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The Construction of College Counselor Team based on Professional Competence from the Perspective of Building a Leading Country in Education: Logical Implications, Realistic Challenges and Practical Approaches

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Abstract: With the building China into a leading country in education shaping a new pattern of fostering moral character, the college counselor team, along with teaching, research, and management, is referred to as the "fourth team". The new strategic positioning has raised higher requirements for the construction of the college counselor team. This article, based on the theory of competence and the strategy of building China into a leading country in education, explores from three logical perspectives (the theoretical alignment basis, the value-oriented goals, and the evolving trends in reality) how professional competence can be integrated into the construction of the college counselor team. It analyzes the current practical challenges, such as blurred identity boundaries, unbalanced ability structure, weakened professional identity, and lagging evaluation mechanisms, and proposes using the competence model as a guiding principle to establish a complete chain mechanism of "selection-training-utilization-assessment," empower the upgrade of competence through stratified and categorized training, build an evaluation and incentive system through collaborative and coordinated linkage, optimize the competence structure through digital means, and promote the high-quality development of the "fourth team".

Keywords: Leading Country in Education, University Counselors, Professional Competence, Ideological and Political Leadership, Team Building.

1. Introduction

Building China into a leading country in education has been a cherished aspiration of the Chinese nation since modern times. In September 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned at the National Education Conference that a strong education country should have strong ideological and political leadership, talent competitiveness, technological support, livelihood security, social coordination, and international influence. "Strong ideological and political leadership"ranks first among these "six major traits" [1].In January 2025, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued "The 2024-2035 master plan on building China into a leading country in education", listing the modernization of ideological and political education in the new era as the top priority [1]. As the backbone force in ideological and political education for college students, counselors are the organizers, implementers and guides of the daily ideological and political education and management work for college students [2]. The quality of the construction of this team directly affects the effectiveness of ideological and political leadership in the front line of education. In April 2024, the Secretariat of the Central Education Work Leading Group issued the "Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening the Construction of College Counselors' Teams in the New Era", establishing professionalization, vocationalization and expertization as the clear direction for the development of the team [3].

However, compared with the policy text and the current situation of team development, the counselor team is still facing difficulties such as vague role orientation, bottleneck of professional quality and limited development channels. In this context, the professional competency analysis framework, which originates from management and psychology and emphasizes the identification of individual deep characteristics by performance, provides a unique theoretical lens for examining the construction of counselors' team: it can not only visualize "what kind of team to build" as an operable quality standard, but also implement "how to build a team" as a verifiable practical mechanism. This article uses the analytical framework of professional competence to expound on the logical implications, current predicaments, and practical approaches of the construction of university counselors' teams in the process of building China into a leading country in education.

2. Logical Implications: The Integration of Professional Competence into the Construction of University Counselor Teams

The integration of professional competence with the construction of university counselor teams encompasses three layers of logic: theoretical, value, and practical. These three aspects support each other and build upon one another, forming a complete logical chain.

2.1. Theoretical Logic: The Intrinsic Fit of Competence Theory and the Professional Attributes of Counselors

Competence was proposed by American psychologist

McClelland in 1973 to describe the deep characteristics that distinguish outstanding individuals from ordinary ones, encompassing factors such as motivation, traits, self-image, attitudes, values, knowledge, and cognitive and behavioral skills [4]. The "iceberg model" proposed by Spencer and his wife further indicates that the knowledge and skills on the surface of the iceberg are easier to observe and cultivate, while the social roles, self-concept, traits, and motivations beneath the surface are the deeper forces driving performance [5].

