Outreach by College Counselors: Increasing Student Attendance at Presentations

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Psychoeducational outreach programming by college counselors can be an effective service to meet students’ needs; however, getting students to attend outreach programs on a college campus can be challenging. The authors describe a model of an outreach series and the strategies implemented to increase student attendance at the presentations. Information collected from students through focus groups, a survey, and presentation evaluation forms revealed factors that seem to be important to increasing attendance.

Outreach programming is an increasingly important activity for college counseling centers (Archer & Cooper, 1998; Guinee & Ness, 2000; Stone & Archer, 1990). In fact, providing outreach interventions is an accreditation standard for college and university counseling centers set by the International Association of Counseling Services (Boyd et al., 2003). Stone and Archer defined outreach as “any organized program, workshop, media effort, class, or systematic attempt to provide psychological education—includes systematic attempts to modify the campus environment” (p. 557). Outreach can occur in many formats: presenting to specific groups, such as academic classes, residence hall groups, and fraternities/sororities, or being present at campus wellness fairs or student services expos. Counseling centers may also develop programs proactively to address identified student needs through offering workshops or providing self-help information on their Web sites (Kern, 2000).

Through the development of psychoeducational programs for the campus community, college counseling centers can fulfill the preventive and educative roles that they have on campus. Encouraging positive health behaviors and preventing common problems through outreach presentations fit with most college counseling center mission statements. Moreover, the opportunity to learn and discuss developmental issues relevant to college students is often a critical component of a college or university’s mission. Thus, services provided by college counselors, including outreach presentations, are an integral part of a student’s comprehensive education (Hurst & Jacobson, 1985).

Outreach is also a useful way to serve the needs of students who may be reluctant to visit a counseling center to seek individual counseling. For example, men who adhere to traditional gender roles tend to prefer a more psychoeducational approach to addressing mental health issues than they do...
personal counseling (Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992). Members of some ethnic minority groups may be less likely to visit a counseling center but be more amenable to attending an outreach presentation given by a mental health professional (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Constantine, Chen, & Ceesay, 1997). Exposure to a psychoeducational presentation may encourage students to take another step and seek personal counseling, even though students may be at varying stages of change with the issue being presented (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992).

Several challenges accompany the worthy endeavor of providing outreach programs (Bishop, 1990; Huff, 1999; Stone & Archer, 1990). Given increasing demands for individual counseling and other direct clinical services, it may be difficult for staff to put time toward developing and carrying out successful outreach presentations. Another problem that many counselors have experienced is that once a program is scheduled, it can be difficult to predict the number of students who will attend, and attendance can be minimal (Schreier & Bialk, 1997; Trice, Desio, & Haire, 1989). On many campuses, efforts are needed to improve student attendance at outreach presentations.

Few empirical studies have been conducted about the factors that might increase student attendance at outreach presentations given by counseling center staff. Schreier and Bialk (1997) described a workshop series and a thorough marketing approach that they reported was successful in increasing attendance. Our study builds on their report by describing attendance considerations that were elicited from students and offering additional methods for increasing attendance.

The purpose of this study was to identify, from students’ perspectives, factors that would make students more likely to attend a psychoeducational presentation. A model of a specific outreach series is described and used as the vehicle for conducting this investigation. The research design of this study is exploratory in nature, which is beneficial because it can generate issues and practical strategies that other college counselors may consider regarding increasing student attendance at outreach presentations.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Overview. This research project took place at a large, metropolitan state university located in the Southeast. There are more than 30,000 undergraduate students and 4,800 graduate students enrolled on the main campus. More than 7,000 students live on campus. The second author developed and implemented an outreach series in fall 2000 similar to the model of Schreier and Bialk (1997). The premise of this primary prevention program was to impart information to college students on healthy adjustment, development, and success through psychoeducational presentations on topics of interest and relevance for students. A title for the series was created that captured both the essence of the programmatic intent and embedded a connection with the university mascot.
Professional staff and trainees from the counseling center conducted the presentations. All presentations were free to enrolled students. Since the series began, it has been offered each semester and has grown steadily in campus visibility and the breadth of topics offered. The outreach series has routinely offered 8 to 10 presentations at 7:00 p.m. on Mondays at the student union. Examples of presentation topics have included time management, self-esteem, relationships, and assertiveness. In the past, attendance at the presentations has varied from 5 to 75 students. In order to develop effective strategies for increasing attendance at all of the presentations, a study was carried out that included three means of data collection: focus groups with students, a survey of students, and evaluations of presentations.

