



Challenges and Opportunities in Counseling Referrals: A Needs Assessment Study on Student Discipline Officers

Article History:

Initial submission: 19 May 2026
First decision: 28 May 2026
Revision received: 21 August 2026
Accepted for publication: 28 August 2026
Online release: 11 September 2026

Ajocrivipor P. Agojo¹, MA, RGC, ORCID No. [0009-0002-4893-4526](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4893-4526)
Mary Marjiemae Lorenzo², Rpm, LPT, RGC, ORCID No. [0009-0001-1653-6331](https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1653-6331)

¹Discipline Programs Officer, De La Salle University, Manila, 2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines

²Coordinator, Student Leadership, Success & Coaching, De La Salle University, Manila, 2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

Student discipline offices are critical in promoting safe and supportive learning environments by addressing behavioral concerns and facilitating referrals to counseling and support services. While referrals are intended to provide students with timely psychosocial support, the process is often hindered by practical, institutional, and perceptual barriers. This study sought to examine the challenges and opportunities encountered by discipline officers in the counseling referral process and to identify needs that can inform capacity-building and inter-office collaboration. Guided by interpretivism, social constructivism, and pragmatism, the study employed a descriptive qualitative design. Discipline officers were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in referral procedures. Data were collected through focus group discussion using a structured guide, and thematic analysis was applied to generate patterns of meaning. Findings indicated several challenges: student reluctance to avail counseling due to stigma, complexity and inconsistency in referral procedures, and concerns about confidentiality and data privacy. Officers also identified the need for training in early detection of mental health concerns, ethical considerations, and skills for preparing and supporting students during the referral process. Opportunities highlighted include strengthening collaboration between offices, streamlining communication systems, and improving the visibility and accessibility of counseling services. The study concludes that enhancing discipline officers' knowledge, institutional protocols, and inter-office coordination is essential to improve referral efficacy. The insights generated serve as a foundation for developing targeted training programs and collaborative frameworks that can improve the counseling referral process of discipline officers, thereby strengthening student support systems.

Keywords: counseling referral, discipline officers, needs assessment, student support, qualitative research



Copyright © 2026. The Author/s. Published by VMC Analytik's Multidisciplinary Journal News Publishing Services. Challenges and Opportunities in Counseling Referrals: A Needs Assessment Study on Student Discipline Officers © 2026 by Ajocrivipor P. Agojo I and Mary Marjiemae Lorenzo is an open access article licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). This permits the copying, redistribution, remixing, transforming, and building upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially, provided that appropriate credit is given to the copyright owner/s through proper acknowledgement and standard citation.

INTRODUCTION

Student discipline offices play a vital role in maintaining a safe, supportive, and orderly learning environment. In Philippine educational institutions, the delivery of student discipline services varies, with some schools integrating these functions into student affairs or counseling services. In one university setting, student discipline is housed under a discipline and formation office, where coordinators are responsible for upholding institutional policies, addressing behavioral violations, and implementing a holistic, student-centered approach. This includes identifying students who may require psychosocial support and

referring them to appropriate university services, particularly the counseling and psychological services unit. Despite the availability of mental health programs, challenges continue to affect the effectiveness of this referral process (M. Reyes, personal communication, September 2, 2025).

Research indicates that counseling referrals in school settings are influenced by institutional protocols, staff attitudes toward mental health, and students' perceptions of counseling services (Deacon, 2015; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Franklin et al., 2012). Students may be reluctant to access counseling when referrals are perceived as punitive rather than

supportive. The process may also be affected when discipline officers lack adequate training to recognize behaviors that warrant professional psychological intervention or are uncertain about appropriate referral procedures.

Understanding the perspectives of student discipline officers is therefore important. A needs assessment can identify the practical, institutional, and perceptual challenges they encounter, as well as the factors that facilitate effective referrals. Such evidence can inform collaborative frameworks, institutional support mechanisms, and targeted capacity-building programs designed to improve referral practices. Ultimately, strengthening discipline officers' ability to make timely and appropriate referrals may contribute to improved mental health outcomes and student well-being.

This study explores the challenges and opportunities experienced by discipline officers when referring students to counseling, with particular attention to factors that may be addressed through training, policy improvements, and institutional support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Early Intervention and Referral Systems. Early identification and referral of students with behavioral and emotional concerns are important in promoting academic and psychosocial outcomes (Farmer et al., 2003). Discipline officers are potentially well positioned to contribute to early identification because their frequent interactions with students involved in behavioral or disciplinary concerns provide opportunities to recognize difficulties that might otherwise remain unidentified. However, identification alone does not ensure effective intervention. The success of referral systems also depends on perceptions of mental health services and how referrals are facilitated.

Farmer et al. (2003) emphasize the importance of early identification in connecting students with appropriate support, while Balderama

(2019) highlights the value of early mental health intervention in preventing the escalation of behavioral concerns in the Philippine context. Together, these studies suggest that referral should be understood not merely as a procedural requirement but as part of a broader support system connecting behavioral identification with psychosocial intervention.

Despite this, limited attention has been given to how personnel whose primary responsibilities are disciplinary, rather than counseling-oriented, navigate counseling referrals. In Philippine higher education, discipline officers may serve as an initial point of contact for students experiencing behavioral and emotional difficulties. Examining their experiences and perceived needs may therefore provide important insights into strengthening institutional referral systems.

