

The Art of Heart-to-Heart Talks by College Counselors and Strategies to Enhance the Effectiveness of Ideological and Political Education

Yutong Wang*

Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou 570000, Hainan, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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Abstract: Heart-to-heart talks are the core means for college counselors to fulfill their ideological and political education responsibilities, a key bridge connecting teachers and students emotionally, and a critical path to implement the fundamental task of moral education. In the new era, college students have diverse ideological concepts and multi-dimensional growth needs, making traditional heart-to-heart talk models incompatible with the new requirements of ideological and political education. Based on the practical work of college counselors, this paper defines the core connotations and coupling relationship between heart-to-heart talks and ideological and political education, analyzes the practical dilemmas of counselors' heart-to-heart talks in content, methods, capabilities and mechanisms, systematically expounds the key artistic points of heart-to-heart talks throughout the whole process, puts forward targeted strategies to enhance the effectiveness of ideological and political education, and verifies the practical paths with typical cases of college student management, so as to provide theoretical support and practical reference for college counselors to optimize heart-to-heart talks and improve the pertinence and effectiveness of ideological and political education.

Keywords: College counselors; Art of heart-to-heart talks; Ideological and political education; Educational effectiveness; Promotion strategies

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Moral education is the fundamental task of higher education. As the backbone force in college students' ideological and political education, college counselors shoulder the important mission of guiding students' thinking, accompanying their growth, and facilitating their success. As a "treasured tradition" for counselors to

carry out ideological and political work, heart-to-heart talks have dual functions of emotional communication and value guidance, serving as the most direct and effective way to understand students' ideological dynamics, ease psychological confusion, and cultivate correct outlooks on the world, life, and values. At present, with the interweaving of diverse social cultures and rapid iteration of information technology, contemporary college students grow up in an environment of information explosion, showing distinct independence, selectivity, variability, and diversity in ideological activities. Problems such as academic pressure, employment anxiety, interpersonal conflicts, and value cognitive confusion occur frequently, putting forward higher requirements for the pertinence, artistry, and effectiveness of counselors' heart-to-heart talks. How to break through the limitations of traditional indoctrinative and passive talks, innovate the art of heart-to-heart talks, and strengthen the effectiveness of ideological and political education has become an urgent issue for college counselors in the new era.

1.2. Research significance

1.2.1. Theoretical significance

It enriches the methodology system of college ideological and political education, clarifies the internal logical relationship between the art of heart-to-heart talks and the effectiveness of ideological and political education, fills the gap in targeted research on the deep integration of counselors' heart-to-heart talks and ideological and political education in the new era, and provides a useful supplement to the theoretical innovation of college ideological and political education.

1.2.2. Practical significance

It provides operable skills of heart-to-heart talks and paths of ideological and political education for frontline college counselors, helping them solve work dilemmas and improve professional ability in ideological and political education; it helps college students establish correct outlooks on the world, life, and values, and cultivates new-era talents with firm ideals and beliefs, profound patriotic feelings, and excellent comprehensive qualities.

1.3. Research status at home and abroad

1.3.1. Domestic research status

Domestic academic research on counselors' heart-to-heart talks started early. Existing achievements mostly focus on basic aspects such as talk principles, methods, and skills. Some studies explore integration paths combined with ideological and political education goals, but there is a general fragmentation problem. The systematic sorting of the art of heart-to-heart talks is insufficient, the targeted research on improving the effectiveness of ideological and political education is not in-depth, and the integration with the growth characteristics of college students and college education needs in the new era needs to be strengthened. Dale Carnegie wrote in "How to Win Friends and Influence People": "You can't win an argument nine times out of ten. Treat others as you want to be treated." As a counselor, the author finds this sentence very thought-provoking. Frankly speaking, arguing with students will only make them more insistent on their own views. If we lose, we lose the initiative in education; if we win, we hurt the students' self-esteem and dignity, leading to an unpleasant teacher-student relationship. What have we really gained then?

1.3.2. Foreign research status

Foreign relevant research mostly focuses on teacher-student communication and psychological counseling, forming mature communication theories and practical methods. However, due to differences in education systems and cultural backgrounds, their research results cannot be directly applied to heart-to-heart talks in the context of college counselors' ideological and political education in China, and need to be localized according to the actual situation of Chinese colleges and universities. In fact, students have a natural tendency to accept counselors' teachings and can distinguish between positive and negative messages from counselors. As counselors, when dealing with students' problems, they should try to avoid judgment and prediction—judgment may make students develop real flaws. Labeling is harmful: labeling students based on their grades, appearance, family background, wealth, or performance. Students often grow into what counselors describe with such negative labeling.

