

The Referral Process and Interagency Relationships Between Student Personnel Services

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The referral process is defined as "the act of transferring an individual to another person or agency for specialized assistance not available from the original source." (Shetter and Stone, 1968) It is an old, recognized and frequently used aspect of counseling, but one which is much neglected as far as a survey of the literature on the topic shows. The extent of research on the referral process is limited to brief excerpts in counseling training textbooks and articles in professional journals.

This paper will deal with what the referral process actually entails, including some misconceptions surrounding the process; how the referral process is/is not used in student personnel administration and some considerations and possible solutions to the future use of the referral process in education.

The mechanics of the referral process are presented best in the realm of counseling. By showing each step in the counseling referral process, a clearer understanding of what can be done in the area of student personnel administration can be attained.

There are three phases to the referral process. First there is the decision itself of whether a client should actually be referred to another person or agency. Secondly, the referral itself is very important. Referral does not consist of making a decision to refer and then washing one's hands of the whole situation. Lastly, a follow-up procedure is vital if the process is to be successful.

Counselors should be able to make a preliminary appraisal of the situation and recognize signs which indicate that a referral should be made. To be able to meet this challenge there are some professional criteria which must be met. The counselor must be able to evaluate the needs of the client and assess his/her own ability and resources to render the necessary services. This takes into account the professional learning, experience, skills, knowledge, area of specialization and command of services and resources the counselor possesses. Cantoni and Cantoni (1965) describe these characteristics of the professional: "... they can enter into their client's emotional experiences and yet retain a high degree of objectivity." Oftentimes students go to friends for assistance, and while one

degree removed is sometimes enough objectivity, in other cases a professional is needed.

Legal regulations are an important factor in assessing a possible referral decision. In many cases the law determines authority, i. e. medical case must be administered by licensed physicians and child abuse must be reported to state welfare agencies. The counselor should acquaint himself with the laws of his state so he can make referrals expeditiously and in accordance with legal provisions.

A third criterion to be met in determining a need for referral is the counselor's personal orientation surrounding the decision. Professionally and ethically, a counselor should refer a client if he feels he is unable or unwilling to advise the client to the best of his/her ability. "The method of referral must involve close relationships between the participating parties." (Wygant, 1971) If the counselor or student personnel worker feels he cannot get involved, it is his duty to refer the client to the best of his ability to an agency or person whom he feels can best meet the demands of the individual.

The second phase of the referral process deals with the referral itself. This brings up many questions which must be answered by the referral agent. For example, how should the counselor relate the referral decision to the client? Many times the client/student may feel rejected because of a decision to refer him elsewhere. This could be because of a loss of trust in the person from whom he first sought help or else the rejection might be in the form of a possible "label" put on him for being referred to a particular type of agency or person. To best alleviate this problem before it arises, the counselor should predetermine how many visits the problem might take and that a re-evaluation will take place at the last meeting. In short, the counselor should lead up to the referral decision, and get the client involved in any referral situation that may occur. If the client knows beforehand that he might be referred elsewhere, and if he has a helping hand in this decision, he is already on the road to solving his problem. There are also questions concerning the confidentiality of records and the amount of information to be transferred. All relevant findings, facts and information that might influence the solution of the problem should be

referred directly to the person or persons involved. The client should be assured that the person or agency he is being referred to is the best place for him. All information and records will be kept in strictest confidence by the qualified professionals involved.

The last phase of the referral process is the follow-up procedure. An evaluation of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the referral should be enacted. How the client judges the referral and how the referral agency evaluates the transaction is of utmost importance. This follow-up allows the counselor an opportunity to check the effectiveness of a specific referral to provide feedback for further use. (Ramsey, 1965) The easiest way to follow-up on a referral is via the telephone. Also, personal contacts, letters and reports, as well as the client himself, are means of evaluation.

The explanation of the basics of the referral process as emphasized in the area of counseling will help refine the following misconceptions: (1) Referral is used only in times of emergency and (2) Referral sometimes causes counselors to either unnecessarily prolong or terminate a relationship. A comparison of the process in counseling to student personnel administration shows that both misconceptions are indeed, unjustified. The student personnel administrator daily sees students with routine problems, not just emergencies. Also by professional and ethical standards, the counselor should do his best to recognize the existence of a problem and assess his ability to handle it himself or refer it elsewhere. This decision should always be what is best for the student involved.

To understand how the referral process should be used, an example of how it is not used is helpful. The relationship between two campus agencies are shown in a study (Kirk, 1965) that demonstrates how university counseling and placement centers have similar functions but rarely communicate or refer students from one agency to the other. Along with crisis counseling, the counseling office usually deals with vocational or long-range career planning. On the other hand, the placement office usually deals exclusively with employment counseling, i. e. getting their students a job after graduation. One can easily see that long-range career planning and placement counseling should be dispensed from the same, if not similar, agencies.

By use of a questionnaire (Kirk, 1965) sixty-seven responding major colleges and universities showed that their university counseling and placement services were quite similar but contact between the two was limited. For instance, 59% of the institutions had similar services and of these services, 75% had placement services which offered mostly employment counseling and only 1% of the institutions kept employer information in the counseling offices. For two services that are so similar there is very little interaction between the two. Proving this are two further questions in the study:

The Counseling Center refers students to Placement:

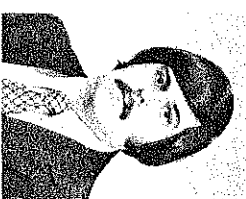
Frequently	1%
Occasionally	59%
Rarely	22%
The Placement Office refers students to counseling:	
Frequently	7%
Occasionally	56%
Rarely	37%

It would appear that these services, operating on the same campuses, work relatively independent of each other even though the nature of their services are complementary to each other. A cooperative relationship should be vital to these services so that referrals, when needed, can be effectively carried out.

Some possible solutions to establishing closer relationships include interagency workshops, exchange of internships of staff members, joint meetings and the telephone. This is the most vital means of communication and communication is one of the most vital means of solving problem situations. Real communication between student personnel and counseling agencies can be found by continuous attempts to clarify ideas and concepts so personnel workers in various areas can help to understand each other. As Wygant (1971) states "referral of an individual to another counselor is best dictated by the person's need, not by rigid rule." As long as the needs of the individual are being met and the various campus services strive to improve relationships with each other, the referral process will further develop as an integral part of the educational process.

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