

PROFESSIONAL ABILITY OF COUNSELORS IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN GUIZHOU PROVINCE

Yun Xie ¹, Thanaphan Boonyarutkalin ^{*2}, Dowroong Wacharinrat ¹, Pradit Songsangyos ³

¹ Faculty of Education, Shinawatra University, Thailand

² Faculty of Liberal Arts, Shinawatra University, Thailand

³ Faculty of Engineering and Technology, Shinawatra University, Thailand

* E-mail (Corresponding Author): thanaphan.b@siu.ac.th

วันที่รับบทความ 5 เมษายน 2569 วันที่แก้ไขบทความ 1 มิถุนายน 2569 วันที่ตอบรับบทความ 8 มิถุนายน 2569

ABSTRACT

Counselors in private higher education play an irreplaceable role in advancing the high-quality development of higher education. Their professional ability directly impacts the quality of students' cultivation and the overall effectiveness of ideological and political education work. The objectives of this research were to explore the current status of counselors' professional ability in private universities in Guizhou Province. A mixed-method design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, was adopted in this study. The sample consisted of 278 counselors and 20 participants. The statistical methods used for data analysis include descriptive statistics analysis. This study found that the overall professional ability of counselors was reported at a high level. Communication and Expression and Theoretical Instruction received higher scores, whereas Student Relationships, Psychological Well-being, and Daily Administrative Affairs scored comparatively lower.

Keywords: Counselor; Professional Ability; Private Universities

1. Introduction

Enhancing the quality of higher education has become a strategic priority in China, with ideological and political education increasingly being progressively integrated into higher education reform. Counselors play a key role in implementing ideological and political education and guiding students' overall development in universities and colleges. Compared with public universities, private universities lag behind in institutional development, management systems, recruitment mechanisms, resource guarantee, and so on [1][2]. Existing researches have shown that counselors in private universities often exhibited weaker professional ability, lower professional identity and

higher turnover rates [3][4][5]. These can be attributed to heavy workloads, high-pressure work environments, underdeveloped incentive and evaluation systems, and insufficient professional training, which have constrained counselors' professional growth and development [6][7][8]. In the era of artificial intelligence, counselors were increasingly confronted with diverse academic, psychological, and career development needs from students, which expanded work boundaries and raised new demands for professional adaptability [9]. Therefore, counselors are required to develop diverse professional ability to adapt to ongoing social and technological changes as well as students' evolving needs.

As mentioned above, although in-depth studies have made on counselors' professional ability from the perspectives of components, requirements and problems, those based on quantitative data are still far from adequate. Therefore, this study employed an empirical approach to examine the current situation of counselors' professional ability in private universities. It aims to propose strategies for private universities to strengthen the development of counselors' professional abilities and to promote the specialization and professionalization of the counselor team.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theory Framework

This study was grounded in an Ecological Systems Theory [10] and Holland's Theory of Career Choice [11][12]. Ecological Systems Theory conceptualizes counselors' professional ability as influenced by interactions among university, faculty, and individual factors. Holland's theory highlights the importance of person-role congruence in sustaining professional identity and long-term career commitment.

2.2 Concepts of Counselor

The counselor refers to student affairs administrators or educators in higher education institutions in Western countries. With professional training in psychology, counseling, or related fields, they assist students in managing personal, academic, and emotional challenges, aiming to enhance student well-being and promote academic success [13][14][15][16][17]. In China, counselors are positioned as the backbone of ideological and political education and the primary implementers of student affairs, with the expectation that they act as life mentors and trusted companions supporting students' healthy growth [18][19][20][21].

2.3 Researches on The Professional Ability of Counselors

Existing researches conceptualize counselors' professional ability as a multi-dimensional component that integrates management competency, organizational capacity, psychological counseling support, communication skills, and so on [22][23]. Subsequently, some studies further

emphasize cultural responsiveness and alignment with specific institutional settings and student characteristics, as exemplified by university frameworks, such as UCLA's College Counseling Competency Model [24][25]. In China, scholars define counselors' professional ability as the integrated knowledge and skills required to fulfill educational, administrative, and student support responsibilities [5][21][26][27], commonly categorizing it into core, basic, specialized, and developmental dimensions [6][28][29][30].

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative analysis was conducted to describe the current status. Qualitative interviews were used to further interpret the quantitative findings and to propose guidelines for enhancing counselors' professional ability.

