

CHRIS O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Welcome to another edition of Let's Talk Ed. First and foremost, if you have not subscribed, please, please, please do so.

Parents, thank you all for sharing this with your kids that are still in college or thinking about going to college. And students as I usually call on your service since you're still trying to maintain your balance in college, please share with your friends and do subscribe as well.

Our last episode, as I promised to talk to the students. We did and I listen to them.

And I also promised them to reach out to the experts that will be helping them with some of the challenges they have in college.

The idea, again, a mission for Let's Talk Ed is experience college don't survive college experience college. Experience college.

So, we're doing our best to make sure that that happens. One of the experts that I decided to talk to is a counselor, and I'm very happy to have a counselor with us today.

That's very versed and has expertise in counseling, and hopefully we'll share some ideas.

I did also promise to talk to a faculty, which I would do and guess what? Ombudsman. Who is that?

Stay tuned, but for now, very happy to welcome one of our counselors, Elaine.

ELAINE RODRIGUEZ: Hi, Chris.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: How you doing, Elaine?

RODRIGUEZ: I'm doing well today. How are you?

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: I'm doing just fine. I'm doing just fine and again, thank you for being on Let's Talk Ed.

We're gonna be talking about a lot about counselors, so let's just start with a little bit about yourself. Not too much, not giving out too much. But tell us a little bit about yourself and also what do counselors do?

RODRIGUEZ: Sure. So, thank you again for having me, first of all, Chris.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: You're welcome.

RODRIGUEZ: So, I'm a licensed clinical social worker.

My background is in social work and I've been with Wake Tech for about two years now.

Prior to that, I was working in an employee assistance program and then a few years before that, back when I was in Connecticut, I worked for a substance abuse program for teens and young adults as well as their families.

But here at Wake Tech, we offer students what's called solution-focused counseling.

So, we meet with students, help them to identify their goals, clarify maybe what, what the problem is? We can also help them develop new coping skills.

We also do offer referrals to students should they need perhaps more intensive therapy or counseling should they be looking for medication or another specialty area. We can help get them connected to that.

And then finally, the the wellness counselors are here for for consultation with faculty, staff, students. Even if a student is not seeking counseling for themselves, they could be worried about a friend. They're welcome to talk to us about that too.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Perfect.

So, I like the intro and it was very formal, right? So, one of the and the reason I bring formal is because most of the time and we'll get in a little more details with some of the issues that students have had in the past and some of the concerns they bring to me.

But before we get to that, I'm happy that you give that introduction of what you all really do, and I hope the students are listening. So, there isn't any hesitation of why they shouldn't come to you.

Alright, my question is now we know a little bit of what you do. How do students find you?

RODRIGUEZ: right?

So, my my colleague Amanda and I have been really trying to get the word out there. There was a gap where we didn't have a wellness counselor at Wake Tech. In between myself, Amanda and and the previous counselor.

But we advertise a few ways. One of the biggest ways is is simply word of mouth.

We rely a lot on students who come to see us as well as faculty and staff to let their students know that we're available. But aside from that, we have created social media pages. So, I run Instagram, Amanda runs the Twitter page.

Umm, we also have our wellness website, which is available through the Wake Tech site. And then just traditional forms of media, so those TV screens around campus, palm cards and Flyers. All that.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Perfect.

So, this is a very generic question.

Says, I think what you all do is very, very important, and every campus should have it. Does every college or every university have a counselor or counselors?

RODRIGUEZ: So, most large institutions do by, by and far, I would say. For universities or colleges that don't have counselors, they typically have a different model. And so, for example, a student assistance program which is an outside resource that students can contact to talk to a counselor.

We actually have one at Wake Tech, but it's in addition to the wellness counseling. So, just an extra service.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: So, again, students there are counselors. You just need to look for them. But let's get into let's get into a little more details here.

So, when I've had students come to me and I've always told students, I feel very honored and I feel very special because my students in all three institutions that I've been at, feel very comfortable coming to me to talk to me. And that was actually the whole idea of doing this. This podcast is... how else can I get these resources not to the students that come to me, but to everyone else?

