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The Bureaucratization of College Counselor Work: Current Dilemmas and Desired Solutions

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Abstract: The bureaucratization of university counselors' work has become a central factor constraining their educational functions. Drawing on empirical research and literature analysis, this paper systematically investigates the challenges of bureaucratization faced by counselors across four dimensions: role positioning, work content, professional development, and value recognition. It further explores the underlying causes from structural, institutional, resource, and cultural perspectives. The findings indicate that bureaucratization not only transforms counselors into "task executors" but also marginalizes their core educational mission, limiting their ability to support students' holistic growth. To address this issue, the paper proposes comprehensive reforms in four key areas: conceptual reshaping, institutional restructuring, organizational empowerment, and technological enhancement. These measures aim to restore counselors' roles from administrative implementers to facilitators of student development, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for fulfilling the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education.

Keywords: university counselors; bureaucratization; role conflict; education-centered approach; de-bureaucratization

1. Introduction

The work of university counselors plays a vital role in supporting students' growth, safeguarding campus stability, and fulfilling the fundamental mission of fostering virtue through education. In recent years, however, the increasing bureaucratization of counselor responsibilities has become a structural challenge across many higher education institutions. Instead of devoting sufficient time and energy to value guidance, emotional support, and developmental counseling, counselors are often overwhelmed by fragmented administrative tasks, rigid procedural requirements, and multilayered reporting obligations. This shift not only weakens the educational essence of the counselor role but also results in diminished professional autonomy, reduced work engagement, and growing emotional exhaustion.

Current research has shed light on several dimensions of this problem, such as the tension between counselors' dual identities, misaligned incentive mechanisms, and the negative effects of administrative overload on ideological and psychological guidance. However, existing studies tend to focus on describing observable phenomena, offering single-dimensional explanations, or proposing fragmented policy suggestions. Few have systematically examined the structural, institutional, resource-based, and cultural factors that jointly reproduce bureaucratization, nor have they provided a coherent and integrated reform framework that addresses the root causes.

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To fill this gap, this study conducts a multidimensional analysis of the current dilemmas faced by university counselors under bureaucratization, including role ambiguity, task expansion, stalled professional development, and declining value recognition. Based on this analysis, the paper proposes a set of comprehensive strategies centered on conceptual renewal, institutional restructuring, organizational empowerment, and technological integration. These measures aim to restore counselors' professional identity as educators, strengthen their agency, and promote governance reforms aligned with student-centered educational values.

This study contributes to the literature by offering both theoretical insights and practical pathways for reshaping the governance logic of counselor work, providing valuable guidance for higher education institutions seeking to establish more professional, efficient, and education-oriented counselor systems.

2. Problem Statement

The university counselor system constitutes a vital component of China's higher education framework. According to the Regulations on the Development of Counselor Teams in General Higher Education Institutions (*Ministry of Education Order No. 43*), counselors are designated as "the backbone force for conducting ideological and political education among college students," holding dual identities as both "teachers" and "administrators." This institutional design originally aimed to integrate educational and managerial functions, fostering a cohesive force for nurturing talent. However, over the past two decades, against the dual backdrop of higher education expansion and increasingly refined management, the professional landscape for counselors has undergone profound changes. A core paradox has become increasingly apparent: while policy documents repeatedly emphasize the centrality of "education," in practice, this mission is often squeezed, obscured, or supplanted by a deluge of cumbersome procedural administrative tasks. Within the complex organizational networks of universities, counselors are increasingly relegated to roles such as "data statisticians," "event organizers," "document submitters," and "crisis responders." Meanwhile, their essential educational duties—such as ideological guidance, in-depth psychological counseling, personalized academic advising, and long-term career planning—which require significant creative and humanistic commitment, remain marginalized. This occurs because their delayed and implicit outcomes are difficult to accurately capture within current quantitative assessment systems [1].

