



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Dilemmas and Coping Strategies of Academic Counseling in Art and Design Majors in Higher Vocational Colleges in Guangdong, China

Ning Wang<sup>1</sup>, Peng-Fei Chen<sup>2</sup>, Huan Cao<sup>3</sup>, Ke Zhang<sup>4</sup><sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Dhurakij Pundit University, Thailand<sup>1</sup> Guangdong Teachers College of Foreign Language and Arts, China

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Oct 12, 2024 Accepted: Nov 20, 2024	In higher vocational education for art and design majors, addressing the dilemmas faced by students is a critical factor influencing their success in achieving academic goals. Effective academic counseling helps students tackle these dilemmas, improving their satisfaction and enhancing the university's brand influence. This study employs AGIL (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, Latency Pattern Maintenance) theory, using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, with a purposive sampling approach. The research targets 12 faculty members engaged in academic counseling across different positions within art and design majors at vocational colleges in Guangdong, China. The study investigates the current state and strategies of academic counseling, examining four key aspects: school support, counseling issues, counseling process, and other supporting factors. The findings indicate several dilemmas, including insufficient attention from the school, lack of organizational structures, inadequate investment, absence of mechanisms and standards, and mismatched student needs with the school's offerings. The study suggests that addressing these dilemmas requires heightened attention from schools to academic counseling, understanding student counseling needs, developing relevant counseling content, implementing comprehensive counseling processes with designated teams, and obtaining institutional support and stakeholder resources to ensure effective improvement.
<b>Keywords</b>	
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<b>*Corresponding Author:</b> wangning@gtcfla.edu.cn	

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Guangdong is a major province for vocational education in China, with 94 independently established higher vocational institutions and 1.3244 million full-time vocational (junior college) students enrolled (Guangdong Provincial Department of Education, 2023). To meet the demand for numerous skilled positions in art and design created by the growth of the creative industries in the Guangzhou area, all 94 vocational colleges in Guangdong offer art and design programs and have enrolled a large number of art students (Guangdong Provincial Department of Education, 2023).

For Chinese students aged 18-21 who are transitioning to adulthood, enrolling in vocational colleges presents both a challenging hurdle and a leap into an unknown world (Chan, 2016; McInnis et al., 1995). During college, students must independently face responsibilities and pressures from various aspects of life, including academics, social interactions, and family obligations, along with the accompanying anxiety and distress (Agyapong et al., 2022). These issues are thought to be key factors contributing to frequent occurrences of dilemmas with school belonging, professional identity, and social anxiety among college students (Mofatteh, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

For students majoring in art and design, due to the unique nature of their field of study (Mu et al., 2022), they face numerous specialized dilemmas alongside the general ones. For example, students' uneven foundational skills in drawing and limited understanding of their chosen discipline may lead them to question their compatibility with the major (Mu et al., 2022). Students in art and design tend

to exhibit expressive personalities, which can sometimes manifest in extremes (Yao, 2014). Differences in how students interpret academic achievement in professional subjects result in varying learning goals and expectations (Zhao & Zhao, 2022). Furthermore, limited awareness of the design and creative industries can trigger concerns about whether their studies meet the requirements of job roles, align with industry development and expectations (Dam & Teo, 2024), and offer long-term career prospects (Mu et al., 2022). Additionally, due to the multidisciplinary and flexible nature of design programs covering a broad range of areas with few fixed boundaries or standardized answers, students may not feel rewarded by effort alone, unlike in other disciplines, leading to accumulated frustration and negative emotions (Hu et al., 2021). Therefore, students need guidance and timely support across multiple aspects, such as professional development and personal adaptation (Aristovnik et al., 2020), which presents an even greater and more nuanced dilemmas for institutions (Cohen et al., 2022).

Academic counseling plays a vital role in higher education, supporting student development and enhancing academic performance, employability, retention, and satisfaction (Lisiecka et al., 2023; Wakelin, 2023). For vocational art and design students, who often face unique challenges, it is crucial to provide counseling that meets their diverse needs (Cohen et al., 2022), integrates seamlessly into educational activities (Himes, 2023), and fosters skill development and capacity building (Cázares & Páez, 2017). Addressing issues like anxiety, professional misalignment, and self-awareness (Hsu & Goldsmith, 2021) is essential for their growth and success, making these areas worthy of deeper exploration. Extensive research has been conducted on academic counseling theories and practices worldwide (Li et al., 2023; Willemsen, 2023). Key studies highlight strategies such as forming academic counseling teams of "professional teachers + counselors" (Jiang et al., 2023), utilizing peer interventions (Sharma et al., 2023), creating digital counseling platforms (Abdallah & Awwad, 2022), promoting holistic student development (Cerolini et al., 2023), personalizing counseling models (Ning et al., 2022), and evaluating counseling outcomes (Shan et al., 2022). However, most studies focus on Western contexts (Raji et al., 2022), with limited exploration of academic counseling in Chinese universities, particularly in vocational art and design programs (Jiang et al., 2023). This paper addresses these gaps by examining challenges in academic counseling within Chinese vocational art and design colleges and proposing strategies for effective practices, aiming to provide practical solutions and a foundation for further theoretical research.

