



Building a Sustainable Educational Ecology for Arts Major Students: Practice-Based Model Development of a Counselor-Led Mental Health Support Model

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Abstract

Student mental health has become a core issue in university governance, yet existing support models remain insufficiently adaptive to the ecosystem of arts education, which is shaped by public performance, iterative critique, and identity exposure. This practice-oriented paper develops a counselor-led mental health support model for arts major students through a narrative review of relevant literature, reflection on the authors' long-term front-line counseling and student-affairs practice, and the analysis of illustrative de-identified composite cases derived from real practice. Drawing on ecological systems theory, the paper argues that sustainable support must link micro-level counseling work with meso-level studio and peer cultures, exo-level family and labor-market pressures, and macro-level university governance arrangements. The cases on anxiety management, self-esteem rebuilding, and

crisis response show how emotional validation, staged task design, critique reframing, and coordinated referral can be integrated in the arts education context. The paper further identifies major implementation challenges and proposes optimization pathways that include critique-culture reform, faculty feedback-literacy training, family mental-health workshops, and ecosystem assessment indicators. The study contributes a conceptual framework and practice-based model development pathway for building a sustainable educational ecology for arts major students.

Keywords: higher education, college counselors, arts major students, student mental health, educational ecology, ecological systems theory, practice-based model development.

1 Introduction

Student mental health is no longer a marginal student-affairs topic; it is a central condition for learning, development, retention, and campus safety. International studies show that depression, anxiety,



Submitted: 25 May 2026

Revised: 28 June 2026

Accepted: 11 August 2026

Published: 11 September 2026

Vol. 2, No. 3, 2026.

10.62762/FEIR.2026.535517

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Citation

Wu, Y., Lin, R., & Kong, W. (2026). Building a Sustainable Educational Ecology for Arts Major Students: Practice-Based Model Development of a Counselor-Led Mental Health Support Model. *Frontiers in Educational Innovation and Research*, 2(3), 90–103.



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stress, and help-seeking barriers are common among university students, while prevalence and service use vary across campuses and student subgroups [1]. The WHO World Mental Health surveys likewise indicate that the transition into college coincides with a period of elevated onset and persistence of mental disorders [2]. These findings are consistent with the rapid expansion of mental health concerns observed in higher education, where students face academic competition, employment uncertainty, digital-life stress, family expectations, and changing interpersonal patterns.

Recent trend studies further suggest that student distress and help-seeking needs have intensified over time, making campus mental health work a sustained governance challenge rather than a temporary response to isolated crises [3]. Earlier higher education literature already warned that counseling demand was rising faster than many institutional support systems could adapt [4]. In this context, counselors in higher education institutions are not simply administrative staff. They are organizers of mental health education, listeners in students' everyday lives, first responders to risk signals, and bridges to professional psychological services. Empirical evidence suggests that social support plays a crucial role in mitigating psychological distress and enhancing the mental health of college students, including those in arts programs [5]. Notably, arts and music students report significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression than the general student population, underscoring the need for population-specific support strategies [6].

Compared with many non-arts majors, students in music, dance, fine arts, design, theater, film, broadcasting, animation, and other arts programs experience mental health pressures through distinctive educational arrangements. Their learning is often public, embodied, iterative, and judgment-intensive. A poor examination score may remain private, but an unsuccessful performance, rejected portfolio, failed audition, criticized choreography, or weak studio presentation can be experienced as a direct evaluation of the student's self, talent, and future. Artistic work also requires emotional exposure: students are asked to express personal experience, aesthetic preference, bodily presence, and creative imagination in front of teachers and peers. These conditions make arts education fertile ground for growth, but they also increase vulnerability to shame, comparison, avoidance, and perfectionistic rumination.

The labor market faced by arts majors adds another layer of uncertainty. Students are frequently told that artistic careers require passion, persistence, competition, networking, and self-branding. Some students enter college with strong artistic identity but weak psychological preparation for repeated rejection; others discover that professional training is more demanding and less romantic than pre-college imagination. The counselor's work therefore has to address both general student development and the specific ecology of arts education: performance-based assessment, critique routines, rehearsals, exhibitions, competitions, auditions, internships, and the tension between creative freedom and institutional standards.

This paper uses the term *counselor* in the broad higher education sense: a front-line student affairs professional who participates in ideological education, class management, developmental guidance, mental health education, crisis response, and resource coordination. In arts institutions and arts departments, counselors need enough psychological literacy to recognize risk and enough artistic literacy to understand the meanings students attach to stage, studio, portfolio, body, voice, image, and originality. The aim is not to turn counselors into psychotherapists or studio instructors. Rather, the aim is to clarify how counselors can work at the boundary between daily student life and professional support, identifying early warning signs, lowering help-seeking barriers, and building a more humane campus ecology for arts majors.

A key research gap therefore emerges: although university mental health models have become more diversified, most are still framed for general student populations and do not fully capture the arts education ecosystem, where public performance, iterative critique, and identity exposure intensify vulnerability while also reshaping help-seeking behavior. Addressing this gap requires a model that is simultaneously developmental, contextual, and practice-sensitive.