This deviation and alienation from the core value of counselor work constitute the "bureaucratization" that this paper seeks to explore. It is crucial to clarify that the "bureaucratization" criticized here does not refer to effective administrative management that pursues efficiency and order. Rather, it denotes a process of alienation in the nature of work: educational tasks that should be characterized by personalized interaction, creative inspiration, and life-affirming influence are forcibly simplified into a series of standardized, procedural, and tool-based administrative processes. Counselors, who should embody the agency of educators, are instead largely reduced to policy-implementing tools at the periphery of administrative systems. This alienation directly leads to role ambiguity, stunted professional development, and widespread burnout among counselors, constituting the core challenge to their professionalization and career advancement [2].

This administrative shift not only undermines counselors' professional identity and intrinsic motivation but also, at the practical level, causes disconnects in the ideological guidance chain and isolation of educational platforms within the broader "Three-All Education" system. Consequently, the ideal vision of education involving all members, throughout the entire process, and across all dimensions faces severe challenges in implementation [3].

Academic research has already addressed the issue of counselors' bureaucratization, forming several valuable strands. Some studies, approaching from role theory, analyze the internal tensions arising from counselors' dual identities. Others focus on misaligned incentive mechanisms, highlighting administratively oriented evaluations as a key reason why educational work is neglected. Within the theoretical framework of all-round education, studies have explored the negative impact of bureaucratization on counselors' ideological guidance and career counseling functions. However, most research emphasizes descriptive analysis of phenomena or offers single-dimensional policy recommendations, lacking a systematic deconstruction of the causes of bureaucratization and integrated solutions. Existing studies also suggest the importance of stimulating counselors' agency through de-bureaucratization management, but reviews reveal two notable shortcomings: first, most analyses are single-dimensional or partial, failing to provide a multidimensional, systematic dissection of the complex phenomenon of bureaucratization; second, the proposed countermeasures are often fragmented, lacking an integrated solution that combines theoretical depth with practical feasibility [4].

Given these gaps, this study aims to transcend fragmented descriptions and piecemeal policy listings, striving for three levels of deepening: first, it provides a multidimensional depiction of the actual state of counselors' bureaucratization, revealing its internal logic and external manifestations; second, it systematically dissects its causes through the quadruple lens of structure, institutions, resources, and culture, forming a more explanatory analytical framework; third, it constructs a systemic path to de-administration that integrates concepts, institutions, organizations, and technology, providing a reference with both theoretical depth and practical validity to advance the restoration of counselors' work to its educational core [5].

3. Actual Landscape: The Multidimensional Dilemma of "Bureaucratization" in University Counselor Work

3.1. Role Dilemma: The Identity Fracture Between "Ideological and Political Educator" and "Administrative Clerk"

The dual identities of "teacher" and "administrator" conferred by policy were intended to foster complementarity and synergy between education and management. However, under the powerful administrative inertia and resource allocation patterns of higher education institutions, these two identities have become entrenched in persistent tension and, in many cases, practical opposition (*Ministry of Education Order No. 43*). In operational practice, the administrative responsibilities derived from the "administrator" identity exhibit an endless expansion trend, with various ad hoc and emergency tasks constantly emerging. Meanwhile, the educational functions associated with the "teacher" identity—which demand deep commitment—continue to shrink and become marginalized under the pressure of time and energy constraints [6].

This identity split and conflict is primarily rooted in the dual leadership management system. Counselors are administratively affiliated with their respective schools or departments, reporting directly to the deputy party secretary responsible for student affairs. However, their professional guidance, specialized task assignments, and critical evaluations are overseen by the university's Student Affairs Office. When the management objectives and role expectations of faculties (focused on teaching, research, and departmental interests) and student affairs departments (focused on university-wide policy implementation and stability) diverge or conflict, counselors caught in the middle are prone to experiencing role conflicts and a sense of being "at a loss." Furthermore, various university departments, driven by their own interests, impose diverse and often contradictory role expectations on counselors. Student affairs departments demand they be efficient policy enforcers and pillars of ideological education, while academic affairs departments expect them to safeguard teaching order. Logistics, security, and other departments view them as points of contact for administrative tasks. This "thousand

threads above, one needle below" scenario leaves counselors exhausted from switching between roles, severely diluting their core functions as students' ideological guides and life mentors, plunging them into a profound identity crisis. Within the "three-all education" framework, counselors experience disconnects and interruptions in ideological guidance, cognitive biases, and operational silos. Their work risks becoming overly transactional while their agency is reduced to mere tools [7].