The quantitative study focused on counselors employed in private universities in Guizhou Province, with a total population of 998. According to Krejcie and Morgan [31], 278 counselors were selected to ensure representativeness. A total of 290 questionnaires were distributed via the online survey platform Wenjuanxing, and 278 valid questionnaires were retained after data screening, corresponding to a valid response rate of 95.8%. The questionnaire consisted of 78 items was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (highest, high, moderate, low, lowest). The questionnaire's content validity was evaluated by three experts, with an Item Objective Congruence (IOC) index ranging from 0.75 to 0.96, indicating satisfactory content validity. The KMO values for all scales exceeded 0.8, indicating sufficient inter-item correlations. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant for all constructs ($p < 0.001$), confirming that the correlation matrices were appropriate for factor analysis. The overall reliability of the instrument, as determined by Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient, was 0.89, indicating a good internal consistency. Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software, including descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA for group comparisons.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants and analyzed using thematic analysis. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 20 participants closely related to counselors' work, including 5 vice presidents responsible for student affairs, 5 directors of the student affairs office, 5 outstanding counselors, and 5 general counselors.

4. Results

This section revealed the results of the study on counselors' professional ability in private universities in Guizhou Province, as follows:

4.1 The Results of the Current Status of the Professional Ability of College Counselors in Guizhou Province

The current status of counselors' professional ability was examined using descriptive statistical analysis. Mean values and standard deviations were calculated to assess the overall level of professional ability and the distribution of its dimensions among counselors in private universities in Guizhou Province.

Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Professional Ability of Counselors (n = 278)

Dimension	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level
Basic Ability	3.62	0.76	High
Specialized Ability	3.71	0.80	High
Work Ability	3.71	0.78	High
Overall	3.70	0.91	High

Table 4.1 showed that the overall professional ability of counselors was at a high level ($\bar{x} = 3.70$, S.D. = 0.91). Professional ability was composed of basic ability, specialized ability and work ability. At the dimensional level, basic ability ($\bar{x} = 3.62$, S.D. = 0.76), specialized ability ($\bar{x} = 3.71$, S.D. = 0.80), and work ability ($\bar{x} = 3.71$, S.D. = 0.78) were all classified within the high range. Among them, specialized ability and work ability recorded the highest mean, whereas basic ability was comparatively lower.

Based on the dimensional analysis, item-level descriptive statistics were further examined to provide a detailed understanding of the internal structure of counselors' professional ability. The results were presented in Table 4.2., Table 4.3. and Table 4.4.

Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Counselors' Basic Ability (n = 278)

Dimension	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level	Rank
Student Relationships	3.52	0.94	High	5
Colleague Relationships	3.53	0.90	High	4
Communication and Expression	3.79	0.94	High	1
Emotional Regulation	3.74	0.93	High	2
Psychological Well-being	3.54	0.96	High	3

Table 4.2 presented the descriptive statistics of counselors' basic ability. All five dimensions were at a high level, with $\bar{x}$ ranging from 3.52 to 3.79. Communication and Expression obtained the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 3.79$, S.D. = 0.94), highlighting counselors' perceived strength in communication related skills. Emotional Regulation followed ($\bar{x} = 3.74$, S.D. = 0.93), reflecting a

solid ability for emotional management. Psychological Well-being ($\bar{x} = 3.54$, S.D. = 0.96) ranked third and showed the greatest variability among the five dimensions. By comparison, Student Relationships ($\bar{x} = 3.52$, S.D. = 0.94) and Colleague Relationships ($\bar{x} = 3.53$, S.D. = 0.90) received relatively lower rate, suggesting that relational competencies were less developed than other dimensions of professional ability. Overall, although counselors demonstrated strong basic abilities, the results revealed differentiated strengths, with greater prominence in communication-related competency than in relational and well-being domains.

Table 4.3 Descriptive Statistics of Counselors' Specialized Ability of Counselors (n = 278)

Dimension	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level
Crisis Response	3.64	0.94	High
Career Planning	3.79	0.92	High
Employment Guidance	3.63	0.95	High
Theoretical Research	3.80	0.92	High

Table 4.3 showed that all four dimensions were at a high level, with $\bar{x}$ ranging from 3.63 to 3.80, indicating generally strong specialized competencies. Theoretical Research obtained the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 3.80$, S.D. = 0.92), followed closely by Career Planning ($\bar{x} = 3.79$, S.D. = 0.92), suggesting relatively stronger performance in researching and career development related domains. In contrast, Crisis Response ($\bar{x} = 3.64$, S.D. = 0.94) and Employment Guidance ($\bar{x} = 3.63$, S.D. = 0.95) received comparatively lower rate, reflecting that ability related to immediate intervention and employment services was comparatively less prominent within the whole specialized ability.