1.4. Research content and methods

1.4.1. Research content

It defines the core connotations of college counselors' heart-to-heart talks and ideological and political education, analyzes their internal coupling relationship, explores the existing dilemmas and causes of heart-to-heart talk work, systematically sorts out the artistic points of heart-to-heart talks throughout the whole process, puts forward strategies to enhance the effectiveness of ideological and political education, and verifies practical feasibility with typical cases. Accurately grasping background information is the foundation for counselors to carry out effective heart-to-heart talks. Generally speaking, background information mainly includes students' growth experiences, main family social relations, and family economic conditions. At the same time, according to the specific situation of the interviewee, counselors should also understand their study, life, work, interpersonal relationships, as well as difficulties, confusions, and troubles in growth and development.

1.4.2. Research methods

Literature research method: Sort out domestic and foreign relevant literature to lay a theoretical foundation; Case analysis method: Select typical cases of college counselors' heart-to-heart talks to enhance practical persuasiveness; Interview method: Interview frontline counselors and college students to obtain real work materials; Inductive summary method: Refine feasible strategies to form systematic research results.

1.5. Research innovations

Based on the whole process of counselors' work, construct a three-dimensional art system of heart-to-heart talks covering "pre-talk, in-talk, and post-talk"; combine the characteristics of college students in the new era to put forward differentiated promotion strategies meeting the needs of ideological and political education; integrate practical cases of college student management to realize the deep integration of theory and practice.

2. Core connotations and the coupling relationship between college counselors' heart-to-heart talks and ideological and political education

2.1. Core connotation of college counselors' heart-to-heart talks

College counselors' heart-to-heart talks refer to emotional communication, ideological guidance, problem-solving, and value-leading activities carried out by counselors one-on-one or in groups with college students

as the core object, centering on students' ideological dynamics, academic development, living conditions, psychological state, and career planning under the fundamental principle of moral education. Its core characteristics are emotionality, pertinence, educational nature, and interactivity. Different from ordinary teacher-student chats, it has dual attributes of affair settlement and ideological education, serving as the core carrier for counselors to perform student management and ideological and political education responsibilities.

2.2. Core connotation and goals of college ideological and political education

College ideological and political education takes Marxism as the guide, focuses on the fundamental task of moral education, cultivates college students' correct outlooks on the world, life and values through diversified educational carriers, improves their ideological and moral cultivation, political literacy and social responsibility awareness, and cultivates socialist builders and successors who support the Party's leadership, root in China and serve national development. The core goals include: consolidating the foundation of ideals and beliefs, cultivating correct values, improving comprehensive humanistic quality, strengthening the sense of responsibility in the new era, and realizing the resonance between students' personal growth and national development.

2.3. Coupling relationship between the art of heart-to-heart talks and the effectiveness of ideological and political education

The art of heart-to-heart talks is the core support for improving the effectiveness of ideological and political education. Excellent talk art can dispel students' resistance, transform ideological and political content from theoretical indoctrination to spiritual resonance, and improve educational acceptance; the effectiveness of ideological and political education is the value goal of the art of heart-to-heart talks. The ultimate purpose of heart-to-heart talks is to implement ideological and political education goals, and all communication skills serve students' ideological growth and value shaping. The two are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, forming a positive cycle of "educating through talks and shaping souls through education." Speaking is one of the main ways of communication and an important means for counselors to educate students. In the author's student work, the author has always adhered to two principles: "Interesting" and "Evidence-Based."

Interesting Principle: The author likes to let students learn with interest rather than being forced to learn. For example, when learning English, start with translating the name of a pack of tissues—Hearttex ("mind act upon mind"). Then, encourage students to collect and memorize common CET-4 and CET-6 words in daily life, like "Crest", "Rejoice", and "VIP" in a "stamp-collecting" way. Alternatively, suggest students switch their mobile phone language to English. In this way, English words such as contacts, messages, videos, record, confirm, and delete will soon be remembered, changing the boring English recitation mode and enhancing enthusiasm for English learning. The core of the interesting principle is that when counselors provide guidance and communication, the ideas and methods conveyed to students are novel, meaningful, and interesting, making students accept them willingly with great interest.