3.2. Work Content Dilemma: Decline of Value-Oriented Tasks and Proliferation of Administrative Duties

Ideally, counselors' core responsibilities should align with the eight key duties outlined in the Regulations on the Development of Counselor Teams in General Higher Education Institutions: ideological and theoretical education with value guidance; Party, Youth League, and class organization development; academic conduct cultivation; mental health education and counseling; online ideological and political education; campus crisis response; and career planning and employment guidance. Most of these tasks require counselors to invest significant time in deep communication, personalized care, and creative design. They constitute high-value, generative "soft" work, whose effectiveness manifests in shaping students' worldviews, outlooks on life, and fostering their inner growth [8].

However, in practice, these core functions are widely supplanted by "hard" administrative tasks such as collecting materials, compiling statistics, organizing attendance, implementing policies, and writing reports. This distortion of work content directly deteriorates the counselor-student relationship, shifting it from an educationally rich nurturing relationship to a simplified administrative one. If counselors are overly entangled in routine administrative tasks, they struggle to deeply engage in students' spiritual growth and value-shaping processes. Administrative tendencies also render employment guidance overly bureaucratic and data-driven, lacking deep care and guidance for individual career development. The resulting contradictions ultimately manifest in prioritization imbalances within work responsibilities, undermining the generative, value-oriented aspects of counselors' roles [9].

3.3. Professional Development Dilemma: Conflict Between Internal Professionalization Needs and External Administrative Incentives

The professionalization and careerization of counselors inherently require systematic mastery and continuous updating of specialized knowledge and practical skills across education, psychology, management, sociology, and law, alongside a capacity for research and reflection. However, prevailing assessment, evaluation, and promotion mechanisms diverge significantly from this intrinsic demand. Existing incentive mechanisms often prioritize performance in administrative tasks-such as maintaining stability, timely submission of materials, and organizing large-scale events-focusing on whether counselors "avoid mistakes," "complete tasks quickly," and "create impressive appearances." This approach neglects achievements in educational work, such as the depth of ideological guidance, the effectiveness of psychological counseling, targeted academic support, and professional research capabilities [10].

Administratively oriented incentive mechanisms compel counselors to allocate limited time and energy toward transactional tasks that yield immediate returns, severely undermining intrinsic motivation for theoretical reflection, professional development, and skill enhancement. This contradicts the professional code of conduct outlined in the regulations, which encourages counselors to pursue lifelong learning. Restricted professional development opportunities represent one of the primary practical challenges to the professionalization of the counselor workforce. The administrative orientation of their work traps counselors in a state of professional rootlessness, undermining both professional identity and career advancement [11].

3.4. Value Identity Dilemma: Coexistence of Professional Dignity and Work Burnout

The role of a counselor should inherently carry the mission of cultivating virtue and nurturing talent, providing a profound sense of professional accomplishment and value. Yet, the trivialization, proceduralization, and devaluation of work steadily erode this sense of nobility. Many counselors experience continuous, non-stop workloads, yet feel disconnected from the purpose of their efforts. This sense of powerlessness stemming from a lack of perceived value leads to widespread burnout. Counselors' ambivalent professional identity-intellectually affirming the social value of their vocation while emotionally dissatisfied with its current state—negatively impacts work engagement, often mediated by ego depletion. Role stress further contributes to decreased engagement and heightened burnout, resulting in a deep crisis of value recognition. This crisis harms counselors' physical and mental health, undermines their belief in their profession, and contributes to a continuous loss of talented individuals, standing in stark contrast to the professional principles of dedication to students and education as the foundation [12].