Barriers and Facilitators to Effective Counseling Referrals. Several factors may hinder effective counseling referrals, including inadequate training, mental health stigma, unclear referral procedures, misconceptions about counseling, and weak coordination between discipline and counseling offices (Rickwood et al., 2005; Owens et al., 2012). In the Philippine setting, De Guzman and Celestino (2018) found that students may perceive counseling referrals as punitive rather than supportive. This perception can reduce students' willingness to participate in counseling and underscores the importance of how discipline officers communicate the purpose and benefits of mental health services.

Conversely, effective referrals are facilitated by clear procedures, interoffice coordination, capacity-building activities, and positive institutional attitudes toward mental health services (Elias et al., 2008). Gonzales and Tuazon (2020) similarly reported that strong working relationships between discipline personnel and guidance counselors were associated with higher referral follow-up rates and reduced student dropout. These findings emphasize that effective referral systems depend not only on formal procedures but also on collaboration and informed personnel.

Institutional and Relational Factors Influencing Counseling Referrals. The competence and confidence of discipline officers in making referrals are associated with capacity-building initiatives (Franklin et al., 2012). Training in mental health literacy, communication strategies, and institutional support systems can help personnel recognize signs of student distress and facilitate timely referrals (Balderama, 2019). Well-prepared personnel may also foster trust and reduce students' reluctance to seek psychosocial assistance.

Staff attitudes toward counseling likewise influence the quality and frequency of referrals. Positive attitudes are associated with increased referrals, whereas negative attitudes may result in inappropriate or missed referrals (Deacon, 2015). De Guzman and Celestino (2018) further emphasized that sustained mental health awareness can improve staff attitudes and strengthen the supportive dimension of referral systems.

Because college students generally exercise greater independence in accessing services, counseling must be framed as a supportive resource rather than a punitive consequence (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Gonzales and Tuazon (2020) also highlighted the importance of relational practices, particularly trust-building and effective communication, in Philippine higher education. These findings demonstrate that referral effectiveness is shaped by both institutional systems and interpersonal relationships.

Philosophical Underpinnings. This study is informed by interpretivism, social constructivism, and pragmatism. Interpretivism views reality as socially constructed and emphasizes how individuals' beliefs, contexts, and interpretations shape their experiences and behaviors (Schwandt, 2000; Willis, 2007). This perspective is appropriate for examining how discipline officers understand and give meaning to their experiences, particularly their roles, challenges, and opportunities in counseling referrals. It enables the researchers to explore the subjective and contextual

dimensions of referral practices that may not be fully captured through quantitative approaches.

Social constructivism, situated within the interpretivist tradition, holds that knowledge and meaning are constructed through interaction and shaped by social and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Creswell, 2013). In this study, discipline officers' understanding and practices regarding counseling referrals may be shaped by their interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader institutional environment. Institutional culture, disciplinary practices, shared understandings, and interpersonal experiences may therefore influence how counseling referrals are understood and implemented.

Finally, the study adopts a pragmatic paradigm, which emphasizes the practical application of knowledge and the use of research findings to address real-world problems and generate useful solutions (Morgan, 2007; Patton, 2015). Pragmatism is particularly relevant because the study seeks to generate actionable findings that can inform the development of a capacity-building training program for discipline officers. Through qualitative inquiry, the researchers aim to identify practical needs, challenges, and concerns and translate these findings into interventions aligned with the realities of discipline work.

Taken together, interpretivism, social constructivism, and pragmatism provide a context-sensitive and action-oriented foundation for understanding counseling referral practices within the discipline office.

Conceptual Framework

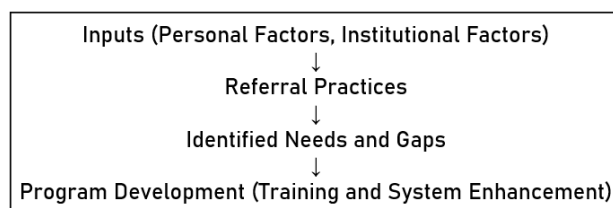


Figure 1
Mapping the Referral Process

Following the concepts of interpretivism and social constructivism, the researcher recognizes that discipline officers' perspectives and experiences regarding counseling referrals are shaped by the institutional, social, and contextual environments in which they perform their roles. Discipline officers are primarily tasked with implementing and operationalizing school policies and administrative protocols as part of student affairs management and practice. However, from an interpretivist perspective, the implementation of these policies and protocols may not be experienced or understood in the same way by all discipline officers. Their specific roles, functions, relationships with students and other institutional stakeholders, and experiences in facilitating counseling referrals may lead them to develop unique interpretations of their responsibilities and of the referral process itself. Similarly, social constructivism recognizes that these interpretations may be shaped through their interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader university community. Thus, the research seeks to understand how discipline officers make meaning of their experiences, particularly the facilitators and barriers they encounter in counseling referrals. Consistent with pragmatism, the researcher also aims to translate these insights into practical recommendations, including the development of a targeted capacity-building training program that responds to the identified needs and challenges of discipline officers.

This framework shows that discipline officers' counseling referral practices are not isolated individual actions but are shaped through the interaction of individual knowledge, organizational structures, and broader systemic environments. Through the understanding of officers' lived realities and experiences, it will be a basis for the researchers to create an evidence-based, context-relevant training and system support program in the future.

