

# Challenges and Opportunities of Ethical Leadership for University Counselors

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## ABSTRACT

University counselors play a crucial role in today's educational environment, and their ethical leadership is vital in shaping the holistic development of students. However, amidst the constant changes in educational and social environments, counselors face a myriad of challenges and opportunities in ethical leadership. This study aims to delve into the challenges and opportunities of ethical leadership for university counselors, providing a profound understanding of this field and offering substantial recommendations to enhance the ethical leadership skills of university counselors. Through interviews, surveys, and literature reviews, this paper explores counselors' experiences and perspectives on ethical leadership, identifying challenges such as understanding and addressing multicultural backgrounds and revealing opportunities, such as global exchange learning. Based on the findings, the study concludes with practical recommendations to help counselors navigate the evolving educational landscape.

## KEYWORDS

University Counselors; Ethical Leadership; Opportunities; Challenges.

## 1. BACKGROUND

Ethical leadership involves making professional and personal decisions based on moral principles, summarized as "doing the right thing." Leaders who guide and motivate members with high moral standards and values in an upright, fair, and responsible manner demonstrate ethical leadership. University counselors, as frontline educators in higher education, hold a significant responsibility in ideological and moral education, impacting students beyond academic aspects. The importance of ethical leadership among university counselors is increasingly evident in today's context. However, existing research has predominantly focused on the ethical leadership of school principals, with limited attention to counselors. Given this gap, this paper aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of counselors' ethical leadership, providing guidance for counselor training, educational management, and academic institutional administration to better fulfill their ideological guidance role.

### 1.1. The Role of Ethical Leadership in Higher Education

"Leaders must possess the ability or power to influence followers, and these capabilities or powers include the position and authority granted to leaders by the organization, as well as the personal influence possessed by the leaders themselves [1]." Regarding the specific elements of ethical leadership, the academic community has not yet reached a consensus. Some scholars believe that ethical leadership includes four dimensions: humanistic care, leading by example, fairness and

integrity, and self-awareness of responsibility[2]. A university is a moral community, determined by the fundamental mission of higher education. Higher education shoulders the important mission of cultivating talents for society, and human progress and social development are inseparable from the "people" cultivated by higher education. Human beings are the only beings in need of education, and only through education can individuals truly become human. All individuals inherently possess a moral and virtuous nature, and the seeds of these virtuous qualities need a certain environment to grow. Just as plants need suitable soil, sunlight, and moisture for nourishment, individuals need the nurturing environment provided by higher education institutions to cultivate good moral character. The educator Herbart once said, "Morality is the highest aim of education" [3]. "The virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the virtue of a petty person is like the grass. When the wind blows, the grass must bend." Leaders serve as a guide in an organization. The personal moral character of higher education administrators directly influences the improvement of the moral qualities of others. "If one's own conduct is upright, one can lead without giving orders." When administrators in higher education conduct themselves with integrity, it has a subtle and pervasive influence on the entire management team, and administrative staff tend to emulate the leadership style of higher education administrators. The improved moral character of counselors is evident in their humble, amiable demeanor, fairness, integrity, self-confidence, and courage during daily interactions with students. This intangible moral influence silently permeates the hearts of students, making counselors role models of ethics for students to emulate. The educational effect of leading by example is more effective than rigid and direct lecturing. Counselors, by employing their ethical leadership, can subtly influence students and achieve a more efficient educational outcome. Therefore, the role of ethical leadership in the education of students is particularly significant in higher education.

## **1.2. Ethical Leadership Qualities for University Counselors**

There are various perspectives on ethical leadership in the academic community. Based on relevant literature research, this paper refers to the "Ethical Leadership Framework in Education" formulated in the United Kingdom as a reference for ethical leadership. This framework was jointly released by the Association of School and College Leaders in the UK and 13 other influential educational organizations in 2019. It presents 14 ethical principles that educational leaders should adhere to, including selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, leadership, trust, wisdom, kindness, fairness, service, courage, and optimism[4]. This framework encourages educational leaders to reflect on school management based on ethical principles, influencing the cultivation of future leaders and the improvement of school education quality. University counselors, often seen as the "mentors" shaping students' character, behavior, and taste, should possess ethical leadership qualities. They must uphold high standards of moral cultivation for themselves while demonstrating and guiding students to cultivate their own character through ethical behavior.

## **2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

What opportunities and challenges does the ethical leadership of university counselors face in the current context?

## **3. RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN**

This paper adopts a combination of interview, questionnaire survey, and literature review methods to collect and organize relevant information, followed by summarization and analysis. The study targets counselors with a certain level of work experience and professional ethical awareness in three universities.

## **4. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Through the compilation and summarization of information gathered from individual interviews, survey questionnaires, and literature reviews, this research has documented the current status and practical challenges faced by university counselors in terms of ethical leadership. The specific details are outlined below:

