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Abstract

SPAM: Supporting Professionals with Advising Maladies

Certain student cases that counselors encounter are not always straightforward. Complications that arise might need creative and sensible solutions that balance student needs and institutional expectations, while sustaining professionalism. SPAM is an established time and collective venue for counseling staff in College Academic Counseling (CAC) unit to share their experiences, questions, and other concerns. It provides a setting to discuss, listen, and pool ideas in a safe and supportive environment. This presentation hopes to share SPAM’s benefits, and to stimulate ideas of a comparable structure for other units.

Goals of the Presentation

1) Share a collaborative practice in UCLA’s College Academic Counseling unit to help address counselors’ challenging advising experiences.

2) Explain the benefits of such practice for students and counselors.

3) Encourage the audience to think about their own work environment and professional interactions that might nourish, support, and sustain a similar practice based on their unique circumstances.

Context of SPAM

- Identifying a need for collaborative discussion of counseling cases that are difficult, complicated, unusual, or unclear

- SPAM as the unit’s response to this need

- From a concept to an identifiable and easily remembered name
Guiding Framework

**What:** An informal forum for counseling staff in College Academic Counseling (CAC) unit to share their experiences, questions, and other concerns. It provides a setting to discuss, listen, and pool ideas in a safe and supportive environment.

**Why:** To provide an alternative outlet for discussing, reviewing, and evaluating difficult advising cases without the constraints of agenda-based staff meetings or workgroups. To enhance communication among counselors as a group.

**Who:** College Counselors (ten full time staff & Director of Counseling) in CAC as participants.

**When:** It started on January 22, 2008 for an hour; thereafter, the same one hour meeting every two weeks.

**Where:** Set venue. In CAC, it is held in the office conference room.

**How/Dynamics:** It is informal, voluntary, and self-managing. A counselor would usually bring a case with the student’s record available for the group to look at and explain the context of the advising “malady.” The rest of the group will ask questions for further clarification and bring up options for the presenting counselor’s consideration. Sometimes, the resolution (through consensus or a majority vote) to a specific case could generate further policy review and procedures for the office.

If there is an impasse on a case due to its complexity, it is referred to specialized committee/s (e.g., Student Petition, Rules & Regulations) or the Director of Counseling for more focused consideration and final action.

It is self-managing because the discussion of a case can vary from a few minutes to an intensive half-hour or more. It also depends on the number of cases or questions that counselors bring to a given meeting. Regardless, SPAM is scheduled for one hour as a set time and it is up to the counselors how to take advantage of it.

**Benefits of SPAM – For students**

- an opportunity for a comprehensive review of their individual case based on counselors’ collective brainstorming, generation of options, and discussion of possible resolution

- fairness – e.g., having counselors be on the same page vs. an overly lenient or overly strict action if reviewed by an individual counselor alone

**Benefits of SPAM – For counselors**

- promotes a collaborative working environment by coming together for the opportunity to brainstorm, listen, pool ideas, share experience of especially difficult advising situations, and contribute feedback in a safe and informal setting
• enhances professional development and support – e.g., opportunity to articulate/express issues, to tolerate ambiguity and gray areas, promote critical and creative thinking, practice listening skills with each other, respect differences of opinion, appreciate each other’s counseling strengths and perspective

• self-evaluation -- even though we do not make policy, we are able to talk about them towards implementation of practices and procedures in the office for better staff coordination and student customer service

For “new” counselors

• provides exposure to policies and procedures learned from training by seeing them applied “in action” to various cases

• appreciate ambiguities and gray areas

For “experienced” counselors

• share institutional perspectives and resources by providing historical context

• get a review of existing policies and practices

Samples of General Cases Discussed

• graduating students with issues -- e.g., GPA eligibility in the major, course availability, unit maximum

• non-traditional, returning students with more complicated circumstances -- e.g., no longer living locally, ongoing family or work commitments, medical condition, senior residency issues

• persistent students who see multiple counselors hoping to get a different response to an underlying issue such as degree requirement/s, study list petition/s, and other policy exceptions

Miscellaneous

Is SPAM mandatory?

Answer: No, and counselors can choose not to come if they have other tasks to do. However, SPAM in CAC has become an integral part of office practice that most counselors do attend.

What if there are no cases to discuss in SPAM?

Answer: There are always things to talk about to fill the time such as clarification of office procedures (e.g., when to place or remove holds, when to allow excess study list units). Sometimes, staff share updates about their specific responsibilities or interactions with colleagues in academic departments and other units such as
Admissions, Registrar’s, Financial Aid, Center for International Students and Scholars, Office for Students with Disabilities, International Education Office, Career Center, Student Health Center, etc..

**How is SPAM different from regular staff meeting?**

**Answer:** Unlike a staff meeting where there is expected attendance, agenda items, or guest speakers regarding specific topics or programs, SPAM is informal, voluntary, and with a free flowing discussion generated by counselors themselves.

**Does SPAM generate policy changes?**

**Answer:** No, but it creates the venue for feedback and anticipation of potential issues that can be communicated to appropriate personnel in departments and other units. As an internal mechanism, SPAM hopes to identify office practices and procedures that need follow up or updates.