Evidence-Based Principle: This principle best reflects counselors' image of being rigorous, thorough, and meticulous. For example, regarding employment: the number of college graduates in China exceeded 10 million in 2021, the average monthly income of 2022 undergraduates was 5,990 yuan, and the admission rate for postgraduates nationwide in 2023 was 16%. When communicating with students about employment situations and backgrounds, accurate and timely data can reflect the authority and scientificity of the employment

guidance and services. In the face of many facts, data is the strength. When counselors need to “take up arms”, they should not use empty and vague words. Being reasonable and evidence-based, using numbers to prove points, striking a chord with students—this is the right way.

3. Current situation, dilemmas, and causes of college counselors’ heart-to-heart talk work

3.1. Current situation

Colleges and universities generally attach importance to counselors’ heart-to-heart talk work, incorporating it into daily work assessment. Most counselors can take the initiative to carry out talks, focusing on providing basic guidance on students’ academic, psychological, and employment issues. With the deepening of ideological and political education, some counselors try online-offline integrated talk models, expanding the coverage of talks. However, the overall quality is uneven. Some talks only stay at the level of “completing tasks”, with insufficient integration of ideological and political elements, and the educational effectiveness is not fully exerted. Of course, in the process of giving suggestions, the students’ trust and affection for the counselor are crucial. With them, students will open up their hearts wholeheartedly; otherwise, conflicts will occur frequently. Beyond the basic framework, many aspects such as cognition, attitude, and behavior will become a “contest” or dispute, and even questioning and arguing will become the norm. However, most students’ affection has no quantitative indicators—it is simply liking, recognition, and willingness to listen. Therefore, a counselor’s personal style supported by their own cognition and knowledge, ability and attitude, personality, and accomplishment is a feasible and powerful way to achieve this. Whether gentle and firm, capable and professional, elegant and approachable, or decisive and efficient, counselors can influence and guide students with their personal charm, so as to give appropriate, feasible, and acceptable suggestions to students at the right time.

3.2. Practical dilemmas

3.2.1. Single talk content and insufficient integration of ideological and political elements

Talks mostly focus on problem-oriented content such as academic failure and disciplinary punishment, emphasizing affair settlement over ideological guidance, and lacking guidance on students’ ideals and beliefs, patriotic feelings and professional ethics; the content is fragmented, failing to build a systematic ideological and political education system combined with students’ grade and major characteristics, resulting in the shortcoming of “more talks on problems, fewer talks on ideology.” Listen attentively, speak less and listen more: Listening is a form of respect and recognition for students, enabling them to open up their hearts, which serves as the foundation for effective guidance afterward.

3.2.2. Rigid talk methods and lack of pertinence

The traditional indoctrinative and one-way talk model is still used, focusing on “teachers speaking and students listening” and ignoring students’ dominant position; talk scenarios are limited to offices with a serious and oppressive atmosphere; differentiated measures are not taken according to students’ personalities and growth backgrounds, and talks with introverted, personality and special-family students lack flexibility, making it difficult to achieve emotional resonance. Use silence appropriately: Timely silence during talks can express care and respect, prompt students to reflect, and help counselors clarify students’ attitudes, enhancing the pertinence

of guidance.

3.2.3. Inadequate talk ability and artistic literacy

Some counselors lack systematic communication skills training, make inadequate preparations before talks, and have insufficient understanding of students; during talks, they are not good at listening, eager to interrupt students' expressions, and unable to capture ideological pain points; their language expression is rigid, making it difficult to naturally integrate ideological and political elements, resulting in the problem of "ideological and political content being divorced from talk content"; their understanding of students' psychology is insufficient, and their counseling ability is weak. Convey hopes to students: Avoid imperative language; instead, express expectations with trusting and encouraging words. This not only maintains counselors' authority but also makes students feel cared for, boosting their motivation to act.

3.2.4. Imperfect mechanism construction and lack of educational guarantee

The regular interview mechanism is not fully implemented, with most talks conducted only after problems occur, lacking active prevention; the follow-up feedback and support mechanism after talks is missing, resulting in "ending talks once finished" and incomplete problem-solving; the assessment and evaluation emphasize quantity over quality, taking the number of talks as the core indicator and ignoring the effectiveness of ideological and political education, leading to insufficient motivation for counselors to improve quality. Abandon the "eagerness to teach" mindset: Communicate with students with a learning attitude, use more inquisitive tones rather than forced expressions, share experiences based on students' characteristics, and avoid blind preaching^[1].

