

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Professionalisation of Student Affairs Educators in China: History, Challenges, and Solutions

Yongshan Li* & Yuanyuan Fang**

Abstract

Student affairs administration in Chinese universities is characterised by a dual-layer system of governance, with student affairs practitioners, i.e. advisors to students, being supervised by either central university administration or by affiliated colleges. In the last decade, government-oriented developments have achieved great success in China. This paper introduces the background and major strategies adopted by the Chinese government in professionalising university advisors. Major challenges are analysed, and solutions to address these challenges are proposed.

Keywords

student affairs educators, professionalisation, professional development, higher education, China

Historical Development of University Advising in Student Affairs

Professional student affairs management in China can be traced back to the year of 1956, when the then president of Tsinghua University, Jiang Nanxiang, set up the first political advisor position. At that time, political advisors were senior undergraduates or young teachers, that is, they served in two roles: as students and advisors of other students (as peer counselors), or as teachers and advisors (similar to the tutorial system in British universities), and involved in both the ideological and political education of students, and learning or teaching, and doing research themselves. This practice was believed to be politically incorrect and was discontinued by the Revolutionary Committee of Tsinghua University during the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (Lin & Peng, 2003). After 1978, the practice was resumed in universities throughout China. Since then, and gradually, the position of “advisor” (i.e. student affairs practitioner) has become a full-time job. The advisors serve as educators, academic advisors, psychological counselors, administrators, and service providers.

The development of a class system is a unique feature of early American college life. In the earliest days, all students who entered the university at the time were considered members of a single “class” (equivalent to “cohort” as used today in the west) and

* Dr Yongshan Li is the Deputy Director of the Department of Educational Administration and Dean of Humanistic Quality Education Center, Hefei University of Technology, Hefei, Anhui, China.

** Dr Yuanyuan Fang is Associate Professor of the School of Foreign Languages, Hefei University of Technology, Hefei, Anhui, China.

continued so for instructional and administrative purposes throughout their college career (Brubacher & Rudy, 1977). Chinese universities follow a similar practice except that students who enter at the same time are further organised and managed in groups of about 30 to 50 students based on their major discipline. Each advisor would take charge of several such groups, usually totaling 150 to 200 students. Both central university administration and affiliated “schools” (equivalent to “colleges” and/or “faculties” of academic disciplines) are in charge of student affairs management. Hence, student affairs practitioners in Chinese universities may either be supervised by the “student affairs office” of the central university administration, or by the deputy dean in charge of student affairs in affiliated “colleges” (in this paper we mainly focus on the latter).

In 1984, the Ministry of Education of China initiated a new academic discipline, namely, “ideological and political education,” in 12 universities. This is believed to be the very beginning of “professionalised” training of university advisors. However, these positions were met with challenges of low professional recognition among other university positions, discouragingly low pay, and high turnover rate, among others. Though a position of political superiority, it is widely perceived, even by the college deans, that being an advisor is not a lifelong professional career. As Zhan (2004) observed, quite a number of student affairs practitioners enter this profession only to use it as a stepping stone to their intended position of choice in the academic or administrative divisions. Thus, they have little investment in this career, nor possess any sense of responsibility towards their work. There is not much interest in furthering their career in student services. A survey of 601 advisors (Peng & Wang, 2008) revealed that about 60% of them felt reluctant to remain in the job long term, and most of them were disappointed by an occupation that both lacked specific professional goals and the future of which was obscure. All such challenges were related to the low level of professional training and development at that time (Feng, 2007).

Large-scaled enrollment expansion in China began in 1998, and by 2005, the admission rate reached 21%, compared to 9% in 1997. This marked the massification of higher education in China. However, issues also emerged with expansion, especially those related to university student services. Among them, the biggest challenge is recruiting new staff members with potential skills or professional experience of student affairs work. For instance, in 2004, Gang Feng, an officer of the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE), conducted a survey that showed that many universities did not provide full-time positions for advisors, and one extreme example revealed that one advisor was in charge of a total of 1,500 students from 38 different classes in that university. Hence, MOE undertook several systematic measures to promote professional training of university advisors. These strategies were divided into five actionable areas. First, policies to support development of advisors were established. In May of 2006, the Ministry released the “University Advisor Development Regulations” under which the selection, allocation, training, development, management and evaluation of advisors were specified. The Regulations mandated an allocation of at least one full-time advisor for every 200 students. Second, in-service training and education of Ph.D students in the field was promoted. Since 2006, the MOE successively enacted two five-year plans aimed at promoting training of advisors.