Table 4.4 Descriptive Statistics of Counselors' Work Ability (n = 278)

Dimension	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level	Rank
Ideological Guidance	3.71	0.94	High	3
Value Integration	3.65	0.90	High	5
Theoretical Instruction	3.82	0.90	High	1
Cadre Training and Development of Students	3.82	0.92	High	1
Academic Guidance	3.68	0.94	High	4
Daily Administrative Affairs	3.54	0.95	High	6
Online Ideological and Political Education	3.73	0.92	High	2

As Table 4.4 illustrated, all seven dimensions were at a high level, with $\bar{x}$ ranging from 3.54 to 3.82. Theoretical Instruction ($\bar{x} = 3.82$, S.D. = 0.90) and Cadre Training and Development of Students ($\bar{x} = 3.82$, S.D. = 0.92) obtained the highest scores, suggesting that counselors demonstrated relatively strong performance in instructional and student development functions. Online Ideological and Political Education ($\bar{x} = 3.73$, S.D. = 0.92) ranked second, followed by Ideological Guidance ($\bar{x} = 3.73$, S.D. = 0.92). Daily Administrative Affairs ($\bar{x} = 3.54$, S.D. = 0.95) recorded the lowest mean score, followed by Value Integration ($\bar{x} = 3.65$, S.D. = 0.90), indicating comparatively lower ratings in routine administrative and integrative coordination functions.

Group difference analyses were conducted to examine variations in counselors' professional ability across demographic information, as shown in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Group Differences in Overall Professional Ability of Counselors (n = 278)

Dimension		N	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	t/F	p	Significant Pairwise Differences
Gender	Male	125	3.79	0.81	t= 2.046	.042*	Male > Female
	Female	154	3.60	0.71			
Education Degree	Bachelor	106	3.60	0.75	F=4.873	.008**	Master > Bachelor, Doctor
	Master	153	3.80	0.76			
	Doctor	19	3.34	0.73			
Major	Student affairs-related majors (e.g., ideological and political education, education, psychology, sociology)	69	3.57	0.71	F=4.873	0.004**	Science & Engineering > Humanities
	Other humanities and social sciences	168	3.64	0.78			
	Science and engineering	41	4.04	0.66			
Professional Qualifications Obtained	Psychological counselor	31	4.03	0.64	F=3.093	.016*	Psychological counselor > None
	Employment guidance counselor	16	3.79	0.90			

	Global Career Development Facilitator	37	3.84	0.67			
	Other relevant qualifications	53	3.68	0.76			
	None	141	3.56	0.77			
Years of Work Experience	≤ 1 year	19	3.31	0.97	F=2.426	.048*	6–10 years > ≤1 year
	1–3 years	87	3.67	0.67			
	3–6 years	123	3.66	0.8			
	6–10 years	45	3.91	0.66			
	> 10 years	4	4.02	0.85			
Number of Students Managed	≤ 150 students	69	3.54	0.82	F=4.758	.003**	301–400 students > ≤150 students, 151–200 students, 201–300 students groups
	151 - 200 students	98	3.63	0.74			
	201 - 300 students	43	3.58	0.81			
	301 - 400 students	68	3.97	0.63			
Administrative Rank	Division director	24	3.96	0.75	F=2.666	.033*	Overall significant, but no stable pairwise differences. Group effect without robust contrasts
	Deputy division director	52	3.52	0.79			
	Section chief	44	3.50	0.85			
	Deputy section chief	48	3.63	0.76			
	None	110	3.79	0.69			
Professional Title	Professor	14	4.20	0.67	F=4.299	.002**	Professor, None > Lecturer
	Associate professor	25	3.65	0.65			
	Lecturer	83	3.46	0.82			
	Assistant lecturer	81	3.70	0.81			
	None	75	3.83	0.62			
Satisfaction With Current Income	Strongly satisfied	22	3.29	0.64	F=4.224	.002**	Completely dissatisfied > strongly satisfied, satisfied groups
	Satisfied	63	3.48	0.76			
	Average	77	3.76	0.73			
	Dissatisfied	81	3.77	0.77			
	Completely dissatisfied	35	3.93	0.74			

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Female counselors accounted for 55%, while male counselors represented 45%. There was a significant gender difference in overall professional ability, $t = 2.046$, $p = .042$. Male counselors ($\bar{x} = 3.79$, S.D. = 0.81) scored higher than female counselors ($\bar{x} = 3.60$, S.D. = 0.71).

