

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING CORE COMPETENCIES OF VOCATIONAL COLLEGE COUNSELORS IN QINZHOU, GUANGXI IN THE NEW ERA

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 21 July 2026

Revised: 23 July 2026

Published: 24 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the current situation, limiting factors and optimization approaches of counselors' core competencies in Qinzhou port vocational colleges of Guangxi. Using mixed research methods, questionnaires were distributed to 92 counselors and semi-structured interviews were carried out with 5 frontline staff. A localized five-dimensional competency framework covering political literacy, Lingang port industry adaptive competence, management service literacy, digital technology literacy and scientific research literacy was constructed. The overall average competency score of participants is 3.22, belonging to moderate level. Political literacy reaches high level, scientific research literacy ranks the lowest at low level, while Lingang industry adaptation and digital literacy remain moderate with prominent deficiencies. Unbalanced competency growth mainly stems from single training systems, heavy administrative workload and inadequate school-enterprise cooperation platforms. This study fills the empirical research gap of counselor competency construction for Beibu Gulf port vocational colleges, and provides empirical data and operable optimization paths for local vocational schools to build professional counselor teams and upgrade student ideological and political management.

Keywords: Vocational College Counselors, Core Competencies, Lingang Port Industry, Educational Administration, Qinzhou Vocational Education

CITATION INFORMATION: Huang, M., & Noichun, N. (2026). Strategies for Improving Core Competencies of Vocational College Counselors in Qinzhou, Guangxi in the New Era. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(7), 90.

INTRODUCTION

Industrial transformation, AI popularization and vocational education digital upgrading have transformed student management and counselor development (Li Jing, 2024; Lu Xu, 2025). National and Guangxi local policies demand counselors match regional industrial talent needs (Ministry of Education, 2017; General Office of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, 2023). As a core Beibu Gulf port hub, Qinzhou focuses on port logistics, green chemical and advanced manufacturing talents, requiring counselors to possess extra industry-adaptive capacities beyond traditional student and ideological work (Ma Wei, 2024). Existing domestic research mostly builds general competency frameworks for vocational counselors, lacking localized empirical studies targeting southwest coastal port vocational schools (Peng Xiaona & Cheng Jing, 2026). Few evaluation systems include port industry adaptation indicators and ignore counselors' responsibility to guide graduates into local port jobs (Gu Weiying, 2025). Local counselors face three major hurdles: insufficient enterprise practice, weak digital skills and poor research awareness, making it hard to adapt to Gen Z students and port enterprise recruitment standards (Liu Min & Zhang Xiaoqing, 2023). This paper selects two Qinzhou port vocational colleges as research objects, constructs a five-dimensional regional competency evaluation system, assesses counselors' actual ability levels, sorts out internal and external constraints, and puts forward targeted tiered improvement strategies. Its findings can offer decision-making references for schools and municipal education authorities to optimize counselor training, assessment and incentive mechanisms.

Research Significance

Theoretically, this paper enriches research on port vocational counselors' core competencies. Based on the Iceberg Competency Model, Three-All Education Theory and regional industry collaborative education theory, it innovatively adds the Lingang port industry adaptation dimension to form a localized measurement framework, filling the research gap of Beibu Gulf coastal counselor team construction and supplementing empirical data for vocational educational administration.

Practically, the study identifies competency weak points via questionnaires and interviews and proposes region-specific solutions including school-enterprise joint training, digital literacy improvement and research incentives. The results can guide Qinzhou vocational colleges to reform training systems, cut redundant administrative work and raise local port employment rates, and provide replicable standards for all coastal port vocational colleges in Guangxi.

Research Objectives

- (1) To study the level of core competencies among counselors in higher vocational colleges in Qinzhou City during the new era.
- (2) To propose strategies for enhancing the core competencies of counselors in higher vocational colleges in Qinzhou during the new era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Core Concepts

Vocational college counselors are full-time staff responsible for students' ideological and political education, daily administration, mental health counseling and career guidance. Different from general university counselors, Qinzhou Lingang vocational counselors undertake an exclusive extra function: linking port enterprises, interpreting local industrial policies and guiding students to take port-related jobs, acting as a bridge connecting schools, students and Lingang industrial clusters. Counselors' core competencies refer to stable essential qualities and comprehensive capabilities required to fulfill the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and promote students' all-round development, defined by China Student Development Core Competencies Research Group (2016). Combined with Qinzhou's port industrial positioning, this study divides core competencies into five interrelated dimensions:

1 . Political literacy: Implicit value foundation, including political theory learning, policy interpretation, online public opinion risk prevention and localized red cultural ideological guidance.