3.2.5. Low student cooperation and great communication resistance

Some students misunderstand heart-to-heart talks as criticism and indoctrination, hiding their true thoughts during talks; some students have strong self-awareness and resist ideological guidance; indulgence in the internet leads to weak willingness for offline communication, and online talks lack emotional warmth, affecting educational effectiveness. Minimize negative vocabulary: Replace negative expressions with positive ones to reduce students' resistance, offer more affirmation and encouragement, and narrow the distance between teachers and students.

3.3. Analysis of dilemma causes

3.3.1. Counselor level: Insufficient sense of responsibility and professional ability

Some counselors underestimate the ideological and political education value of heart-to-heart talks, equating them with routine work; they are burdened with heavy daily work, including student management and scholarship evaluation, resulting in limited energy; new counselors lack work experience and systematic training, with room for improvement in professional ability. Combine strictness with leniency: Clearly and seriously point out students' mistakes to avoid misleading them; after criticism, acknowledge students' strengths, jointly analyze problems, provide solutions and future plans, balancing principles with care. Attach importance to follow-up tracking and return visits: After talks, promptly explore the root causes of problems, summarize and reflect, strengthen relevant education, and prevent other students from encountering similar issues.

3.3.2. College level: Imperfect support and guarantee system

The training system is inadequate, focusing on theory over practice; there is a lack of dedicated talk venues to create a relaxed atmosphere; the assessment and incentive mechanism is unreasonable, failing to include educational effectiveness in core indicators; insufficient efforts to reduce counselors' non-core workload affect their work input.

3.3.3. Student and social level: Dual influences of a diverse environment

The impact of diverse social cultures and negative online information leads to chaotic values among some students; most contemporary college students are only children with strong self-awareness and insufficient communication skills; academic and employment pressure make students pay more attention to practical interests and less to ideological guidance.

4. The core art of college counselors' heart-to-heart talks

4.1. The art of pre-talk preparation: precise policy-making to lay a solid foundation for education

4.1.1. Fully investigate students' situation and establish a personalized file for each student

Comprehensively sort out students' family background, academic performance, personality traits, hobbies, and psychological state, and grasp their ideological dynamics through class cadres, roommates, and parents to accurately locate core puzzles and avoid blind talks.

4.1.2. Clarify talk objectives and lock the direction of ideological and political education

Distinguish between problem-solving, ideological guidance, and growth-support talks, and clarify the focus of value guidance combined with ideological and political goals to ensure that talks do not deviate from the core of moral education.

4.1.3. Optimize talk scenarios and mentality to create a relaxed atmosphere

Select talk venues according to students' personalities; for introverted students, choose relaxed places such as campus corridors and cafes; adjust personal mentality, abandon the identity of "manager", and carry out talks as an equal and respectful companion.

4.2. The art of in-talk communication: Empathy to convey the warmth of ideological and political education

4.2.1. The art of listening: listen patiently to understand students' true thoughts

Achieve "three types of listening": listen patiently without interrupting arbitrarily; listen attentively to capture implicit meanings; listen empathetically to understand feelings from students' perspective, and lay a solid emotional foundation.

4.2.2. The art of language: Influence students gently to convey ideological strength

Use down-to-earth language instead of empty indoctrination; keep language sincere and warm, with more encouragement and less criticism; make language accurate and in-depth, integrating ideological and political elements with students' majors; keep language flexible and appropriate, adjusting tone according to different

students' personalities.

4.2.3. The art of emotion: Touch students with sincere feelings to narrow the emotional gap

Treat students sincerely with genuine feelings, think in others' shoes with empathy, guide students' mentality with positive emotions, and let ideological and political education take root in emotional resonance ^[2].

4.2.4. The art of questioning: Guide students step by step to inspire independent thinking

Use more open-ended and progressive questions, from superficial puzzles to ideological depth, guide students to reflect independently, realize self-education, and avoid one-way indoctrination.

4.2.5. The art of feedback: Respond timely to strengthen educational effectiveness

Affirm students' correct ideas in a timely manner, guide their wrong perceptions tactfully, recognize their efforts and progress, and make students feel valued.

4.3. The art of post-talk follow-up: Persistently consolidate educational effectiveness

4.3.1. Sort out and summarize timely to improve students' files

Record core talk content and support measures, update students' files, reflect on talk deficiencies, and optimize subsequent work methods.

4.3.2. Follow-up support measures to solve practical problems

Formulate exclusive support plans for students' problems; coordinate tutoring resources for academic difficulties, and link with psychological counseling centers for psychological puzzles to ensure every matter is addressed.

4.3.3. Make regular return visits to deepen ideological guidance

Carry out regular return visits according to students' growth nodes, continuously integrate ideological and political guidance, let ideological education run through the whole process of students' growth, and achieve "one talk with long-term influence."

