



Evolving Counselor Experiences: Navigating Pre- and Post-Pandemic Mental Health Challenges of University Students in Manila

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Abstract— The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered mental health counseling, transforming both the delivery of services and the nature of clients' presenting issues at a university level. This research explored the counselor experience pre- and post-pandemic, focusing on the shifts in counseling modalities, the emerging mental health challenges, and the adaptation of counselors to a rapidly changing environment. Utilizing a convergent parallel mixed-method design, the researchers administered Counselor Initial Development Plan-Counselor Competency Survey and focus group discussions to 14 university counselors from a university in Manila, Philippines. The research highlights the ways counselors adapted to these challenges, including technological adoption and evolving techniques and interventions. Post-pandemic, a hybrid model of counseling has emerged, with counselors balancing both in-person and virtual sessions while addressing an ongoing increase in mental health concerns exacerbated by the long-term effects of the pandemic. This study provides a comprehensive overview of the evolving role of counselors, the challenges faced, and the innovations that emerged in response to the global health crisis.

Keywords— university counselors, pandemic, change, student challenges, Philippines.

INTRODUCTION

School counseling centers, often at the front line of providing mental health support to students, found themselves navigating a dual crisis: the escalating demand for services and the necessity to adapt their delivery models to pandemic-related constraints. As schools and universities have been forced to adapt to the new realities, the role of school counselors has become increasingly crucial in supporting students' mental health and well-being. (Capurso et al., 2020 and Schwartz et al., 2021). A study have shown a considerable percentage of students experienced moderate to severe anxiety and depression during the pandemic's early stages with reports of increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness (MacPhee et al., 2021)

In the Philippines, the pandemic has heightened existing challenges and also brought new ones especially in the school counseling setting. School counselors bore the twin weight of dealing with their own COVID-related stresses while supporting clients coping with increased anxiety, isolation and uncertainty. In addition, the transition from conventional in-person counseling to virtual formats necessitated the adjustment of counselors to technological tools, calling into question the accessibility, effectiveness, and sustainability of such modalities.



In this context, mental health professionals have suggested that specific interventions should be implemented during the pandemic to address the psychological needs of children, such as addressing their heightened anxiety, behavioral problems, and fears stemming from the disruptions caused by the crisis (Garro et al., 2023; Zhang (2022)). Several studies highlighted the mental health struggles faced by university students in the Philippines, including anxiety, depression, and difficulty adjusting to university life (Tan et al., 2022). These studies emphasize the need for robust mental health support services within universities. While research specifically measuring the direct impact of counselors is limited, the available literature suggests counselors play a crucial role in helping students navigate these challenges (Lancaster & Brasfield, 2023; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). For instance, counselors can provide support for academic and personal issues, contributing to improved student well-being and academic success. Further research focusing specifically on the impact of university counselors in the Philippines would be valuable in understanding their effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement.

As students and their families grapple with the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic, the role of school counselors has become crucial in promoting mental health and well-being. The pandemic amplified existing inequities in access to mental health services. Recent research underscores the need for school counselors to address these disparities and ensure equitable support for all students, particularly those from marginalized communities. All the while, recognizing that counselors faced numerous challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a lack of preparation for transitioning to remote services, which was compounded by insufficient training and resources (Akgul, Brown, & Karch, 2021). Staffing shortages created additional strain, often leading to role ambiguity as counselors were required to take on multiple responsibilities. The increased workload, coupled with personal and professional pressures, resulted in significant burnout and stress. Furthermore, many counselors felt isolated and lacked adequate support, highlighting the critical need for better communication, professional development opportunities, and institutional backing to navigate crisis situations effectively.

This research investigates the experiences of university counselors in Manila, capturing their journey through the pandemic's different phases. By exploring shifts in counseling modalities, emerging mental health challenges, and the adaptations employed by counselors, this study aims to illuminate the evolving role of mental health professionals in a post-pandemic world. Employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the study combines quantitative insights from standardized surveys with qualitative depth from focus group discussions.