1. What are the dilemmas faced in academic counseling for art and design majors at vocational colleges in Guangdong, China?
2. What strategies can address these dilemmas in academic counseling for art and design majors at vocational colleges in Guangdong, China?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

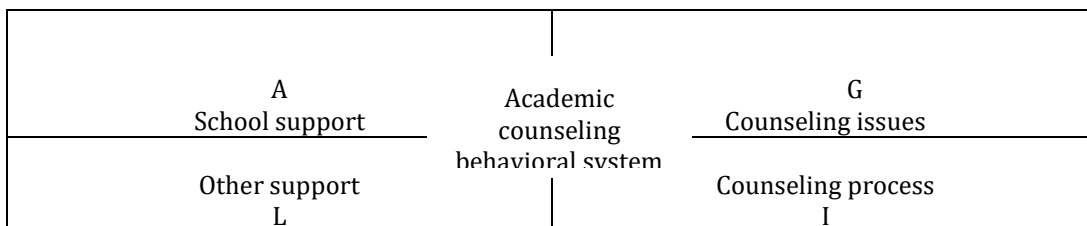
### 2.1 AGIL theory

The AGIL (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, Latency Pattern Maintenance) functional analysis theory was proposed by Parsons (1974), an American sociologist and structural functionalism representative. In AGIL theory, "Adaptation" is responsible for the development, acquisition, and allocation of essential resources; "Goal Attainment" involves directing efforts to achieve collective objectives; "Latency" is the task of the cultural system to transmit, preserve, and develop societal values; and "Integration" serves as the core of social system cohesion, establishing a shared framework of normative order (laws, customs, traditions, etc.) to define the scope of action and to build trust and solidarity among actors (Cantamutto, 2018).

AGIL theory has been recognized as both macro and comprehensive (Bellah, 1979). Due to its universal abstraction (Barber, 1994), it is considered applicable to any organization, institution, or structure, possessing an inherently presuppositional nature (James, 2023). Today, numerous scholars continue to apply AGIL theory to the field of educational management, offering valuable theoretical guidance and practical insights for optimizing school governance (Drucker, 1974; Jones & Brazzel, 2012; Kotter, 2007; Kong & Yang, 2023; Li, 2007; Xu et al., 2021).

In this study, the research has developed an "Academic Counseling Strategy Model" based on the AGIL theory, as shown in Figure 1. The study's scope is constructed according to the four functional

analysis dimensions of AGIL. Specifically, "Adaptation" explains "school support" (Fung, 2015; Museus & Ravello, 2010), "Goal Attainment" explains "counseling issues" (Ismail et al., 2021), "Integration" explains "counseling process" (Kuhail et al., 2023; Museus & Ravello, 2010), and "Latency" explains "other support" (Cantamutto, 2018), as shown in Table 1.



**Figure 1: Academic counseling strategy model**

Note: A=Adaptation to environmental conditions, G=Goal attainment, I=System integration, L=Maintenance of system patterns.

**Table 1: AGIL theory and dimensions of academic counseling strategy model**

AGIL function	Definition	Academic counseling strategy model
Adaptation	A system must interact with its environment and have means to acquire the resources needed for its survival.	School support
Goal Attainment	Any action system is goal-oriented; it must have the ability to determine its priorities and mobilize internal resources to achieve its objectives.	Counseling issues
Integration	Any action system is composed of parts, and in order for the system to function effectively as a whole, the parts must be linked together to harmonize between them.	Counseling process
Latent Pattern Maintenance	During the temporary interruption of the system operation process, that is, the interaction suspension period, the original operation mode must be completely saved to ensure that the interaction can be restored as usual when the system starts running again.	Other support

### 2.2 School support

According to the explanation in AGIL theory that "organizational systems must adapt to their environment, have means to acquire resources externally, and participate in the production and distribution of these resources among participants" (Cantamutto, 2018), this dimension can be interpreted as the "Academic Counseling Strategy Model" requiring diverse approaches to obtain broad support at the institutional level. This support should include, but is not limited to, institutional support (Fung, 2015) and other resource-based support (Museus & Ravello, 2010), such as personnel (McClellan, 2013), funding (Himes, 2023), space (King, 2008), and policies (Johnson et al., 2022).