4. Root Cause Analysis: The Multi-Layered Logic of the "Bureaucratization" Dilemma

4.1. Structural Causes: The Inherent Expansion Logic and Path Dependence of Bureaucratic Organizations

Max Weber's bureaucracy, characterized by specialized division of labor, hierarchical authority, codified rules, and impersonal operations, has established the foundation of efficiency and stability in modern organizational management. However, this organizational form inherently carries tendencies toward self-expansion, formalism, and goal displacement. As complex, large-scale bureaucratic entities, higher education institutions' administrative systems naturally gravitate toward standardizing, proceduralizing, and quantifying all organizational activities to maintain orderly operations and control risks. Educational work, particularly in ideological guidance, value formation, and character cultivation, exhibits delayed effects, implicit outcomes, and resistance to precise quantification. This makes it especially susceptible to being subsumed within the logic of bureaucratic management, transformed into a series of definable, measurable, and assessable administrative tasks, such as activity counts, conversation records, and material submissions. This represents the deepest structural root of the bureaucratization of counselor work—a powerful organizational path dependency [13].

4.2. Institutional Causes: Role Ambiguity and Imbalanced Authority and Responsibility Under the Dual Management System

Although regulations outline counselors' educational, managerial, and service functions, the dual management system often leads to blurred responsibilities and imbalanced authority in practice. Counselors report to both the university's student affairs department and their respective academic departments, yet these entities do not always align in management objectives, priorities, or resource allocation. The Student Affairs Office focuses on conveying university-wide policies, providing operational guidance, and coordinating macro-level student affairs, with evaluations emphasizing policy implementation rigor and compliance. In contrast, academic departments tend to view counselors as extensions of departmental functions, assigning numerous tasks related to teaching operations, research support, discipline evaluations, and daily management. This fragmented system, lacking rigid definitions and protective clauses for counselors' core educational responsibilities, makes them vulnerable to becoming the most convenient receivers and buffer zones for administrative tasks. Even when certain universities attempt to regulate this dual management, the problem of role diffusion remains difficult to fully avoid in practice. Dual management thus constitutes a key institutional factor contributing to counselors' role confusion and the unlimited expansion of their responsibilities. For instance, Xi'an University of Finance and Economics

introduced its *Counselor Team Development and Management Measures (Revised)* in an effort to standardize the dual-management system, but the longstanding issue of role diffusion persists in practice [14].

4.3. Resource-Based Causes: Resource Dependency Under Administrative Power Dominance

Within the current governance structure and resource allocation system of higher education institutions, administrative power typically holds a dominant position. Key developmental resources for schools and departments—such as operational funding, discipline development projects, promotion quotas for professional titles, and opportunities for commendations and awards—are significantly influenced and controlled by the administrative system. This resource dependency compels counselors and their supervisors to prioritize and diligently complete tasks assigned by administrative departments, as these tasks are often directly or indirectly linked to resource allocation. Regarding career development pathways, many universities still adopt administrative promotion models rather than professional technical positions parallel to the faculty track that emphasize competence and educational effectiveness. This further reinforces the administrative orientation and value orientation of their work in career planning. Without innovative incentive mechanisms that break the strong linkage between resource allocation and administrative task completion, reforms may yield minimal results [15].

4.4. Cultural Root: The Erosion of Education-Centered Culture by Managerialism

In recent years, the trend of managerialism, originating from the commercial sphere, has strongly permeated higher education. Its core characteristics emphasize performance supremacy, quantitative assessment, efficiency prioritization, and precise accountability. This cultural atmosphere creates inherent tension with higher education's education-centered culture, which values long-term, immersive, generative, and life-affirming approaches [16].