As the world transitions toward recovery, understanding these transformations is essential. The findings of this study offer valuable insights into how counselors have redefined their practices, overcome challenges, and innovated their approaches, paving the way for a hybrid model of counseling that blends in-person and virtual support. In doing so, this research contributes to the broader discourse on mental health resilience and adaptation in the face of global crises.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to investigate the experiences of university counselors in adapting to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach allowed for the



simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the shifts in counseling practices, emerging mental health challenges, and the strategies employed by counselors during and after the pandemic. The integration of the two data sets occurs during the interpretation phase, where researchers compare and contrast findings to draw meaningful conclusions.

The study involved 14 university counselors from a university in Manila, Philippines. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of those actively engaged in counseling both pre- and post-pandemic. The qualitative component is a Focus group discussion that allowed the researchers to explore the counselors' personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges while the Quantitative Component is the Counselor Initial Development Plan-Counselor Competency Survey which provided measurable insights into the counselors' skills, competencies, and adaptations before and after the pandemic. Data collection for both components was conducted concurrently, with quantitative surveys completed prior to the focus group discussions to ensure no bias influenced the qualitative narratives.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. The informed consent is also reiterated at the start of every focus group discussion.

Data Analysis

For the qualitative part, focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis using NVIVO software. Codes were generated inductively to identify key themes and patterns in the data, capturing the nuances of the counselors' experiences and challenges. For the quantitative part, the survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

After separate analyses, quantitative and qualitative findings were compared and integrated during the interpretation phase. This allowed for the identification of convergences, divergences, and complementarities, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the counselors' experiences.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The analysis revealed three primary themes reflecting the challenges faced by university counselors and their clients during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Each primary theme is supported by several subthemes, illustrating the nuanced mental health issues and academic struggles experienced by clients.

Primary Theme 1: Academic Concerns

This theme encompasses the academic challenges students faced during the pandemic and the subsequent transitions between learning modalities.

Subtheme: Adjustment (Traditional-Online-Hybrid)

Students struggled to adapt to sudden shifts in learning environments, from traditional face-to-face classes to online modalities, and eventually to hybrid setups. These transitions disrupted routines, learning processes, and overall academic stability. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted mental health support systems,



prompting university counselors to adapt through technological advancements and evolving intervention strategies. Remote counseling became a critical tool, although it presented challenges like technological literacy and the need for robust infrastructure (Witteveen et al., 2022; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021).

Subtheme: Low or Failing Grades

The inability to cope with academic demands during these transitions often resulted in poor academic performance, leading to heightened stress and decreased self-esteem among students.

Primary Theme 2: Increase of Clinical Cases

A significant rise in clinical cases was observed, with students presenting more complex and severe mental health issues. According to Pandya & Lodha (2022), there is an increase in levels of stress, fear, loneliness, sleeplessness, and a heightened sense of uncertainty of students during and after the pandemic. According to McLafferty et al (2023) a fluctuating pattern of anxiety experienced by students during the pandemic. It stresses the need for targeted interventions to address these identified mental health concerns. Additionally, students' relationships with friends were adversely affected, with many young people missing out on opportunities to develop essential social skills during this period. This gap may influence their college experience and have long-term effects.

Subtheme: Anxiety

Anxiety was one of the most common issues reported during and after the pandemic, as students faced immense academic pressures from adapting to new learning modalities. The uncertainty surrounding future academic and career prospects further fueled their anxiety. Additionally, the prolonged periods of social isolation stripped many students of the emotional support and connections they relied on, intensifying their feelings of worry and apprehension. The resulting chronic stress often interfered with their ability to concentrate, make decisions, and perform academically.

Subtheme: Depression

Prolonged isolation, coupled with disrupted routines and a lack of motivation, led to a significant rise in depressive symptoms among students. Feelings of hopelessness and persistent sadness became commonplace, driven by an overwhelming sense of loss—whether of opportunities, stability, or connections with others. The absence of regular social interactions and support systems exacerbated these symptoms, creating barriers to seeking help or finding meaningful ways to cope. According to the counselor participants, depression became a silent struggle, significantly affecting the mental health and academic engagement of the students.