Referral of students with behavioral concerns to counseling services is important in

promoting their individual growth, well-being, and academic achievement. In the university setting, the discipline office plays an important role in identifying students who may require additional psychosocial support and facilitating their referral to appropriate counseling services. However, the effectiveness of the referral process may be influenced by discipline officers' individual beliefs, understanding of counseling, experiences, and interpretations of their roles and responsibilities in making referrals. From an interpretivist perspective, it is therefore important to understand how discipline officers make meaning of their experiences in the referral process, including how they perceive their roles, the challenges they encounter, and the factors that facilitate or hinder their referral practices. These subjective meanings and lived experiences may provide deeper insight into how discipline officers understand and navigate counseling referrals within the context of their work. From a social constructivist perspective, these experiences and interpretations do not develop in isolation but are shaped by the social and institutional contexts in which discipline officers operate. Their interactions with students, fellow discipline officers, counselors, administrators, and other university stakeholders, as well as institutional policies, practices, and cultural perceptions of counseling, may influence how they understand and carry out the referral process. Thus, examining the social contexts surrounding discipline officers' experiences is essential to understanding why certain practices, barriers, and facilitators emerge. At the same time, the study adopts a pragmatic orientation by seeking to translate these findings into practical and contextually appropriate solutions. Specifically, identifying gaps in knowledge, skills, referral practices, and institutional support may inform recommendations for strengthening the counseling referral process and guide the development of a targeted capacity-building training program for discipline officers. In this way, understanding the meanings and lived experiences of discipline officers, the social contexts in which their referral practices are formed, and the practical challenges they

encounter can contribute to improvements in institutional referral mechanisms and student support services.

To be able to execute this framework, the researchers will look into the experiences, attitudes, and challenges of discipline officers in referring students for counseling. It aims to reveal the factors of their referral behavior and determine the needs and possibilities of enhancing the existing guidelines and practices. In understanding these, the research will be able to gather information needed for the creation of a specific capacity-building program to enhance the coordination between the discipline office and counseling services.

Specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges and opportunities experienced by discipline officers in referring students with behavioral issues to counseling services?
2. What skills, knowledge, or support do discipline officers identify as necessary to improve the counseling referral process?
3. What suggestions do the officers have for strengthening the collaboration between the discipline office and the counseling services?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. The study utilized a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the opportunities and challenges that student discipline officers encounter when referring students with behavioral concerns to the counseling and psychological services office. The objective of this is to provide a comprehensive summary of events and experiences in everyday terms, thereby enabling the voices and perspectives of the participants to arise naturally (Sandelowski, 2000). A qualitative design is considered appropriate to produce rich, detailed insights that are grounded in the real-world context, as the study is focused on understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of officers.

Population and Sampling. The discipline officers who participated in the study are from a local private university situated in the Manila. Given the small and specialized population of discipline officers within a single university office, a census sampling approach was employed, in which all discipline officers in the office were invited to participate in the study ($n = 12$). The office director assisted in identifying potential participants by providing a list of officers who were directly involved in managing student disciplinary cases and in referring students to counseling and psychological services. This strategy allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the perspectives and experiences of the entire group.

In cases where some officers were unavailable or declined participation, purposive sampling was utilized to ensure the inclusion of participants who held key roles and had relevant experience in the counseling referral process. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicating that no new significant insights were emerging from the discussions.

Participants' age ranged from 28 to 64 years old. All were currently employed at this university in Manila and currently serving as discipline officers at the time of data collection. All of them had at least six months of experience handling student disciplinary cases and had prior experience referring students to counseling and psychological services.

Data Collection. Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained ethical clearance from the university's Research Ethics Office. After approval was granted, the researchers contacted the director of the university's student discipline office through a formal letter of intent outlining the purpose of the study, the expected duration of data collection, and a request for assistance in identifying potential participants. The director subsequently provided a list of discipline officers who met the inclusion criteria and who were directly involved in handling student disciplinary cases and referring students to counseling services.

Eligible participants were then invited through email to participate in the study. The invitation included an informed consent form, a Google Form requesting their availability for the focus group discussion (FGD), and options regarding their preferred mode of participation. Three possible schedules were provided to accommodate participants' availability. The FGDs were conducted face-to-face in a private conference room within the university. Face-to-face sessions were limited to a maximum of three participants per group to ensure a manageable and confidential discussion environment. As a gesture of appreciation, participants received a small token valued at 200 pesos, which was sent through a digital payment platform after their participation.

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group discussions. An FGD guide was used to facilitate a systematic flow of conversation while allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on relevant experiences and perspectives. The discussion focused on the following key questions:

1. Can you describe your experiences in referring students to counseling and psychological services?
2. What challenges or difficulties have you encountered when referring students to counseling services?
3. If you had the opportunity to improve the counseling referral process, what type of training, support, or changes would you recommend?

Data Analysis. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method provided flexibility in interpreting various aspects of the research topic while maintaining a close connection to the participants' accounts.

The analysis followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data familiarization

was conducted by transcribing the focus group discussion recordings and repeatedly reading the transcripts. The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented both the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole. Then, the themes were defined and named, allowing the researchers to clarify the essence of each theme and the broader narrative emerging from the analysis. Finally, the researchers produced the report by selecting representative extracts from the discussions, conducting further analysis of these excerpts, and linking the findings to the research questions and relevant literature.

To ensure qualitative rigor, strategies were employed to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability. These included maintaining detailed field notes during data collection, engaging in peer debriefings to review emerging interpretations, and keeping a clear audit trail documenting all analytical procedures and decisions.

Ethical Considerations. To protect participants' rights, safety, and welfare, this study adhered to established ethical standards for human research. Formal ethical clearance was obtained from the university's Research Ethics Review Committee, ensuring compliance with institutional and national regulations. Throughout all research stages, respect for the autonomy, dignity, and professional roles of the participants was strictly upheld.

Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. The consent process clearly detailed the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were explicitly informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without negative consequences or penalty.

Confidentiality and privacy were meticulously maintained. Focus group discussions were conducted in private, secure settings to facilitate open dialogue. All collected data were anonymized by removing identifying details

from transcripts and final reports. Audio recordings and digital files were stored in secure, password-protected folders accessible only to the research team. These data were used solely for research purposes and will be permanently deleted following a predetermined retention period, in line with ethical guidelines.

While the overall potential risks were minimal, discussions regarding counseling referrals and disciplinary cases could evoke mild emotional discomfort, and the focus group setup posed peer-confidentiality concerns. To mitigate these issues, the researchers reinforced confidentiality protocols and facilitated a respectful, supportive environment. Participants' well-being was actively monitored, structured debriefings were conducted after each session, and institutional support services were made available if required.

RESULTS

This section presents the dominant themes that emerged from the data, and identified through thematic analysis. The results are shown according to research questions.

Challenges and opportunities experienced in referring students with behavioral issues to counseling services.

Theme 1: Evolving Referral Processes and Communication Channels. Participants noted that the transition to online referral systems has improved the efficiency of counseling referrals. This theme was supported by codes such as "online referral system," "faster referral processing," "improved coordination," "documentation of referrals," and "monitoring of referred students." These codes reflect participants' experiences of how digital processes have streamlined the referral procedure and facilitated smoother coordination with the counseling office, particularly in documenting, tracking, and monitoring students referred for counseling.

The findings suggest that the adoption of online referral mechanisms has not only made the referral process more efficient but has also

strengthened communication and coordination between the discipline and counseling offices. The participants' responses shown below support this theme.

Participant 1: "Simula noong naging online na ang referral process, via email, mas naging mabilis ang coordination namin sa counseling office. Dati kasi manual pa ang forms and sulat kamay pa kaya minsan natatagalan bago ma-process."

Participant 4: "Mas organized na ngayon ang documentation ng referrals dahil naka-email na. Mas madali na ring i-monitor kung nagpunta na ba ang student para sa counseling."

Participant 7: "Para sa amin malaking improvement yung digital referral system. Hindi na kami masyadong nahihirapan sa follow-up dahil mas madali balikan ang communication with counselors."

Theme 2: Student Barriers to Accessing Counseling. Participants observed that several factors may hinder students' access to counseling services. This theme was supported by codes such as "limited awareness of counseling services," "unfamiliarity with available services," "stigma toward counseling," "fear of punitive consequences," "perceived complexity of the referral process," and "association of counseling with disciplinary outcomes." These codes reflect participants' observations that students may be reluctant to seek counseling because they are unfamiliar with the services available to them, perceive counseling as stigmatizing, or fear that seeking help may negatively affect the outcome of their discipline cases. Participants also noted that students may perceive the referral process as complicated, further discouraging them from accessing counseling services. Overall, the findings suggest that students' barriers to counseling are influenced not only by their awareness of available services but also by their perceptions, fears, and interpretations of counseling within the disciplinary context. The participants' responses below highlight this theme.

Participant 2: "Napansin ko na maraming students pa din ang hindi talaga familiar kung ano ang counseling. Minsan iniisip nila na punishment sya kasi galing sa discipline office ang referral."

Participant 6: "May mga students na nagiging hesitant kasi iniisip nila na baka makaapekto sa decision ng case nila kapag pumunta sila sa counseling. Na baka yung counseling part pala ang investigation."

Participant 9: "Sa experience ko, may stigma pa rin talaga. Kapag sinabi mong counseling may ibang students na nag-a-assume agad na may problema sila sa mental health. Gusto lang naman namin na safe and okay sila kahit may case pa rin."

Theme 3: Data Privacy Concerns. Participants identified concerns regarding the privacy and confidentiality of cases involving students referred to counseling. This theme was supported by codes such as "confidentiality of student cases," "privacy of referral information," "data privacy compliance," "referral form concerns," and "unclear data-handling procedures." While improvements and changes in referral forms have been made, participants noted that certain aspects of the referral protocols and procedures continue to raise concerns regarding the appropriate collection, documentation, sharing, and handling of students' personal and case-related information. These concerns highlight the importance of having clear and consistently implemented data privacy procedures to ensure that sensitive student information is appropriately protected throughout the counseling referral process. The participants' responses presented below support this theme.

Participant 3: "Minsan nagiging maingat kami sa paglagay ng details sa referral form kasi iniisip namin kung hanggang saan lang ang dapat i-share na information. Baka ma data privacy kapag may ibang details pa kami ilagay."

Participant 8: "Importante sa amin ang confidentiality ng students, kaya gusto rin

namin na malinaw kung ano lang ang pwede naming i-disclose sa counseling office."

Participant 11: "Kahit may existing forms na, minsan may confusion pa rin kung paano i-handle ang sensitive information ng students lalo na kung related sa personal issues. Minsan kasi may students na nagsasabi na may condition sila pero hindi namin alam kung dapat ba namin ilagay din yun sa referral form."

