more than one alternative, so that a total of 83 answers were given to this question, as noted in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Association</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handout</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Visit</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Apart from the way in which the client became aware of the counselling service, three other questions examined the ways in which access to counselling may be affected. The first asked if someone was available to deal with an enquiry when the client first contacted the service. The second asked if an appointment was available at a convenient time, while the third asked if the office was easy to find. Overwhelmingly the answers to these questions were positive, as noted on the accompanying graph. Only two people found that there was no-one available when they first came to the office, and four people found the office hard to find (three at Reid campus, and one who did not specify a campus).

**Satisfaction**

Remaining questions in the survey addressed various aspects of client satisfaction with the service they had received in the Counselling Department. The first step in that process was to ask how many appointments the client had had with a CIT counsellor during 1998. Answers ranged from 1 to 15 sessions, with a mean of 2.97 and a standard deviation of 3.03. Details of this question are shown in the accompanying graph. Clearly, a majority of clients are dealt with in a relatively few number of sessions, with just a small number of clients going on to become more long term clients, needing a more intensive form of intervention.

Clients were then asked to rate the counselling session they have just had on a four point scale; very satisfactory, satisfactory, unsatisfactory and very unsatisfactory, and to state whether some progress had been made towards resolving their issue. There were 54 clients who were very satisfied, and a
further 10 who were satisfied with their counselling session. One client stated that she was found her session very unsatisfactory. Some 59 clients stated that progress had been made, while 2 stated that progress had not been made. Four clients did not answer the question. It is noticeable that the client who found the session very unsatisfactory was one of the two who stated that no progress had been made. The other client who reported no progress was still very satisfied with the session. Of the four who did not answer the question, three were satisfied with their session, and one was very satisfied.

Clients were then given a list of five elements which may be part of a counselling session, and asked to indicate whether they found each element helpful, unhelpful or not used. The following grid shows the number of clients who marked each alternative response for each element.

Clearly clients of the Department perceive a range of counselling strategies are used by the counsellors, which they generally find to be helpful in their particular situations.
The final question simply asks clients if they would be prepared to recommend the service to a fellow student. One client did not respond to this question, but 59 responded “Definitely”, another 3 responded “Maybe”, and one said “Not Sure”. The last client responded “No”. This was the same client who stated she found her session very unsatisfactory and that no progress had been made towards resolving her issue.

Qualitative results

The final section of the survey instrument asked clients to add any other comments they wished, but particularly asked for ways that the service might be improved. An examination of the responses to this section yielded six major areas of comment. These are listed below, with an indication of the numbers of comments which fall into each category, and one or two sample quotes for each area.

1. Thanks and Appreciation (17)
   
   “No additional comments except that I have found the sessions that I have had to be excellent, very helpful and very professional.” {Female Faculty of Management & Business student, aged 33}
   
   “You were very helpful to me as I got over my situation real Well. I recommend it to anyone as you’d be able to help a lot of people, I’m going to keep using your services now.” {Female Faculty of Communication and Community Services student, aged 18}

2. No Change Needed (3)
   
   “I believe the service is excellent already.” {Male Faculty of Applied Science student, aged 32}
   
   “Very good - without it I would be stuck. Very little needs to be improved, if anything.” {Female School of Applied Arts & Design student, aged 35}

3. Negotiation (1)
   
   “Teach how to negotiate. Conduct a Negotiation Workshop at no or low cost.” {Female Faculty of Management & Business student, aged 33}

4. Need to Go Further (1)
   
   “As I’ve only just started, there is probably a lot more to do. So many elements above have not been used yet. N (counsellor) is lovely, though.” {Female School of Applied Arts & Design student, aged 25}

5. Use the Bible (1)
   
   “Teach how to negotiate. Conduct a Negotiation Workshop at no or low cost.” {Female Faculty of Management & Business student, aged 33}
   
   On a confidential basis use the Bible (sic). Be careful not to tell the authority(ies) (sic) what I said.” {Male Faculty of Communication and Community Services student, aged 27}

6. Liaise with Student Association (1)
   
   “Work in with Student Association instead of working against them as you are both working towards helping the students at CIT.” {Female Faculty of Applied Science student, aged 34}

Discussion

Demography

The demographic make-up of the sample shows a number of interesting features. The first noticeable point is the response rate of 40.1%, which suggests that valid and reliable conclusions can be drawn from the data collected in the study. This suggestion is supported by the wide range of ages of clients participating in the study, and the presence of a number of participants who are members of the special target groups for the Institute. There is a gender imbalance in the study, with
a ratio of females to males of almost 3:1. However, this reflects a typical imbalance within the client group of the Counselling Department, also observed in the total 1997 client group, where the ratio was approximately 2:1. This consistency with previous observations adds to the suggestion that valid and reliable conclusions may be drawn from the study. There are also imbalances between full time and part time students, with an over-representation of full time students, and between the different faculties of the Institute. More than 76% of participants in the survey were full time students, which does not reflect that overall enrolment at the Institute. However, this figure is again consistent with the data of overall client numbers (including prospective students, unknowns, and others such as parents and partners of students) during 1997, when 68.9% of clients of the Counselling Department were full time students. Again, it appears that valid and reliable conclusions can be drawn. The only point where it appears that the demographics of this client group are somewhat idiosyncratic is in the faculties from which the group is drawn. The faculties of Applied Science, Communication and Community Service, and Management and Business appear to be over-represented, with the other faculties and the School of Applied Arts and Design correspondingly under-represented. However, this is not likely to distort the results in any significant way. Finally, it is noticeable that there are clients from all four of the Institute’s special target groups included in the study. There are low numbers of clients from those groups whose specialised service providers adopt a “whole of life” approach to provision of services (Yurauna Centre for indigenous students, and the International Services Unit for international students), while those whose specialised service providers concentrate in a more focussed way on the nature of their difficulty (disability, or a non-English speaking background) have accessed counselling at a higher level.