**Focus groups.** Two focus groups with undergraduate students were held early in the fall 2002 semester to generate qualitative ideas and suggestions regarding attendance issues from students’ perspectives. Nine students volunteered to participate, with three students in one group and six in the other group. Across both groups, there were eight women and one man. Four students identified themselves as Hispanic, two as African American, and three as White. Of the nine students, there was one freshman, one sophomore, three juniors, and four seniors. Ages ranged from 18 to 22 years, and the mean age of the focus group participants was 20.33 (SD = 1.32). Four of the nine students had heard of the presentation series prior to participating in the focus groups, and two of the four had attended one of the center’s presentations in the past. Counseling center staff members, including the authors of this article, facilitated the group discussion. The facilitators explained the outreach series to the students and posed open-ended questions to them about increasing attendance at the presentations.

**Survey.** A survey of students was conducted to obtain a quantitative measure of responses about factors that would influence students’ likelihood of attending an outreach presentation and interest in attending presentations on specific topics. Students (N = 163) were recruited from several different undergraduate classes to voluntarily participate and received extra credit in their classes for participating. The sample consisted of 50 men and 113 women, with a mean age of 21 years (SD = 3.18, median age = 20 years). Each undergraduate class was represented: 21% freshmen, 18% sophomores, 31% juniors, and 29% seniors; 1% were graduate students. In terms of ethnicity, 64% were Caucasian/White, 18% were African American/Black, 9% were Hispanic, 4% were multiracial, 2% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% were Native American, and 2% identified themselves as other. Of the 163 participants, 8% indicated that they had previously attended a counseling center outreach series presentation.

**Evaluations.** To assess student ratings of the presentations, future topic ideas, and the effectiveness of interventions used to increase attendance, students were asked to complete a brief evaluation form after each of the outreach series presentations. Evaluation forms were completed by 236 students in the fall 2002 semester and 216 students in the spring 2003 semester.
Instruments

*Counseling Center Perceptions Survey.* A survey was developed for the purposes of this investigation. Examples of factors that were assessed in this survey included topic of interest, time and location of program, types of advertising, and if the speaker had been heard previously. There were 16 items in this section, and each item was rated using a 5-point, Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *very important*). On the basis of staff members’ areas of interest and expertise, knowledge of college students’ developmental issues, past topics, and results from evaluations of past programs, 30 potential presentation topics were selected to be rated. In addition, items assessing potential use of counseling services were a part of the survey. Also included in this survey were items addressing experience with a list of personal problems/issues and the number of hours spent doing a variety of activities. Because these latter items were not part of the present investigation, we do not discuss them further in this article. The various sections of the survey were counterbalanced across packet copies and randomly distributed to participants.

*Evaluation form.* This form asked students to indicate demographic information and to rate their opinions of the content and effectiveness of the presentation. The items were rated on a 5-point, Likert-type scale (5 = *excellent*, 1 = *poor*). Three open-ended items were used to allow attendees to write additional comments and to indicate how they had learned about the presentation and what topics they would like to see offered in the future.

Interventions to Increase Attendance

One of the major factors involved in whether students attend a presentation is their knowing about it in the first place. The development of a series brochure was a first step of a marketing campaign to inform students of the series. The brochure briefly described each of the presentations and indicated the date, time, location, and name of presenter(s). Approximately 2,500 brochures were distributed over two semesters to at least 30 university offices that serve students.

Another intervention was to collaborate with several departments that incorporated the outreach series into their programs or courses. For example, as part of a leadership program, students must attend various campus events, and the outreach series is included in the list of options. The presentations were also included during the university’s Leadership Week and were part of a university Fitness Program. In both cases, advertising for these special programs included information about the presentations.