Subtheme: Neurodevelopmental Conditions

Students with pre-existing neurodevelopmental conditions, such as ADHD or autism, faced amplified challenges due to changes in routines and lack of structured support. These students often rely on structured routines and specialized support to thrive, but the abrupt shifts to remote and hybrid learning disrupted this stability. The lack of accessible accommodations, coupled with changes in the delivery of educational services, left these students feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. As shared by the counselors, the academic performance and overall well-



being of students with neurodevelopmental needs were significantly impacted, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and resources.

Subtheme: Suicidal Ideation and Behavior

The pandemic aggravated feelings of despair in some students, leading to an increase in reports of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The heightened stress, combined with prolonged isolation are detrimental to the existing mental health conditions, leaving some students feeling trapped and unable to envision a positive future. The counselor participants related that many reports of suicidal ideation, behavior, and even attempts are recorded during and after the period of pandemic.

Subtheme: Trauma Brought by the Pandemic

Many students reported experiencing trauma, including the loss of loved ones, disruptions in daily life, and the overall uncertainty and fear caused by the global crisis. According to the interviews, the trauma of the students manifested in various ways, including heightened anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and difficulty processing grief. Students often struggled to regain a sense of normalcy, as the ongoing disruptions made recovery challenging. The cumulative impact of these experiences highlighted the need for trauma-informed counseling approaches to support students in their healing journeys.

Subtheme: Cases of Domestic Abuse

For some students, the pandemic exposed or intensified experiences of domestic abuse, as they spent extended periods at home in potentially unsafe environments. The lack of access to external support systems, such as schools and community organizations, left many feeling isolated and powerless to seek help. The psychological toll of such abuse contributed to significant emotional distress, including feelings of fear, shame, and helplessness. Addressing this subtheme requires a coordinated effort to provide resources, safe spaces, and advocacy for students affected by domestic violence.

Primary Theme 3: Social Concerns

The pandemic also disrupted social relationships, leading to feelings of grief, isolation, and difficulty maintaining connections.

Subtheme: Grief

As shared by the counselors, grief was a profound and pervasive experience for many students during the pandemic, especially for those who lost family members, close friends, or mentors. The compounded loss of loved ones due to COVID-19 or pandemic-related circumstances left students with unresolved feelings of sadness, shock, and mourning. This grief was often complicated by the inability to hold proper memorial services or seek solace in communal support systems, such as religious gatherings or group counseling. The lack of social rituals that usually aid in the grieving process further delayed emotional healing and exacerbated students' sense of loss. Counselors observed that students struggled to process their grief due to the suddenness and severity of the losses, requiring specialized support in navigating their mourning.



Subtheme: Lost Relationships

The prolonged isolation caused by the pandemic also led to the deterioration of many existing relationships, including friendships and romantic partnerships. With social distancing guidelines in place, face-to-face interaction was limited, and virtual communication often lacked the depth and quality of in-person engagement. As a result, many students found it increasingly difficult to maintain meaningful connections. Some friendships fizzled out due to lack of shared experiences or communication barriers, while romantic relationships suffered from a lack of physical closeness or intimacy. The emotional toll of these lost relationships created feelings of loneliness and, in some cases, contributed to depressive symptoms. Additionally, students found it challenging to form new relationships, as the social distancing measures prevented the typical opportunities for socialization and bonding that are crucial during their formative years in university.

Subtheme: Difficulty Maintaining Relationships

Beyond the loss of relationships, counselor participants shared that many students reported significant challenges in maintaining their existing relationships due to the altered dynamics caused by the pandemic. Social distancing restrictions, the shift to online learning, and the need for self-isolation meant that students had to adjust their communication styles. Many found that virtual interactions, while helpful, lacked the intimacy and immediacy of in-person exchanges, leaving them feeling disconnected. Face-to-face contact with friends, family, and even counselors, which previously served as essential sources of emotional support, became rare or nonexistent. Furthermore, the abrupt change in daily routines and the stressors of academic and personal life made it harder for students to prioritize relationships. The lack of social engagement also led to a deterioration in students' social skills, making it difficult for some to reintegrate into regular social activities when restrictions eased. The difficulty in maintaining relationships had a cascading effect on students' mental health, leading to heightened feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and social anxiety.