Theme 4: Identifying Students to Refer to Counseling. Some participants expressed difficulty in determining which students should be referred for counseling. This theme was supported by codes such as "difficulty identifying students for referral," "uncertainty in determining referral needs," "observable signs of psychosocial concerns," "student reluctance," "hesitation to seek counseling," and "difficulty encouraging students to access counseling." Participants reported that although they may observe behavioral or emotional indicators suggesting that professional support could be beneficial, determining whether a student requires counseling remains challenging. They also described difficulties in encouraging students who are hesitant or unwilling to access counseling services. These findings suggest that discipline officers may need clearer guidance in recognizing appropriate referral indicators and developing effective approaches for communicating the purpose and benefits of counseling to students who may be reluctant to seek professional support. The participants' responses below provide support for this theme.

Participant 5: "Minsan nahihirapan kaming i-encourage ang students na magpa-counseling kasi sinasabi nila na okay naman daw sila kahit na may behavioral concern na na-observe or halata naman."

Participant 10: "May mga students na ayaw pumunta sa counseling kasi feeling nila hindi naman nila kailangan ng emotional support. Kahit minsan umiiyak na sila during investigation."

Participant 12: "Kahit ipaliwanag namin ang benefits ng counseling, may ilan pa ring hesitant kasi iniisip nila na dagdag lang ito sa disciplinary process."

Identified skills, knowledge, or support necessary to improve the counseling referral process.

Theme 1: Lack of Mental Health Training.

Participants acknowledged challenges in detecting early signs of mental health concerns among students and emphasized the need for greater sensitivity and preparedness in responding to mental health-related issues. This theme was supported by codes such as "difficulty recognizing early signs," "limited mental health knowledge," "identifying behavioral and emotional indicators," "need for greater sensitivity," "uncertainty in responding to mental health concerns," and "need for capacity-building." These codes reflect participants' perceived limitations in recognizing and appropriately responding to students who may be experiencing mental health concerns. Participants identified mental health awareness and sensitivity as important areas for professional development, particularly in relation to determining when a student may require counseling referral. Overall, the findings suggest a need for targeted mental health training that can enhance discipline officers' knowledge, confidence, and skills in recognizing potential concerns and facilitating appropriate referrals. The following responses from the participants substantiate this theme.

Participant 6: "Sa totoo lang, hindi rin kami experts sa mental health kaya minsan nahihirapan kaming i-identify kung may deeper concerns ang students."

Participant 1: "Makakatulong talaga kung may training kami tungkol sa basic signs ng mental health concerns para mas maaga naming ma-refer ang student. Kahit yung mga red flags lang na makita or masabi sa amin."

Participant 9: "Kailangan din namin ng training kung paano maging mas sensitive sa pag-handle ng cases na may emotional or mental or psychological aspects."

Theme 2: Confusion on Protocols and Referral Guidelines.

Participants highlighted confusion surrounding the existing guidelines and protocols for referring students to counseling. This theme was supported by codes such as "unclear referral guidelines," "confusion about referral procedures," "lack of clarity on referral protocols," "inconsistent understanding of procedures," "need for inter-office coordination," and "need to review and refine referral guidelines." Participants emphasized the need to review and refine the referral guidelines of both the counseling and discipline offices to establish clearer roles, responsibilities, procedures, and expectations throughout the referral process. These findings suggest that ambiguity in referral protocols may contribute to inconsistencies in practice and may affect the efficiency of coordination between offices. Clear, standardized, and mutually understood referral guidelines may therefore strengthen the consistency and effectiveness of counseling referrals. The participants' accounts presented below demonstrates this theme.

Participant 4: "Minsan nagkakaroon ng confusion sa exact steps ng referral process. Maganda kung mas malinaw at standardized ang guidelines."

Participant 7: "Importante na aligned ang policies ng discipline office at counseling office para hindi nagkakaroon ng misunderstanding sa proseso. Baka kasi magkaiba yung ginagawa namin sa ineexpect nila sa amin eh."

Participant 11: "Kung may updated manual o orientation tungkol sa referral process, mas magiging consistent ang implementation. Nakakalito kasi minsan and matagal na nagkaroon ng meeting or orientation tungkol doon."

Theme 3: Knowledge on Data Privacy and Ethical Considerations. Some participants identified the need to refresh their understanding of data privacy policies and ethical considerations, which are central to the counseling referral process. This theme was supported by codes such as “need to refresh knowledge on data privacy,” “limited familiarity with data privacy policies,” “confidentiality of student information,” “ethical handling of student cases,” “data privacy compliance concerns,” and “need for updated training.” Participants acknowledged that certain existing practices may not be fully aligned with current data privacy requirements, particularly in relation to the handling, sharing, and protection of information concerning students referred for counseling. These findings underscore the importance of updated and context-specific training to strengthen discipline officers’ knowledge of data privacy and ethical considerations and to promote more appropriate and compliant practices throughout the counseling referral process. The following participant responses reflect this emerging theme.

Participant 2: “Sa tingin ko kailangan din naming i-refresh ang knowledge namin sa data privacy policies para masigurong compliant ang ginagawa namin.”

Participant 8: “Minsan hindi rin malinaw kung anong specific information ang pwede naming i-share sa referral form. Kaya usually general info lang nilalagay namin.”

Participant 12: “Makakatulong kung may regular orientation tungkol sa ethical handling ng student information lalo na sa mga sensitive cases. Kahit refresher lang pwede na.”