In addition, various academic course instructors incorporated the series into their curriculum. Most 1st-year students enroll in a freshman success course, and in some of these classes, students earned extra credit for attending a presentation, whereas in other sections of this course, students were required to attend any campus presentation and the outreach series was listed as an option. Students in a health and wellness education class were also given extra credit...
for attending. Students in a speech class who were required to critique a speech were given the series list by the instructor.

Several Internet resources were used to advertise the series. The outreach series was included in a daily university sponsored e-mail announcements/events list that is sent to every student. Information about the outreach series was also e-mailed to presidents of clubs and organizations each week. Each semester, details about the outreach series were posted on the counseling center Web site, and the presentations were also listed on the university events calendar Web site.

In addition to the Internet, classified ads were placed in the student newspaper, flyers were put up on campus each week, and an article describing the outreach series appeared in a staff newsletter. Furthermore, presentation information was posted each week on a sign outside the counseling center. In the counseling center, small flyers and brochures about the series were made available for students to browse through and/or take with them.

Finally, counseling center staff promoted the series whenever possible. All of the counselors referred clients as needed to particular workshops, giving the counselor and client an additional therapeutic resource. In addition, whenever counselors spoke to student groups or faculty and staff about the center’s services, the counselors would routinely promote the outreach program and distribute brochures.

Results

Focus Groups

The nine students who attended the focus groups provided a range of feedback regarding the factors that might influence students’ decision to attend or not attend an outreach presentation and also provided suggestions of ways to increase students’ attendance at these presentations. Suggestions included (a) using catchy titles that clearly convey the presentation’s content, (b) preferable methods and locations of advertising, (c) enlisting campus offices and organizations to help promote and advertise presentations, (d) considering particular days and times that may be most appealing to students for the presentations, (e) tailoring presentations for specific student groups/populations, and (f) using giveaways and free food to attract students.

Counseling Center Perceptions Survey

Responses from the 163 students who completed this survey revealed valuable information. Regarding students’ likelihood of using the various counseling services/programs, 58% of students reported that they were likely or very likely to attend a presentation on a topic of interest. In contrast, 30% of students indicated that they were likely or very likely to make use of individual counseling for personal issues, 14% were likely or very likely to attend a crisis intervention session, and 9% were likely to use group counseling for personal issues.
A question addressing the main focus of our study asked about factors that would make the respondent more likely to attend a counseling center presentation. The following are the percentages of students who rated each of the factors as important or very important: having the presentation be a topic of interest (91%), receiving extra credit in class for attending a presentation (83%), time of the presentation (76%), location of the presentation (71%), seeing more advertising for the presentation (44%), whether the speaker was known or heard before (44%), whether a friend was attending (41%), whether a teacher or adviser told the student about it (30%), and whether free food was provided (28%).

Early evening was rated as the best time of day to attend a counseling center outreach presentation by 43% of the sample; late afternoon was rated as best by 35%. Morning (5%) and early afternoon (17%) were not as often rated as the best time. The student union was rated as the best location to attend a presentation by a majority of the sample (83%). The counseling center (8%), a residence hall (8%), or another location (1%) were less preferred as locations.

Five types of advertising that would best help the respondent find out about the presentations were assessed. E-mail announcements were rated as important or very important by 61% of the participants, followed by flyers on campus (54%), ads in the student newspaper (40%), advertising via the campus radio (9%), and ads on the campus television network (8%).

Included in the survey was a list of 30 potential presentation topics for which participants were asked to rate their level of interest in attending. There was a high degree of variability in students’ interest ratings. Interest level ratings for the top 15 topics are given in Table 1.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress management</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication between men and women</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeping well</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding depression</td>
<td>56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting and meeting goals</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improving intimacy in relationships</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality and relationships</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing self-esteem</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myths and realities of marriage</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with relationship difficulties</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s issues</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship breakups</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overcoming shyness</td>
<td>37</td>
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</tbody>
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*Note. Topics with the 15 highest percentages are listed.*
Evaluation Forms

Results from the evaluation items revealed that students had a positive reaction to the outreach series. Across all of the presentations for the year, the mean rating for overall opinion of the presentation was 4.18 (SD = .70), the mean rating for the content of the presentation was 4.28 (SD = .70), and the mean rating for effectiveness of the presenter was 4.28 (SD = .74). In addition, students wrote numerous positive comments about the presentations.

