

Redefining the Role of Counselors as the “Fourth Team” in Higher Vocational Education and Innovating Collaborative Education Approaches from the Perspective of Cultivating New Types of Talent

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[**Abstract**] Against the backdrop of high-quality development in vocational education and the cultivation of talents for new-generation productive forces, university counselors—referred to as the “fourth team” distinct from teaching, research, and administrative staff—have become the core force driving moral education and the development of highly skilled technical professionals in higher vocational institutions. Drawing on five years of practical experience as a frontline counselor at a higher vocational college, this study examines the contemporary rationale behind the strategic positioning of the “fourth team”, identifies current challenges including excessive administrative duties, ambiguous professional identities, insufficient collaborative efforts in student development, and limited professional growth opportunities, and proposes a systematic framework for transforming counselors’ roles from “administrative managers” to “partners in student development”. The study outlines innovative approaches across four dimensions: digitalized precision-based ideological education, industry-education integration in practical education, quadruple collaboration among families, schools, teachers, and enterprises, and specialized development of counselor-focused workshops. Additionally, it establishes sustainable institutional support through three components: entry-level training programs, dual career advancement pathways, and developmental evaluation systems. This research aims to address the fragmentation in counselor-led educational practices, elevate counselors from peripheral support roles to frontline educators, and provide actionable recommendations for professionalizing, specializing, and expertizing the “fourth team” within vocational institutions.

[**Key words**] new-type talents; higher vocational colleges; the fourth team; counselors; role redefinition; collaborative education

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1 Introduction

Under the national policy orientation of accelerating the building of a strong education system and vigorously developing modern vocational education, teaching, research, and management form the three traditional pillars of university education. As the “fourth pillar” responsible for providing comprehensive ideological, political, and developmental support to students throughout their entire academic journey, counselors’ strategic importance continues to grow. Unlike regular undergraduate institutions, higher vocational colleges are employment-oriented and focus on skill development; their student body primarily consists of post-2000s and Generation Z digital natives, who often exhibit characteristics such as weak academic foundations, unclear career aspirations, limited psychological resilience, and susceptibility to diverse online ideologies. These features impose higher demands on the professionalism, companionship, and practicality required in counselors’ educational work.

The author has been engaged in the management of vocational college students and ideological and political education for over five years, and has long been responsible for comprehensive tasks spanning orientation programs

for new students, dormitory management, psychological crisis intervention, tracking of industry internships, employment support, financial assistance programs (including scholarships, grants, and loans), as well as Party and Youth League development. This experience has given the author a deep understanding of the tension between the policy definition and the practical realities faced by this “fourth team”: on the one hand, top-level documents explicitly recognize counselors as the primary force in ideological and political work and key drivers of talent cultivation; on the other hand, vocational college counselors commonly encounter challenges such as excessive administrative workloads, limited career advancement opportunities, inadequate collaborative education mechanisms among stakeholders, and superficial utilization of digital educational tools. While existing research predominantly focuses on counselor development in regular undergraduate institutions, there remains a gap in studies examining how to redefine the role of this “fourth team” within the context of vocational colleges’ distinctive industry – education integration models and the specific needs of skilled talent development.

Based on this, drawing on five years of practical experience from frontline counselors and incorporating case studies such as the campus dormitory – based support system, student digital profiling, three – tier collaborative consultation mechanisms, and specialized counselor workstations, this paper elucidates the contemporary role and practical challenges of the “fourth team”, establishes a framework for redefining the “growth partner” role, proposes innovative, multi – dimensional collaborative education approaches tailored to higher vocational education models, and introduces a robust long – term institutional support mechanism to ensure that counselor teams at higher vocational institutions firmly remain at the forefront of student development.

2 “The fourth team”: the inevitable historical imperative and practical challenges in the strategic positioning of higher vocational college counselors

2.1 The logic behind the reconfiguration of educational frameworks through the concept of the “fourth team”

“The fourth team” is not merely a simple ranking of teams, but rather a structural complement to the holistic student development system. The teaching team focuses on imparting professional knowledge; the research team emphasizes academic innovation; and the management team ensures the smooth operation of campus administration. Each of these teams has limitations within their educational context and struggles to address key aspects of student development beyond the classroom, such as value formation, psychological support, career guidance, and internship adaptation. The unique role of vocational college counselors is reflected in three irreplaceable functions:

Counselors serve as the primary force in delivering ideological and political education across all academic stages—from student enrollment and on-campus development to internship placements and graduate employment—spanning their entire three – year vocational education journey. They leverage dormitories, classrooms, student clubs, internship workshops, and online platforms to provide consistent ideological education, addressing the fragmented nature of traditional classroom instruction.