The quantitative analysis focused on describing the overall competencies of counselors, their specific skills, and their comfort level with various counseling approaches. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and range, were calculated.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of overall counselor competencies from Counselor Initial Development Plan-Counselor Competency Survey (IDP)

	M	SD	Min	Max
Overall counselor Competencies	2.89	0.50	1.80	3.80

n=14

The mean score of 2.89 indicates that counselors generally rated themselves as moderately competent across all areas. The overall competency of counselors, as measured by the Counselor Initial Development Plan (IDP), suggests a moderate level of self-assessed competence. This indicates that counselors perceive themselves as moderately competent across all competencies, with some variation in the scores (SD = 0.50). The score range from 1.80 to 3.80 reflects the diverse levels of confidence and skill among the counselors in this study.



Table 2. Mean Score in Counselor Initial Development Plan (IDP) based on counselor competencies

	M	SD	Min	Max
Understanding Mental Illness	3.00	.55	2.00	4.00
Treatment Knowledge	2.93	.62	2.00	4.00
Application to Practice	2.57	.76	1.00	4.00
Diversity and Cultural Competence	3.00	.68	2.00	4.00
Client Evaluation	3.07	.62	2.00	4.00
Assess Co-Occurring Disorders	2.71	.73	1.00	4.00
Treatment Planning	2.86	.66	2.00	4.00
Referral and Follow-up	3.21	.70	2.00	4.00
Case Management	3.07	.62	2.00	4.00
Group Counseling	2.64	.93	1.00	4.00
Family & Couples Counseling	2.14	.77	1.00	3.00
Individual Counseling	3.21	.58	2.00	4.00
Client, Family, and Community Education	2.57	.51	2.00	3.00
Documentation	3.00	.55	2.00	4.00
Professional and Ethical Responsibilities	3.29	.61	2.00	4.00

n=14

Looking at Table 2, the mean scores for individual competencies reveal that counselors rate themselves most highly in areas like Client Evaluation (M = 3.07), Referral and Follow-up (M = 3.21), and Professional and Ethical Responsibilities (M = 3.29), with scores ranging from 2.00 to 4.00. These areas suggest that counselors feel more confident in their abilities to evaluate clients and manage ethical responsibilities. Conversely, areas like Family & Couples Counseling (M = 2.14) and Application to Practice (M = 2.57) have lower mean scores, indicating that these competencies may be areas for improvement or development.

Table 3. Mean Score in Counselor Initial Development Plan (IDP) based on Counselor comfortability with the counseling approaches

	M	SD	Min	Max
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	3.43	0.65	3.0	5.0
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	4.21	0.43	4.0	5.0
Cognitive Processing Therapy	3.43	0.65	2.0	4.0
Dialectical Behavior Therapy	3.93	0.62	3.0	5.0
Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction	3.43	0.65	2.0	4.0

n=14

In terms of counseling approaches, as shown in Table 3, counselors report feeling most comfortable with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (M = 4.21) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (M = 3.93). These approaches seem to be well understood and implemented by the counselors. On the other hand, counselors are less comfortable with



approaches like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Cognitive Processing Therapy, both of which have mean scores of 3.43, suggesting a moderate level of comfort.

DISCUSSION

The transition between traditional, online, and hybrid learning modalities emerged as a major challenge for students. This aligns with prior research highlighting the disruptive impact of rapid shifts in learning environments on students' academic routines and performance (Crawford et al., 2020). The struggle to adjust resulted in widespread academic underperformance, with some students experiencing low or failing grades. These findings emphasize the importance of providing targeted academic support, such as structured study programs and accessible tutoring, to ease the transition and foster resilience.

Universities must also prioritize faculty training to deliver hybrid education effectively and integrate mental health resources into academic advising. Collaborative efforts between academic staff and counselors can help mitigate the adverse effects of academic stress on mental health.

On the other hand, the pandemic catalyzed an increase in the severity and complexity of mental health cases among students, consistent with global trends reported in studies by Wang et al. (2021). Anxiety and depression were the most prevalent concerns, driven by factors such as academic pressures, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future. Students with pre-existing neurodevelopmental conditions faced amplified difficulties, suggesting the need for tailored interventions that address their unique needs.