My biggest... well, actually my students biggest challenge when they come to me and this is where I tried to be very, very careful, right? Because in my case I'm in faculty and I've had some industry experience, but students bring all kinds of questions to me from, again... Sometimes I'm even surprised as to how very open they are with some of the things they share with me.

If it's beyond my expertise, which is why I'm I'm planning on interviewing all this expertise. And one area, of course, is with the counselors when I've had students, and I will tell them I think you should go see a counselor.

There's always this big hesitation, so I try to pull that out of them. And I said, why wouldn't you go to the counselor? You're very comfortable coming to me and it always has to do with two things; One is trust. So, we're gonna start with trust, first.

My students trust me, and it takes time for them to trust me, you know? A semester or two because they haven't classes with me.

In your case, as a counselor, what do you think the method is, or the strategy is, for a student to build that trust?

RADRIGUEZ: Right. So, so counseling provides this, like a nonjudgmental space, essentially, where a student, you know, can express themselves without fear that we are going to pass judgment on them or try to offer advice that they might not be ready for yet.

I think that a big misconception students have about counselors is that we just offer advice that we give you those answers. Really, it's more of like an exploration with you.

You know, I like to think of the counselor as kind of being a guide. So, what we're not driving the car, right? We're maybe giving you some tools and helping you out along the way, but it's it's your time, your space.

So, going back to what you said about building trust it, it can be a slow process. You're right.

You know you as faculty and some other staff have much more contact with students, so it comes a little more naturally.

But what I would say to students is that we are, you know, as we are experts in counseling, we're also a little bit of experts in that rapport building, building that trust.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Okay, do you have any candy or anything in the offense to just have students say... no, come in, you know, feel at home with us, I'm sure those are some of the incentives, right?

But the other thing also I think the hesitation is students will say, well, when I come to the counselors, they have to record, they have to take notes.

And again, I'm not sure how true that is, but I know you will have a very high level of confidentiality. So, you're not sharing information with students. Sorry, or anybody else.

So, what is... What type of documentation do you all take when students come to you?

So, then that way, again, I think it's a myth that in their mind. Oh, into getting all this information from me and I don't know who they're gonna share it with, right?

And now social media, and I definitely don't think that is the case or that's the essence of what you all do.

So, take us through the process. When a student comes to you and why you have to take notes or not take notes or what type of record you keep.

RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely. So, at first I would love to debunk the myth that we record sessions. So, Amanda and I certainly do not record either audio or video.

And that goes for both in-person counseling sessions and our virtual meetings. Those recording requirements are usually for intern or practicum students.

We do have an intern with us right now, but she is not recording sessions either, so we'll start there.

Documentation, yes, counselors, absolutely take notes. And the main reason for us taking notes is so that we can remember about what you told us, right?

We like to be able to document any progress you've made. Any struggles you've had, for basically just you and I, right? That information is absolutely never disclosed except in very rare scenarios.

And that would be, you know, if someone's in danger if we need to keep someone safe. If you told us about a child that was being harmed, for example, right?

Very rare cases and and counseling files, too... are never a part of your academic record at Wake Tech. So, it is, the only people that have access to it is your counselor that you're seeing and yourself.

If you want it, you always have access to your records.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That is, that is comforting for me to hear, and I don't know why in the past when students school say to me, oh no, I'm not going to counselor because of this reason, because I never really talked to a counselor. I couldn't say no, that's not true, because they've actually gone to the counselor, and they've seen what happens there. And I never had an opportunity. So, this is a learning experience for myself.

All right, so this is good. I'm happy with debunking some of all these myths students have about counselors.

The other aspect, and I already asked before, what are some of the ways you are reaching out to students? What is the relationship between the counselors and the instructors or the faculty?

I wanna start with that and then my follow-up question is going to be: What advice do you have for faculty or are there any signs to look out for with students either going through something that is very obvious for us to say you need to go see a counselor?

