

COVID-19 Return-to-Campus Considerations for California Community College Counseling Faculty

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This document was developed by and in consultation with lead author Doralí Pichardo-Díaz (Counseling faculty member, Rio Hondo College), Steve Bautista (Counseling faculty member, Santa Ana College), Flor Huerta (Counseling faculty member, Fullerton College), Lorena Marquez (Counseling faculty member, Fullerton College), Yvonne Portillo (Counseling faculty member, Golden West College), and Luisa Cortez-Ortiz (Counseling faculty member, Los Angeles City College).

As community colleges begin discussions about a return to campus, at the center of most conversations are the safety implications for the classroom setting. While this is a critical conversation, it is important to recognize that counseling faculty also have roles outside of the classroom with substantial face-to-face interaction with students, often at very close range and in confined office spaces. When discussing the environmental and personal prevention practices that need to be considered to protect both students and campus personnel, it is of utmost importance that campus leadership include counseling faculty and their role outside of the classroom in the conversation.

Phasing counseling faculty back into the office space creates new uncertainties about personal safety, new routines, and the work environment. Leaders across campuses need to consider how the return of counseling faculty to the office will impact work effectiveness, stress, and appropriate working conditions.

As open access institutions, community colleges can not mandate vaccinations. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions take proper precautions to minimize the spread of COVID-19. As campus leaders plan for a safe return to campus, the following are recommendations to keep in mind when considering the role of counseling faculty:

1. Campus Communication

- a. Counseling faculty should be part of campus conversations that will impact decisions of what a safe return to campus will look like. Should a campus develop a COVID-19 task force/committee or any decision-making body that will be addressing the safe return to campus, it is strongly recommended that a counseling faculty member be included. Inclusion of counseling faculty in these decision-making bodies will help ensure that the proper safety measures are considered for both students and counselors in their daily interactions.

2. Considerations of the Physical Workspace for the Delivery of Counseling Services

In addition to teaching in the classroom, counseling faculty work with students in counseling appointments, walk-in/express counseling, and deliver small and large group presentations and workshops. As leaders begin their return-to-campus plans, appropriately socially distanced and ventilated work spaces are needed to ensure that both counseling faculty and students remain safe. Counseling faculty offices tend to be small and do not allow for the recommended 6-foot distancing, nor do they always have adequate ventilation equipment or structures. Therefore, ventilation system upgrades or improvements are needed to increase the delivery of clean air and dilute potential contaminants.

With this in mind, the following considerations for a counseling faculty member's physical workspace need to be addressed:

- a. Spaces that allow for a minimum of 6 feet of social distancing between counselor and student (and perhaps even more distance with the emergence of the more contagious virus variants).
- b. Decrease occupancy in areas where outdoor ventilation cannot be increased.
- c. Provide physical guides, such as tape on floors or sidewalks and signs on walls to ensure that individuals remain at least 6 feet apart in lines and at other times.
- d. Install physical barriers, such as sneeze guards and partitions, stanchion barriers, temporary ropes, or other easily movable structures to restrict movement in buildings and outline designated areas that are marked for social distancing, particularly in areas where it is difficult for individuals to remain at least 6 feet apart (e.g., cash registers).
- e. When weather conditions allow, increase fresh outdoor air by opening windows and doors.
- f. Use fans to increase the effectiveness of open windows. To safely achieve this, fan placement is important and will vary based upon room configuration. Avoid placing fans in a way that could potentially cause contaminated air to flow directly from one person to another.
- g. Ensure restroom exhaust fans are functional and operating at full capacity when the building is occupied.
 - i. Restrict use of hand dryers and provide adequate paper products for hand drying.
- h. Open outdoor air dampers beyond minimum settings to reduce or eliminate HVAC air recirculation.
- i. Use portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fan/filtration systems to help enhance air cleaning.

- j. Use ultraviolet germicidal irradiation (UVGI) as a supplement to help inactivate SARS-CoV-2.
- k. Turn off any demand-controlled ventilation (DCV) controls that reduce air supply based on occupancy or temperature during occupied hours.
- l. HVAC fan operation can be controlled at the thermostat; set the fan to the “on” position instead of “auto,” which will operate the fan continuously, even when heating or air-conditioning is not required.