### 2.3 Counseling issues

According to the AGIL theory's explanation that "organizational systems are goal-oriented, taking actions to achieve established objectives; in terms of action, it involves the most structured adjustments toward achieving goals, maintaining high complexity while reducing randomness" (Cantamutto, 2018), this dimension in constructing the "Academic Counseling Strategy Model" focuses on enhancing the retention rates, graduation satisfaction, and loyalty of students in art and design programs (Ismail et al., 2021). The goals include meeting institutional educational requirements and facilitating students' academic success (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Drawing on previous findings by Wang et al. (2024), the counseling content in this study would address four dimensions of academic counseling needs for art and design students: individual, organization, learning related and social interaction.

## 2.4 Counseling process

According to the AGIL theory, "any action system is composed of parts, in order to effectively function the system as a whole, must be linked together, through the rules and standards to indicate the loyalty, adhesion and interdependence of the organization" interpretation (Cantamutto, 2018). This dimension can be interpreted as the "Academic Counseling Strategy Model" for the coordination of various aspects involved in the academic counseling process, including but not limited to counseling strategy (Museus & Ravello, 2010), coaching form (Eduljee & Michaud, 2014), tutoring media (Li et al., 2023), implementation process (Himes, 2023), counseling effectiveness assessment (Johnson et al., 2022).

## 2.5 Other support

In AGIL theory, there is "maintenance", namely, maintaining common values to ensure the persistence of the system through the correct motivation of the actor (Cantamutto, 2018; Parsons, 1974). In this study, this dimension can be interpreted as the support and synergy of multiple stakeholders (Fernandez et al., 2023). A relatively stable mechanism is formed through the joint action of stakeholders (Blair et al., 2024; Doyle, 2008) to address the complex academic counseling work environment (Caceres et al., 2020; Chiu et al., 2024; Salimi et al., 2023).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research structure

Based on the AGIL theory and the "Academic Counseling Strategy Model," this study designed an interview guide by integrating relevant literature from previous research. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), it explores dilemmas and coping strategies in academic counseling for art and design programs in vocational colleges in Guangdong, China. The research process and framework are illustrated in Figure 2.

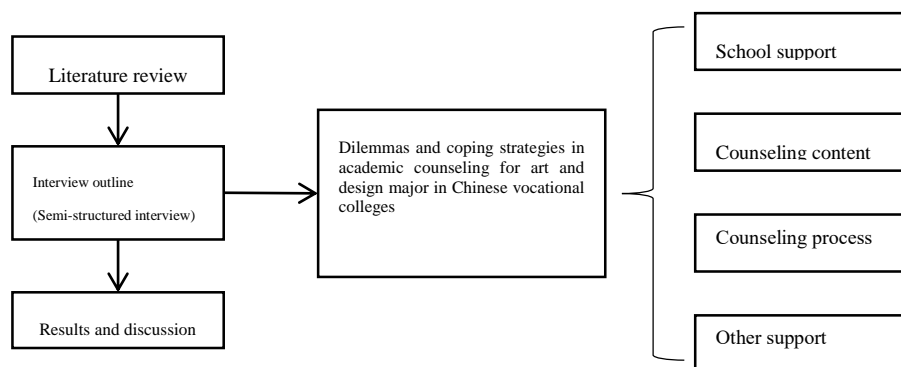


Figure 2: Research structure

### 3.2 Participants

Data collection was conducted in Guangdong Province, China. To ensure the sample was highly representative, this study covered all levels of academic quality in the 94 vocational colleges in Guangdong, including national-level high-quality vocational colleges, provincial-level high-quality vocational colleges, public vocational colleges, and private vocational colleges. A representative sample of faculty and staff was selected for participation. The information about the colleges of the respondents at the time data collection began in 2024 is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Respondent college's information at the start of data collection in 2024

Code	Levels of educational quality	Third-party rankings of comprehensive strength for Chinese vocational colleges	Covering the number of art and design majors	Number of students majoring in art and design in 2023
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A	National-level high-quality vocational college	1-50	16	3500
B	Provincial-level high-quality vocational college	250-300	7	1700
C	Public vocational college	300-400	6	1100
D	Private vocational college	250-300	11	2300

Based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendation that the sample size for interviews should exceed 12, purposive sampling (Gill, 2020) was employed from May to June 2024. In four selected colleges, one student counselor, one class teacher (or student affairs officer), and one department chair from each institution were chosen, resulting in 12 participants. These faculty and staff members were selected for their profound insights into academic counseling practices for art and design students and their ability to clearly reflect the dilemmas and current developments in implementing strategies and practices. All participants had over five years of experience in higher education and held a master's degree or higher. The interviews were conducted by offline semi-structured interviews, and the interview time of each interviewee was about 60 minutes. The interview sample details are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: The information of the interview participants**