Against this background, the present paper makes three contributions. First, it reframes counselor-led mental health work for arts majors as *practice-based ecosystem building* rather than as isolated crisis response, using ecological systems theory to connect individual distress with the layered environments of arts education. Second, it translates this framing into an operational model, comprising a case-handling pathway, a four-level ecological architecture, and

an intervention matrix, that counselors can apply to recurrent needs such as performance anxiety, portfolio perfectionism, body-image pressure, and psychological crisis. Third, it moves from description to governance by proposing concrete optimization pathways and assessment indicators through which institutions can make a sustainable support ecosystem measurable and durable. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the practice-centered model development framework. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework and clarifies the research gap. Section 4 sets out counselors' practical strategies. Section 5 presents the visualized work model and practice framework. Section 6 analyzes three illustrative cases. Sections 7 and 8 discuss current challenges and optimization pathways. Section 9 concludes and discusses limitations and future directions.

2 Research Design and Methods

This paper follows a practice-centered model development framework. It begins with a narrative review of existing research covering student mental health, help-seeking behaviors, performance anxiety, perfectionism, and support systems within arts education. Next, it integrates sustained, in-depth reflections from the authors and their team, built on years of front-line experience in higher education student affairs, counseling support, and crisis coordination. Finally, it presents de-identified composite cases derived from recurring practice patterns to illustrate how the proposed model may operate in common scenarios, including anxiety management, self-esteem recovery, and crisis response.

The three strands were designed to complement one another. The literature strand is a *narrative* rather than a fully protocol-driven systematic review: relevant peer-reviewed studies were identified from major databases and reference chaining, prioritizing work on university student mental health, help-seeking, performance anxiety, perfectionism, embodied and occupational risk in the performing arts, and campus prevention programs. Sources were selected for conceptual relevance to the arts education ecosystem rather than for statistical pooling, because the aim is theory integration rather than effect-size estimation.

The reflective strand draws on the authors' combined roles in student affairs, developmental guidance, and crisis coordination. Reflection was structured around recurring questions, namely what early signals

appeared, how help-seeking barriers manifested, which referral pathways worked, and how studio and family environments shaped outcomes, so that individual experience could be abstracted into transferable practice patterns. Where the authors' interpretations differed, discrepancies were discussed until a shared reading was reached, providing a basic form of collaborative interpretive checking.

The case strand is illustrative and interpretive. As detailed in Section 6, the cases presented in this paper are de-identified composite cases constructed from real practice patterns rather than verbatim reports of single students. All cases have been anonymized in compliance with institutional confidentiality and ethical standards; as this study involves no personally identifiable information, formal ethical approval is not applicable. This design is suitable for the paper's primary purpose of conceptual clarification and practice-informed model development, although it does not permit causal inference or empirical validation of the proposed model. Accordingly, the model should be read as a transferable framework to be adapted and empirically evaluated in local contexts, not as a validated intervention with established effect sizes.

3 Theoretical Framework and Research Gap

Existing research offers strong foundations for campus mental health support, but a problem remains: many models are optimized for general academic stress and do not fully explain the distinctive ecosystem of arts education. For arts major students, distress is often shaped not only by workload or transition pressure but also by recurrent public evaluation, embodied performance, critique-centered pedagogy, and the fusion of creative output with self-identity [7]. Theoretical framing must therefore connect individual symptoms with layered educational environments [8].

Ecological systems theory provides a suitable integrative lens for this task. At the micro level, counselors work with students' emotions, cognitions, coping skills, and help-seeking decisions. At the meso level, studio routines, peer comparison, rehearsal structures, and faculty feedback cultures shape whether support is experienced as enabling or shaming. At the exo level, family expectations, labor-market uncertainty, and off-campus performance opportunities influence pressure accumulation. At the macro level, university governance, policy, confidentiality norms, and resource allocation determine whether a sustainable support ecosystem

can be institutionalized.

Help-seeking theory is equally important. Many students experience distress but do not seek help because of stigma, low mental health literacy, fear of disclosure, uncertainty about service access, or doubts about whether their problems are serious enough [9]. Systematic reviews of barriers and facilitators confirm that help-seeking is shaped by personal attitudes, perceived need, service accessibility, and the quality of informal support [10]. Counselors are therefore crucial because they can lower the psychological and procedural threshold for help: they recognize early signs, normalize help-seeking, and guide students toward appropriate services.

Intervention research further validates the value of a proactive prevention model. Existing reviews of stress reduction interventions for university students show that structured psychological, mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral, and skill-focused programs can effectively ease stress and enhance students' coping capabilities [11]. Universal mental health promotion and prevention programs in higher education tend to show stronger outcomes when they match students' developmental needs, prioritize practical skill cultivation, and integrate seamlessly into daily campus life, instead of being offered as disconnected standalone lectures [12]. Accordingly, front-line counseling practice should combine personalized one-on-one support with group education, peer support system design, and campus-wide mental health culture development.

For arts majors, social support has a special structure. Students may receive emotional support from roommates or family members, technical feedback from studio teachers, career information from senior students, and identity affirmation from creative communities. However, these sources can also become sources of pressure. A teacher's rigorous critique may be educationally necessary, but if students lack psychological preparation, they may interpret critique as personal rejection. Family support may be sincere, but it can be mixed with anxiety about tuition, employment, and the perceived instability of artistic careers. Counselors need to help students distinguish evaluative feedback from personal worth and transform support networks from judgment networks into growth networks [5].