Twenty-one training and research centers were set up in higher education institutions capable of granting Ph.D degrees in student affairs. Third, exchange platforms for professional development were established. In 2008, the University Advisors Board was set up, and MOE sponsored two academic journals in the field: the *Journal of University Advisor* and the *College Advisor* in 2009. Next, funding for relevant research projects and training programmes was created to enhance research and increase work efficiency. And finally, an interim list of career qualifications of university advisors was enacted in 2014. This list provided standards for various levels of in-service training, professional competence recognition, and talent cultivation of professionals.

The Ministry of Education continues to promote, among all universities in each province in China, the professional development of advisors. A series of supporting measures were implemented to help establish policies, funding and training opportunities. For example, in Liaoning Province, full-time university advisors enjoy extra subsidies of 200 RMB in addition to their basic salary and position allowance. A quota policy is used to promote full-time advisors and grant tenureship through an application process. Nominating excellent faculty and staff members, including full-time student affairs advisors, of the university is another policy adopted. Excellent full-time advisors will be trained by a special “successor programme” (a programme aimed at training potential leaders in the field), and promotion by exception may apply to them.

Another example is located in the Shaanxi Province where universities were asked to allocate at least one advisor for every 200 students in 2015, and 1,763 vacancies in 41 provincial universities were assigned to full-time advisors. A quota system is also employed in this province, and a special channel for promotion and tenure application is set aside for full-time advisors so as to guarantee a reasonable and longer lasting professional team structure. Each advisor can enjoy a working allowance of 3 RMB per student per month. Moreover, funds are set aside to reward advisors serving in the post for more than 12 years. Each year at least 1,000 RMB would be assigned to each advisor to offset the training cost. All these incentives contributed to the developmental goals of advisors, who are provided with comfortable working conditions (e.g. large offices, better office furniture and air conditioning, etc.), better pay, and a promising career (Feng, 2015).

During the initial stage of developing student affairs as a respectable profession, the effort relied on a “top-down” approach from the government to the universities. This strategy seemed to have worked and achieved great success in China. However, after years of developmental efforts, deep-seated problems began to emerge (Gao, 2012). Challenges mainly come from three areas: (1) a large proportion of young and inexperienced advisors may overload the current capacity in personnel training; (2) a systematic academic or preparatory programme specifically designed for student affairs administration is still elusive; and (3) personnel policy reform fails to conform to the dual career track system (supervision of positions by University administration and Colleges) of advisor governance and promotion (Gao, 2012).

Challenges in the Professionalisation of University Advisors

Emphasis on quality

Professionalisation of university advisors parallels the popularisation of higher education in China, and demonstrates the practical needs for the professional development of student affairs practitioners. It also guarantees the stability of university development and talent cultivation goals. During the following five years from 2016, “quality” will become the “buzz” word in higher education. The new phase of professionalisation of student affairs will put more focus on the cultivation of students’ social responsibilities, innovation, and practical abilities in solving problems. As an important component of talent/staff training, student affairs practice should also emphasise the promotion of quality of programmes and services. Such enhancement relies mostly on the professional level of currently seasoned student affairs practitioners. Therefore, clarifying and solving the problems in professionalisation serves as the premise and foundation in this process.

Theories in student affairs

Due to historical and traditional factors, establishing a major discipline in ideological and political education has been the means used for training university advisors in China. However, as a discipline, for the last 30 years, it has failed to provide plans focusing on “personal, interpersonal and advisory skills” training of advisors (Xu & Zhao, 2011). With the massification of higher education, the functions of the advisors have been expanded from traditional student education and management to include various other duties, e.g. academic advice, employment guidance, psychological counseling, financial aid counseling, college life guidance, orientation, and so on. Under the current practice, the university advisors have to undertake various tasks from both university administration and the affiliated colleges. Subsequently, diverse professional knowledge and capabilities are required for the job. A gap needs to be bridged between the job training and position qualifications. As a matter of fact, it has become apparent that the advisors’ professional knowledge and capabilities failed to meet the new needs in some new areas (Qi, 2016). It is realised that training of professional advisors should be supported by a multi-disciplinary approach, e.g. disciplines in education, psychology, management, sociology, law, and politics. The urgent problem to be addressed is how to build a systematic and detailed theoretical foundation for the professionalisation process. However, no consensus has been achieved to that end. In 2015, the Shanghai Education Commission started the training plan that aimed to train students from various majors, like philosophy, law and politics, sociology, education, psychology and public administration, aside from ideological and political education, to become skilled advisors to students of the next generation, possibly with a Ph.D degree conferred upon graduation.