Code	Position	Years of work experience	Gender	Age	Degree	Full-time or part-time
TA1	Student counselor	11	Female	36	Master	Full-time
TA2	Class teacher	7	Female	32	Master	Part-time
TA3	Department chair	9	Male	35	Doctor	Full-time
TB1	Student counselor	5	Female	32	Master	Full-time
TB2	Class teacher	20	Male	45	Doctor	Part-time
TB3	Department chair	21	Female	43	Master	Full-time
TC1	Student counselor	6	Male	31	Master	Full-time
TC2	Class teacher	6	Female	33	Master	Part-time
TC3	Department chair	14	Male	40	Doctor	Full-time
TD1	Student counselor	5	Female	30	Master	Full-time
TD2	Student affairs officer	5	Male	31	Master	Full-time
TD3	Department chair	8	Male	32	Master	Full-time

Note: TA=national high quality vocational staff, TB=Guangdong high quality vocational staff, TC=public vocational staff, TD=private vocational staff.

### 3.3 Instruments

This study utilized the "Academic Counseling Strategy Model" as a framework, combined with previous research findings, to design a semi-structured interview guide for participants. The guide focused on four dimensions: school support, counseling issues, counseling process, and other support, comprising 13 questions in total. The specific questions are detailed in Table 4.

**Table 4: Interview outline**

Number	Dimension	Questions	Sources
1	School support (1-2)	What are the challenges the college faces in implementing academic counseling?	Himes (2023); McClellan (2023); Museus and Ravello (2010); Wang et al. (2024)
2		What are the challenges in establishing academic counseling institutions in college?	Alenezi et al. (2023); King (2008); Fung (2015)

3	Counseling issues (3-6)	What are the dilemmas in conducting student-centered counseling on a personal level?	Chen et al. (2024); Raji et al. (2022); Trautwein and Bosse (2017); Wang et al. (2024); Yu (2009)
4		What are the dilemmas in conducting counseling and guidance within the dimension of student organizational management?	Abdallah and Awwad (2022); Ahmad Rizal et al. (2024); Bell and Meyer (2024); Crawford et al. (2024); Li et al. (2023); Liu et al. (2023); Trautwein and Bosse (2017)
5		What are the dilemmas in conducting counseling and guidance related to students' learning dimensions?	Batyrbekova et al. (2022); Cerolini et al. (2023); Devine and Ash (2022); Liu et al. (2023); Lujan and DiCarlo (2017); Raji et al. (2022)
6		What are the dilemmas in conducting counseling and guidance in the dimension of student social interactions?	Busbridge et al. (2024); Chan (2016); Çoban et al. (2023); Strahan and Poteat (2022)
7	Counseling process (7-10)	What are the dilemmas in developing and implementing counseling programs in college?	Museus and Ravello (2010)
8		What are the dilemmas in forming counseling teams in college?	Leung (2022);Tang (2023)
9		What are the dilemmas encountered in implementing academic counseling in terms of formats, media, and processes?	Eduljee and Michaud (2014); Himes (2023); Kuhail et al. (2023); Li et al. (2023)
10		What are the dilemmas in evaluating the effectiveness of counseling?	Johnson et al. (2022)
11	Other support (11-12)	What are the dilemmas in ensuring the sustainability of counseling efforts?	Ahmad Rizal et al. (2024); Blair et al. (2024); Doyle (2008); Johnson et al. (2022)
12		What are the dilemmas in guaranteeing occasional counseling, and what should be done to address them?	Ahmad Rizal et al. (2024); Blair et al. (2024); Doyle (2008); Johnson et al. (2022)
13	Open to the additional questions	Do you have any additional thoughts or comments you would like to add regarding academic counseling and guidance?	

### 3.4 Coding

This study employs thematic analysis to conduct inductive reasoning on the collected data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The coding process is as follows: First, the collected data is organized into an interview transcript for analysis. Next, using the third-party analysis software Nvivo, the original interview texts are compared for thematic similarities, and texts with similar themes are compiled. The data is then organized according to emergent themes and summarized in accordance with semantic concepts. Through continuous comparison and inductive analysis, the most frequent, important, or most relevant codes are identified.

The coding rules are as follows: The first group of codes represents the participant's affiliated school (TA represents a nationally recognized high-quality vocational college, TB represents a provincially recognized high-quality vocational college, TC represents a public vocational college, and TD represents a private vocational college). The second digit in the code represents the position (1 indicates student counselor, 2 indicates class teacher or student affairs staff, 3 indicates department head of teaching and research). The third digit represents the dimension (S stands for school support, C stands for counseling issues, P stands for counseling process, O stands for other support). The fourth digit represents the issue and corresponding countermeasures (1 indicates the question, 2 indicates suggested countermeasures). For example, the code "TB1S1" indicates a student counselor

from a high-quality provincial vocational college in Guangdong addressing a college support-related issue.