The professional attributes and competence theory of college counselors have an inherent compatibility. Counselors undertake nine responsibilities such as ideological and theoretical education and value guidance, party and class construction, academic style construction, daily student affairs management, mental health education and counseling, and online ideological and political education [2]. The effectiveness of their work depends not only on external abilities such as policy grasping and organizational coordination, but is also constrained by internal qualities such as political literacy, educational sentiment, and professional identity. Some scholars analyzed the deeds of 60 "National College Counselor of the Year" using grounded theory and found that personal ability, professional ability, and organizational support jointly affect professional competence. Among them, professional ability is the key factor that distinguishes outstanding from ordinary counselors [6]. This indicates that applying competence theory to analyze the construction of counselor teams can, to a certain extent, break through the "dealing with matters based on matters" position management thinking and grasp the internal laws of team construction from the complete chain of quality formation.

2.2. Value Logic: The Inevitable Requirement of Strengthening Ideological and Political Leadership through Professional Competence

Ideological and political leadership is the primary characteristic of a socialist education power with Chinese characteristics. Its essence lies in the comprehensive ability of the education system to arm people with scientific theories, guide them with correct values, and shape them with noble character [7]. Ideological and political leadership needs to be carried out and realized through specific entities. College counselors are the final link in student education management and services, and they are the key force for connecting the "last mile" of ideological and political work. Their level of competence directly determines the depth and effectiveness of the transmission of ideological and political leadership. Whether ideological and political work can produce practical results depends on a team of staff with strong political awareness, excellent professional skills, strict discipline, and positive style [8].

The construction of professional competence not only concerns the career development of individual counselors, but also relates to whether the strategy of building China into a leading country in education can be implemented in the micro educational field. Only when the ideals and beliefs, political qualities, and educational capabilities of counselors match the goals of building China into a leading country in educationcan the guiding power of ideological and political education have a solid micro foundation. Therefore, promoting the construction of the team by taking professional competence as the pivot is an inherent need to consolidate the guiding power of ideological and political education [9].

2.3. Realistic Logic: The Era Calls for the "Three Transformations" of the Counselor Team Development

From the perspective of policy evolution, the construction of the counselor team has generally gone through three stages: "completing the quantity allocation" - "improving the quality" - "in-depth development". The "Regulations on the Construction of Counselor Teams in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions" implemented in 2017 established a basic institutional framework [2]; the "Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening the Construction of Counselor Teams in the New Era of Universities" issued in 2024 set professionalization, vocationalization, and expertization as the fundamental direction [3]; and in December of the same year, the National Conference on the Construction of Counselor Teams in Universities further emphasized focusing on the main responsibilities and core tasks to achieve "three transformations" development [10]. The logic of policy changes indicates that the focus of team construction has shifted from structural issues to quality issues.

Specialization demands solid professional knowledge and educational skills, professionalization requires stable professional identity and professional personality, and expertization requires deep theoretical knowledge and practical expertise in a certain field [11]. All three ultimately aim at the overall improvement of competence. Professional competence, as a core element of the construction of counselor teams [11], is not only the core requirement for achieving the "three specializations," but also the fundamental criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of the "three specializations." Promoting team building with professional competence as the main line conforms to the objective law that the team expands from the external to the internal.

3. Realistic Challenges: Outstanding Issues in the Construction of Counselors' Professional Competence from the Perspective of Building China into a Leading Country in Education

Compared with the strategic requirements for building China into a leading country in education and the appropriate standards for competence building, the current construction of counselors' professional competence still faces several prominent challenges.

3.1. Ambiguous Identity Boundaries and Disintegration of the Clarity of the Competence Structure

Counselors have dual identities as teachers and managers. The original intention of the institutional design was to form complementary advantages. However, in actual operation, the dual identities often evolve into multiple roles superimposed. Counselors are required to undertake a large amount of non-core tasks such as administrative affairs, safety and stability, and event organization, and "thousands of threads above, one needle below" has become the norm. Routine tasks constantly occupy the space of their main responsibilities [12]. The

ambiguity of identity boundaries has two impacts: First, there is a lack of consensus within the team regarding "what capabilities counselors should possess", and the competence standards always lack clear direction; second, external evaluations cannot accurately identify the professional contributions of counselors, weakening their professional reputation. Unclear role positioning leads to the lack of a stable reference coordinate for selection, training, and assessment based on competence.