Continuing professional education of university advisors

Universities in China currently fail to reach consensus on the professional background that an advisor should possess. Three representative views co-exist as proposed by Chen

and Zhu (2014) based on their investigations: (1) the professional background is not important at all; (2) the advisors should have a degree in humanities and social sciences; and (3) their major should be consistent with the students they advise. The three views are well supported in research literature, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. Due to this lack of qualifications, graduates from diverse majors and with different degrees entered the field of student affairs. By the year 2015, full-time advisors in Chinese universities had grown from 40,000 in 2005 to 137,000 in accordance with the governmental regulation that mandates at least one advisor for every 200 students and an explosive growth in university enrollment. Among them, 42% have a master's degree or above, and 53% are still in their twenties (Feng, 2015). As mentioned above, the Ministry of Education had previously established 21 training centers that provide training courses annually. Since these centers are located in specialised institutions, and training is theory-oriented, such training has failed to cover the practical issues and problems in the field of student affairs. The training courses provided by the universities also lack systematic and consistent procedures and contents. A survey of 16 universities in Guangdong in 2016 revealed that almost 67.7% of the advisors claimed that they had never been asked about their training needs; 73.4% of the interviewees believed the training courses failed to adapt to their specific educational backgrounds, majors, job requirements, or advisors' skills. Only 38.7% believed that the training courses were effective (Xie, 2016). Four factors caused the unsatisfactory phenomenon: (1) training courses failed to solve practical problems; (2) training methods lack creativity and practicality; (3) courses were not well planned or organised, and (4) training content was routine and simplified. Therefore, the major challenge for the continuing professional education of university advisors is how to customise systematic in-service training of advisors from various professional backgrounds in order to guarantee the quality and effectiveness of the courses providing the necessary knowledge and skills.

Professional motivation of the university advisors

In universities in China, advisors are either faculty members or administrative staff. Therefore, they can flexibly choose their promotion track. Such flexible career track aims to appeal to more staff. It is hoped that the two options could help avoid career impediments, and show that the goal of the government is to keep a stable job market and a harmonious team (Qi, 2016). However, due to the fact that the advisors are from various professional backgrounds, they tend to have low motivation to do research or write academic papers needed for promotion and tenure and required of academic professors. Eventually, they hardly devote any time or effort to professional research (Chen, Le & Chen, 2014). In practice, they scarcely choose any professional enhancement during their tenure as advisors. Instead, they tend to seek promotion within the central university administration which has lower requirements regarding professional background. This preference inevitably eliminates their inner motivation for professional development and serves as an impediment to the professionalisation of the advisors. Consequently, the professional recognition and career loyalty of the university advisors remain comparatively low (Zhu, 2016).

Carpenter, Miller and Winston (1980) suggested five propositions for a model of professional development in student affairs. First, professional development is continuous and cumulative in nature, and moves from simpler to more complex behaviour. Secondly, optimal professional development is a direct result of the interaction between the total person striving for positive professional growth and the environment. Next, optimal professional preparation combines mastery of a body of knowledge and a cluster of skills and competencies within the context of personal development. Fourth, professional credibility and excellence of practice are directly dependent upon the quality of professional preparation. Finally, professional preparation is a lifelong learning process (Carpenter, Miller & Winston, 1980). Therefore, the speed and degree of the professionalisation of university advisors must rely more on their self-consciousness and motivation than on the priority or policy established by the government. Professional development is in essence personal and advisors should be responsible for their own professional development. Clear goals and powerful motivations outweigh policies and guaranteed supports from the government, which only help to construct favorable external conditions. Low recognition by other academic colleagues, high turnover rate, inconsistent developmental goals and lack of personal passion may all lead to a failure of the professional development of advisors.