### 3.5 Reliability, validity, and research ethics

This study applies the triangulation method (Denzin, 1978) to assess the reliability and validity of the processes and data. The expert review panel consists of five experts, all holding associate professor or higher titles, with master's degrees or above (including master's degree), and having more than 20 years of professional experience. The source of the experts is shown in Table 5.

**Table 5: Expert sources**

Code	Position / title	Degree	Source	Years of work experience
001	Vice president / Professor	Doctoral	College	36
002	College dean / Professor	Master	College	41
003	Director of the student affairs department / Associate professor	Master	College	32
004	Expert scholar / Department head / Professor	Doctoral	College	38
005	College secretary / Associate professor	Doctoral	College	21

Before the interview, the expert review panel examined the interview topics and made relevant revisions to ensure the expert content validity of the research tool. Additionally, to maintain the effectiveness of the interview process, the interview outline is usually provided to the interviewees 1-2 days before the interview, allowing them sufficient time to reflect on the questions in advance. This contributes to ensure that the interviewees clearly understand the questions and are able to present their viewpoints and explanations effectively (Wolcott, 1994). After the interview, the research team verified the interviewees' views individually (Kaman, 2016) to minimize misunderstandings (Ozolins, 2009). During the data analysis phase, to reduce researcher bias, all data, including raw data and preliminary research findings, were analyzed independently by the researcher and reviewed by the expert panel (Carcary, 2009). Throughout the entire coding process, the researcher and the expert panel maintained ongoing discussions until a consensus was reached (Wang & Wang, 2010).

In line with research ethics, all participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. Before the interview, the interviewer provided the participants with an informed consent form, clearly explaining the research process, participants' rights, and privacy protection measures. The interview only proceeded once the participants had signed the informed consent form and given their agreement. During the data analysis process, the research team maintained strict confidentiality of the data. Additionally, to ensure the professionalism of the interview content and uphold the principles of purposive sampling in selecting participants, the identities of the interviewees are presented in this paper using codes.

## 4. RESULTS

During the research process, the researcher found that after a large amount of valid information was obtained in the first round of interviews, the subsequent interview transcripts showed a clear decrease in the amount of useful information. Starting from the 5th interview transcript, it became evident that no new information was being provided. When the proportion of new information to the total information gathered in previous interviews fell below 5%, it was determined that the study had reached thematic and coding saturation (Guest et al., 2020). This indicated that the scope of the study's themes had been essentially established. However, to ensure the completeness of the data, the research team continued to conduct all 12 planned interviews to confirm data saturation (Senden et al., 2015). Through the analysis, consolidation, and comparison of the raw data, the study ultimately developed a coding framework for the academic support dilemmas and coping strategies of students in vocational college art and design programs. This framework included four dimensions—school support, counseling issues, counseling process, and other support—along with 23 secondary codes.

Among them, (1) the school support dimension refers to the external resources required to ensure the smooth implementation of academic guidance work. This includes the school's attention,

establishment of institutions, resource investment, and the formation of mechanisms. (2) Counseling issues dimension refers to the setting of guidance content based on the needs of student counseling and school management. (3) Counseling process dimension refers to how academic guidance is implemented for students, including the establishment of teams, goal setting, implementation processes, and evaluation. (4) Other support dimensions mainly include various aspects that provide maintenance for academic guidance work and support the system's operation. This primarily involves collaboration among stakeholders, sharing of experiences, and conducting theoretical research, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: Statistical data on coding of academic counseling dilemmas and coping strategies for vocational college students**

No.	Themes	Dilemmas	Coping strategy	Number of Occurrences
1	School support	Lack of college' attention	Strengthen attention from school decision-makers	12
		Absence of academic counseling institutions	Establish academic counseling institutions in art departments	11
		Multiple management layers in academic counseling work	Establish an academic counseling management system	10
		Insufficient allocation of resources such as personnel, funds, and facilities	Increase resource investment	11
		Lack of systems and operational mechanisms	Develop policies and establish operational mechanisms	9
2	Counseling issues	Lack of understanding of students' counseling needs	Timely acquire information on students' dynamic needs	11
		Counseling content development without surveying student needs	Develop counseling content based on students' needs	10
		Inconsistent counseling recommendations	Ensure consistency in counseling recommendations and direction	6
		Neglect of interest development and low alignment between counseling content and majors	Focus on cultivating interests and tapping into students' intrinsic motivation	7
3	Counseling process	Lack of professionalism and instability in the counseling team	Build a professional and stable counseling team	12
		Unclear responsibilities of counseling team members	Clarify the scope of work for team members	11
		Lack of communication in the counseling process	Establish a regular communication mechanism	7
		Failure to help students set personalized goals	Set overall goals based on individual students	7
		Lack of planning in the counseling process	Refine the counseling process	9
		Lack of connection between student development goals and counseling work	Ensure alignment between overall goals and counseling work	10
		Difficulty in gaining student trust	Gain students' trust	8
		Single form of counseling and guidance	Diversify and normalize counseling formats	9