RODRIGUEZ: Right. So, we try to keep a really close relationship with faculty, especially as I said earlier, you all have the most interaction by far with students. So, if a faculty member is concerned, we really want you to contact us directly, and as soon as possible.

If a student sends you an email, that might, they might directly express that they are stressed out or or not doing well. Feeling low.

Tell us you know, contact us on Teams. Email us there is a formal way to submit a referral. I'm not sure if you want me to go into that right now or not.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: No.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's good. That's good.

Alright, so yes, I'm gonna take a deep breath as I'm about to unveil the second part of our discussion here.

Umm, but we also have to talk about it is stress, depression and unfortunately suicide.

My experience, as already mentioned, it's been at like three different institutions. One, was one of the largest universities ever in the US.

The second one was probably the smallest university in the US. And now I'm kind of in between those two.

And the reason I bring this up is because when it comes to suicide, I've experience it in all three areas and it's very, very important because we cannot assume... and, not to mention of one of the colleges actually is religious-based it's a Christian, a faith-based school.

So, you think, okay, you know, nothing of such should happen there. But, it's happened there. Again, across all three.

So, I think it's something that we need to discuss. Just recently on the news right down the street from us, we had an incident that it has happened.

When I interviewed the students last week, very impressive with what is shared on how to deal with stress. One actually did mention, I pray, I talked to my parents. You know, that's faith based.

I think that's a great approach, but also realizing that not everybody would do that and not everybody would talk to their parents about this here.

How do you all deal with students with stress?

Let's start from that and then we'll get more in depth into it.

RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely, so I would say now more than ever, it is a stressful time to be a student. Stress is probably the number one concern we see along with anxiety.

So, we we can help you manage stress in a few ways, ton of techniques, right?

We can go the route of mindfulness, right? Teaching you techniques related to breathing, using your senses to manage stress in the moment. We can talk about how you think about stress and work with those thoughts a little bit.

Maybe help you explore some different perspectives. And then finally, just like you said, exploring those opportunities for support outside of counseling.

So, whether it is faith talking to friend or family member, could be sports. We like to encourage students to reconnect with maybe old hobbies or try something new, right?

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's right.

So, this is one that I usually you know when I'm talking to parents or those that I refer to as an old school. There's a mentality or there's a shift in concept of what is happening now with so much stress with students? What has changed?

Or they will say back in our day with death, we deal with and dealt with everything else and maybe even more than what students are currently dealing with right now, but they seem to be stressing more.

Is there a study that has been done to really kind of debunk the myth as to... is there more stress now than there was in the past?

I guess that's kind of the question that I... any idea of...

RODRIGUEZ: From my perspective, I don't think there is. I think that these levels of stress have always existed.

Same thing with depression and anxiety. It's just that we're talking about it more now.

The younger generation is much more open about coming forward, that they're struggling, talking to their peers about it with the internet and other advances in technology. There are more ways for students and young people in general. I mean to connect with that side of themselves.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Alright. Good, good.

Alright, so I'm happy we actually able to talk about this topic.

You know suicide, stress, depression with ease, to be honest with you. Usually it's tough for me because I have flashback of again very closely, you know, it hit home with those incidents and I've always , I've always kind of wanted to look for outlet, you know, to help students.

Again, the goal for this podcast is, there's so much going on. I don't want you leaving college thinking there was kind of a war zone that you survived, right? And students are like, uh, I finally did it.

I think it's a great experience. I think it's a great opportunity for students to kind of experience. So, everything that I can do, you know, I would love to do to make sure that students go through the experience.

When it comes to suicide and I'm not trying to kind of get too much in depth with, you know, who comes to you. What are some of the close calls you've had and how do people reach out to you to say we think this student might be thinking along those those lines.

And I know you mentioned some ways in which you know you help students deal with stress, but let's talk about some of the close calls. Do you usually get some of this close calls like, I'm thinking about suicide and how how do you deal with it?

RODRIGUEZ: It does happen, absolutely.

I will not sugarcoat that. Faculty, staff or students directly will reach out to us and say that they are thinking about hurting themselves, thinking about ending their lives, right?