The alarming rise in suicidal ideation and behaviors, as well as trauma stemming from the pandemic, highlights the critical role of early identification and intervention. Counselors must be equipped with advanced skills in crisis management and trauma-informed care to respond effectively. Universities should also explore group therapy and peer support programs as complementary approaches to individual counseling. The subtheme of domestic abuse underscores the importance of recognizing non-academic stressors that influence students' mental health. Institutions should strengthen partnerships with external support organizations to provide comprehensive resources for students in abusive environments.

Moreover, the disruption of social relationships during the pandemic resulted in feelings of grief, isolation, and relational challenges, consistent with studies documenting the social ramifications of prolonged isolation (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Grief from losing loved ones, coupled with the difficulty of maintaining relationships, exacerbated feelings of loneliness. With this, counseling interventions should focus on rebuilding social connections and fostering a sense of community. Group counseling sessions, peer-led workshops, and campus-wide initiatives to enhance social engagement can help students recover from the relational disruptions caused by the pandemic. Hence, access to school counselors positively impacts student outcomes, including improved academic performance, higher graduation rates, and increased college enrollment (Impact of School Counseling, 2023).

With this, Guidance counselors had to quickly adapt to online platforms for delivering counseling services. There are also various challenges, including difficulties in establishing rapport with students online, managing their own



stress and mental health, and addressing the diverse needs of students during a time of crisis (Mababa & Fabella, 2023)

Relating to the results from the Counselor Initial Development Plan (IDP), it shows that while counselors are moderately confident in their overall competencies, there are notable areas where they feel less competent, such as in Family & Couples Counseling and Application to Practice. Counselors highlighted the importance of additional training programs dedicated to online counseling methods and mental health support, as the pandemic profoundly affected their job performance, prompting a reassessment of their roles and responsibilities in effectively supporting students (Mababa & Fabella, 2023). Further development and training in these specific competencies may help enhance counselor effectiveness. Additionally, counselors tend to feel more comfortable with well-established therapeutic approaches like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Dialectical Behavior Therapy, whereas newer approaches may require additional familiarity and practice. To improve overall counselor effectiveness, targeted professional development in both specific competencies and counseling approaches is recommended.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive view of the challenges faced by university counselors and their clients during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, while also evaluating counselor competencies and comfort levels. The study's findings are organized around both qualitative themes and quantitative data, each shedding light on key areas of concern and the need for targeted interventions.

The study highlights the significant impact the pandemic had on students' mental health, particularly in the areas of academic struggles, mental health conditions, and social isolation. Counselors demonstrated strengths in core counseling skills but may need additional training in specialized areas like family therapy and co-occurring disorders. Moreover, counselors' comfort with evidence-based approaches such as CBT and DBT reflects the need for continued professional development and adaptation to new therapeutic techniques.

Overall, the findings emphasize the critical role of counselors in addressing the complex mental health and academic issues faced by students. There is a clear need for enhanced counselor training, particularly in specialized competencies, to better support students in the aftermath of the pandemic. By focusing on these areas, counselors can be better equipped to address the evolving challenges students face in both academic and personal domains.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance university counseling services, address gaps in counselor competencies, and improve overall mental health outcomes for students.

First, strengthening counselor training and development is crucial. This includes providing specialized training to equip counselors with skills to handle complex cases such as trauma, neurodevelopmental conditions, and addiction, alongside offering workshops on less familiar therapeutic approaches like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Continuous professional development programs should also be implemented to keep counselors updated on emerging mental health trends. To further aid the



counselors, institutional support for counselors must be enhanced by reducing workloads through additional staffing, delegating administrative tasks to support personnel, and providing mental health resources such as peer supervision groups and regular check-ins to ensure counselor well-being.

Then, expanding and improving counseling modalities is essential, with a focus on developing a robust hybrid counseling model that integrates in-person and virtual services while maintaining quality and accessibility. Fourth, tailored academic support services should be developed to address challenges related to hybrid learning environments, such as stress management workshops, study skills training, and programs targeting adjustment issues. Additionally, peer support networks can complement professional services by offering students emotional and academic support. Lastly, addressing systemic gaps in competency alignment is critical, involving regular evaluations of counselor skills against emerging student needs and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration with psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to manage complex cases effectively.

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