The literature on music performance anxiety is particularly relevant to arts majors because it shows how artistic assessment can produce both

physiological arousal and cognitive threat. Kenny and Osborne describe music performance anxiety as a phenomenon shaped by trait vulnerability, learning history, evaluative exposure, and the perceived consequences of performance [13]. Papageorgi, Creech, and Welch further show that advanced musicians' performance anxiety is not a simple fear of the stage; it is connected with preparation, self-belief, audience perception, peer comparison, and institutional expectations [14]. Although music students are only one group among arts majors, the mechanism is widely applicable: public display transforms learning into identity exposure.

Perfectionism provides another important framework. Arts education often encourages high standards, precise technique, repeated revision, and sensitivity to detail. These qualities are valuable, but they can become psychologically harmful when students equate imperfection with failure or believe that any mistake proves a lack of talent. Research on adolescent musicians indicates that perfectionism is linked with both achievement striving and distress, depending on whether standards are accompanied by self-criticism and fear of negative evaluation [15]. Counselors should therefore avoid simplistic messages such as "do not pursue perfection." The healthier message is that excellence requires flexible standards, recovery from errors, and the ability to separate performance outcomes from self-worth.

A third framework concerns occupational and embodied risk. Performing artists may face injury, sleep disruption, irregular rehearsal schedules, body image pressure, and the emotional exhaustion that comes from constant self-presentation. Studies of professional orchestral musicians have found associations among performance-related musculoskeletal pain, depression, and music performance anxiety, suggesting that psychological and physical distress often interact [16]. Even before students become professionals, they may experience similar patterns in a preliminary form: dance students may fear weight-related judgment, acting students may struggle with emotional exposure, design students may experience prolonged screen work and deadline pressure, and fine arts students may feel isolated during intensive creation. Mental health education for arts majors must therefore be embodied, contextual, and profession-sensitive.

Finally, identity development is central. Many arts students enter college with a strong narrative of

being talented, special, or destined for a creative life. College training can enrich this identity, but it can also destabilize it when students encounter peers who are more skilled, teachers who are stricter, and markets that are more uncertain than expected. Studies of musicians' working lives show that creative careers involve specific demands, including insecurity, self-management, intense identification with work, and blurred boundaries between personal and professional life [17]. Counselors can help students build a more sustainable artistic identity: one that values discipline and creativity, but also allows ordinary difficulty, rest, collaboration, and career diversification.

4 Practical Strategies of Counselors in Mental Health Guidance

4.1 Communication, Listening, and Trust Building

The first practical requirement for counselors is high-quality communication. Students often approach counselors with complex and sometimes unclear feelings rather than with neatly defined psychological problems. Counselors must therefore listen actively, observe verbal and nonverbal cues, avoid premature judgment, and use open-ended questions to help students clarify their experiences. A question such as "How has this situation affected your daily life?" is more useful than a closed question because it gives the student room to describe emotion, context, and meaning.

Trust is the precondition for any effective counseling relationship. Rogers' person-centered theory emphasizes congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding as necessary conditions for constructive psychological change [18]. In practice, this means that counselors must create a safe, confidential, and respectful atmosphere. Students are more willing to disclose anxiety, family conflict, self-doubt, or crisis thoughts when they feel that the counselor will not label, blame, or expose them.

For arts majors, trust building also requires respect for artistic subjectivity. A student may say, "I am not good enough to be here," after a failed performance; another may say, "My work has no soul," after a portfolio review. These statements should not be dismissed as melodrama or ordinary artistic temperament. They may reveal intense shame, identity threat, depressive thinking, or fear of losing belonging in the artistic community. Counselors should translate artistic

language into psychological understanding without stripping away its meaning. Instead of replying, "Everyone receives criticism," a more constructive response is, "It sounds as if the critique felt like a judgment on you as a person. Let us separate what the work needs from what you need as a person."

Confidentiality needs careful explanation in arts programs because students often study in small cohorts where teachers, accompanists, rehearsal partners, and classmates know one another closely. Students may worry that asking for help will affect casting, exhibition opportunities, competition recommendations, or teacher evaluations. Counselors should clearly explain what can remain confidential, what must be reported for safety reasons, and how coordination with faculty can be conducted with the student's consent whenever possible. This procedural clarity reduces fear and makes help-seeking feel less risky.

4.2 Problem Exploration and Goal-Oriented Support

After trust is established, counselors help students explore the origin, intensity, duration, and consequences of their problems. This process should not turn the counselor into a substitute decision-maker. Instead, the counselor should help students identify priorities, set short-term and long-term goals, and design realistic action plans. The skilled-helper model emphasizes problem clarification, preferred-outcome construction, and action planning [19]. Applied to campus work, this model can guide counselors to move from emotional containment to structured problem solving.

In arts education, problem exploration should include the student's artistic ecology. Counselors can ask about rehearsal load, studio critique frequency, sleep before performances, teacher-student communication, peer comparison, body-related comments, online exposure, family expectations, and career planning. These questions help counselors avoid treating symptoms in isolation. For instance, a student's insomnia may not be only a sleep problem; it may be tied to late-night editing, repeated redesign, fear of tomorrow's critique, or the belief that rest means laziness. A student's avoidance of class may not be laziness; it may be fear of singing in front of peers, panic before dance assessment, or shame after a teacher's public criticism.