5. Strategies to enhance the effectiveness of ideological and political education from the perspective of college counselors' heart-to-heart talks

5.1. Enrich talk content: Focus on the core of ideological and political education to realize content-based education

Construct a trinity content system of "problems, ideology, and growth" to make talks both down-to-earth and ideological. Focus on differences in students' grades and majors: carry out adaptation education and ideal belief education for junior students, academic planning and moral cultivation education for intermediate students, and employment entrepreneurship and social responsibility education for senior students; integrate ideological and political elements with professional characteristics, such as integrating Nightingale Spirit and benevolence of medical workers into nursing majors to realize the deep integration of professional education and ideological and political education; strengthen patriotic feelings and sense of responsibility education combined with current hot topics and industry model deeds.

5.2. Innovate talk methods: Adapt to students' characteristics to realize method-based education

Implement differentiated talks: adopt guided talks for introverted students, discussion-based talks for personality students and caring talks for students from special families; expand diversified scenarios, break the limitation of offices to extend to campuses and internship bases, and combine online-offline linkage mode to meet students' communication needs; enrich talk forms, integrate one-on-one talks, group discussions and immersive practical talks to improve students' participation.

5.3. Improve ability and literacy: Strengthen team construction to realize ability-based education

Strengthen ideological construction to improve counselors' political theoretical literacy and morality; build a systematic training system, invite experts to carry out special training on communication skills, psychological counseling, and ideological and political integration, and organize simulation exercises and experience exchanges; encourage counselors to independently learn psychology and pedagogy to broaden knowledge and improve professional educational ability^[3].

5.4. Improve long-term mechanisms: Perfect system guarantee to realize mechanism-based education

Implement the “five mandatory talks” system (mandatory talks for new student enrollment, academic difficulties, psychological abnormalities, disciplinary punishment and graduation), and establish a regular interview mechanism; build a closed-loop follow-up mechanism of “talks-support-return visits-summary” to form educational synergy; optimize the assessment and evaluation mechanism, incorporate educational effectiveness and student satisfaction into core indicators and link them with excellent evaluation and professional title promotion; improve the incentive guarantee mechanism, provide dedicated talk venues and funds, and reduce non-core workload.

5.5. Gather educational synergy: Create a good environment to realize environment-based education

Optimize the campus educational environment and create brand activities of red culture and professional culture; strengthen home-school coordination, establish a regular home-school communication mechanism, and guide parents to participate in ideological and political education; integrate social resources, invite industry models and outstanding alumni to campus, organize students to participate in volunteer services, and transform ideological guidance into practical actions.

6. Case analysis: Practical exploration of ideological and political education aided by heart-to-heart talks

6.1. Case background

Zhang, a sophomore nursing student at a university, had low professional recognition due to voluntary adjustment, with declining academic performance, absenteeism, introversion and social withdrawal, and confusion about future career development, resisting teacher-student communication.

6.2. Talk implementation process

Before the talk, the counselor found out the situation through files, roommates and parents, clarified the goal of “alleviating resistance, strengthening professional identity and establishing career ideals”, and chose the campus nursing training base as the talk venue; during the talk, starting with training equipment, the counselor listened to the student’s puzzles patiently, explained the value of nursing profession combined with Nightingale’s deeds, resolved confusion with outstanding alumni cases, and guided him to establish the concept of benevolence of medical workers; after the talk, the counselor formulated an academic support plan, recommended him to participate in nursing volunteer services and made regular return visits to track ideological changes.

6.3. Case effectiveness

Zhang gradually changed his attitude towards nursing, regained learning confidence, improved academic performance steadily, took the initiative to participate in volunteer services, clarified his career goals, and aspired to become a caring nurse, achieving remarkable effectiveness in ideological and political education.

6.4. Case enlightenment

Heart-to-heart talks need precise policy-making, integrating ideological and political elements with professional characteristics; thorough preparation, effective communication, and continuous follow-up throughout the whole process are crucial to realize the dual goals of ideological guidance and problem-solving.

7. Conclusion

This paper studies the art of college counselors’ heart-to-heart talks and strategies to enhance the effectiveness of ideological and political education, and confirms that heart-to-heart talks are the core carrier of college students’ ideological and political education. The research shows that sincerity, empathy, and pertinence are the core of the art of heart-to-heart talks, while student-centered concept, innovative talk forms, improved counselor literacy, and collaborative mechanism are key to enhancing the effectiveness of ideological and political education.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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