Access

The investigation of access to counselling revealed a number of important points. In the first place, and consistent with other results obtained in the past, the greatest number of referrals came from staff of the Institute, whether teachers or staff of the Student Association. Together, these made up 38 (45.8%) of 83 responses to this question, emphasising the importance of liaison with staff across the entire Institute in facilitating referrals to the Department. The next major area for referrals arises out of the more obviously “marketing” activities of preparing and distributing handouts of various kinds, and making visits to classes to introduce the Department and its activities, leading to 17 referrals (20.5%). Alongside these staff liaison and marketing activities, there is a further set of referrals which came by word of mouth among students, which resulted in 10 clients (12.0%) stating that they were referred to counselling by a friend. The final possible category in this question, of “Other” was nominated on 18 occasions, and it may be useful in future replications of this study to seek an explanation of what is meant by respondents who use this alternative.

The other access questions all looked at the practicalities of making and attending an appointment. Only two people indicated that there was no-one available to speak to them when they first approached the Counselling Department. This is an excellent outcome, suggesting a preparedness on the part of counselling staff to make themselves available to clients at need. This is confirmed by the fact that there were no clients who expressed the view that an appointment was not available to meet their needs. It thus appears that there is a focus on customer service in the Department. The final point in the practicalities concerned the difficulty of finding the office. Three of the four people who stated that the office was not easy to find attended at Reid campus, suggesting that signage at Reid may need to be upgraded for the benefit of clients.

Satisfaction

The first matter dealt with under the heading of satisfaction looks simply at the number of sessions which the client has attended in the Counselling Department during 1998. The results obtained were consistent with the results obtained for the review of overall 1997 statistics. The majority of clients are seen for only a small number of sessions, with only eight clients (12.3%) seen for more than six sessions to the survey point during 1998. It is expected that this percentage figure will decrease as
the year progresses, as anecdotal evidence from the past suggests that clients who will fall into that long-term category tend to commence seeing a counsellor from the early part of the year.

The actual satisfaction and progress of counselling questions produced extremely positive results for the Counselling Department. Every participant except one was either satisfied or very satisfied with the counselling session which had just been undertaken. Curiously, the one client who stated that she was very unsatisfied with her session also stated that she had in fact attended for 10 counselling sessions during 1998. This opens up the possibility of wide-ranging speculation about why she would attend that number of sessions if she found them unsatisfactory. Unfortunately, there is no evidence available in the survey to provide any firm answers to the questions raised in that speculation.

Given the level of satisfaction, it is then no surprise that participants overwhelmingly reported that progress had been made in dealing with the issues that they had brought to their counselling session. Coupled with this progress, there is a recognition that the techniques used in the sessions have been helpful. The 65 participants in the survey identified a total of 219 elements that were used in their sessions, of which only one element (Problem Solving) was identified as unhelpful, on one occasion.

These figures, tapping a range of different aspects of client satisfaction, are clearly indicative of a high quality of service offered to clients of the Counselling Department. The Department’s most important critics, its clients, have expressed almost unanimous approval of the service they have received. Furthermore, they have confirmed this approval by indicating their willingness to undertake the most important form of advertising that any organisation can have; work of mouth advertising. Of 64 clients who answered the question on recommending the service to other students, there were 59 who answered “Definitely”, and another three who answered “Maybe”.

Overall, there is a clear indication of extremely high levels of satisfaction among the clients who participated in this survey.

**Written Comments**

This high level of satisfaction is reflected in the written comments offered by participants in the survey. Twenty of the 24 written comments expressed either thanks or a belief that no change was needed to the services offered by the Counselling Department, and one other stated that the respondent had only just started seeing a counsellor. The other three responses offered suggestions for the Department; offer a Negotiation Workshop, improve liaison with the Student Association, and use the Bible as a resource in counselling sessions.

The call for liaison with the Student Association reiterates a position already taken within the Department, and emphasises the need to sustain and encourage that relationship. The call for a Negotiation Workshop opens up a possible area of work for the Department in planning, trialing and then operating such a program in the future. The final suggestion requires no action.

**Conclusion**

This investigation into the views and opinions of clients of the Counselling Department at CIT has produced valuable, reliable and positive information about the Department. It accessed comments and responses from a wide range of the Department’s clients, in a group that is broadly consistent with other examinations of the overall client group of the Department. These clients access the Department via referrals from Institute staff and through the Departments own marketing activities. They are able to seek and obtain appointments in an appropriate way, although there may be a case for improved signposting for Counselling Offices. There is an extremely high level of satisfaction with the services offered by the Department, reflected in a number of measures of client satisfaction. It may be worthwhile to take up a suggestion about running a negotiation workshop, as was suggested by one respondent to the survey, perhaps initially in a pilot with a small group from the same subject area as the client who made the suggestion.
References

Canberra Institute of Technology Counselling Department (1998a) Survey of Teaching Staff Views and Opinions of the Department. Canberra.


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