Goal setting should be concrete and staged. For a student with performance anxiety, the first goal may

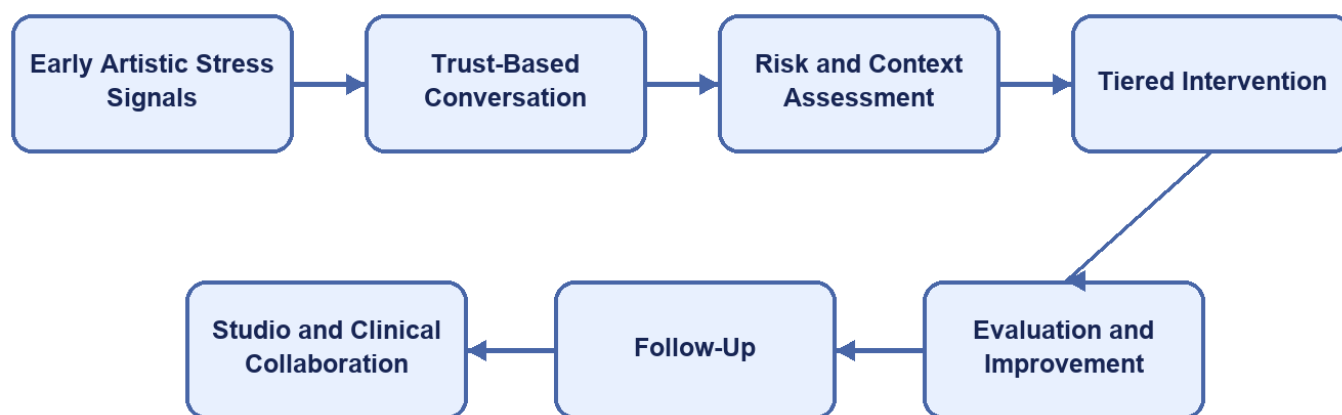


Figure 1. Counselor-led mental health support pathway for arts majors. The pathway connects studio observation, counselor support, peer belonging, and professional referral while preserving dignity and confidentiality.

be to attend rehearsal and complete one simulated performance, not to achieve an excellent grade immediately. For a student trapped in portfolio perfectionism, the first goal may be to submit a complete draft by a fixed time, not to produce a flawless work. For a student who avoids classmates after critique, the first goal may be to have one low-stakes conversation with a peer. Small goals restore agency and create evidence against helplessness.

4.3 Emotional Support and Crisis Response

Students frequently seek help when emotions have already exceeded their perceived coping capacity. Counselors need to provide emotional validation, teach basic regulation skills, and distinguish ordinary distress from crisis risk. When a student shows suicidal ideation, self-injury risk, severe depressive symptoms, or loss of behavioral control, counselors should activate a crisis protocol. Safety planning is an evidence-informed brief intervention that helps students identify warning signs, coping strategies, supportive contacts, professional resources, and steps to reduce access to lethal means [20].

Crisis work also requires a public-health perspective. The World Health Organization emphasizes that suicide prevention depends on coordinated identification, restriction of means, responsible communication, and accessible care [21]. For campuses, this means that counselors cannot work alone. They must coordinate with psychological counseling centers, academic departments, residence staff, security offices, hospitals, and families when legally and ethically appropriate. Beyond crisis situations, research on higher education music students shows that sleep quality, fatigue, and health-promoting behaviors are often suboptimal,

highlighting that anxiety and physical exhaustion require routine prevention rather than crisis-only response [22].

Emotional support for arts majors should include normalization of artistic difficulty without normalizing suffering as a requirement for creativity. Some students believe that a real artist must endure pain, sleeplessness, rejection, and emotional extremity. This belief can delay help-seeking and romanticize distress. Counselors should affirm the value of dedication while making clear that psychological injury is not proof of artistic depth. Creativity is more sustainable when students can regulate emotion, protect sleep, maintain relationships, and recover after failure.

Counselors should also build early-warning routines with arts faculty. Teachers often notice changes before counselors do: missed rehearsals, sudden withdrawal from group work, uncharacteristic irritability, repeated crying after critique, excessive practice despite injury, drastic weight change, or panic before presentations. A simple referral pathway can help teachers report concerns without attempting to diagnose students. The counselor then conducts a supportive conversation and decides whether ordinary guidance, counseling-center referral, family communication, medical attention, or emergency intervention is needed.

Digital environments require additional attention. Arts students frequently display work online, receive public comments, compare portfolios through social media, and construct personal brands before graduation. Online praise may temporarily improve confidence, while online criticism can amplify shame. Counselors can help students develop digital boundaries: limiting late-night comparison,