The evaluation form also asked students to indicate topic suggestions for future presentations. Although there was a large variety of ideas suggested by the students, the topics most often suggested were ones that were already being presented, such as relationship issues (enhancing, breakups, long-distance, dating). Other topics that were frequently suggested included self-esteem, improving communication (nonverbal, between genders, expressing feelings, resolving conflicts), and anxiety management.

To assess the type of advertising that was most effective, students were asked to indicate on the evaluation form how they learned about the presentation. Because some students attended multiple presentations and may have reported the same methods of finding out about the presentation each time they attended one, the number of endorsements for each source of advertising or promotion does not necessarily reflect discrete individual responses. Nonetheless, there were advertising methods that stood out as receiving the most endorsements. Across both semesters, the freshman success course and the university events list sent by e-mail clearly attracted the most students to the presentations, with 76 and 71 endorsements, respectively, out of 370 total endorsements. Hearing about the presentation from a friend received 50 endorsements. Seeing a brochure/flyer had 37 endorsements, and learning about the presentations from a Web site or online had 36 endorsements. Other top sources of advertising and promotion were the health and wellness education class, with 30 endorsements, and being informed by a counselor, with 14 endorsements.

Attendance

For comparison, in the 2001–2002 academic year, a total of 409 students attended 16 presentations, and the mean number of attendees at each presentation was 25.6 (SD = 12.54). In the 2002–2003 academic year, 612 students attended 18 presentations, and the mean number of attendees was 34 (SD = 21.23). Because of the large variability in attendance, these means were not significantly different, t(32) = −1.39, p > .10. However, there was an increase in the number of students overall who were served during the 2002–2003 academic year, the year that this study was conducted.

According to the completed evaluation forms during the 2002–2003 academic year, 25% of the students indicated they were attending for extra credit or as part of a class requirement. Of these 25%, 62% returned for at least one subsequent presentation. (Note that these percentages do not correspond to distinct individuals, because students may have attended more than one presentation and completed the evaluation form each time.)
Discussion

Program Evaluation

Outreach by college and university counseling center staff can be an effective modality for providing psychoeducational information for students. This investigation set out to determine from students’ perspectives what factors would increase attendance at outreach presentations. Data collected via the focus groups, survey, and presentation evaluation forms provided numerous strategies that can be used for increasing attendance at the outreach series. In addition, other recommendations that were sparked by going through the process of examining data and conducting the outreach series are offered below.

The way that a program is marketed to students is essential to their choosing to attend (Winett, 1995). Advertising the series through the university’s e-mail announcement list was one of the most effective techniques for publicizing each presentation. Having the series posted online, including in the university’s calendar of events, on the counseling center’s Web site, and in links from other departments, was a deliberate way to inform students who frequently obtain information from the Internet.

Incorporating the series into different course curricula as a supplemental learning opportunity or as a way to receive extra credit also proved to be an effective incentive for students to attend presentations. It is noteworthy, though, that a majority of the students reported attending for personal interest rather than to receive extra credit or as part of a class requirement. Many students who first came for class reasons returned for a subsequent presentation. Collaborating with different academic and student service departments is, in itself, a form of outreach that informs staff and faculty about the counseling center’s services, and these collaborations demonstrate the center’s role in the educational mission of the university (Ellingson, Kochenour, & Weitzman, 1999).

Students who were surveyed indicated that they would be most likely to attend a presentation if the topic was of interest to them. This emphasizes the importance of careful and thoughtful planning of presentation topics and having input from students. Furthermore, having the presentation at a convenient time, possibly at multiple times, and holding the series at a consistent and well-known location seemed to be essential components of the success of the series. Seeing brochures of the series also helped to inform students about the presentations. Strategically distributing brochures to campus offices allowed counseling staff to connect with other professionals and to provide them with a referral resource for the students with whom they worked, especially culturally diverse students or other groups who may be more reluctant to use individual counseling. In addition, the brochures were a visible promotion of the counseling center to the campus community, including the university administration. Numerous students indicated that they learned of the program through a friend, and it is expected that the outreach series will continue to grow through word of mouth. In contrast, the limited number of flyers posted on campus and ads in the student newspaper were not as useful for advertising.
Additional Interventions and Implications for Counseling Centers