2 . Lingang port industry adaptive competence: Exclusive regional dimension, covering port industry knowledge reserve, enterprise internship experience and targeted port employment guidance.

3 . Management service literacy: Daily practice dimension, involving standardized student administration, home-school communication, campus emergency disposal and differentiated refined student management.

4 . Digital technology literacy: Digital education transformation dimension, including smart student affairs platform operation, big data student portrait analysis and new media ideological education creation.

5 . Scientific research literacy: Long-term professional development dimension, containing educational problem excavation, academic paper writing and transformation of practical research achievements

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Four core theories support this research: Iceberg Competency Model, Three-All Education Theory, Regional Industrial Collaborative Education Theory and Lifelong Learning & Humanistic Management Theory.

McClelland's (1973) Iceberg Competency Model separates occupational competencies into explicit surface skills and implicit internal qualities. This research regards political literacy as the deep implicit core, and industry adaptation, management service, digital technology and research literacy as observable explicit capabilities, forming a hierarchical framework to explain counselors' unbalanced ability development. Wang Guangguang (2026) verified the model's applicability in vocational counselor research, laying solid theoretical support for dimensional division.

Three-All Education Theory stresses all-staff, whole-process and all-round education, requiring counselors to integrate ideological guidance, professional training and industrial employment services into every stage of campus life (Zhu Bingcheng & Fan Yue, 2025). It logically supports embedding port industry guidance, digital education and educational research into counselors' daily work.

Regional Industrial Collaborative Education Theory advocates deep integration between vocational education and local industrial chains, requiring student management staff to master enterprise post competency standards (Xia Lu, 2023). It serves as the core basis for setting the Lingang industry adaptation dimension.

Lifelong Learning Theory (Lengrand, 1965) proves counselor competency improvement is a long-cycle iterative process, supporting the design of tiered long-term training schemes. Humanistic Management Theory focuses on reducing counselors' trivial administrative burden and reserving independent learning time, guiding the institutional optimization countermeasures in this paper (Zhou Ying, 2026).

Previous Studies

Domestic scholars have widely studied vocational counselors' competency composition, practical dilemmas and promotion paths. Mainstream three or four-dimensional systems only cover political education, student management and basic research without regional industrial matching indicators (Ning Henan & Su Mingfeng, 2023; Zhang Jiazi et al., 2023). Studies confirm heavy administrative loads, monotonous training and inadequate research incentives are nationwide common problems for vocational counselors (Wang Xiao, 2025; Zhu Na, 2026).

However, most existing research samples are inland vocational colleges or universities; empirical research on Beibu Gulf Lingang port vocational colleges is scarce, and existing improvement

strategies are universal without targeted port enterprise training schemes (Peng Xiaona & Cheng Jing, 2026), which forms the core research gap of this paper.

Overseas institutions have no identical vocational counselor position, with relevant research focusing on student affairs administrators. ACPA & NASPA (2025) formulated multi-dimensional competency standards and tiered training systems; UK universities adopt internal tutor training while Germany relies on third-party institutions for staff cultivation (Duvivier et al., 2023; Schüller, 2022). Though overseas student management models can provide reference, their ideological education and vocational education mechanisms differ fundamentally from China's and cannot be directly copied to Qinzhou's context

Research Gap

1. Regional & Industrial Gap: Existing domestic research rarely targets vocational colleges serving Beibu Gulf port industrial clusters, lacking localized competency evaluation standards matching Lingang industrial talent demands;
2. Dimension Design Gap: General competency frameworks ignore the exclusive port industry adaptation dimension, failing to reflect Qinzhou counselors' unique employment guidance responsibility for local port enterprises;
3. Strategy Pertinence Gap: Most existing improvement paths are universal general suggestions, without localized measures such as port enterprise temporary post training and industrial employment guidance curriculum development.

This study fills the above three research gaps through field questionnaire investigation of Qinzhou local vocational colleges and localized targeted strategy design.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts mixed research methods integrating quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires quantify the scoring level and gap degree of counselors' five competency dimensions; interview data supplement deep-seated restrictive factors and frontline practical demands, realizing multi-source data cross-verification and improving research reliability.

