



# Professionalizing Counselors Teams in Vocational Education: A Five-Dimensional Framework Centered on Moral Cultivation, Skill Development, and Talent Formation

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## Abstract

Counselors in vocational education play a crucial role as agents of moral guidance, technical facilitation, and holistic student development. As the global economy increasingly relies on high-quality technical and skilled labor, the professionalization of counselors teams has become essential to ensure that vocational education cultivates both competence and character. This paper draws on insights from China's vocational education reforms and international practices to conceptualize the counselor's role. We argue that this role needs to be professionalized, vocationalized, and stabilized to effectively bridge the domains of moral education, skill development, and talent formation. The study identifies key challenges—such as work overload, limited professional preparation, and insufficient institutional recognition—and proposes a comprehensive five-dimensional framework encompassing value-based selection, systematic training, evidence-driven evaluation, incentive-aligned promotion, and holistic well-being support. By integrating moral cultivation, skill development, and talent formation into counselors professionalization, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of how vocational institutions can achieve human-centered education and sustainable workforce development in skill-oriented societies.

## Subject Areas

Education Administration

## Keywords

Vocational Education, Counselors, Professionalization, Moral Education, Skill Development, Talent Formation

## 1. Introduction

Vocational education occupies a strategic position in the transformation toward innovation-driven and skill-oriented economies. Beyond merely transferring occupational competencies, vocational institutions are responsible for cultivating ethical integrity, civic consciousness, and a spirit of lifelong learning. Within this context, counselors play a uniquely integrative role—connecting students' moral growth, technical capability, and psychosocial resilience—making them critical to realizing the “three-dimensional objective” of vocational education: moral cultivation, technical skill development, and talent formation [1]-[4]. However, across many educational systems, the counselor's role remains under-recognized and under-resourced. Counselors frequently manage extensive administrative duties, lack specialized preparation in vocational pedagogy or counseling, and face unclear career pathways [1]-[4]. Such systemic constraints not only burden counselors but also hinder their ability to fulfill the deeper educational mandate of vocational institutions, ultimately impeding the achievement of the three-dimensional objective.

To address these challenges and align counselors team development with the three-dimensional objective, this study proposes a targeted Five-Dimensional Framework. By exploring how this five-dimensional framework can professionalize counselors teams, this research aims to provide a long-term mechanism for sustainable counselors team building, supporting vocational institutions in fulfilling their role in human-centered education and sustainable workforce development.

The analytical basis of this paper is rooted in Chinese policy documents on vocational education reform and empirical studies published in domestic core journals. By systematically reviewing relevant Chinese literature from the past decade, this study synthesizes the core challenges and role expectations for counselors within China's institutional context. This primarily domestic analysis is occasionally juxtaposed with international discourse to highlight distinctive features of the Chinese context, ultimately aiming to construct a localized, actionable five-dimensional professional development framework.

## 2. Counselors' Core Responsibilities under the Three-Dimensional Educational Objective

The three-dimensional objective of moral cultivation, technical skill development, and talent formation defines not only the intended outcomes of vocational education but also the fundamental responsibilities of counselors within this system. Counselors are not merely facilitators of student affairs; they are practitioners and transmitters of these three educational dimensions.

### 2.1. Moral Cultivation: Counselors as Ethical Guides and Value Shapers

Within the moral dimension, counselors serve as the ethical compass of vocational

education. Their primary responsibility is to integrate moral education into the daily rhythm of campus life, helping students cultivate integrity, empathy, and social responsibility through consistent modeling and reflective dialogue. Unlike classroom teachers who transmit disciplinary knowledge, counselors embody the moral culture of the institution through personal conduct and mentoring [5]. Their credibility as “ethical professionals” determines their ability to influence students’ value orientations.

## **2.2. Skill Development: Counselors as Career Mentors and Learning Facilitators**

The second dimension—technical skill development—positions counselors as connectors between education and industry. Their duty is not to teach technical content directly but to create enabling conditions for skill mastery. This includes advising students on vocational pathways, coordinating with enterprises for internships, and promoting participation in technical competitions. Counselors also help students build “learning resilience” by addressing psychological barriers that hinder performance. Their understanding of labor market trends and professional standards allows them to guide students toward realistic and aspirational goals, thereby helping students integrate technical competence with professional identity.

## **2.3. Talent Formation: Counselors as Developers of Human Potential**

The third dimension—talent formation—extends beyond skill acquisition toward the comprehensive development of personality, creativity, and civic capacity. Counselors serve as developmental mentors, cultivating self-efficacy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence among students. Their work includes early identification of developmental risks, provision of psychological counseling, and coordination of holistic support systems that sustain student growth. Ultimately, talent formation as a counselors’ task signifies the transformation from managing students to developing people.

# **3. Challenges in Counselors Professionalization**

Despite their importance, counselors teams in many vocational institutions remain underdeveloped and undervalued [6] [7]. Three structural challenges are particularly salient.