Comprehensive growth support leader: With the implementation of the on – site residency system, counselors now serve in dormitories, training workshops, and online communities, ensuring students can seek assistance promptly when facing challenges or receive timely intervention when encountering risks.

A comprehensive talent development accelerator: Addressing common challenges faced by vocational students—including course failures, psychological anxiety, internship setbacks, employment uncertainty, and financial difficulties—through proactive interventions that span the entire growth trajectory from enrollment to practical training and employment, achieving both moral cultivation and professional excellence.

2.2 The practical development challenges faced by vocational college counselors as the “fourth team”

Based on five years of frontline observation and interviews with counselors from the same cohort within the institution, the current team of vocational college counselors faces four structural contradictions, creating a tension between “clear strategic positioning” and “implied marginalization”.

2.2.1 The scope of responsibilities has been generalized, diluting the core educational focus

“Thousand threads above, a single needle below” describes the daily reality of work for vocational college counselors. End – point tasks—including maintaining safety and stability, conducting academic integrity inspections, processing applications for scholarships, financial aid, and loans, carrying out military recruitment campaigns, organizing youth league and student activities, ensuring dormitory hygiene, managing internships, and completing various reporting forms—are all assigned to counselors. The heavy burden of repetitive administrative duties consumes valuable time that should be dedicated to core educational responsibilities such as ideological guidance, psychological counseling, and career planning. On some workdays, up to 80% of their effort is devoted to administrative tasks, making in-depth counseling sessions and practical implementation of ideological education initiatives difficult to sustain regularly.

2.2.2 Ambiguous identity recognition and limited career development pathways

Higher vocational counselors consistently face a dilemma between becoming full-time faculty members and becoming administrative staff. While professional title evaluations for full-time teachers prioritize teaching and research achievements, the practical contributions of counselors—including class management, crisis intervention, and student development cases—are difficult to quantify. With limited administrative promotion opportunities, most counselors remain in entry-level positions for extended periods, experiencing significant career burnout and identity anxiety. Some institutions categorize student affairs as “soft tasks”, allocating resources and performance incentives primarily toward teaching and research, thereby diminishing counselors’ sense of professional fulfillment.

2.2.3 The collaborative education system suffers from fragmentation, with various educational resources being isolated from each other

Professional course instructors focus primarily on skill development while paying insufficient attention to students’ ideological development; corporate internship supervisors concentrate solely on practical job requirements and lack awareness of value – oriented guidance; parents predominantly focus on academic performance and employment outcomes, with delayed communication between schools and families; counselors shoulder all student-related responsibilities alone, leaving information barriers between professional teachers, enterprises, and parents unbroken, thereby hindering the creation of a comprehensive student growth profile.

2.2.4 Insufficient professional interdisciplinary competence, with digital education merely serving as a formality

Modern counselors need comprehensive competencies in ideological and political education, psychological counseling, career planning, and digital literacy. However, existing training programs predominantly focus on theoretical lectures, with insufficient practical training in areas such as crisis intervention, big data analysis, and online public opinion management. While some institutions have established student digital management platforms, these are limited to attendance tracking and grade statistics, failing to leverage consumption patterns, internet usage data, or borrowing records for risk assessment; consequently, these technological tools remain underutilized as precise tools for educational support.

3 Paradigm shift: role remodeling from “affairs manager” to “growth partner” of higher vocational college students

The traditional counselor model, centered on control, inspection, and notification as an “administrative manager”, is becoming increasingly inadequate. Post-00s students in higher vocational education exhibit strong digital literacy, independent value judgments, and resistance to one-way authoritative management. Counselors must undergo three fundamental transformations—in power dynamics, professional competence, and work value—and establish themselves as new “growth partners”.

3.1 Flattening of power relationships: shifting from “I control you” to “I support you”

Discard the top-down management mindset and establish an equal, supportive educational relationship. Over five years of implementation, we have established regular office presence in dormitories, moving away from the

traditional model where students only seek teachers' assistance when problems arise, and proactively visited dormitories and training workshops to conduct spontaneous conversations. When dealing with students facing academic failures, romantic setbacks, or internship difficulties, our initial response is no longer disciplinary action or lecturing, but rather jointly identifying issues and developing improvement plans. For instance, a student majoring in mechanical and electrical engineering developed self-doubt due to an operational error during practical training and remained isolated in the dormitory for a week. The resident counselor maintained communication over multiple nights leveraging the trust built through daily interactions, collaborated with the psychological support team to provide group counseling, and coordinated with training instructors to adjust hands-on tasks, thereby preventing severe psychological distress. This demonstrates that the essence of effective education lies in being physically present, emotionally engaged, and deeply involved.