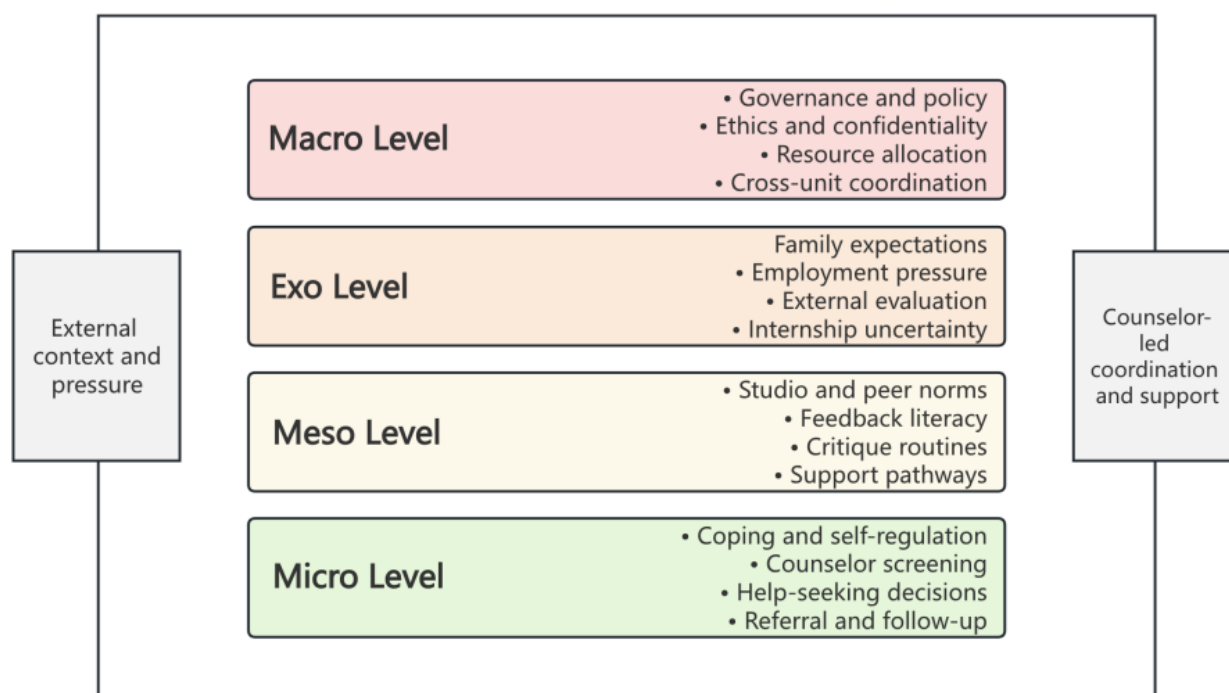


Figure 2. Ecological systems architecture for sustainable mental health support among arts major students.

separating feedback from identity, using online platforms strategically rather than compulsively, and seeking trusted offline feedback before treating online reaction as final judgment.

5 Visualized Work Model and Practice Framework

Figure 1 should be read as a multi-layered pathway rather than as a simple counseling sequence. At the operational level, it begins with daily observation of arts-specific stress signals, proceeds through trust-based conversation and contextualized risk assessment, and then differentiates intervention intensity according to need. At the ecological level, the pathway also depends on whether studio feedback norms, peer interaction, family support, and institutional referral systems work in coordination. The model is therefore both a case-handling flowchart and an ecosystem-building framework.

To construct a sustainable mental health support architecture for arts majors, a highly coordinated, multi-layered approach must be implemented across the micro, meso, exo, and macro levels, as shown in Figure 2. At the micro level, the focus centers on immediate interpersonal dynamics and individual agency, emphasizing student self-regulation, attentive counselor listening, proactive early screening, and structured, staged referral protocols. At the meso level, the architecture capitalizes on the interconnections

between immediate environments, which include fostering a supportive studio climate, mobilizing peer support networks, optimizing rehearsal routines, and enhancing faculty feedback literacy. At the exo level, the system addresses broader environments that indirectly impact students' well-being, specifically mitigating intense family expectations, internship and employment pressures, and the rigorous demands of external artistic evaluation. At the macro level, institutional infrastructure provides overarching structural integrity through university governance, formalized mental health policies, strict confidentiality procedures, and cross-departmental resource coordination. Ultimately, building a truly sustainable ecosystem depends on the synergy of continuous feedback loops across all four levels, shifting the paradigm away from isolated individual counseling toward systemic, holistic support.

The pathway is intentionally circular rather than linear. Arts students may improve after one intervention and then become distressed again before a major exhibition, public performance, competition, thesis defense, or graduation audition. Counselors should therefore treat follow-up and evaluation as ongoing responsibilities. Each cycle should ask three questions: Has the student's safety improved? Has the student's learning environment become more supportive? Has the student gained skills for managing the next artistic challenge? This cyclical logic prevents mental health

Table 1. Counselor intervention matrix for common mental health needs among arts majors.

Arts student need	Counselor focus	Practical methods	Expected outcome
Performance anxiety	Clarify triggers and reduce physiological arousal	Active listening, breathing practice, graded exposure, rehearsal planning	Lower anxiety and better performance readiness
Portfolio perfectionism	Rebuild flexible standards and task completion	Draft deadlines, critique reframing, small goals, reflective review	Improved completion and reduced self-criticism
Body or image pressure	Protect dignity and strengthen self-acceptance	Private check-ins, media literacy, referral when eating or self-harm risk appears	Healthier body relationship and earlier support
Psychological crisis	Protect safety and connect professional resources	Risk assessment, safety plan, emergency referral, family–school coordination	Stabilization, treatment access, and continued monitoring

education from becoming a one-time conversation after visible crisis. Building on this pathway, Table 1 distills the model into an intervention matrix that maps four recurrent needs among arts majors to a corresponding counselor focus, set of practical methods, and expected outcome.

6 Practice Case Analysis

Before discussing the cases, it should be emphasized that the following narratives are illustrative de-identified composite cases based on recurrent practice patterns. They are used to demonstrate intervention logic, not to disclose any single student’s identifiable experience.