In relation to education degree, more than half of the respondents held a master's degree (55%), followed by those with a bachelor's degree (38.12%) and doctoral degree (6.88%), indicating that a master's degree was the most common educational qualification among counselors. It showed a significant effect, $F = 4.873$, $p = .008$. Counselors with a master's degree ($\bar{x} = 3.80$, S.D. = 0.76) reported higher professional ability than those with a bachelors' degree ($\bar{x} = 3.56$, S.D. = 0.75) and doctoral degree ($\bar{x} = 3.34$, S.D. = 0.73).

In terms of major, 24.82% of counselors reported majors directly related to student affairs, 60.43% were from other humanities and social science disciplines, while 14.7% were academic backgrounds in science and engineering. Significant differences were also found across majors, $F = 4.873$, $p = .004$. Counselors with science and engineering backgrounds ($\bar{x} = 4.04$, S.D. = 0.66) reported higher professional ability than those from humanities and social sciences ($\bar{x} = 3.64$, S.D. = 0.78) and student affairs-related majors ($\bar{x} = 3.57$, S.D. = 0.71).

Regarding professional qualifications, over half of the counselors (50.73%) indicated that they did not possess any formal professional qualification certificates. Qualifications of global career development facilitator accounted for 13.31%, the qualifications of psychological counselor were 11.15%, and qualifications of employment guidance counselor were 5.75%. Professional qualifications demonstrated a significant effect, $F = 3.093$, $p = .016$. Counselors holding psychological counselor certification ($\bar{x} = 4.03$, S.D. = 0.64) reported higher ability levels than those without relevant qualifications ($\bar{x} = 3.56$, S.D. = 0.77).

Working experience as counselors was generally concentrated in the early to middle career stages. The largest proportion of respondents reported 3-6 years of experience (44.24%), followed by 1-3 years (31.3%) and 6-10 years (16.19%). Only a small proportion of counselors had one year or less of experience (6.83%) or more than 10 years (1.44%). It also showed significant differences, $F = 2.426$, $p = .048$. Counselors with 6-10 years of experience ($\bar{x} = 3.91$, S.D. = 0.66) reported higher professional ability than those with one year or less of experience ($\bar{x} = 3.31$, S.D. = 0.97).

The largest group reported managing 151-200 students accounted for 35.25%, followed by 150 students or fewer (24.82%), 301-400 students (24.56%) and 300 students (15.47%). The number of students managed significantly influenced professional ability, $F = 4.758$, $p = .003$. Counselors responsible for 301-400 students ($\bar{x} = 3.97$, S.D. = 0.63) reported higher ability levels

than those managing 150 or fewer students ($\bar{x} = 3.54$, S.D. = 0.82), 151-200 students ($\bar{x} = 3.63$, S.D. = 0.74), and 201-300 students ($\bar{x} = 3.58$, S.D. = 0.81).

As for administrative rank, counselors with no administrative position accounted for 39.57%, deputy division director was 18.71%, deputy section chief was 17.27%, section chief was 15.82%, and division director was 8.63%. It showed a significant overall effect on counselors' professional ability ($F = 2.666$, $p = .033$). Division directors reported the highest level ($\bar{x} = 3.96$, S.D. = 0.75), whereas deputy division directors ($\bar{x} = 3.52$, S.D. = 0.79) and section chiefs ($\bar{x} = 3.50$, S.D. = 0.85) scored lower. Deputy section chiefs showed a moderate level ($\bar{x} = 3.63$, S.D. = 0.76), and counselors without administrative rank performed relatively well ($\bar{x} = 3.79$, S.D. = 0.69). Nevertheless, Tukey's HSD post hoc test revealed no significant pairwise differences (all $p > .05$), indicating that the overall effect was not attributable to stable contrasts between specific ranks. This result suggested that, despite the presence of an overall group effect, the differences between individual administrative ranks were not sufficiently pronounced to withstand conservative adjustment for multiple comparisons.

Regarding professional title, Lecturers (29.85%) and assistant lecturers (29.13%) constituted the largest groups in terms of academic titles, while 27.03% held no academic title. It also revealed a significant overall effect, $F = 4.299$, $p = .002$. Professional title significantly affected professional ability, $F = 4.299$, $p = .002$. Professors ($\bar{x} = 4.20$, S.D. = 0.67) and those without professional titles ($\bar{x} = 3.83$, S.D. = 0.62) reported higher ability levels than lecturers ($\bar{x} = 3.46$, S.D. = 0.82).