3. 2 Multidimensional professional competence development: cultivating a four – dimensional competency framework integrating ideological education, psychology, career planning, and digital literacy

Higher vocational counselors cannot rely solely on individual experience in their work; they must develop a comprehensive framework of professional competencies: first, political acumen to grasp the core requirements of vocational education—fostering moral integrity and cultivating a craftsman spirit; second, psychological intervention skills, including basic psychological screening, emotional guidance, and crisis management procedures; third, career planning capabilities to provide targeted employment guidance integrated with industry – education collaboration, internships, and skill certification programs; fourth, digital analysis proficiency to identify students' potential risks using campus big data. Regular on-campus activities such as case studies, psychological counseling sessions, and practical training in digital ideological and political education are conducted to facilitate counselors' transition from being “experience-based” to “professional”.

3. 3 Manifestation of emotional labor: incorporating empathy and relationship building into core educational evaluation

The essence of counseling work is high-intensity emotional labor; prolonged listening, reassurance, and companionship cannot be quantified through reports or documentation but directly determine educational effectiveness. Role redefinition requires universities to redefine the core competencies of counselors by incorporating outcomes of emotional labor—such as teacher – student trust relationships, students' willingness to seek help proactively, successful interventions in psychological crises, and student growth transformations—into performance evaluations, thereby shifting away from an evaluation approach that prioritizes documentation over actual results.

4 Path innovation: building a diverse collaborative education ecosystem aligned with the characteristics of industry–education integration in higher vocational education

The key to successful role transformation lies in implementing a systematic, professional, and digitalized educational approach, overcoming the isolation faced by counselors working alone, and fostering an educational ecosystem characterized by multi-stakeholder collaboration, integration of virtual and physical environments, and concurrent research efforts.

4. 1 Digital empowerment enhances targeted ideological and political education: leveraging technology as the tool and human warmth as the core to build a digital profile for student development

By leveraging the campus smart platform to integrate multidimensional data—including academic performance, practical training attendance, cafeteria consumption, library borrowing records, online activity patterns, and dormitory check-in records—this system establishes a dynamic digital growth profile for vocational students. Risk alert thresholds are predefined: when three warning indicators converge simultaneously—a sharp decline in spending frequency, excessive nighttime internet usage, or consecutive absences from practical training—the system automatically sends alerts to counselors, shifting management from reactive response to proactive monitoring.

In practice, we adhere to the principle of “using algorithms as a supplement while prioritizing human-centered

approaches”, employing big data solely as a tool for identifying problem leads, and ultimately relying on in-person in-depth conversations and home-school communication to implement interventions. This approach prevents technological monitoring from replacing humanistic care and balances digital efficiency with educational warmth. For vocational college students participating in on-the-job internships, we establish an online dynamic internship record system to monitor their psychological well-being, job adaptation, and rights protection in real time, ensuring continuous ideological and political education throughout the off-campus internship period.

4.2 Integrating ideological and political education into both curriculum-based programs and daily activities, to establish a mobile micro-ideological and political workshop tailored to the characteristics of higher vocational education

The core of talent cultivation in higher vocational colleges lies in the dual development of skills and competencies, transforming broad ideological and political narratives into micro-practical topics tailored to specific majors and internship contexts. The institution has established “Micro Ideological and Political Workshops”, where counselors guide students in conducting field research, visiting enterprises, and interviewing master craftsmen within their respective disciplines; students majoring in intelligent manufacturing visit local manufacturing companies and interview renowned master artisans; those in modern agriculture conduct research on rural revitalization upon returning to their hometowns; while finance and economics majors engage in grassroots employment practices with small and micro enterprises.

Integrate reflections and insights gained during practical activities into daily ideological and political education records, establishing a bridge between classroom knowledge and students’ practical actions. Incorporate the spirit of craftsmanship, labor education, and ideals and beliefs throughout all training and internship phases to address the issues of superficiality and disconnection from professional contexts in vocational ideological education.

4.3 Establishing a four-party collaborative mechanism involving counselors, subject-specific instructors, industry mentors, and parents.

To overcome the limitations of a single educational entity, a tripartite consultation mechanism has been established at the beginning of each semester; led by academic counselors, involving professional course instructors, corporate internship mentors, and online parent representatives who jointly assess students’ overall status regarding school performance, practical training, and family circumstances to develop personalized growth support plans. Clear boundaries for educational responsibilities and information-sharing protocols have been defined; academic deficiencies are addressed by professional course instructors; workplace adaptation issues are guided by corporate mentors; psychological and financial concerns are handled through coordinated intervention between counselors and parents. Standardized guidelines for information sharing and confidentiality have been established to prevent excessive interference that may compromise student privacy.