3. Communal Areas/Student Waiting Spaces

Counseling faculty offices are often in spaces where students congregate such as counseling centers, transfer centers, career centers, first year success centers, etc. Peak times such as transfer application filing period, registration, and graduation petitions often increase student traffic flow to common waiting areas while students wait for counseling appointments and services. Further, many counseling faculty offices are within Student Services centers that have open concept floor plans. This creates a secondary issue due to a lack of physical spaces with protective barriers, the ability to monitor movement and occupancy within the building, and challenges with temporary modifications to counseling faculty work spaces. The following are recommendations to consider when configuring these communal areas:

- a. Space seating/desks at least 6 feet apart when feasible in common areas where students tend to wait for services.
- b. Host smaller classes, workshops, and presentations in larger rooms such as large lecture halls. When possible, tape off seats and rows to ensure six-foot distance between students.
- c. Turn desks to face the same direction (rather than facing each other), or have students sit spaced 6 feet apart on only one side of tables.
- d. Modify learning stations and activities as applicable so that there are fewer students per group, with each student being placed at least 6 feet apart whenever possible.
- e. Offer distance learning and hybrid classes to minimize the number of in-person learners on campus and ensure safety of counseling faculty and students.
- f. Provide adequate distance between people engaged in experiential learning opportunities (e.g., labs, vocational skill building activities, etc.).
- g. Orientation and group counseling sessions should be held in smaller-group sessions in larger spaces. Considerations for online video orientations with shorter in-person advising sessions are recommended. Supplement with written text, narrated video, infographic, slides and other media in an open-access Canvas shell that students can access at any time.

- h. Minimize high-touch materials: limit sharing of office supplies and other resources typically shared among colleagues and students.

4. Contact Tracing for Non-Students or Members of the Public Seeking Information

As an open-entry campus, community colleges will be faced with having to re-imagine how to serve community members who are not registered students. Often, student services offices are initial points of contact for prospective students and the community; contact tracing can be difficult when personal information is not available .

Administrators will need to consider how to track these individuals for potential contact tracing, including the assignment of a temporary student ID number along with requiring the collection of name, address, and phone or email address for all visitors. Counseling faculty are often called upon to answer questions from community members which can pose potential exposure. Therefore, it is important to consider having a check-in/check-out process, an online health screening form before stepping foot on campus, or even a self-reporting app to help campuses monitor traces of exposure.

5. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Since COVID-19 is thought to mainly spread by respiratory droplets released when people talk, cough, or sneeze, much needs to be considered in these high contamination settings. The role of counseling faculty performing their duties in spaces that don't allow for the recommended 6 feet of separation, outdated or poorly ventilated air systems, and face coverings that make it difficult to identify non-verbal facial cues pose a lot of challenges.

According to the CDC, the more a person interacts with others, and the longer that interaction lasts, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread in the community. This implies that limiting the physical time that a student spends in a counseling office minimizes risk for both the counselor and student. Typical counseling appointments last anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes. To continue providing counseling faculty and students the appropriate amount of time, the continuation of remote services is strongly encouraged.

- a. Masks Required for all visitors.
Institutions should have disposable masks available for counseling faculty and students. Proper use of face masks is crucial in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, administrators should empower counseling faculty with the right to refuse services when this guideline is not followed. Proper and consistent signage should also be used across the campus regarding mask wearing to create a campus culture that promotes and enforces this critical safety measure.
- b. Sanitizing stations and disinfecting work areas.
Each campus is encouraged to promote and reinforce cleaning, disinfection, and

healthy hygiene practices as recommended and documented in the California Department of Public Health, COVID-19 Industry Guidance: Institutions of Higher Education (covid19.ca.gov, 2020). Campuses should ensure adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene, including sanitation stations, soap, hand sanitizer containing at least 60 percent ethyl alcohol, paper towels, tissues, disinfectant wipes, and no-touch/foot pedal operated trash cans.

- c. In addition, each individual counseling office should be stocked with the aforementioned supplies to ensure quick and easy access.

6. Updating Campus Policies

Clear campus policies and signage across campus need to be developed that would explain the mask-wearing mandate, as well as how it will be enforced and by whom. At the same time, administrators need to plan for accommodations, modifications, and assistance for students with disabilities and special healthcare needs. Wearing masks may be difficult for people with sensory (e.g., visual or hearing) or cognitive disabilities or behavioral challenges, or persons with chronic health conditions that cause breathing difficulties.

7. Pro's and Con's of Remaining Remote

The quick transition to remote counseling presented many challenges. Counseling faculty, however, quickly adapted and transformed their services in a way that increased access and promoted equity and inclusion. Each campus needs to be open to serving students in new and innovative ways that work with students' life commitments and work schedules. Many students are essential workers and live in multi-generational homes. Therefore, supporting students in non-traditional ways will be key to the retention of disproportionately impacted populations.

- a. Considerations for short- and long-term planning
 - i. Many campuses have reported an increase in appointment fill rates and attendance. While serving students is at the forefront, it is important it is done in a safe environment. This has led to the belief that there may be a place for expanded remote counseling services even when campuses are back to functioning at full on-campus capacity.
 1. Revisit remote counseling services and alternative hours beyond traditional schedules.
 2. Offer additional phone appointments, chat, and email communication to limit physical contact and increase access to those without the technology for video appointments.