Counselors reported annual incomes between 80,000 and 100,000 yuan accounted for 28.05%, followed by those earning between 100,000 and 150,000 yuan (24.46%). Satisfaction with current income was significantly associated with professional ability, $F = 4.224$, $p = .002$. Counselors who were completely dissatisfied ($\bar{x} = 3.93$, S.D. = 0.74) reported higher ability levels than those who were strongly satisfied ($\bar{x} = 3.29$, S.D. = 0.64) and satisfied ($\bar{x} = 3.48$, S.D. = 0.76).

Overall, the findings indicated that professional ability varied significantly across several demographic and occupational characteristics. Differences were particularly evident in educational degree, major background, professional qualification, years of work experience, number of students managed, professional title, income satisfaction, and gender. These results suggested that both individual background factors and job-related structural conditions were associated with variations in counselors' professional ability, thereby highlighting the multidimensional nature of professional ability development.

Qualitative interview findings further illuminated the existing problems underlying these quantitative data. Participants frequently reported excessive administrative workload, blurred role

boundaries between teacher and administrative executor, insufficient practical training systems, limited promotion channels, and inadequate institutional support for counselors' development. Many counselors reported that routine management tasks consumed substantial time and energy, leaving little time for theoretical study and long-term professional growth. As a result, while counselors generally demonstrated adequate ability in daily administration tasks, their basic and developmental ability remained relatively constrained.

In summary, counselors in private universities in Guizhou Province exhibited a high level of professional ability, with comparatively stronger practice-oriented dimensions and relatively weaker basic competencies. Counselors were characterized by youthfulness, short tenure, and heavy workload pressure, and professional ability varied significantly across demographic information. Existing problems primarily manifested as structural constraints, role strain, limited systematic training, insufficient career-development support and so on, all of which restricted the advancement of professionalization and specialization of counselors.

5. Conclusion

The demographic statistics showed that counselors' overall professional ability remained at a high level ($\bar{x} = 3.70$, $S.D = 0.91$), consistent with prior studies suggesting that institutionalized professional standards and policies contributed to the enhancement of professional ability [20][5]. At the dimensional level, Communication and Expression, Theoretical Instruction, and Student Cadre Development were comparatively higher scores. These corresponded closely with policy-defined responsibilities emphasizing ideological education and instructional functions [32]. On the contrary, Student Relationships, Psychological Well-being, and Daily Administrative Affairs were rated lower. Existing researches showed that counselors are often confronted with high administrative workloads and ambiguous role boundaries, which might limit long-term engagement with students [28]. Another study further suggested that excessive administrative duties led to occupational burnout [33].

Furthermore, consistent with Ecological Systems Theory and Holland's theory. Ecological Systems Theory suggested that professional ability development resulted from the alignment or misalignment across these nested systems. When institutional factors, faculty-level environments, and individual motivation operated in concert, they create mutually reinforcing conditions that supported sustainable professional growth. Conversely, inconsistencies across levels could weaken developmental trajectories. Holland's theory strengthened professional identity helping align personal values with occupational roles. When counselors perceived a stronger fit between their personal aspirations and professional responsibilities, they were more likely to maintain

engagement and pursue long-term development. On the contrary, unresolved role ambiguity or weak identification might undermine sustained effort.

Therefore, enhancing counselors' professional ability requires cooperation at university, faculty, and individual levels. From the perspective of the university, it should clarify career development pathways, establish scientific evaluation and incentive systems, strengthen systematic training and career-stage development, and reducing excessive administrative burden. Furthermore, priority should be given to maintaining a stable and supportive counseling team, clarifying task allocation and coordination, and promoting continuous professional development. Regarding to personal factors, counselors should strengthen professional identity and career planning, enhance professional knowledge and obtain relevant certifications, cultivate resilience and sustained learning engagement, and accumulate practical experience to better adapt to their professional roles. In conclusion, sustainable improvement depends on the alignment of institutional policies, organizational support, and individual engagement.

While this study provided empirical evidence for a multi-level framework of counselors' professional ability, several directions remain for future research. Future studies may expand the sample to include public and vocational institutions in order to examine the generalizability of the framework. Longitudinal designs could further clarify developmental trajectories and potential causal relationships. Influencing factors of counselors' professional ability could be explored, such as institutional factors, psychological factors, and so on.

6. References

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