

OCC's counselors dispense advice with a modern edge

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Counselors have new tools at Oakland Community College. They also have new responsibilities. And they've always had the fun and challenge of "meeting people at the crossroads of their lives," in the words of Ruth Grass.

"The job is unique at a community college," said 20-year veteran Grass, who works at the Highland Lakes Campus, "because the counselor handles such a wide variety of people — people from 18-80. The kid from high school. The divorced mom. The senior citizen. The laid-off worker seeking retraining. People who want to re-career."

She said she loves the challenges she faces.

"How do you help people get unstuck? I love that work! When a light bulb comes on," she said, using the comic strip analogy, "that's pretty powerful stuff. People bring in their lives: work schedules, families, lack of support at home, test anxiety. Some I refer to the financial aid office. Ours is right across the hall," she said, nodding across a corridor in the campus' Highland Hall.

Unlike universities

That makes counseling at a two-year, open-admissions college far different from counseling at a university.

"Such support is not commonly available in higher education," said OCC Chancellor Richard T. Thompson, himself a former counselor. Community colleges are "opportunity institutions" so "transitions are a large part of our students' lives," he said.

Grass elaborated: "At a university, a counselor is a faculty advisor, and it's organized around an academic curriculum. Here it's on a more personal level — social development, academic advising, career planning. We have so many partnerships with business and industry.

(retraining and upgrading existing workforce members). It's not an easy job."

She uses another analogy: A counselor is like a naval navigator who is supposed to know the waters, the reefs, the shoals, the passages. "Everything is goal-centered and student-centered. We (counselors) are not here to fill classes. Students' goals vary — and change."

New tools

"Counselors see themselves as high-tech, but in the last five years we've become high-tech," she said, patting the keyboard of her computer with its VCR program. VCR stands for verified counseling record.

Grass records every interview with a student, the advice she gives and gives the student a printout.

"They (students) leave with a printed plan of work. They love it. They have something tangible. And I'm accountable," Grass added that a later counselor also can look up the advice she gave that student.

"It's the most exciting thing in counseling in a long time," she said — "once you learn the system."

Most counselors are generalists, but a few are specialists, such as Roger Zapinski, who knows the computer information system curriculum, and Larry Gage, who helps the impaired.

Both hold doctorates. Foreign student advisors, who know the immigration rules, are in a separate office.

Computers also help counselors look up the programs and requirements of universities to which students might transfer.

"More students are university-bound," said Grass. "That percentage has increased. Some of our students are university students who come here for the summer. A student may come in and say, 'I want to transfer to Michigan State, and I want to

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Ruth Grass
—OCC counselor

know exactly what courses will transfer. We also have a lot of undecided students. My question to them usually is, 'What do you want OCC to do for you?'

Options are plentiful, she said. "We have career planning classes. We have career centers on every campus that give assessment tests, do a personality and interests inventory, look for patterns."

New emphasis

OCC has put greater emphasis on counseling, in part because it guides students away from failure, in part because it helps student retention.

Take the literacy program. Previously, a student who finished at Level 1 on the ASSET test in English and needs developmental English course must see a counselor. Now, anyone finishing at Levels 1 and 2 must see a counselor. "That's a whole other group we've been asked to see," Grass said.

Also, students registering in the same course for the fourth time must see a counselor. "The student may have dropped out. There may have been a job change, or he may have been ill. He needs to articulate his commitment," Grass said.

She said 95 percent of students are receptive, open and motivated. "They said, 'I need you.' Some are frustrated because they're on a hold."

Each of OCC's five campuses has a counseling office. Phone numbers, all in the 248 area code, are: Auburn Hills, 340-

Massage class gives 'hands on' training

Classes leading to a one-year certificate, or two-year associate degree in Oakland Community College's new massage therapy program will be offered at the Highland Lakes campus this fall.

The program is designed to

provide students with the academic background and "hands on" skills for employment in the field.

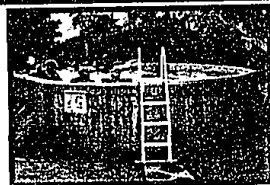
An information session for prospective students in scheduled at the Highland Lakes campus on Aug. 11. For further

details, and a packet of materials on the Massage Therapy Program, call Lynette Curtis at (248) 360-3021.

Walk in registration for OCC's fall semester is Aug. 31, Sept. 1 and 2. Classes begin Sept. 3.

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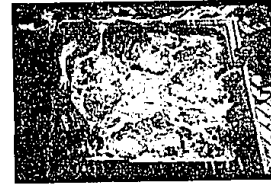
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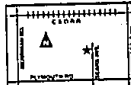
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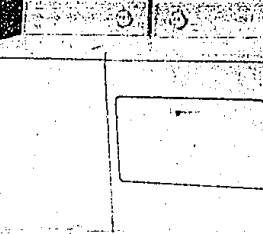
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