3. Consider modifying in-person hours to limited times when students are more likely to be on campus and in need of services.
 4. Require pre-registration or appointments for students to minimize the number of individuals in a building at a given time.
 5. Consider messaging all students with a scheduled appointment that they need to either cancel or convert to a phone or video appointment if they are experiencing any symptoms of illness or fever.
- ii. Faculty workload and compensation
1. Campuses may consider revisiting faculty contracts and diversifying options for delivery of counseling services.

8. Hybrid Options

- a. Innovation for access: campuses are encouraged to get creative and consider options such as providing spaces for students to access technology needed to see a counselor in a remote environment (i.e., student on campus, counselor remote). As student services slowly begin to return to campus, innovation and creativity should be used to help implement hybrid approaches that provide essential support to students and maintain safety protocols. Some examples of hybrid models could include:
- i. On-campus staff with proper personal protective equipment (PPE) could be available to assist students with accessing counselors and other faculty working remotely using on-campus computers and office spaces.
 - ii. If students need on-campus student services, stations could be available on campus with live remote counseling to assist students with their counseling needs.
 - iii. Re-imagine spaces for the delivery of on-campus counseling services where physical distancing is not possible in student service areas. This includes exploration of other campus spaces where counseling can be moved temporarily to adhere to both social distancing and FERPA guidelines.
 - iv. Create hubs where students can access multiple services in one spot so that students don't have to navigate multiple offices. Also, attendance can be monitored.

9. Future Directions for Counseling Faculty

a. Mental Health

- i. To help counseling faculty in their transition back to campus and to help them feel less apprehensive about returning, the American Psychological Association recommends that leaders ease uncertainty by giving each faculty decision-making power over where, how and when they work.
- ii. Supporting the mental health and well-being of counseling faculty with supportive and safe working conditions will allow for effective delivery of services to the students being served. The small physical space of counseling offices may very well trigger a sense of anxiety among counseling faculty.
- iii. The constant revolving door of students in their offices every 30 to 60 minutes does not always allow enough time to disinfect the space before another student appointment comes in. Administrators need to consider time between appointments to sanitize and disinfect and limit the overall number of hours on campus.
- iv. Leaders across college campuses should also consider creating favorable work environments by encouraging counseling faculty to have some control over decisions about where and when they work. In addition, leaders should consider whether counseling faculty can continue to work remotely. Campus leaders can also consider providing a dedicated flex hour, beyond lunch, that is devoted to outdoor activities, recreation, or exercise. This extra time can serve as a coping strategy to help counseling faculty recharge and transition from remote work to office work.

b. Maintaining Healthy Operations

Institutions of higher education may consider implementing several strategies to maintain healthy operations. This includes protections for students, faculty, and staff at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

- i. Offer options for faculty and staff at higher risk for severe illness (including older adults and people of all ages with certain underlying medical conditions) that limit their exposure risk (e.g., telework and modified job responsibilities).
- ii. Offer options for students at higher risk for severe illness that limit their exposure risk (e.g., virtual learning opportunities).
- iii. Provide inclusive programming for people with special healthcare needs and disabilities that allow on-site or virtual participation with appropriate

accommodations, modifications, and assistance (e.g., students with disabilities may have more difficulties accessing and using technology for virtual learning).

- iv. Consistent with applicable law, put in place policies to protect the privacy of people at higher risk for severe illness (e.g., policies to protect the health information of people with underlying medical conditions).

10. Implications for Practice

Counseling faculty are committed to student success and the well-being of students they serve. Counseling is a highly personalized process and requires considerations beyond that of classroom instructional and general staff interactions. Considerations and implications for on-campus counseling practices include the following:

Balancing safety needs for all with the needs of students. Spending prolonged time with students helps build rapport, counselor/student trust, and provides time for engagement and sharing. However, the safety protocol for COVID-19 recommends limiting this type of interaction. Furthermore, counselors are bound by FERPA regulations in order to maintain confidentiality. Therefore, a counselor's workspace can not be altered in a way that violates this protection.

Some of the nuanced challenges that counselors will be faced with is having a student appointment with masks on, as masks limit the giving and receiving of non-verbal cues. The counseling profession relies on listening skills and non-verbal cues to properly probe students and work toward a plan that takes personal, educational, and career goals into consideration. While recognizing equity and access to technology, considerations for remote sessions that allow for non-verbal interaction should be prioritized over in-person sessions while wearing masks.

Finally, equity-centered counseling practices, particularly for marginalized students who are often reluctant to seek services, require time together and extensive rapport building. This work is more extensive than just writing education plans or explaining college policies. It requires time for counselors to meet with students to establish trust, learn more about the students' experiences, and help with answering questions and sharing resources. However, unless done in a safe physical environment with proper safety protocols for COVID-19, these types of interactions are limited. Advocacy for transformational counseling practices over transactional ones are key to forging these student connections and are critical during the return to campus transition. Counseling faculty should be supported in providing services that meet both equity needs and build student trust and rapport, which may include non-traditional services during this unprecedented time.

Resources and Citations

This document modified and used the following resources:

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