Numerous other strategies that were not used during the year that this investigation was conducted but that may be implemented in the future to advertise the outreach series are offered here as suggestions. These ideas include (a) using print and sign advertising, for example through a small changeable A-frame sign displayed on campus, placing a large banner in the student union, putting table tents or small flyers on cafeteria tables, writing ads on the sidewalk in chalk, posting the information on a university marquee, and distributing the outreach series brochure to all academic advisers and advising offices; (b) sitting at a table on campus handing out information about the counseling center, including information about the outreach series; (c) collaborating with other university programs (such as a new career self-exploration and decision-making program targeting freshmen), collaborating with other special events such as Diversity Week, and seeking cosponsorship of programs with student groups and organizations (e.g., Greeks, interest clubs); (d) asking professors to announce the series in their relevant courses (e.g., psychology classes) or going to classes and talking about the center’s services, including outreach programs; (e) developing a counseling center events e-mail announcement list to which students could voluntarily subscribe; and (f) including the series on calendars that various departments develop, such as a residence life calendar for freshmen, and combining advertising for the series with workshops conducted by other university departments.

Trying different themes for the series and developing programs for specific groups are other considerations for the future. For example, first-time-in-college students share unique developmental issues (Brower, 1990). Because the freshman success classes draw many new students to the series in the fall, addressing topics germane to freshman, including homesickness, dealing with roommates, and transitioning into college, may be beneficial during that semester. An outreach series with a relationship theme would also likely be popular with students. Experimenting with changing presentation times from the early evening to the lunchtime hour can also be done to determine if that may affect attendance by students.

Research and data collection are imperative for the success of a counseling center’s outreach programming efforts. Hanson and Yancey (1985) pointed out three important uses of data about educational programs: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Using focus groups and surveys of students and examining what topics meet the needs of students should be part of the planning process when developing outreach programs (Kern, 2000). Administering evaluation surveys at presentations provides valuable feedback to the presenter(s) as well as information about which topics students find most meaningful. Tracking attendance at presentations and evaluation ratings provide useful data to demonstrate to administrators the center’s impact on stu-
dents and effectiveness, a critical task for counseling centers in justifying their value and necessity on a college campus.

The current outreach series is a traditional type of primary prevention program; however, there are many other effective and creative ways that counseling centers may reach out to the campus community, such as sponsoring wellness fairs or events focusing on specific issues (Cronin, 1991). Counseling centers might collaborate with existing peer education programs on their campuses by either working together in developing programs or coordinating and clarifying presentation efforts, schedules, and topics given by each group or office. Alternatively, counseling centers may choose to involve undergraduates, together with senior staff and interns, as members of their center’s outreach teams. This model may increase attendance at presentations because of the promotion by and participation of the students themselves, as well as provide a learning experience for the peer educators (Berry, Poulin, Wallace, Brown, & Cochran, 1998).

Limitations and Conclusion

There are limitations to the current investigation that should be considered and may prompt future research. Only a small number of students participated in the focus groups, and additional students may have provided even more ideas. There are likely other factors related to attendance at outreach programs that have not been identified through this investigation. An analysis of students by gender, class, and/or ethnicity may provide further information for attracting students to outreach workshops. Although a variety of recommendations offered here can work to increase attendance, it is difficult to determine exactly which variables contributed to the actual increases in attendance, because different strategies were used across assorted presentation topics. In addition, because this study was conducted at a single university and there are varying factors inherent in different campus settings, generalizability of the results may be limited.

When successful, an outreach program is an efficient way to proactively educate students regarding mental health issues, have a positive impact on students who may not otherwise pursue formal counseling, and promote visibility and awareness of counseling center services. Outreach programming can be used as an adjunct to individual therapy and/or used as a psychoeducational resource in and of itself to meet the current needs of students. By giving attention to students’ needs and making a targeted and concerted effort at promoting outreach presentations, the challenge of increasing attendance by students can be overcome, and the result will be well-attended programs. We hope that the information gathered from this applied research about increasing attendance at outreach presentations will allow college counselors to use the strategies that have been found to be effective or to adapt the ideas to fit their own counseling centers and campuses.
References