		Lack of clear role of school clubs, peer support, and role models	Leverage the role of school clubs, peers, and role models	8
		Lack of student counseling process documentation	Establish personalized student counseling process records	6
		Lack of counseling effectiveness evaluation	Conduct counseling effectiveness evaluation	8
4	Other support	Difficulty in forming synergy among stakeholders (society, family, students, teachers, etc.)	Mobilize stakeholders (society, family, students, teachers, etc.) to work collaboratively	10
		Lack of theoretical foundation in research	Conduct specialized research to enhance theoretical capacity	7
		Lack of opportunities for experience exchange and work reflection	Regularly organize experience-sharing sessions to feedback into educational practices.	8

#### 4.1 School support

From the school support dimension, based on the frequency of occurrence of each item, it can be seen that the respondents focus on "school attention (12 times)", "academic counseling institutions (11 times)", and "resource input (11 times)", while "academic counseling work management system (10 times)" and "institutional and work mechanism construction (9 times)" are also mentioned relatively often. This indicates that the core of the current dilemmas and responses lies in whether the school prioritizes academic counseling work, and the key to improvement is the establishment of professional counseling institutions. For example, one respondent mentioned the following dilemmas regarding school support:

*The core issue remains that the school does not pay enough attention and fails to recognize the importance of this work. (TD1S1)*

*Our school does not have a dedicated academic counseling institution, and I have not heard of other schools having such an institution either. (TC1S1)*

*There is no system, no assessment, and multiple departments manage the work in a fragmented manner. (TA3S1)*

Regarding the strategies for responding to the dilemmas of school support, some respondents mentioned:

*School attention is a prerequisite; only with this attention can the school potentially set up institutions and invest in human and material resources. (TD3S2)*

*It is unlikely to establish an independent institution, but it would be more appropriate to use colleges to establish professional institutions, as they can set up according to their own situation. (TC3S2)*

*Having a system is important, as it facilitates evaluation, assessment, and rewards and penalties, which in turn can promote motivation. (TC2S2)*

#### 4.2 Counseling issues

From the results of this study, it is evident that the core issue with the counseling content, as perceived by the respondents, is that the school does not fully understand the students' counseling needs. Instead, the counseling content is often tailored according to the school's own management needs. Therefore, addressing this issue should focus on "understanding students' counseling needs" (11 times) and "formulating counseling issues" (10 times). For example, regarding the dilemmas encountered in counseling content, some respondents mentioned:

*The school completely lacks an understanding of students' needs and has not explored them in any way. (TD2C1)*

*Current counseling focuses more on how to manage and convey the information the school wants to communicate. (TC3C1)*

In addressing these dilemmas, the respondents suggested:

*Counseling must first understand students' needs to effectively help them solve their actual problems. (TA3C2)*

*Counseling work needs to shift perspectives; solving issues solely from a management perspective is inadequate. (TB2C2)*

### **4.3 Counseling process**

As the core factor determining whether an academic counseling system can operate stably (Cantamutto, 2018), issues within the counseling process dimension were mentioned by respondents more frequently than in other dimensions. Specifically, the most cited dilemmas were "counseling team (12 mentions), "responsibility scope of team members" (11 mentions), and "alignment of student development goals with counseling efforts" (10 mentions). These were followed by "counseling process planning" (9 mentions), "diverse and regular counseling formats" (9 mentions), "role of school organizations, peers, and mentors" (8 mentions), "building student trust" (8 mentions), and "effectiveness evaluation of counseling" (8 mentions). Regarding difficulties encountered in the counseling process, respondents mentioned:

*The school lacks guiding opinions on academic counseling teams, let alone management or improvement. (TD2P1)*

*The roles and responsibilities of counselors and homeroom teachers are unclear, with overlaps and gaps. (TC1P1)*

*Currently, counseling is conducted through fixed courses and temporary lectures, but the effects are not significant. (TB1P1)*

*Students have low trust in us; they solve most issues on their own. (TB1P1)*

*It is challenging to evaluate the overall effectiveness of student counseling. (TA1P1)*

*Helping students address individualized issues in academic counseling is quite difficult. (TA1P1)*

Regarding strategies to address these dilemmas, respondents suggested:

*Building an academic counseling team from the perspective of school management is the foundation of academic counseling work. (TD2P2)*

*Counselors handle student life, professional teachers focus on academics, and academic advisors emphasize student development goals. (TA2P2)*

*Having clear objectives is crucial. Counseling should help students achieve a specific state or goal. (TA3P2)*

*Counseling work requires a plan, from task division to meeting arrangements with students. (TC2P2)*

*Maintaining contact with students through a stable team of teachers and establishing student counseling records are essential. (TC2P2)*