Theme 4: Encouraging and Preparing Students for Counseling. Participants shared experiences of students expressing hesitance or lack of awareness about counseling services. This theme was supported by codes such as “student hesitancy,” “limited awareness of counseling services,” “fear of mental health diagnosis,” “perceived lack of need for counseling,”

“resistance to emotional support,” and “need to prepare students for counseling.” Some students reportedly feared being diagnosed with a mental health condition, while others believed that they did not require emotional or psychosocial support despite observable concerns noted during hearings or conferences with discipline officers. Participants’ experiences suggest that students’ reluctance to engage in counseling may be influenced by misconceptions, fears, and limited understanding of the purpose and benefits of counseling. These findings highlight the need to equip discipline officers with appropriate communication strategies for explaining counseling services, addressing students’ concerns, reducing misconceptions and apprehension, and preparing students for referral without making clinical judgments or diagnoses. Such support may help facilitate a more receptive and informed transition from the disciplinary process to appropriate counseling services. This theme is further supported by the participants’ responses presented below.

Participant 5: “May mga students na natatakot sa counseling kasi iniisip nila na baka ma-diagnose sila agad ng mental health condition. Akala nila parang assessment agad gagawin.”

Participant 10: “May pagkakataon na sinasabi ng student na okay naman daw siya kahit na may mga signs na kailangan niya ng support. Sana mabigyan kami nung guide or techniques na pwedeng makatulong sa amin sa pag encourage sa students.”

Participant 3: “Makakatulong kung may strategies kaming matutunan kung paano ipaliwanag sa students ang purpose ng counseling.”

Suggestions to strengthen the collaboration between the discipline office and the counseling services.

Theme 1: Review Referral Systems. Participants raised concerns about certain guidelines and protocols within the current referral system. This theme was supported by codes such as

“need to review referral guidelines,” “unclear referral protocols,” “data privacy alignment,” “student consent for referral,” “documentation of consent,” and “need for standardized referral procedures.” Participants emphasized the importance of reviewing and refining existing procedures to ensure that the referral process is consistent with applicable data privacy policies and that students’ consent to be referred for counseling is appropriately obtained and documented. These findings suggest that strengthening the referral system requires not only clearer procedural guidelines but also safeguards that protect students’ privacy and autonomy throughout the referral process. A systematic review of the referral protocols may therefore help clarify the responsibilities of discipline officers and counseling personnel and promote a more consistent, transparent, and ethically responsive referral process. The participants’ narratives below provide evidence of this theme.

Participant 1: “Maganda siguro kung ma-review ulit ang referral process para masigurong updated ito at aligned sa data privacy policies. Or baka may changes pala na hindi kami aware.”

Participant 6: “Importante rin na malinaw ang consent ng student bago siya i-refer sa counseling. Kasi paano kung ayaw pala talaga pero tingin namin need nila.”

Participant 9: “Kung mas simple at malinaw ang referral system, mas magiging efficient ang proseso para sa discipline officers at students.”

Theme 2: Joint Training and Capacity-Building Programs. Participants suggested that joint capacity-building programs involving discipline officers and counselors would be beneficial in fostering a shared understanding of referral processes, roles, and expectations. This theme was supported by codes such as “joint training with counselors,” “inter-office collaboration,” “shared understanding of referral processes,” “clarification of roles and expectations,” “integration of professional perspectives,” and “collaborative capacity-building.” Participants

emphasized the importance of incorporating the perspectives and experiences of both counselors and discipline officers in developing and implementing training initiatives. Such collaboration may help clarify the respective roles of both offices, address gaps or inconsistencies in referral practices, and strengthen communication and coordination throughout the referral process. The findings therefore suggest that capacity-building should not be limited to discipline officers alone but may be more effective when designed as a collaborative initiative that promotes shared responsibility and a common understanding of the counseling referral framework. The following excerpts from the participants’ responses highlight this theme.

Participant 7: “Makakatulong kung may joint training ang discipline officers at counselors para mas maintindihan namin ang roles ng bawat isa at makilala namin sila.”

Participant 10: “Kung may workshops kasama ang counselors, mas magiging confident kami sa pag-refer ng students. Madami na din bagong counselors, sana makilala namin sila.”

Participant 4: “Maganda rin na magkaroon ng regular learning sessions para ma-align ang practices ng dalawang offices.”

Theme 3: Enhancing Awareness of Counseling Services. Participants emphasized the need to increase awareness and understanding of counseling services. This theme was supported by codes such as “limited awareness of counseling services,” “misconceptions about counseling,” “lack of understanding of counseling benefits,” “parental unfamiliarity with counseling,” “student awareness gap,” and “need for counseling orientation.” Based on their experiences, participants observed that both students and parents may have limited understanding of the nature, purpose, and potential benefits of counseling, which may contribute to hesitation or reluctance to engage with counseling services. Participants therefore recommended learning sessions or orientation activities that explain the nature and benefits of

counseling to students, parents, and discipline officers. Such initiatives may help address misconceptions, improve awareness, and promote a shared understanding of counseling as a supportive resource rather than solely as a response to disciplinary or behavioral concerns. The participants' accounts, with excerpts below, reinforce this theme.

Participant 2: "Sa observation ko, maraming students ang hindi pa talaga alam kung ano ang counseling at makakatulong sa kanila."

Participant 11: "Kung may awareness programs tungkol sa counseling services, mas mababawasan ang stigma sa mga students. Sana mas ma promote pa kung tungkol saan yun."

Participant 8: "Maganda rin kung pati parents ay ma-orient tungkol sa counseling para mas maintindihan nila ang purpose nito."