3.2. Imbalance in Ability Structure, with Deficiencies in Professional and Digital-savvy Competencies

From the perspective of ability supply, there is a structural mismatch between the ability structure of the counselor team and the job requirements. On one hand, some counselors have a diverse professional background and do not have a systematic grasp of the knowledge system of Marxist theory and ideological and political education disciplines, resulting in a gap between theoretical literacy and educational practice [11]; on the other hand, the digital age has raised new ability requirements for counselors. Scenarios such as online ideological and political education, analysis based on digital student data, and human-machine collaborative education all require corresponding digital-savvy competencies, but most counselors still handle new problems in digitalized situations with traditional experience, and the ability supply does not match the educational needs. The cultivation of specialized abilities such as investigation and research, crisis management, and career guidance is also unbalanced, which further limits the performance of counselors in complex situations.

3.3. Weakening of Professional Identity and Internal Motivation Restricting Continuous Improvement of Competence

The formation and enhancement of competence cannot be separated from stable professional emotions and internal motivation. The weakening of professional identity is a deep-seated concern in the current cadre team. The combination of narrow promotion channels, disparity in job grades and benefits, and low external recognition easily triggers job burnout, making some counselors view the position merely as a "stepping stone" rather than a worthy long-term career pursuit [6]. The weakening of professional identity leads to a chain reaction: Unrecognized counselors find it difficult to form the internal need for improving competence, training participation often remains superficial, and innovative exploration lacks sustained momentum. Over time, they are prone to fall into the "low identity - low investment - low performance - low recognition" predicament. At the same time, professional identity not only stems from individual perception but is also subject to organizational support. Improving the institutional environment plays a crucial role in stabilizing the team and stimulating vitality [6].

3.4. Delayed Evaluation Mechanism, Disconnection between Competency Standards and Assessment Incentives

A scientific evaluation mechanism serves as the guiding principle for team building. However, there is a significant gap between the current assessment and evaluation system and the competency standards. Firstly, most assessment indicators are at the level of routine work, with insufficient attention paid to core competency dimensions such as educational effectiveness and value guidance; secondly, the evaluation subjects are relatively limited, and diversified feedback mechanisms such as student evaluations, peer evaluations, and self-assessments have not been fully established [13]; thirdly, the correlation between assessment results and career advancement, professional title evaluation, and merit awards and promotions is not high, and the incentive effect cannot be fully released. The failure of the evaluation guidance mechanism leads to a lack of direction guidance and incentive drive in competency building, and the tendency of "emphasizing allocation but neglecting evaluation" urgently needs to be reversed.

4. Practical Approach: Path for Building University Counselors Based on Professional Competence

Focusing on professional competence as the main thread, efforts are made in four dimensions: model construction, training empowerment, evaluation guarantee, and digital empowerment, to explore practical approaches for resolving the challenges in building the professional competence of counselors.

4.1. Guided by the Competence Model, Establish a Complete "Selection - Training - Utilization - Assessment" Chain Mechanism

To solve the problem of fragmented team building, it is necessary to construct a local-based and easy-to-operate model for university counselors' professional competence. Based on the job responsibilities of counselors and the requirements of building China into a leading country in education, by using methods such as behavioral event interviews, the Delphi method, and questionnaire surveys, competence elements such as knowledge, skills, social roles, self-concept, traits, and motivation are extracted, forming a quality standard system that runs through the entire process of selection, training, utilization, and assessment [4][5]. In the "selection" stage, optimize selection standards and assessment tools, focusing on the examination of implicit traits such as political literacy and educational sentiment; in the "training" stage, design training plans based on model gaps to achieve precise matching of ability supply and job requirements; in the "utilization" stage, promote person-job matching, leaving differentiated development space for counselors with different specialties; in the "assessment" stage, break down competence elements into observable and evaluable indicators, allowing the evaluation results to feed back into subsequent team building decisions.