6.1 Case 1: Supporting a Student with Anxiety

Zhang Qiang, a pseudonymous second-year music performance student, showed persistent insomnia, poor appetite, difficulty concentrating, and fear before studio class. He reported that his hands trembled before playing in front of peers and that he repeatedly imagined the teacher stopping him after the first mistake. The counselor began by building a nonjudgmental relationship and allowing the student to describe his experience in detail. Through open-ended questioning, the counselor identified uncertainty about future development, fear of public evaluation, and doubts about personal competence as the main sources of anxiety. The counselor then taught simple regulation techniques, including slow breathing and brief mindfulness, while helping the student rebuild a regular practice schedule.

The intervention also included graded exposure.

Zhang first practiced a short passage alone after completing breathing exercises, then recorded himself, then played for one trusted classmate, and finally completed a simulated performance in a small practice room. The counselor coordinated with the studio teacher, with Zhang’s consent, so that feedback in the early stage focused on one or two concrete technical points rather than broad judgments about talent. With regular follow-up, Zhang’s sleep and appetite improved, and he reported greater confidence in managing rehearsal and classroom pressure. The case shows that anxiety intervention for arts majors should combine emotional support with staged performance tasks.

6.2 Case 2: Enhancing Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

The second case concerns a visual communication student who was quiet, withdrawn, and reluctant to participate in group critique because of low self-evaluation. After several portfolio reviews, she concluded that her design style was immature and that she had no future in the field. The counselor’s strategy was not to impose encouragement from outside but to help the student discover evidence of competence in everyday work. The counselor asked her to bring three past assignments and identify one strength in each: color sensitivity, user empathy, layout discipline, or narrative clarity. This exercise shifted the conversation from global self-denial to specific artistic development.

The counselor then helped the student create a revision plan with limited goals. Instead of trying to redesign the entire portfolio, she selected one project for improvement, asked two peers for

targeted feedback, and prepared a short explanation of her design intention before the next critique. The counselor also encouraged her to separate three categories of feedback: technical suggestions, aesthetic disagreement, and personal preference. This classification reduced the feeling that every comment was an attack. Over time, the student became more willing to communicate with peers and take responsibility in class activities. The case shows that self-esteem work among arts majors should combine emotional acceptance, evidence-based self-appraisal, and concrete opportunities for artistic agency.

6.3 Case 3: Responding to Psychological Crisis

Hu Zhe, a pseudonymous second-year dance student, experienced severe emotional distress under the combined pressure of academic difficulty, interpersonal conflict, body-related criticism, and family problems. He showed persistent low mood, insomnia, loss of appetite, and signs of self-harm risk. The counselor immediately contacted the student, conducted a preliminary risk assessment, informed the campus counseling center, and helped build a safety network involving relevant departments and family members. Because the student feared losing performance opportunities, the counselor explained the difference between support and punishment and emphasized that the first priority was safety.

The counselor's intervention included three layers. The first layer was immediate safety: staying with the student, reducing access to means of self-harm, contacting professional staff, and documenting the risk process. The second layer was relational stabilization: identifying one trusted classmate, one family member, and one teacher who could provide support without excessive questioning. The third layer was learning-environment adjustment: temporarily reducing high-intensity rehearsal exposure and arranging a gradual return plan after professional evaluation. When the risk exceeded the counselor's professional scope, the student was referred to specialized psychological services. The crisis gradually stabilized. This case demonstrates the importance of rapid response, clear referral boundaries, and coordinated care in embodied arts disciplines.

6.4 Case Reflection

The three cases suggest that counselor practice should not stop at individual persuasion. Anxiety, low self-esteem, and crisis risk are experienced by individuals, but they are produced and intensified

within educational contexts. A music student's anxiety is linked with performance routines; a design student's self-doubt is linked with critique culture; a dance student's crisis may be linked with body pressure and intense rehearsal systems. Therefore, the counselor's role includes both micro-level support and meso-level coordination. Counselors should protect student privacy, but they should also identify repeated environmental factors that require institutional improvement.

Case reflection should become part of counselor professional development. After each significant case, counselors can review what signals appeared early, who noticed them, how quickly the referral pathway worked, whether family communication was helpful, and whether teaching arrangements unintentionally increased risk. This reflective loop transforms cases from isolated events into institutional learning. In arts programs, such reflection may lead to practical changes: clearer critique norms, pre-performance mental skills workshops, rest and injury policies, peer-support groups, and teacher training on psychologically safe feedback.

7 Current Problems and Challenges

First, some institutions still do not attach sufficient strategic importance to mental health education for arts majors. Because arts students are often seen as emotional, expressive, or naturally sensitive, distress may be misread as personality style rather than as a signal requiring support. Music performance anxiety research warns against this casual interpretation: anxiety can have developmental, cognitive, social, and physiological dimensions that influence learning and well-being [13]. When student mental health work is treated as auxiliary administration rather than as an integral component of artistic talent cultivation, prevention becomes weak and crisis response becomes reactive.

Second, outdated educational concepts remain a problem. Some programs still understand psychological toughness as the ability to endure harsh critique, long rehearsal, public embarrassment, and repeated rejection without complaint. Rigorous artistic training is necessary, but rigor should not be confused with humiliation or neglect. Studies of advanced musicians show that performance anxiety is shaped by preparation, audience evaluation, and teacher-student environments [14]. This means that educational design can either intensify anxiety or help students metabolize it productively.