Theme 4: Improving Collaborative Support Structures. Although collaborative protocols between the counseling and discipline offices already exist, participants identified areas for improvement in the existing support structures. This theme was supported by codes such as "existing inter-office collaboration," "need for consistent feedback mechanisms," "case conference," "follow-up communication," "strengthening inter-office coordination," and "collaborative student support." Participants emphasized the need for more consistent feedback mechanisms between the counseling and discipline offices to facilitate appropriate follow-up and coordination regarding referred students. They also suggested the use of case conferences, when necessary, particularly for cases that may require closer coordination or a more comprehensive understanding of the student's needs. These findings suggest that existing collaborative protocols provide an important foundation for student support but may benefit from more structured and consistent mechanisms for communication, feedback, and case coordination. Strengthening these collaborative support structures may contribute to a more coordinated and

responsive counseling referral process while ensuring that student support remains appropriately guided by the respective roles and responsibilities of the counseling and discipline offices. This theme is evident in the participants' responses presented in the following excerpts.

Participant 3: "Makakatulong kung may regular feedback mechanism sa pagitan ng discipline office at counseling office. Kahit annually pwede ievaluate sana."

Participant 5: "Kung may pagkakataon na magkaroon ng case conference para sa complicated cases, mas magiging holistic ang support sa student. Iba kasi minsan perspective lalo na if may diagnosis ang student."

Participant 12: "Mas magiging effective ang referral process kung may continuous communication between the two offices. Meron naman na, pero baka may ibang ways pa."

DISCUSSION

The findings provide insight into the lived experiences of discipline officers referring students with behavioral issues to counseling services, highlighting a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and systemic factors.

A prominent theme was the evolution of referral processes. Participants noted that transitioning from hard-copy to online systems post-pandemic enhanced administrative efficiency, reduced documentation burdens, and smoothed inter-office coordination. This institutional adaptation aligns with Ganga et al. (2024) and Santa et al. (2024), who observed that digital platforms optimize referral pathways and mitigate paper-based delays. However, administrative efficiency does not guarantee successful counseling outcomes. While technology streamlines the movement of data, it cannot resolve deep-seated interpersonal and psychosocial barriers. True engagement still hinges on addressing students' limited awareness, reluctance to seek support, and institutional anxieties.

The theme of student barriers revealed persistent reluctance driven by stigma, lack of awareness, and fear of punitive implications. This indicates that historical misconceptions endure; the belief that students perceive counseling as a disciplinary measure rather than a supportive intervention remains unchanged from observations made by Franklin et al. (2012) over a decade ago. Similarly, Deacon (2015) emphasized that cultural perceptions and institutional contexts heavily dictate help-seeking behaviors. This explains why students in this study resisted counseling even when visibly in distress, underscoring the urgent need to reframe counseling as a developmental and restorative process.

Finally, data privacy and confidentiality emerged as salient concerns. Despite digital improvements, officers expressed unease regarding perceived vulnerabilities in collecting, transmitting, and sharing sensitive student information. This uncertainty regarding institutional data privacy alignment—even without actual breaches occurring—highlights the need for clearer data-handling protocols. As Kearney and Graczyk (2014) argued, unclear or inconsistently applied institutional protocols inadvertently create barriers to effective referrals. Furthermore, recent literature stresses that successful systems require both defined pathways and ongoing professional development. Halladay et al. (2022) noted that robust guidance materials and targeted training are essential for helping university personnel respond appropriately to mental health needs. Consequently, establishing technical safeguards must be paired with continuous training and the reinforcement of ethical practices among discipline officers to ensure referral integrity and consistency.

Regarding capacity-building, officers identified a critical need for mental health training, clear protocols, and knowledge of data privacy and ethical considerations. Effective counseling referrals require more than knowing when and where to refer a student; officers must possess a combination of practical skills, procedural clarity, and ethical awareness. Mental health

training enhances an officer's ability to recognize behavioral and emotional indicators warranting professional intervention, while clearer protocols establish consistency across offices. Furthermore, updated knowledge on data privacy ensures that student confidentiality is protected throughout the process.

Professional development must therefore adopt a holistic, context-specific approach addressing both individual competencies and supportive institutional structures. These findings provide a data-driven foundation for a targeted capacity-building program. This aligns with Sandelowski's (2000) assertion that qualitative accounts reveal crucial gaps in institutional preparedness and training overlooked by quantitative assessments. The demand for practical training in early distress identification matches broader literature emphasizing the need to equip higher education personnel with skills to recognize student distress, understand professional boundaries, and link students with support networks (Halladay et al., 2022). Locally, Philippine initiatives similarly highlight the necessity of equipping student affairs personnel to address mental health concerns (Gonzalo & Alibudbud, 2024), extending early work by Franklin et al. (2012) on dismantling gatekeeper knowledge and attitudinal barriers.

Finally, participants suggested structural enhancements to strengthen collaboration, including reviewing referral systems, conducting joint training, increasing counseling awareness, and improving feedback mechanisms. These measures reflect an understanding of the systemic nature of referral practices, where individual competence depends heavily on institutional frameworks. Sustainable improvement requires explicit alignment across individual, organizational, and systemic levels (Deacon, 2015). Ultimately, while digitalization has streamlined administrative workflows, significant gaps remain regarding student perceptions, data privacy, and officer support. Addressing these gaps through integrated, context-sensitive frameworks will enhance

referral efficacy, thus optimizing overall student well-being.

Recommendations. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the referral process between the discipline office and counseling services:

Enhance Training and Capacity-Building. Discipline officers should undergo regular training on mental health literacy, early detection of psychological concerns, and referral sensitivity. Joint capacity-building activities, conducted by a Registered Guidance Counselor or Registered Psychologist, are recommended to bridge role differences and foster shared understanding.

