Professional Development of Quality Mentors: Case from China

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ABSTRACT

University counselors have been in place in China for more than fifty years, and they serve an important (yet underappreciated) role in Chinses universities. The professional development of this profession is (1) a realistic need for the construction of quality education development teams in colleges/universities; (2) a theoretical need for the perfection of the counselor system, and (3) an urgent need for the development and improvement of counselors. The researchers analyzed an improved counselor system, Quality Mentor (QM), implemented by Wuchang University of Technology (WUT) and the results suggest that professional development of QM can be promoted by improving the social recognition, perfecting the system, and improving the quality of QMs.

Keywords: quality mentors, professional development, higher education, China

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education systems in different countries vary across many aspects. For example, in the American system, schools use credit hours to gauge students' progress toward program completion whereas students in the British system complete modules to earn their degrees. Also, some countries (e.g.: China) utilize the cohort model where students enter a program together and graduate together. In other countries like the United States, students in the same discipline entering school at the same time may not have taken a course together when they graduate. This just showed how much variation among different education systems across countries.

In China, college students are assigned into cohorts (based on year/major) and are expected to study and live together as a group. When students first entered college, they are grouped based on major and assigned to a class. A counselor, or "*fu dao yuan*", will then be assigned to that class. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education requirements, a full-time counselor is required for every 200 students (Ministry of Education, 2006; 2008; 2014). So, in a typical class size of fifty, each counselor is responsible for up to four classes. To flatten the learning curve, counselors are typically assigned to classes with similar majors. For example, a counselor could be responsible for four classes: "Marketing1", "Marketing2", "Management1", and "Management2". Counselors typically have no teaching responsibility; they act as a faculty advisor to the students, engaged in students' day-to-day management, moral education, cultural exchange, financial aid, recreation, employment guidance, mental health counseling, student activities, etc. (Li and Fang, 2017).

It has been widely understood that faculty members at Chinese universities are well-respected by others, creating a sense of self-esteem/prestige (Lin and Xie, 1988; Bian, 1996; Chiu, 1999; Lynn and Ellerbach, 2017; Valentino, 2019). Faculty jobs have always been viewed as "metal bowls" (as it will not break easily) and that faculty are well rewarded in terms of benefits (salary, fringe, etc.). Therefore, many job seekers strive to get through the employment door as faculty members. However, faculty positions are limited in the sense that minimum job requirements are high (doctorates typically required) and job openings are not abundant. So, many seek to join the university through an alternative route, as counselors. Typically, a Master's degree is needed, but in many cases, someone with a Bachelor's degree gets recruited. The goal is to get in the door first; gain academic experience; and ultimately transition into a faculty position with teaching/research responsibilities. To a certain extent, a counselor is often viewed as a "second-class" faculty, more like a hybrid between faculty and staff. Hence, social recognition (status) is not as high as a regular faculty (Zhu, 2016). The "counselor" system in China has been in existence for more than fifty years and while professional development for counselors still exists, the preparation mechanism is potentially flawed due to lack of quality control and/or oversight (Feng, 2007; Gao, 2012).

To help promote the professional development of counselors, the researchers tracked and researched a private university in China, Wuchang University of Technology (WUT), looking for a potential breakthrough on the bottleneck of the professional development of counselors. WUT, located in city of Wuhan (capital city of Hubei province), is an ordinary undergraduate institution founded in 1997 and is accredited by the Chinese Ministry of Education. It enrolls more than 15,000 students in 11 colleges and 41 undergraduate majors.

WUT innovates by implementing the quality mentors (QMs) system, which builds upon the basic counselor system adopted across China. The role of the QM at WUT is five-in-one; the QM assumes the roles of general education instructor, mental/physical health counselor, quality

extender, quality appraiser, and career counselor at different times, on different occasions, or as the needs arise. At WUT, the QMs follow the "6 Guide" (life guidance, moral guidance, psychological counseling guidance, employment guidance, entrepreneurial guidance, and academic guidance) and "6 Supervise" policies. "6 Supervise" is to supervise students to "3 Use", "3 Do", "3 Exercise", "3 Question", "3 More", and "3 Self-Study". "3 Use" means to urge students to master basic theory, basic knowledge, and basic skills. "3 Do" means to urge students to internalize, practice, and innovate. "3 Exercise" means to urge students to preview, review and praxis. "3 Question" means to urge students to dare to ask, to ask diligently, and to ask good question. "3 More" means to urge students to read more books, practice more, and make more friends. "3 Self-Study" means to urge students to ideal faith, think ethically, and behave in a civilized manner. As part of graduation requirements since 2004, students must complete all six areas prior to applying for graduation.