Third, perfectionism and comparison are difficult to manage. Arts programs often gather students who were among the best in their previous schools. After entering college, they suddenly encounter peers with equal or stronger talent. This status shift may produce shame, avoidance, overpractice, or hostile comparison. Perfectionism research among young musicians suggests that high standards can support achievement, but perfectionistic concern and fear of mistakes are associated with distress [15]. Counselors need to help students understand excellence as a developmental process rather than a fixed identity.

Fourth, embodied and occupational stressors are often underestimated. Dance, music, theater, and design students may experience pain, fatigue, sleep disruption, voice strain, screen-related exhaustion, body dissatisfaction, and pressure to maintain a certain appearance. Evidence from professional orchestral musicians shows that performance-related pain, depression, and anxiety can coexist [16]. If universities wait until students become professionals to address these patterns, they miss a crucial period for preventive education.

Fifth, career uncertainty is particularly salient. Many arts students face non-linear employment pathways, freelance work, project-based income, high competition, and pressure to self-promote. Research on the career demands of professional musicians highlights that identity investment, insecurity, and self-management pressures begin well before graduation, reinforcing the case for embedding mental health support throughout the educational pathway [17]. Counselors therefore need to integrate mental health education with career education. Helping students build multiple career narratives can reduce catastrophic thinking when one audition, competition, or portfolio review fails, while strengthening resilience for the non-linear trajectories that characterize artistic careers.

Sixth, counselors' own competence and workload can limit the quality of mental health work. Counselors often handle class management, ideological education, employment guidance, dormitory affairs, emergency response, and family communication at the same time. In arts institutions, they may also need to follow rehearsal schedules, competitions, exhibitions, off-campus performances, and internships. Without systematic training in developmental psychology, counseling ethics, crisis assessment, arts-specific stress, and referral procedures, counselors may find it

difficult to identify problems accurately or respond proportionately.

Taken together, these six challenges indicate that optimization cannot be limited to improving counselors' individual skills. The response must also address critique culture, faculty practices, family literacy, institutional workflows, and governance-level resource coordination. Section 8 therefore translates each challenge into a corresponding pathway for ecosystem building.

8 Optimization Pathways

The following pathways respond directly to the problems identified in Section 7 and shift the focus from isolated remediation toward measurable ecosystem construction.

8.1 Strengthening Professional Training and Continuing Education

Professional training should cover basic psychological theory, counseling communication, crisis identification, ethical confidentiality, trauma-informed support, and referral collaboration. For counselors serving arts majors, training should additionally include performance anxiety, perfectionism, body image, creative block, artistic identity, critique culture, and career uncertainty. Kenny's work on music performance anxiety provides a useful model because it connects anxiety with personal vulnerability, learning history, and evaluative performance contexts rather than treating it as simple nervousness [23]. Institutions should translate this knowledge into annual training plans, case-supervision mechanisms, and competency assessment standards.

Continuing education should be practice-based. Counselors can observe studio classes, attend performances, speak with faculty about assessment routines, and learn the language students use to describe artistic difficulty. Such learning does not make counselors art experts; it helps them ask better questions. A counselor who understands the difference between rehearsal anxiety, audition anxiety, critique anxiety, and career anxiety can offer more precise support than one who treats all distress as general pressure.

8.2 Building an Integrated Mental Health Education System

A complete system should include required or elective mental health courses, counseling services, online

and offline psychoeducation, peer-support networks, crisis warning mechanisms, and post-crisis follow-up. In arts programs, mental health education should be embedded before predictable pressure points: first-year transition, first public performance, first major critique, competitions, internship placement, graduation exhibition, and employment season. Research on the career demands of professional musicians highlights that identity investment, insecurity, and self-management pressures begin well before graduation, reinforcing the case for embedding mental health support throughout the educational pathway [17]. Counselors should therefore be placed within a clear institutional workflow instead of being left to rely on personal experience alone.

The system should also include mental-skills education. Workshops on arousal regulation, attention control, self-compassion, recovery after mistakes, and feedback literacy can be offered before performances and critiques. These workshops should use examples from students' own disciplines. A dance student may need grounding strategies before rehearsal; a design student may need methods for stopping endless revision; a music student may need a pre-performance routine; a theater student may need emotional decompression after intense roles. This discipline-sensitive design makes mental health education more credible.

8.3 Improving Counselor Team Construction

Counselor recruitment and development should value psychological literacy, communication competence, ethical awareness, and reflective practice. Institutions can establish regular case seminars, peer consultation, and supervision groups. Assessment should reward preventive work, student trust, effective referral, and collaborative outcomes rather than only visible administrative performance.

Team construction should include division of expertise. One counselor may develop stronger competence in crisis response, another in career counseling, another in peer-support training, and another in arts-performance stress. A shared case database, with privacy protection, can help the team identify repeated patterns across cohorts: anxiety before auditions, eating concerns in dance programs, burnout during graduation design, or social withdrawal after public critique. This kind of data-informed team learning supports early intervention while respecting confidentiality.

8.4 Creating a Supportive Campus Atmosphere

Mental health education should become part of campus culture. Mental health weeks, workshops, class meetings, student associations, peer volunteers, and media campaigns can reduce stigma and improve literacy. For arts majors, culture building should also address the hidden curriculum of artistic suffering. Campuses should communicate that disciplined practice is valuable, but chronic exhaustion, self-harm, humiliation, and untreated anxiety are not signs of artistic seriousness. This message can be reinforced through teacher training, peer stories, exhibition themes, and pre-performance briefings.