### **4.1. Challenges and Dilemmas Faced by the Ethical Leadership of University Counselors in the Current Context:**

Understanding and Addressing Diversity in a Multicultural Background: Despite the close age proximity between university counselors and students, rapid economic and social changes have accentuated generational differences. Additionally, societal structural differentiation has diversified peer groups [5]. Contemporary students exhibit internal differentiation and diversity in their circumstances, attitudes, and aspirations, presenting a challenge for counselors in understanding and addressing diverse cultural values, expectations, and needs; Societal Pressure and Expectations: Increasing societal expectations place additional burdens on university counselors. They are expected to assume more responsibilities in areas such as student career planning and psychological support. Some counselors also handle administrative affairs within the university, potentially leading to an overwhelming workload that can hinder the effective practice of ethical leadership; Ethical Issues in the Digital Age: The advancement of technology introduces new ethical leadership challenges for counselors, including issues related to privacy protection and norms for online communication. Counselors are required to find appropriate solutions in navigating these ethical dilemmas; Uncertainty in Professional Development: Some counselors express confusion about their future career development, influenced by factors such as limited promotion opportunities and restrictive conditions for job transfers. This uncertainty can impact their professional motivation and ethical principles; Academic Integrity and Moral Conflicts: Under the pressure of a busy work environment, counselors may face challenges related to academic integrity and moral conflicts. Handling issues like student leaders engaging in cheating or plagiarism poses ethical and integrity challenges; Ethical Issues in Information Management: Counselors managing student information may encounter ethical issues, including the security and fairness of information related to students with specific psychological issues or family difficulties. Balancing the sharing of work-related information and protecting student privacy becomes a complex ethical consideration; Insufficient Training and Development: Varying levels of attention and training on ethical leadership for counselors across different universities may leave some counselors feeling inadequately prepared to cope with emerging ethical challenges; Changes in Professional Ethical Standards: The ethical standards of university counselors may evolve over time with societal changes. Counselors need to continuously monitor and adapt to these changes to maintain ethical integrity in their profession.

### **4.2. Opportunities for Ethical Leadership of University Counselors in the Current Context:**

Multicultural Education Opportunities: Dealing with incidents involving diverse multicultural student groups provides counselors with more opportunities for education. This allows them to gain a deeper understanding and respect for students' values from various backgrounds, enhancing their abilities in cross-cultural communication and understanding; Societal Emphasis on Mental Health Support: The increasing focus on the psychological well-being of young students in society is evident in annual psychological screenings for new students. Counselors, encountering students with psychological challenges in their daily work, have the opportunity to leverage ethical leadership to play a greater role in providing comprehensive support for students and promoting their mental health; Global Exchange and Learning Opportunities: Counselors with international study experience highlight the benefits of collaborating with students and educators from different countries and regions. This

fosters communication and understanding of global cultures and knowledge, contributing to the enhancement of global awareness and cross-cultural ethical leadership; Support for Professional Development: Recognizing the importance of counselors in the growth process of students, universities are increasingly providing more opportunities for professional development. This includes training in counselor qualities, specialized workshops, thematic seminars, and lectures, all contributing to the elevation of counselor ethical leadership; Emphasis on Cultivating Students' Social Responsibility: Counselors, adhering to ethical standards in daily affairs, guide students to participate in social service and public welfare activities. This involvement allows counselors to play a greater role in nurturing students' sense of social responsibility; Information Sharing and Collaboration Platforms: Utilizing information technology for sharing and collaborative platforms, counselors can enhance efficiency and leadership by working with other education professionals. Platforms such as OA systems, WeChat, TikTok, Tencent Meetings, and other software facilitate information sharing and cooperation; Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Counselors involved in guiding student teams in Internet+ projects often experience interdisciplinary collaboration with professionals from other disciplines. This comprehensive approach enables counselors to focus on both students' academic and personal development.

These opportunities provide a broader stage for university counselors. By actively exercising ethical leadership, counselors can better serve students and society.

## **5. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP OF UNIVERSITY COUNSELORS BASED ON DISCUSSION RESULTS:**

Elevating the ethical leadership of university counselors is a complex and crucial task that requires attention from various perspectives. The following are some reference recommendations to assist university counselors in enhancing their ethical leadership in practice:

### **5.1. Utilize Appropriate Ethical Cultivation Methods to Enhance the Intrinsic Moral Character of University Counselors:**

Enhancing the internal moral character of university counselors involves employing suitable methods of ethical cultivation. This includes continuous learning, participation in training sessions, seminars, specialized courses, and establishing a robust ethical foundation. Counselors should stay informed about the latest research in education, ethics, and psychology, ensuring the ongoing update of their professional knowledge. Integrating humanistic classics, renowned international and domestic university educational philosophies, and the charismatic traits of university administrators into training content can subtly help counselors clarify their own values and ethical principles. This, in turn, contributes to making wise and ethically sound decisions when faced with complex choices.

### **5.2. Continuously Enhance Ethical Leadership in Relevant Work:**

To continually improve ethical leadership in their roles, university counselors should focus on several key aspects. Firstly, they should enhance their understanding and respect for students from different cultural backgrounds, cultivating cross-cultural sensitivity and advocating for inclusivity and equality. Building good communication and relationships with students, colleagues, and other campus members is also crucial for ethical leadership in daily work. This involves actively listening to others, engaging in timely communication, and establishing trust relationships.

Ethical leadership encompasses attention to the holistic development of students, including academic, career, and mental health aspects. Providing personalized support to help students overcome challenges and realize their potential is essential. Collaborating with other counselors and colleagues

to form an ethical-oriented team ensures that team members understand and actively practice shared ethical values, fostering open discussions.

Addressing potential ethical dilemmas and leveraging ethical leadership in conflict resolution and challenge management is crucial. For instance, in unexpected situations like disease outbreaks, maintaining a calm, objective, and proactive approach to problem-solving sets a positive ethical leadership example within the team. When necessary, establishing professional networks with other university counselors, sharing experiences, providing support, and collectively discussing the challenges and best practices of ethical leadership is beneficial. Adapting to the continuous changes in the educational field and social environment and proactively responding to these changes ensures flexibility in facing new challenges and opportunities, maintaining sensitivity to transformations.

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