RESULTS

Surveys were sent to all QMs at WUT, and more than 80 responses were received. Closer examination on responses found several with incomplete information, hence the final QM sample stands at 71. QM work experience and academic rank data were extracted from the surveys, and summarized in Table 1. As shown in the table, 23.95% of the QMs has more than 10 years of experience. However, QMs with 'senior' academic rank only accounted for 7.04%. This result suggests that QMs may be "stuck" at the 'mid-level' due to lack of motivation or lack of promotional opportunities. In some cases, institutions may place an artificial ceiling on the number of QMs at the 'senior' level for various reasons (most likely budgetary).

QMs at WUT were also surveyed about their job satisfaction, and the results are summarized in Table 2. From the table, 91.6% of QMs approve the profession and have clear goals. This ratio is very optimistic relative to the fact that colleges in mainland China generally use counselors as a "temporary" employment fix to cover shortages. At WUT, only 1.4% of QMs experienced burnout and considered leaving. This is considered very low compared to other institutions in China and may suggest that the general working condition/environment is conducive for personal/professional development.

Next, the researchers collected average employment rates for WUT graduates and graduates from other colleges/universities in Hubei province over a 10-year period, summarized in Table 3. It is interesting to see that for all college/university graduates in Hubei province (including WUT), more than 90% gained employment within three months after graduation. This may be a general trend in the entire country, but that remains to be examined further. As shown in the table, out of the 10-year period, only two years the average employment rates for WUT graduates are less than 1% higher than the other colleges/universities (2013 & 2017). All other years, the average employment rates for WUT graduates are at least 1% higher than other colleges/universities in Hubei province.

In 2018, another survey was conducted on WUT graduates about their employment satisfaction and promotion opportunities (within three years of employment) and compared them against aggregate data from the national database. Results are summarized in Table 4. As shown, more WUT graduates (10.1%) are satisfied with their employment than their counterparts from the rest of the nation (78.1% versus 68.0%). In addition, a higher percentage of WUT graduates received a promotion within three years of employment than graduates from other institutions around the country.

As shown in all analyses, WUT seems to be doing better than other colleges/universities in Hubei and/or the entire country in terms of graduation rates, student employment satisfaction, and percentage of promotion. These could be attributed in part to the QM system adopted by WUT. With better counseling/advising and guidance, students/graduates have a higher chance of succeeding in the workplace.

LIMITATIONS

WUT has implemented a QM system for many years. It has formed a set of effective standardized systems in terms of admissions, training, promotion, assessment, and management of QMs. However, there are still some incomplete aspects in the survey results.

Low Social Recognition – QMs not only have the basic function of traditional counselors, but also focus on cultivating students' quality of thinking, so that they can meet the needs of social development. Additional survey results show that society's understanding of QMs is usually limited to the traditional sense of counselors and that the main functions of QMs are complicated affairs such as ideological and political education for students and daily mundane management. QMs typically do not receive the social status enjoyed by faculty members even though both groups are considered employees of the college/university. In addition, the society's lopsided cognition of the QMs limits the professional development of the QMs.

Imperfect Career Development Mechanism – The majority of QMs are eager to have more training opportunities for self-improvement and are keen to be able to participate in professional/non-professional training and learning. However, the opportunities of learning is quite limited and the learning resources are relatively scarce. In addition, promotion requires some teaching assignments and research output, which is often difficult due to QMs' workload. Viewed as "unattainable", many QMs no longer attach importance to the attainment of senior academic rank, but search for opportunities to move elsewhere, which to a certain extent, affects the stability of the QM team.

Low QM Quality – Because of the rapid social changes and the active thinking of college students, the professional knowledge and practical ability of the QMs are unable to adapt. Coupled with the pressure of active management and scientific research, QMs are aware of the importance of their own quality improvement. Only when the quality of the QM is effectively improved can they act as a role model for the students.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Colleges/Universities in China have generally used mentors/counselors on a short-term basis, expecting to replace them in 3-5 years. Hence, QMs are often viewed as "second-class" faculty at universities/colleges in China. The QM system developed by WUT provides us with a framework to build an effective tutoring model. It is an attempt to explore a new approach in the professional development of quality tutors. WUT has a formalized set of guidelines for its QM system: QM recruitment policies, QM training system, QM performance evaluation, and QM management system. This system could possibly help solve the bottleneck of mentor career development from different aspects.

Publicity and promotion should be guided by the results of talent training. Measurement metrics should be spelled out and communicated clearly, providing samples of excellent quality mentors. Institutions should help publicize the "above and beyond" acts/efforts by exceptional

QMs so other mentors are aware and can potentially follow suit. Quoting a Chinese idiom, "Every trade has its master," in every profession there lies a group of extraordinary expert/specialist. Institutions should recognize outstanding work performance and ethical work behavior by providing incentives (monetary, award ceremony, etc.) to showcase the quality of the mentor style to gain social recognition and respect.

Institutions should establish a well-defined performance evaluation system. The key to the quality of the work of mentors lies in their work performance. Well-performing QMs can reap the rewards of their quality work through salary and fringe benefit increases, year-end bonuses, priority for promotion, etc. QMs should be encouraged to work hard and self-improve. Outstanding QMs will be appreciated and be put to good use in terms of placement and prospects.