To address the challenges of dispersed internship locations and poor communication between schools and families for vocational college students, an online collaborative education community has been established to regularly share internship progress and ideological updates, creating a tripartite educational ecosystem involving the school, enterprises, and families.

4.4 Leveraging specialized counselor workstations to promote the professional specialization of counselors

By leveraging counselors’ individual expertise, specialized studios are established to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Our institution has developed three types of distinctive studios: the Career Empowerment Studio (focusing on guidance for vocational internship experiences, employment, and skill certification); the Psychological Resilience Training Camp (providing group counseling for vocational students facing academic setbacks or internship-related anxiety); and the Digital Literacy Workshop (helping students critically evaluate online trends and regulate their online behavior). Led by specialists in their respective fields, all counselors take turns participating in teaching research, case studies, and collective lesson planning, fostering a team structure

characterized by “specialization with multiple competencies”. These studios also produce educational case studies, practical courses, and research papers, contributing valuable professional achievements for counselors’ title evaluations and career development.

5 Institutional support: enhancing the long-term development support system for the “fourth team”

Without institutional support, role redefinition and innovation in educational approaches risk becoming mere formalities. Based on the practical realities of higher vocational education, a comprehensive support system should be established encompassing three key components: entry-level training, career development pathways, and an evaluation culture.

5.1 Establish a competency-oriented hierarchical admission system and an immersive training framework

Optimize the recruitment criteria for counselors by moving beyond the simplistic standard of “Party member + student leader”, and incorporate psychological resilience assessments, crisis scenario simulations, and practical teacher-student communication evaluations to identify candidates with strong empathy, coordination skills, and emergency response capabilities. Upon appointment, replace single-session lecture-based training with immersive development programs including case studies, on-site residential placements, psychological counseling, and corporate internships. Counselors in service for five years must complete no less than 40 hours of annual professional continuing education covering modules such as digital ideological education, industry-education integration, and psychological intervention, ensuring continuous enhancement of their interdisciplinary competencies.

5.2 Establish dual career development pathways that integrate administrative and professional technical roles

Implement the policy of separate evaluation for counselors’ professional titles, establishing dual pathways for administrative promotion and parallel conversion of professional titles. Develop differentiated evaluation criteria that reduce the weight of teaching and research papers, focusing instead on frontline performance such as class management effectiveness, psychological crisis intervention cases, micro-political education practices, collaborative education projects, and student development feedback—aligns with the nature of vocational college counselors’ work. The institution should establish dedicated research grants and awards for educational achievements to provide counselors with clear career tracks, tangible outcomes, and growth opportunities, thereby alleviating identity-related anxiety.

5.3 Rebuild a culture of developmental evaluation and establish a comprehensive 360-degree assessment mechanism

Reform the extensive assessment logic that equates “no incidents and complete documentation” with excellence, and establish a multi-dimensional developmental evaluation system. Implement a comprehensive 360-degree assessment model incorporating student anonymous feedback, peer evaluations between academic instructors and corporate mentors, counselors’ self-reports, and integrated assessments of educational case outcomes, with a focus on soft educational indicators such as the quality of teacher-student relationships, students’ frequency of seeking assistance proactively, and the effectiveness in supporting academically struggling and psychologically distressed students. Institutional administrators should recognize this strategically: counselors are not merely stability maintenance personnel or report-filling officers, but core educational forces equally vital to teaching, research, and administration; thus, they should receive increased allocation of personnel, funding, and physical resources, along with enhanced support for on-campus offices, psychological counseling services, and dedicated funds for practical ideological education initiatives.

6 Conclusion

In terms of team ranking, the “fourth team” appears to be at the bottom; however, regarding the sequence

and context of talent cultivation, vocational college counselors consistently stand at the forefront of nurturing high-quality technical and skilled professionals. My five years of frontline experience have profoundly demonstrated that the core of counselor team development lies in transitioning from a role focused on managing administrative tasks to one dedicated to fostering personal growth and professional aspirations. Facing the demands of high-quality vocational education development, the distinct characteristics of post-2000s vocational students, and the multifaceted requirements of digital transformation in education, counselors must proactively redefine their role as “growth partners”. This requires leveraging four innovative approaches: digitalized, precise ideological and political education; industry-education integration for practical training; collaborative efforts among stakeholders; and specialized professional development studios, all supported by robust systems including standardized entry training, dual-track career development pathways, and developmental evaluation mechanisms.

As the “fourth pillar”, vocational college counselors bear the mission of cultivating well-rounded individuals with both moral integrity and professional competence for the manufacturing and modern service sectors. Only by continuously advancing role transformation, innovating educational approaches, and strengthening institutional safeguards can they consistently enhance the quality and effectiveness of vocational education, playing an irreplaceable supporting role in building a strong educational nation and developing a modern vocational education system.

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