Review and Clarify Referral Protocols. Existing guidelines should be revisited through regular refreshers to address officer uncertainty, promote consistency, and ensure alignment with data privacy requirements. This includes clarifying referral criteria, proper form usage, and the distinct responsibilities of discipline and counseling personnel to eliminate ambiguity for both staff and students.

Strengthen Data Privacy and Ethical Practices. Institutions must provide refresher sessions on data privacy policies to prevent confidentiality breaches. Embedding ethical safeguards, such as explicit informed consent procedures and secure digital platforms, will reinforce stakeholder trust in the referral system.

Promote Counseling Awareness and Student Engagement. Targeted awareness campaigns, orientations, and student-led advocacy are needed to dismantle the stigma that frames counseling as a punitive disciplinary measure. Because students often resist due to misconceptions or fear of diagnosis, discipline officers must be equipped with communication strategies to encourage hesitant students and clarify the supportive nature of services.

Develop Collaborative Support Structures. Institutionalize regular feedback mechanisms, joint meetings, and case conferences (where appropriate) to enhance inter-office

coordination. This ensures continuity of care and provides discipline officers with timely updates while strictly respecting confidentiality boundaries.

Institutionalize Policy Support. Higher education administrators should prioritize formal policy development that explicitly integrates counseling referrals into student welfare frameworks, ensuring long-term sustainability, accountability, and systemic alignment.

These recommendations underscore a holistic, collaborative approach to behavioral concerns. By refining protocols, building officer competencies, safeguarding data privacy, and engaging students, institutions can transition from punitive frameworks to a supportive culture of care that effectively safeguards student well-being.

DISCLOSURES

Author contributions. Ajocrivipor P. Agojo: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Project Administration, Writing Original Draft, Review and Editing | Mary Marjiemae A. Lorenzo: Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing Original Draft, Review and Editing.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding source. This research received no external funding.

Artificial intelligence use. AI-assisted grammar editing was performed using ChatGPT; authors reviewed and approved all content.

Ethics approval statement. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of De La Salle University Mania, with reference code 2025-201.

Data availability statement. All data supporting the findings of this study are included within the manuscript.

Acknowledgement. (Not available)

Publisher's disclaimer. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher. The publisher disclaims any responsibility for errors or omissions.

REFERENCES

- Balderama, R. M. (2019). Capacity building of school personnel in promoting mental health among learners. *Philippine Journal of Education*, 96(3), 45–52.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Deacon, B. J. (2015). The biomedical model of mental disorder: A critical analysis of its validity, utility, and effects on psychotherapy research. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 33(7), 846–861. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2012.09.007>
- De Guzman, A. B., & Celestino, A. C. (2018). Counseling in Philippine higher education institutions: Perspectives on referral practices and student receptiveness. *Philippine Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 20(1), 25–40.
- Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Graczyk, P. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2008). Implementation, sustainability, and scaling up of social-emotional and academic innovations in public schools. *School Psychology Review*, 32(3), 303–319.
- Farmer, E. M. Z., Burns, B. J., Phillips, S. D., Angold, A., & Costello, E. J. (2003). Pathways into and through mental health services for children and adolescents. *Psychiatric Services*, 54(1), 60–66. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.54.1.60>
- Franklin, C., Kim, J. S., Ryan, T. N., Kelly, M. S., & Montgomery, K. L. (2012). Teacher involvement in school mental health interventions: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(5), 973–982. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.01.027>
- Ganga, R. N., Santa, K., Ali, M., & Smith, G. (2024). The impact of a digital referral platform to improve access to child and adolescent mental health services: A prospective observational study with real-world data. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 21(10), 1318. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21101318>
- Gonzales, M. A., & Tuazon, J. M. (2020). Enhancing referral systems through collaboration: Insights from guidance services in Philippine colleges. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*, 2(1), 78–91.
- Gonzalo, R. P., & Alibudbud, R. (2024). Advancing education-based mental health in low-resource settings during health crises: The mental health initiative of the University of the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, 1428237. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1428237>
- Halladay, J., Woock, R., Xu, A., Boutros Salama, M., & Munn, C. (2022). Professor Hippo-on-Campus: Developing and evaluating an educational intervention to build mental health literacy among university faculty and staff. *Journal of American College Health*, 70(8), 2405–2414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2115305>

- Kearney, C. A., & Graczyk, P. A. (2014). A response to intervention model to promote school attendance and decrease school absenteeism. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 43(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-013-9222-1>
- Morgan, D. L. (2007). Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), 48–76.
- Owens, J. S., Murphy, C. E., Richerson, L., Girio, E., & Himawan, L. (2012). The impact of teacher perceptions on student mental health service use in schools. *School Mental Health*, 4(1), 11–22.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Rickwood, D., Mazzer, K. R., & Telford, N. (2005). Mental health help-seeking in young people and the role of trusted adults: A review. *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 4(3), 1–34.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334–340.
- Santa, K., Dixon, C., Ganga, R. N., Trainor, G., Smith, G., Furfie, V., & Brown, H. (2024). Facilitating access to mental health services: A stakeholder-driven improvement of the Children and Young People (CYP) as One referral platform. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 21(6), 784. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21060784>
- Schwandt, T. A. (2000). Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 189–213). SAGE Publications.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Willis, J. W. (2007). *Foundations of qualitative research: Interpretive and critical approaches*. SAGE Publications.