Assessment is an important way for QMs to evaluate and improve their work. Tools for assessment and their rubrics should be made available to everyone so everything is apparent. This will also reduce ambiguity that may arise among QMs. In addition, QMs are not just evaluated by their supervisors only. Instead, all parties that interact with the QMs will assess their work from a multi-angle perspective. In particular, focus should be placed on linking the results from their training with the results of assessment and use the concrete work effect to measure the performance of the QMs so they can be recognized by society.

Professional title and rank promotion is directly tied to social status and sense of achievement of QMs. Hence, providing a clear path for QMs to achieve professional titles and promotion is an important part of professional development of QMs. It is necessary to make clear the basic requirements of QMs (e.g.: teaching loads, devotion to work, political thoughts, etc.), qualifications (e.g.: education, certification, etc.) and scientific research output, etc., so that QMs have clarity in terms of what is expected in order to be promoted or to attain a particular rank.

In many fields, on-the-job training is often emphasized due to knowledge/skills not taught in colleges/universities. In the case of QM, the training needs to start even before the job commences. Institutions should conduct targeted pre-job training, and training is done in three phases: institution rules and regulations, professional knowledge training, and practical training. In Phase One, new QMs learn about the rules/regulations of the institution and through this training, they can quickly integrate into the organizational/campus culture. Phase Two covers college student career planning guidance, mental health education, innovative entrepreneurship education, student organizations, etc., so the QMs can quickly master nuts and bolts of the job. The final phase, each QM will be assigned to an actual class to perform on-the-job activities and they will be under the guidance of a senior QM.

While pre-job training needs to be emphasized (as discussed earlier), on-the-job training should not be neglected. By providing on-the-job training opportunities to QMs, it allows the QMs' knowledge and working ability to be constantly updated to be able to understand students' thoughts. On-the-job training can take different forms. Self-directed learning allows the QMs to be in charge of their own learning processes. Periodic submissions of learning experience will ensure the QMs is on the right path. Systematic training through unified arrangements by the institutions will ensure centralized, consistent training for all QMs. Experience exchange among QMs (internal and external) will provide an environment for the QMs to share experience and strengthen internal and external communications among QMs. Exchange can also be through symposiums where QMs will learn through workshops and seminars.

Innovation is the driving force of the QM's work and it is also an important part of QM's

"result". QMs should be good at summarizing their own work, thinking positively, and making efforts to study new work ideas and/or methods, to improve work efficiency, to enhance work effectiveness, and to promote innovation. Through innovation, QMs should also improve their own scientific research agenda, combined with personal experience to publish articles to attain professional/personal goal through promotion and/or recognition.

While QMs serve an important role in Chinese universities, their role in foreign colleges/universities remain unclear. Research have shown that most Chinese universities adopt similar QM practices, so our initial sample includes QMs from one institution. This research studies the QM model at WUT and the results show that the WUT QM model is effective/efficient in helping students graduate successfully than other QM models from other universities in China. This study could also be expanded to other Chinese institutions located in different parts of China and see if the results still hold. The main results from this study will be expanded into another research study to include comparisons between QM models in China and the U.S. and explore insights on how the development of QMs can be further promoted.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Survey Results for Experience and Academic Rank

Category		Obs.	Proportion
Years of Experience	< 5	49	69.01%
	≥ 5 but < 10	5	7.04%
	≥ 10	17	23.95%
	Total	71	100%

Academic Rank	Junior	51	71.83%
	Mid-Level	15	21.13%
	Senior	5	7.04%
	Total	71	100%

Table 2: Survey Results on Job Satisfaction

Love work; has sense of accomplishment	42.3%
Accept work; be happy at work	49.3%
Felt pressure at work to cope with things	7.00%
Job burnout; consider job-hopping	1.4%
Total	100%

Table 3: Employment Rates for WUT and Other Colleges/Universities

	Employment Rate		
Year	Other Colleges & Universities (1)	WUT (2)	Difference (2) – (1)
2018	93.2%	94.5%	1.3%
2017	92.3%	93.2%	0.9%
2016	91.0%	92.7%	1.7%
2015	91.4%	92.4%	1.0%
2014	90.8%	93.2%	2.4%
2013	91.8%	92.4%	0.6%
2012	90.5%	92.4%	1.9%
2011	92.3%	93.7%	1.4%
2010	91.0%	93.5%	2.5%
2009	91.0%	92.0%	1.0%

Table 4: Survey Results for Student Employment Satisfaction and Percentage of Promotion

	National Undergraduate (1)	WUT (2)	Difference (2) – (1)
Student Employment Satisfaction (2018)	68.0%	78.1%	10.1%
Percentage of Promotion (2018)	57.0%	62.79%	5.79%