Not until the advisors themselves have a clearer understanding of their own professional goals, can they begin to assess their knowledge, evaluate their capabilities and reflect upon their personal values. They will be unable to focus on professional study for enhancement, nor will they initiate any professional development that becomes truly an “internal and organic part of the higher education, hence acquiring more developing space and stronger voice in the field” (Yang, 2016, p. 15).

Proposals for Promoting Professionalisation of University Advisors

During the past decade, university advisor team building in China has achieved a great deal and it has laid a solid foundation for the future development of student affairs as a profession. However, with the dramatic changes in higher education in China, new challenges and conflicts also emerged. Experiences from student affairs development in US universities reveal that these are common for the transitional stage moving from the primary to the advanced level, and that these problems need to be handled if professionalisation is to be pursued. Therefore, in the new phase of development, Chinese student affairs advisors need to strengthen their goals for professionalisation, learn from experience, and employ new strategies to solve the deep-rooted problems, in order to optimise the development process.

Establishing a Steering Committee for University Advisor Professionalisation

“Professional associations have an obligation to ensure the quality of professional preparation and practice, to provide continuing professional education, and to recognize those practitioners who take steps to improve their knowledge and practice” (Janosik, Carpenter & Creamer, 2006, p. 228).

At the early stages of university advisor professionalisation, the small numbers of associations in the field of student affairs failed to play their leading role in professional

development. Meanwhile, the faculty in relevant majors scarcely put their minds to the theories and practice of student affairs due to their lack of practical experience. For instance, of all the 18 supervisors of master's and doctoral programmes in the field of ideological and political education in Wuhan University, 14 have never undertaken such administrative duties concerning co-curricular education and personal development of the students. Therefore, electing experts in student affairs nation-wide and establishing a national steering committee for professional advice and leadership in the professionalisation process might counter the insufficient role played by student affairs associations in China. The core tasks of the national committee should be:

1. to enact or modify professional standards and qualifications;
2. to provide professional advice for professional development;
3. to organise and undertake theoretical and practical research; and
4. to assess and evaluate student affairs practices.

Modifying the dual career track system

Dual career tracks system of university advisors is unique to Chinese higher education. However, due to the fact that faculty and administrative staff are obviously different in terms of each of their own career culture, professional assessment and promotion requirements, the system has failed to motivate the advisors in their own professional development. In 2014, the Ministry of Education released *Higher Education Advisor Qualifications (interim regulations)* which put advisors into three qualification levels – primary, intermediate and advanced level – with clarification of the basic knowledge and capabilities each level should possess. The “levels” illustrate the progressive stages the career entails, illuminates the match between promotion and qualifications, and helps to avoid previous disadvantage of implicit policies in career development. Moreover, it helps the advisors to gain a better understanding of their professional status, the necessary qualifications and the specific goals they should set based on their years of service. Modifying the system design of dual career tracks, especially in terms of the promotion and the salary systems, based on the professional qualifications, is aimed at inspiring the advisors' internal motivation to seek advancement in the profession.

Promoting interdisciplinary studies on Chinese college student development

Currently, diverse activities are employed in developing student affairs professionally. These activities are mainly drawn from experiences in past practices, but they are scarcely directed by student development theories in design. Although the practitioners in the field have come to realise the importance of interdisciplinary theories (e.g. of education, psychology and sociology) in directing the design of student affairs professional development, most experts in the relevant majors care more about their own professional development, and scarcely focus on the student affairs practices. The limited research findings were scarcely used in designing their activities. Although college student development theories in the US could be used, most are not applicable in the Chinese context due to differences in

social reality, history, culture, and political orientation. Therefore, interdisciplinary studies on college student development based on the unique socio-political structures and cultures of China will be more appropriate. Establishing developmental theories in accordance with the laws pertaining specifically to Chinese university students will help promote the student affairs practice from experience-based to scientifically-based.

Developing professional associations in particular functional area

The role that professional associations play in staff development is “to advance understanding, recognition, and knowledge in the field; to develop and promulgate standards for professional practice; to serve the public interest; and to provide professionals with a peer group that promotes a sense of identity” (Nuss, 1993, p. 365). With the functional expansion of student affairs in Chinese universities, a dozen functional areas have been formed. We can take advantage of the US experiences in student affairs professional development, and promote the development of professional associations by functional areas to cultivate the function-specific skills. This is a key step for the professionalisation of student affairs in China. More specifically, plans should be made to establish professional associations in selected functional areas on the basis of criteria established by the National College Advisor Association in China. Secondly, missions and tasks should be set and regulations and rules should be laid down for the smooth operation of the professional associations and for strengthening the ethical responsibility and behavioural norms of the staff involved. Moreover, efforts should be made to help professional associations plan and organise academic research and exchanges, professional training activities, and publication of academic journals in the field. Finally, management level should be promoted in various associations by regular evaluations and assessments, and by holding international exchanges.