Critique culture deserves particular attention. Feedback should be honest and demanding, but it should be specific, behavior-focused, and connected to improvement. Students should learn how to receive critique without collapsing into global self-denial, and teachers should learn how to identify students whose reactions suggest risk. A healthier critique culture does not lower standards; it makes standards teachable. Counselors can contribute by offering feedback-literacy workshops and by helping departments design procedures for responding when critique triggers significant distress.

8.5 Establishing Family–School–Community Linkage

Family environment strongly influences students' coping patterns, self-evaluation, and help-seeking. Counselors should communicate with parents when appropriate, guide families to understand artistic development, and avoid stigmatizing psychological problems. Families may either underestimate art training by seeing it as enjoyable talent work or overpressure students because of financial investment and uncertain career returns. Counselors can help families understand that arts majors need both disciplined practice and psychological recovery.

Community linkage is also important. Universities should connect with hospitals, professional counseling agencies, arts organizations, alumni networks, and internship partners. Professional arts communities can provide realistic career information and role models who demonstrate sustainable practice. Mental health professionals can provide treatment when student needs exceed the counselor's role. Alumni can normalize non-linear career paths and reduce students' fear that one failure determines their future. This linkage transforms mental health education from campus-only support into a broader developmental

ecology.

Collaborative learning research in higher music education also suggests that peer interaction can become a powerful resource when students learn to share responsibility, exchange feedback, and construct knowledge together rather than compete silently [24]. Counselors can draw on this insight by supporting peer groups that combine artistic discussion with emotional mutual aid. Well-being research among musicians further indicates that meaning, engagement, relationships, accomplishment, and positive emotion are all relevant to sustainable artistic life [25]. Therefore, counselor work should not only reduce risk; it should also help students build meaningful artistic belonging.

8.6 Operational Mechanisms and Assessment Indicators for Ecosystem Building

To make ecosystem building actionable, institutions should specify both mechanisms and assessment indicators. Mechanisms may include critique-culture reform guidelines, annual faculty training in feedback literacy, family workshops on mental health literacy, discipline-specific pre-performance support sessions, and formalized cross-referral protocols linking counselors, faculty, counseling centers, and medical services. Corresponding indicators can include students' perceived support scores, critique-climate survey results, the proportion of faculty completing feedback-literacy training, early-warning referral completion rates, post-crisis follow-up completion, workshop attendance by families, and students' self-reported confidence in seeking help.

8.7 International Comparison and Implications

Compared with international interventions on music performance anxiety, which often focus on arousal regulation, cognitive restructuring, and exposure-based coping [13, 23], the present model broadens intervention from the individual performer to the surrounding educational ecology. Likewise, well-being frameworks in arts education emphasize meaning, engagement, relationships, and accomplishment [25], but they are not always translated into counselor-led governance routines. The contribution of this paper is therefore twofold: it adapts international arts-well-being insights to the specific governance role of college counselors, and it proposes a multi-level framework in which individual intervention, feedback culture, family support, and university policy jointly sustain mental health among

arts major students.

9 Conclusion

This paper argues that counselor-led mental health support for arts major students should be understood as practice-based ecosystem building rather than as crisis response alone. By integrating literature review, long-term practice reflection, and de-identified composite cases, it develops a framework that links individual counseling with studio culture, family expectations, labor-market pressures, and institutional governance.

The main practical implication is that sustainable improvement depends on coordinated mechanisms: psychologically safer critique culture, faculty feedback-literacy training, family mental-health literacy, clear referral workflows, and assessment indicators that show whether support is becoming more timely, trusted, and effective. In this sense, counselor work becomes a strategic force in building a humane and resilient educational ecology for arts major students.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is conceptual and practice-based rather than empirical: the model is grounded in a narrative review and reflective practice, and it is illustrated with de-identified composite cases rather than tested against outcome data, so causal claims about effectiveness cannot be made. The reflective material is shaped by the authors' specific institutional and cultural settings, which may limit direct transferability to other national systems, disciplines, or resource conditions. The proposed assessment indicators have not yet been psychometrically validated, and the case narratives, being composites, prioritize representativeness of recurrent patterns over the idiosyncratic detail of any single student.

Future work should therefore move the framework from proposal to evidence. Priorities include piloting the four-level architecture in one or more arts programs, operationalizing and validating the ecosystem assessment indicators, and evaluating discipline-specific mental-skills workshops and critique-culture reforms through pre-post or quasi-experimental designs. Comparative studies across countries and arts disciplines, together with longitudinal follow-up around predictable pressure points such as auditions, exhibitions, and graduation, would help clarify which mechanisms most strongly sustain student well-being and how counselor-led

coordination can be scaled without compromising confidentiality.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Funding

This work was supported without any funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AI Use Statement

The authors declare that no generative AI was used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

This study did not involve primary data collection from human participants. All illustrative cases presented in this paper are de-identified composite cases constructed from recurring practice patterns; they contain no personally identifiable information and do not correspond to any single individual. Accordingly, formal ethical review and informed consent procedures were not required under applicable institutional and national guidelines. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the relevant institutional committees and with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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