When quantifiable metrics—such as student satisfaction ratings, employment rate figures, event frequency statistics, and research output counts—become the primary or sole criteria for evaluating tasks, crucial yet non-quantifiable aspects of education—such as in-depth conversations, subtle guidance on values, or sustained emotional care—are inevitably marginalized. Counselors consequently face tension between humanized care and mechanized supervision. Achieving an organic integration between administrative management and counselor work requires transcending the technical rationality of managerialism and returning to the essence of education. This cultural erosion represents a subtle yet profound driving force behind the bureaucratization of counselor work [17].

5. The Ideal Pursuit: A Systemic Vision to Resolve the "Bureaucratization" Dilemma

Faced with such a complex and intertwined systemic predicament, piecemeal solutions are insufficient. A profound, collaborative transformation must be initiated, involving systematic reconstruction and empowerment across four dimensions: ideology, institutions, organization, and technology.

5.1. Ideological Reshaping: Upholding the Student-Centered Approach to Drive Value Consensus and Role Perception Transformation

Any systematic and sustainable transformation must begin with profound ideological renewal and the establishment of shared values. The foremost task is to dismantle the narrow performance-oriented mindset prevalent in university leadership and senior administrators—one that prioritizes research over teaching or teaching over education. It is essential to reaffirm unequivocally that the student-centered approach is the fundamental starting point for all university work, serving as the core value and legitimacy basis for counselors' roles. Through formal documents, strategic plans, and key meetings, it must be continuously reinforced and clarified that counselors' primary

identity is as educators. The ultimate criterion for evaluating their work should be whether it promotes students' holistic growth and sustainable development, not merely the completion of administrative directives [18].

Through extensive advocacy, systematic professional training, and organizational culture development, a campus-wide ecosystem should be cultivated — one that encompasses all functional departments and faculty members—that respects counselors' professional identity as educators, understands the unique nature of their work, and safeguards the necessary time and space for their educational mission. Under the three-dimensional education framework, counselors themselves must first undergo a conceptual shift from viewing themselves as administrative officials to embracing the role of life mentors, firmly establishing their self-awareness as core agents in the educational process [19].

5.2. Institutional Reconstruction: Clarifying Authority Boundaries and Establishing a Developmental Evaluation and Support System

The implementation of these concepts requires both rigid and flexible institutional safeguards. Institutional restructuring is the core challenge in de-administration reform.

First, fully implement a duty list system to clearly delineate work boundaries. Drawing from modern governance concepts, universities should provide unified leadership, with student affairs offices taking the lead. Collaborating with relevant functional units, all schools and departments should jointly develop and strictly enforce a counselor duty list. This list should be clearly divided into a positive list (core educational responsibilities derived from regulations and refined at the university level) and a negative list (explicitly prohibiting the assignment of non-core administrative tasks to counselors, such as purely academic scheduling, logistics requests, financial reimbursement documents, or unrelated meetings). The lists must be dynamically updated, publicly announced, and monitored with established oversight and appeal channels. This effectively reduces administrative burdens and frees counselors from non-essential tasks. Establishing this system represents one of the most critical and direct institutional measures for de-bureaucratization [20].

Second, reform the assessment and evaluation system to prioritize the effectiveness of educational outcomes. Evaluations must fundamentally reverse the tendency to emphasize routine task completion over substantive educational effectiveness. The weighting of routine tasks should be reduced, replaced by a developmental evaluation indicator system centered on educational outcomes. Diverse qualitative evaluation methods should be incorporated, including in-depth student interviews, growth satisfaction surveys, peer reviews, case study demonstrations, and research outputs. Simultaneously, the principle of separate quotas, distinct standards, and independent evaluations for professional technical positions must be strictly implemented, ensuring independent, accessible, and professionally oriented career development pathways [21].

Third, optimize organizational management models and explore flattened structures. Universities should reform overly bureaucratic and hierarchical counselor management models according to their circumstances. For example, establishing an integrated Student Affairs Steering Committee under the direct leadership of the university leadership—endowed with high authority and coordination capabilities, can unify macro-management, professional guidance, and resource coordination. This reduces redundant management layers, conflicting directives, and excessive bureaucratic burdens across hierarchies. Institutional regulations should clarify that student affairs offices and similar committees focus on professional guidance, resource support, and service coordination, rather than administrative command, diminishing their de facto administrative control over counselors while enhancing professional support capabilities [22].