## **3.1. Overloaded Responsibilities and Limited Focus**

Counselors often manage an extensive range of duties that extend beyond their educational mandate. The counselors-to-student ratio frequently exceeds 1:300, far surpassing best practices. Consequently, counselors struggle to engage in meaningful moral and career guidance, leading to fatigue, anxiety, and professional burnout [7]. This excessive workload undermines the three-dimensional educational objectives.

### **3.2. Mismatch of Professional Competence**

Many counselors enter the profession without adequate training in psychology, pedagogy, or vocational education. Their academic preparation may lie in unrelated fields, leaving them ill-equipped for tasks such as career counseling, psychological intervention, and value-based education. The absence of systematic professional development programs has led to an uneven level of counselors quality, impeding the institutionalization of moral and technical education as an integrated process.

### **3.3. Ambiguous Role Identity and Weak Recognition**

In many institutions, counselors are perceived as general administrative staff rather than educators. Their work is difficult to quantify, and its outcomes—such as moral growth or social adaptability—are not easily measurable. This weak institutional recognition translates into limited promotion opportunities, inadequate compensation, and low professional identity [7]. Without clear career pathways, counselors retention remains a persistent issue, resulting in instability and a loss of institutional continuity.

## **4. A Five-Dimensional Framework for Counselors Team Development**

Against the challenges of counselors overload, insufficient professional competence, and weak institutional recognition, this study proposes a targeted Five-Dimensional Framework to align counselors development with the three-dimensional educational objectives. This framework comprises five interconnected dimensions: 1) value-based and competency-oriented selection, 2) systematic and tiered training, 3) evidence-based evaluation and dynamic management, 4) incentive systems and dual-career pathways, and 5) psychological well-being and institutional support.

### **4.1. Value-Based and Competency-Oriented Selection**

As the foundational link of counselors team construction, selection should center on two core pillars: moral value alignment and vocational competence matching. It is necessary to assess candidates' ethical awareness, sense of social responsibility, and ability to integrate moral guidance into vocational education scenarios. Evaluation of vocational literacy and interpersonal communication skills is essential to guarantee counselors can bridge the gap between moral education, skill guidance, and student development.

### **4.2. Systematic and Tiered Training**

Training serves as the core driver of counselors professionalization, requiring an institutionalized tiered model embedded in a continuous professional development (CPD) framework. Pre-service training focuses on role orientation, covering the connotation of vocational education's three-dimensional objectives and basic

ethical norms for counselors. In-service development emphasizes specialized capacity building, with modular courses tailored to the three-dimensional objectives and emerging demands [8] [9], which is crucial for enhancing counselors' ability to respond to practical challenges.

#### **4.3. Evidence-Based Evaluation and Dynamic Management**

To break away from the traditional focus on administrative compliance, evaluation should establish an evidence-driven, multi-dimensional system oriented to the three-dimensional educational objectives. Assessment dimensions should cover three core outcome areas: moral outcomes (e.g., student integrity performance, participation in social responsibility activities), skill outcomes (e.g., internship completion rates, skill competition awards, vocational qualification attainment), and talent outcomes (e.g., student retention rates, employment quality, mental health scores) [9]—supplemented by evaluations of counselors' own professional competence. Concrete metrics could include tracking student development portfolios, incorporating enterprise feedback data, and utilizing well-being screening results to enhance objectivity and guidance.

#### **4.4. Incentive Systems and Dual-Career Pathways**

Sustaining counselors motivation and retention requires a dual guarantee of incentives and career development. In terms of incentive mechanisms, a transparent and equitable structure should be established to recognize hard work and enhance professional pride. For career pathways, a dual-ladder design should be adopted, a view supported by existing research [3] [10]: the “professional development ladder” for those focused on counseling practice and academic research, and the “administrative management ladder” for those with leadership potential. The implementation of this dual-path system requires alignment with existing post structures and professional title evaluation mechanisms in Chinese vocational colleges. Clear promotion criteria and transition mechanisms for each path must be established, avoiding role ambiguity and responsibility overlap, thereby enhancing the feasibility and acceptability of the system.

#### **4.5. Psychological Well-Being and Institutional Support**

Counselors' well-being is a prerequisite for their effective service, requiring comprehensive institutional support for physical and mental health. On one hand, psychological support systems should be built [8]; on the other hand, workload optimization and role clarification are essential [6]. This direct link between counselors well-being and their ability to fulfill the three-dimensional objectives underscores the importance of this dimension within the framework.

### **5. Conclusion and Implications**

The professionalization of counselors teams represents both an educational reform and a social innovation. In skill-oriented societies, moral and technical edu-

cation cannot be separated; counselors embody the integration of these domains. Through professionalization, vocationalization, and stabilization, counselors become educators who nurture not only skilled workers but also reflective, responsible citizens. The proposed five-dimensional framework provides a roadmap for institutions seeking to institutionalize counselors development. Its implementation requires systemic support—from government policy to institutional culture—and alignment with global best practices in lifelong learning and human capital development.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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