4.2. Supported by Stratified and Categorized Training, Precisely Empower the Upgrade of the Competency Structure

The training for counselors should abandon the extensive and indiscriminate approach and instead establish a stratified and categorized, progressively advancing training system. For new counselors, focus on building their professional awareness, laying a solid foundation of basic qualities, and mastering practical skills; for key counselors, expand their specialized abilities and innovative competencies, and

support the gradual formation of their own work brands; for senior counselors, emphasize theoretical research and method innovation, and promote their transformation into expert types [10]. The training content should closely target the competency weaknesses of different groups, incorporate elements such as the cultivation of educationalist spirit, the enhancement of digital literacy, and mental health education into the course modules [11][14]. At the same time, through leveraging platforms such as quality and ability competitions, master workshops, and on-the-job training, truly achieve "promoting construction through competitions, enhancing expertise through research, and promoting learning through work". In particular, attention should be paid to the cultivation of the competence of the team, by establishing cross-college collaboration communities, to achieve the coordinated improvement of individual capabilities and organizational capabilities [15].

4.3. Build a Competency Oriented Evaluation and Incentive Mechanism with Collaborative Linkage as the Guarantee

The construction of counselor team is a systematic project, which requires the collaborative efforts of schools, colleges and individuals [9]. At the school level, we should strengthen the top-level design and resource planning, incorporate the construction of counselors' team into the overall planning of talent team construction, implement the "double line promotion" policy, and improve the channels of professional and technical position evaluation and promotion; At the college level, we should clarify the main responsibilities and businesses, establish a list of work rights and responsibilities, and reduce transactional interference; At the personal level, we should strengthen professional identity and self-development awareness, and realize the unity of personal growth and career development in the process of competency improvement. In terms of evaluation and incentive, we should build an assessment and evaluation system with the effectiveness of education as the core and the participation of multiple subjects, run the competency elements through the design of assessment indicators, strengthen the application of assessment results in job promotion, professional title evaluation and employment, and evaluation of excellence, and give play to the guidance, diagnosis and incentive functions of evaluation.

4.4. With Digital Empowerment as the Driving Force, Reshape the Competency Structure of Counselors in the Digital Age

Educational digitalization is an important way to shape new advantages in educational development [1]. The counseling team must actively adapt to this change. Digital literacy should be incorporated into the competency model of counselors, clearly defining requirements for abilities such as online ideological education, data analysis, and application of digital tools. Through specialized training and practical exercises, digital education capabilities should be enhanced. At the same time, new technologies such as artificial intelligence should be effectively utilized to empower ideological and political work, promoting the implementation of "precision ideological education": leveraging big data to accurately grasp students' ideological dynamics, relying on intelligent platforms to achieve personalized educational supply, and using new media platforms to enhance the appeal of value guidance. However, digital empowerment does not replace people with technology; instead, it expands the boundaries of human capabilities. When counselors use technology, they must still adhere to the value position of ideological and political education and maximize the educational effectiveness of thought leadership in the process of human-machine collaboration [13]. The update and iteration of the competency structure should respond to the era's proposition of building China into a leading country in education.

5. Conclusion

Leading country in education depends on talents; talent cultivation is crucial for education. College counselors are the backbone force in the ideological and political education of college students. The quality of their team construction is related to the quality of the "education for moral cultivation" project and the micro-level implementation of ideological and political leadership. The introduction of the perspective of professional competence provides a complete analytical framework from "what to build" to "how to build" and "how well it is built". Facing the strategic goal of building China into a leading country in education by 2035, colleges and universities should take professional competence as the main line of team construction, and implement systematic policies in model construction, training empowerment, evaluation guarantee, and digital transformation, to promote the transformation of the counselor team from "scale guarantee" to "quality leap", and establish a high-quality "fourth team". Of course, the connotation of competence is constantly enriched with the development of the times. How to build a more explanatory and operational local model, and how to achieve deep coupling of competence standards and assessment incentives, still need further research combined with empirical data to deepen.

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