5.3. Organizational Empowerment: Strengthening Professional Learning Communities to Stimulate Internal Motivation and Collective Authority

After institutional boundaries are clarified and evaluations provide guidance, organizational innovation is needed to activate counselors' inherent potential. Strong support should be given for counselors to establish specialized studios, research teams, workshops, or thematic learning communities based on shared interests, professional directions, or work challenges.

These professional learning communities facilitate experience sharing, collective reflection, methodological innovation, and theoretical advancement. They gradually cultivate a professional discourse system, accumulated practical wisdom, and industry standards within the counseling community. Such communities help break down work silos, promote cross-departmental collaborative education, and enhance the collective professional authority of counselors. This enables a fundamental shift from passive executors to proactive creators and professional leaders [23].

5.4. Technology Empowerment: Leveraging Intelligent Technologies to Achieve Workload Reduction, Efficiency Enhancement, and Humanistic Deepening

In the digital era, technology should not intensify administrative burdens or alienate labor. Instead, it should serve as a tool to liberate productivity and return to the essence of education. Modern information technologies, including big data, artificial intelligence, and cloud computing, should be utilized to build integrated, intelligent, and user-friendly student affairs service platforms.

Effective technological integration combines functional modules scattered across departments and systems—including information reporting, task approvals, data analysis, and routine notifications—breaking down data silos and enabling governance efficiency where data runs the extra mile, freeing counselors from repetitive administrative work. Technology maximizes liberation from tedious, low-value tasks, freeing time and cognitive resources for deeper educational work demanding humanistic care, creativity, and emotional investment. Simultaneously, it is crucial to maintain counselors' emotional communication skills, value discernment, and guidance capabilities, ensuring that technological empowerment does not lead to the dehumanization or coldness of educational work. Psychological support and professional development mechanisms should accompany technology-enabled initiatives to achieve a deep integration between efficiency and educational warmth [24].

6. Conclusion and Outlook

The "bureaucratization" dilemma in university counselor work is a complex outcome of multiple intertwined logics: the structural expansion of bureaucracy, the institutional contradictions of dual management, the pragmatic considerations of resource dependency, and the cultural influence of managerialism. It is by no means merely a matter of workload or work intensity; at its core lies the profound alienation of counselors' professional value and the essence of education. Therefore, attempts relying on piecemeal appeals, sporadic adjustments, or technical tweaks will fail to address the underlying causes. A systemic "return" revolution is required to drive a strategic shift and restore counselors' essential roles—transforming them from end-executors of administrative tasks into central leaders in educational work.

This study proposes a systematic path to de-administration through four interrelated and mutually reinforcing dimensions: conceptual reshaping, institutional restructuring, organizational empowerment, and technological facilitation. The framework aims to provide an integrated approach for resolving this long-standing dilemma. Future research can deepen understanding in several areas. First, conducting broader empirical investigations to comparatively analyze variations in counselors' administrative burdens across different regions, types, and tiers of higher education institutions, along with their

underlying mechanisms. Second, refining the design of duty lists-particularly negative lists-to ensure operational clarity in content, formulation procedures, and safeguarding mechanisms. Third, strengthening research on the construction models, data standards, ethical norms, and effectiveness evaluation of intelligent student work platforms. Fourth, maintaining ongoing attention to the actual changes in counselors' professional identity, occupational well-being, and educational effectiveness during the de-bureaucratization reform process, thereby providing continuous evidence for refining theory and optimizing practice.

The road ahead may be long, but progress is achievable through persistent, systematic efforts and resolute reforms within and beyond the education system. Only by alleviating administrative constraints can counselors truly return to their original mission of fostering virtue and nurturing talent, enabling them to radiate their inherent vitality, commitment, and brilliance in the crucial endeavor of cultivating a new generation equipped to shoulder the responsibilities of societal and national development.

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