Conclusion

Chinese universities enjoy a good tradition of focusing on the ideological and political education of students in their education system, which serves as the social background of professionalisation and development of advisors. Meanwhile, the massification of higher education and increasing diverse needs of college students, as well as higher expectations and demands for talents from the society, call for further development and professionalisation of the advisors. This trend is similar to the professional development of advisors in the US, and in other countries around the world. However, Chinese universities still remain at the primary stage, and the achievements accomplished by Chinese university student affairs have mainly relied on central governmental support. To seek further development, Chinese universities need to take their current conditions into consideration, and refer to successful experiences from other countries, especially the advanced experiences from the US and other western countries. By combining governmental support with advisors’ self-motivation and personal efforts, professionalisation of student affairs advisors in Chinese universities will enjoy a prosperous future.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Dr Howard Wang, Associate Dean of Duke Kunshan University, for his insightful advice in the writing and modifying of the paper. We also thank the reviewers for their valuable revision suggestions.

References

- Brubacher, J.S. & Rudy, W. (1977). *Higher education in transition: A history of American colleges and universities* (4th ed.). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Carpenter, D.S., Miller, T.K. & Winston Jr., R.B. (1980). Toward the professionalization of student affairs. *NASPA Journal*, 18(2).
- Chen, Y. & Zhu, P. (2014). Exploration into the professional backgrounds of university advisors. *Leading Journal of Ideological & Theoretical Education*, 11, 118–121.
- Chen, J.R., Le, C. & Chen, Y. (2014). Analysis of the research abilities of university advisors and proposals for improvement. *Journal of College Advisor*, 4, 17–20.
- Feng, G. (2007). Training and professionalization of university advisors. *Studies in Ideological Education*, 11, 13–15.
- Gao, D.Y. (2012). Reflections on the development of university advisors. *Social Sciences in Chinese Higher Education Institutions*, 9, 53–54.
- Janosik, S.M., Carpenter, S. & Creamer, D.G. (2006). Beyond professional preparation programs: The role of professional associations in ensuring a high quality workforce. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 25(2), 228–237.
- Li, T. (2014). Current status of university advisor professionalization and developing strategies. *Journal of College Advisor*, 1, 14–17.
- Lin, T. & Peng, Q. (2003). The characteristics and development of the system of political advisor at Tsinghua University. *Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 6, 85–90.
- Liu, Y. (July 16, 2005). Second to none for the university advisors in Liaoning Province. *China Education Daily*.
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. *Double guarantees for advisors' development in Shaanxi Province*. Retrieved 18 May 2016 from http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A12/moe_2154/201605/t20160518_245013.html
- Nuss, E. M. (1993). The role of professional associations. In: M.J. Barr (Ed.), *The handbook of student affairs administration* (pp. 364–377). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Peng, Q.H. & Wang, Y. (2009). Challenges and solutions for university advisors' professionalization. Proceedings of university advisors' forum (pp.342–352). Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- Qi, M. (2016). Professionalization of university advisors: Challenges and new tasks. *Ideological & Theoretical Education*, 8, 22–25.
- Xie, Q. (2016). University advisor training problems and solutions: A case study of 16 universities in Guangdong. *Journal of College Advisor*, 1, 42–45.
- Xu, Y.J. & Zhao, X. (2011). Oriented training of ideological and political education majors. *Ideological and Political Education Research*, 6, 5–8.
- Yang, J.Y. (2016). Professionalization of university advisors: Review and prospect. *Ideological & Theoretical Education*, 8, 17–21.

Zhu, L.P. (2004). Reflections on the establishment of college counselor in Jilin Province in the new era. *Modern Education Science*, 5(185), 109–111.

Zhu, H.J. (2016). University advisor team building design: A multi-dimensional perspective. *Studies in Ideological Education*, 4, 106–110.