In that moment, what we do is reach right out, you know, phone, email. We try to get in touch with that student and in that moment it is purely about listening and trying to inspire some hope.

Of course, as counselors, and I won't go too much into depth with this, but we do like a safety assessment to make sure that you're okay to leave campus.

You know, do we need to consider getting you connected to more intensive care, right?

But we never, I do want students to know... counseling is a place where you can talk about thoughts of suicide without being concerned that we're going to, for example, send you to a psychiatric Institution, right?

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That is a good point.

RODRIGUEZ: That is, that is only in cases where there is a clear intent and plan to hurt yourself.



You know, I I hear a lot of students say things like sometimes I wish I wouldn't wake up. I don't think I can handle this anymore.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Wow.

RODRIGUEZ: So, we work with those thoughts again without I guess I want students to know that we won't, we won't freak out about it.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: You know we're not there to make you feel even more overwhelmed and on edge, we'll listen.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: That's great. That's great.

Let's talk a little bit about demographic because and maybe someone has stereotypes that we have there.

One I've always said, even with my students, the ones that trust, the ones that are comfortable coming to talk to me are the females. It's happened everywhere I've gone to.

I even joke about how, you know, when one of my students in the past, the boyfriend broke up with her, she ran... she had the courage to come to my office, to blame me about why all men are the way they are supposed to be, right? Professor Chris

Friends, what is wrong with you men? Right? How does he break up with me on the Valentine's Day? And I'm OK with that.

And I'm actually, I get very happy that they can do that.

In your case, who is coming to you? Who feels more comfortable coming to you?

And then I want to touch on all the different demographics. But let's start with genders. Male, female who do you usually see coming to you more?

RODRIGUEZ: I'll be honest, I see an even mix.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Interesting.

RODRIGUEZ: And that you know, with that being said, I will say that maybe as a trend, males tend to be a little more reserved, maybe a little more hesitant.

So, they might come to see me, but they might be a little less talkative at first than a female student, right?

And these are broad generalizations, right?

But I do see an even mix and it is very reassuring to know that more men, young men, are coming forward and talking about these things because society does very much stigmatize that.

O'RIORDAN-ADJAH: Right. And, that's a good point, because I've always said that's an advisor with my students. What I what I the the females come to me.

It's a very quick question. How are you doing? And I get an honest response immediately.

But a male I always have to ask three times. It's a technique that I've uses, but it works.

Yeah, no seriously, how are you doing? How are you doing? How are you doing? So, okay, that's good to know.

I'm happy that we touched on some of all this areas here and also to know that again you have a mix.

I again, stereotypically thinking, I wouldn't have thought the men will open up to come to you.

We've had discussion on a higher level and you know me referring to myself and you know my peers as to why we're not we're not go to psychiatrist right, because it's a sign of weakness.

That's why I'm very, very happy that the men are actually open to coming to you to talk about this, this incident.

I'm excited. I'm excited with the information, you know, that I'm getting from you, Elaine. Thank you very much.

As I'm winding down here with the questions that I have, I think we've touched on a lot of the topics to get debunked or what stigma that people have about, you know, counselors.

I'm also very happy we talked about where to find counselors.

And if nothing... If nothing students will probably will be more comfortable knowing what you all do in terms of record keeping to not have any hesitation to come talk to you.

With that, I do want to say thank you again for taking this this time on, I know it's a very stressful moment that we're going through right now.

I stopped, honestly stopped watching the news because I don't want to hear any incident again with our students.

I do care dearly about our students, and every time I hear any of these incidents, it really breaks my heart and I really hope, you know, what I'm doing and what you're helping me do now goes out a lot.

So, people can find, if nothing, where to find resources to help themselves. Again, the goal is to make sure they experience college and not survive it.

So, thank you again for listening and tuning in to another edition of Let's Talk Ed.

Great information that was shared today. Looking forward, again, to the next episode where we'll be interviewing the experts.

Remember the goal again is to make sure you experience college and not survive it.

Stay tuned and see you next time.