*Gaining students' trust is important and requires long-term effort. (TD1P2)*

*The influence of student organizations and role models plays a significant role in counseling, helping students see hope. (TB1P2)*

*Standards should be established, and management departments should evaluate the effectiveness of counseling work. (TA3P2)*

### **4.4 Other support**

Although academic counseling is primarily driven by the school as the task-oriented entity, it also requires support and collaboration from various stakeholders (Ning et al., 2022). In the dimension of additional support, respondents identified key dilemmas concentrated on three aspects: “stakeholder collaboration (10 mentions)”, “experience sharing and work reflection (8 mentions)”, and “conducting specialized theoretical research (7 mentions)”. For example, regarding the current dilemmas, respondents mentioned:

*Students encounter dilemmas from various aspects, and sometimes it is difficult for the school alone to resolve these issues. (TA101)*

*Academic counseling is a long-term effort with slow results, which can easily lead to discouragement. (TD101)*

*There is limited theoretical research on counseling work, and we rarely engage in it. (TD301)*

Regarding coping strategies, respondents mentioned:

*For counseling efforts, it is essential to gain the cooperation of students' families and the active participation of students. (TA102)*

*Introducing social resources into student counseling can help build students' confidence. (TA302)*

*Specialized research on academic counseling should be conducted to guide our practical educational work. (TB302)*

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the academic counseling work for art and design programs in Guangdong vocational colleges faces significant dilemmas. In response to question one, it struggles to secure effective support from schools, mainly reflected in the lack of academic counseling institutions, insufficient investment in human, financial, and material resources, and the absence of relevant policies and mechanisms. These findings align with previous research on academic counseling (Abdallah & Awwad, 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Higher education decision-makers have not fully realized the impact of academic counseling on student development during their time at school, their satisfaction, and even the shaping of the institution’s educational brand (Salimi et al., 2023). Academic counseling for art and design programs intersects multiple departments and systems within the current higher education management framework, including student affairs, teaching, career services, psychological counseling, and campus safety. However, Guangdong vocational colleges have yet to establish comprehensive and effective mechanisms and policies for academic counseling. Consequently, they fail to adequately support students' counseling needs (Di Consiglio et al., 2022; Gao, 2022). Regarding the issues of counseling, a lack of understanding of students’ counseling needs and the absence of their input in content design reduce their participation (Thomas & Sorbara, 2023). In some cases, the initiatives promoted by schools have little relevance to students’ needs or their professional studies (Wang et al., 2024). This misalignment between the guidance provided by schools and students' actual counseling needs further exacerbates the issue (Salimi et al., 2023).

In terms of the counseling process, the lengthy nature of achieving students' academic goals, combined with the division of responsibilities across different management systems (e.g., student affairs, teaching), often results in discrepancies in focus among counseling personnel handling similar issues (Leung, 2022; Tang, 2023). The implementation of counseling lacks comprehensive planning and coordination. There is insufficient management regarding how to systematically guide students toward their goals, how different counseling personnel can collaborate and communicate effectively, and how to enhance the overall efficiency of counseling efforts. Additionally, the absence of professional teachers in academic counseling reduces the alignment of counseling issues with academic expertise, hindering the development of students' intrinsic motivation (Mohzana, 2024; Bernardo et al., 2023; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). As a result, the effectiveness of academic counseling in vocational colleges remains suboptimal (Abdallah & Awwad, 2022; Higgins et al., 2023). In terms of other support dimensions, there is a lack of effective collaboration among stakeholders, including students, teachers, society, and students’ families. Communication between counseling teachers and families is often limited to problem-solving after issues arise, rather than taking

preventive measures (Mu et al., 2022). Furthermore, due to restrictions in institutional policies regarding the integration of external resources (Alenezi et al., 2023), schools inadequately incorporate societal resources into academic counseling, further limiting its impact.

Therefore, to develop effective coping strategies for dilemmas in academic counseling, the first step is for schools to place greater importance on this work. Establishing a professional and centralized academic counseling management body is essential to develop a cohesive counseling system (Barthelemy et al., 2023; Martinez et al., 2024). Schools should allocate appropriate resources, including personnel, financial, and material support, based on their specific circumstances (Himes, 2023; Museus & Ravello, 2010). Additionally, it is crucial to develop supporting management policies to establish systematic workflows, requirements, and standards, thereby forming a structured academic counseling mechanism—this is a fundamental priority to address (Johnson et al., 2022). The findings of this study validate these conclusions from above referred literature. Regarding the design of counseling issues, the focus should be on enhancing retention rates, graduation rates, satisfaction, and loyalty among art and design students (Ismail et al., 2021). The goals should align with meeting educational requirements and supporting students in achieving their academic success (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Given the diverse and ever-changing nature of students' counseling needs (Batyrbekova et al., 2022), schools should first conduct evidence-based analyses of students' demands. This ensures that the counseling content and processes are tailored to their needs, avoiding inconsistencies between institutional guidance and students' actual consultation requirements (Salimi et al., 2023).

For the academic counseling process, attention should be given to the operational mechanisms of the system to achieve relative stability within the academic counseling framework (Sciortino & Tartaglia, 2005). Implementing counseling through collaborative efforts among faculty teams is essential (Li et al., 2023), with a focus on students' overall developmental experiences during their time at school (Gotay et al., 2024). Counselors should assist students in defining overarching academic goals for their educational journey (Batyrbekova et al., 2022) and establish regular communication mechanisms to provide professional and clear consultation advice (Martinez et al., 2024). The counseling approach should emphasize personalization and diversity (Hsu & Goldsmith, 2021; Sholihah et al., 2024) while incorporating effectiveness evaluations to enhance counseling outcomes (Himes, 2023; Johnson et al., 2022). As Winston and Sandor (1984) argued, successful academic counseling is not the result of a single factor but requires active student engagement (Hassel & Ridout, 2018), fostering positive interactions with counseling teams (Çoban et al., 2023). Additionally, support from stakeholders such as students' families (Li & Zhong, 2022), society, and industry is indispensable (Fernández et al., 2023). Long-term commitment to developing a shared behavioral model is crucial for addressing the complexities of academic counseling needs (Cáceres et al., 2020; Chiu et al., 2024; Salimi et al., 2023).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study, through a qualitative investigation of the current state of academic counseling in art and design majors at higher vocational colleges in Guangdong, China, reached the following conclusions. First, the lack of emphasis placed by schools on academic counseling work is the root cause of the current dilemmas in academic counseling in Guangdong's higher vocational education. Second, the absence of a formal counseling work mechanism, particularly the lack of dedicated counseling institutions, is a key reason for many of the current problems in counseling work. Additionally, the dilemmas are compounded by a lack of understanding of students' personalized counseling needs, insufficient development of counseling teacher teams, a lack of communication and planning in the counseling process, and the failure to mobilize effective support from stakeholders such as society, families, students, and teachers. These factors together contribute to the current difficulties in academic counseling work.

Consequently, academic counseling work needs to undergo systematic improvements in the following areas: First, a coordinated management body for academic counseling should be established, with increased investment to stabilize the counseling teacher team, thereby forming an academic counseling system and mechanism that is suitable for the school's specific needs. Second, academic counseling should ensure its relevance and effectiveness by setting goals based on students' counseling needs and

breaking them down into achievable, incremental tasks to ensure their successful completion. Furthermore, the counseling process should be adjusted according to the specific circumstances of each student, with a continuous feedback and improvement mechanism in place to continually optimize counseling methods and content. Finally, it is essential to secure effective support from stakeholders such as society, families, students, and teachers, forming a long-term, collaborative behavior pattern to address the complex academic counseling needs, promoting the sustainable improvement of the school's academic counseling work.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS

This study aims to analyze the entire process of academic counseling in art and design majors at higher vocational colleges in Guangdong, China, using the AGIL theory (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latency Pattern Maintenance) proposed by Parsons (1974). By employing qualitative research, this study sheds light on the dilemmas faced in academic counseling within Chinese vocational colleges and outlines strategies to address these dilemmas. The study contributes to the theoretical development of a model for identifying and responding to academic counseling difficulties in Chinese higher vocational education. Through an analysis of the current state of academic counseling dilemmas, this study provides practical significance for improving the mechanisms, work behaviors, methods, and effectiveness of counseling services in higher vocational colleges. Furthermore, the findings of this research make the counseling work in vocational education more targeted, offering more efficient solutions for students' academic counseling needs.

## 8. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study employs thematic analysis to examine the dilemmas and strategies of academic counseling in art and design majors at Chinese higher vocational colleges, offering valuable insights for enhancing counseling practices. However, the study has limitations. Variations in interviewees' ability to articulate their thoughts and the researchers' potential oversight during data analysis may have resulted in incomplete findings. Future research should address these issues by expanding the sample size, increasing the diversity of schools and participants, and extending the research period to gather more comprehensive data.

Given the evolving nature of academic counseling, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs or comparative methods with control groups to capture changes over time and environmental factors. Additionally, expanding research methods beyond semi-structured interviews to include observational techniques or open-ended interviews could provide richer insights. Participant observation over extended periods and quantitative tracking of counseling outcomes could further enhance understanding.

Future studies could also refine and validate models of student counseling needs and academic counseling strategies using quantitative methods to establish a more robust theoretical framework. Moreover, while this study focuses on macro-level strategies, future research should explore micro-level implementation, including the development of counseling teams, processes, methods, and evaluation standards. These areas, investigated through theoretical or empirical approaches, could significantly deepen the field.

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