Population and Sample

Research Population

The research population covers all full-time counselors of two port-oriented vocational colleges in Qinzhou: Guangxi Talent International College and Qinzhou Preschool Education College, with a total population of 117 counselors (statistical benchmark: 2026).

Questionnaire Sample

Referring to Krejcie & Morgan's (1970) sample size table, 92 counselors are selected as formal samples covering diversified gender, age, education background, working years and employment types to guarantee representativeness.

Interview Sample

Purposive sampling selects 5 interviewees with over three years of student management experience from Guangxi Talent International College, including two student development center directors, one associate professor-level frontline counselor and two regular full-time counselors, who fully grasp the college's counselor training system and Lingang industry talent cultivation work.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire

Self-designed Qinzhou Vocational College Counselors' Core Competency Questionnaire includes two parts: Part 1 is demographic information with 5 items; Part 2 is a five-dimensional 5-point Likert scale, 8 items per dimension, 40 measurement items in total. Scoring standard:

1=completely inconsistent, 2=slightly inconsistent, 3=moderate, 4=basically consistent, 5=fully consistent.

Semi-structured Interview Outline

Eight targeted questions are set for each competency dimension (40 questions in total), covering competency status, deficiencies, training defects, work obstacles and capacity improvement demands to dig institutional and individual restrictive factors.

Validity and Reliability

Three experts (Beibu Gulf University professor, college Party Secretary, vocational education associate professor) conduct IOC testing. All items' IOC values range from 0.67 to 1.00, exceeding the 0.5 threshold and proving excellent content validity. A pilot test of 30 off-sample counselors shows the overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the 40-item scale reaches 0.917; removing any single dimension still keeps Alpha above 0.90, indicating stable internal consistency. The interview outline is revised multiple times under supervisor guidance, deleting ambiguous questions and adding Lingang industry-targeted items to match the two core research objectives

DATA COLLECTION

1 . Questionnaires are uniformly distributed offline with prior communication with student affairs departments; 92 complete valid questionnaires are recovered with a 100% valid recovery rate.

2 . Separate offline face-to-face interviews are arranged for five interviewees, audio recorded with permission, and standardized transcripts sorted after each interview.

3. Questionnaire data are uniformly coded; interview content is classified and labeled by five competency dimensions for subsequent content analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis uses statistical software to calculate frequency, percentage, mean ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviation (S.D.). Competency grading standard: 4.51–5.00 highest level, 3.51–4.50 high level, 2.51–3.50 moderate level, 1.51–2.50 low level, 1.00–1.50 lowest level. Qualitative analysis adopts content coding to summarize counselors' common problems and improvement demands in each dimension. Triangulation analysis cross-verifies quantitative scoring results and qualitative interview viewpoints to form unified research conclusions.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistical Results

Table 1 Overall Mean and Standard Deviation of Counselors' Five Core Competencies (n = 92)

Competency Dimension	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level Interpretation
1. Political Literacy	3.82	0.72	High level
2. Lingang Port Industry Adaptive Competence	2.91	0.76	Moderate level
3. Management Service Literacy	3.64	0.73	High level
4. Digital Technology Literacy	3.02	0.75	Moderate level
5. Scientific Research Literacy	2.73	0.77	Low level
Total Comprehensive Score	3.22	0.74	Moderate level

The overall average competency score of surveyed counselors is 3.22 (moderate level), with obvious imbalance across five dimensions. Political literacy (3.82) and management service literacy (3.64) reach high levels: counselors finish regular political learning and daily student affairs proficiently, yet lack capabilities to exploit local red cultural resources, conduct online public opinion early warning and implement differentiated refined student management.

Lingang port industry adaptive competence (2.91) and digital technology literacy (3.02) stay at moderate level. Most counselors only master basic office software and cannot carry out big data student analysis or new media ideological creation; they also lack long-term enterprise internship experience and targeted port employment guidance capabilities. Scientific research literacy scores the lowest at 2.73 (low level), becoming the biggest obstacle to counselor professionalization, as most frontline counselors have no academic outputs and cannot extract research topics from daily student management work.

Group Difference Results

Demographic characteristics bring significant competency differences:

1 . Age & working years: Counselors under 33 have stronger digital literacy, while middle-aged and senior counselors score higher in political and management service literacy; all age groups show weak industry adaptation and research capacity.

2 . Educational background: Master's and doctoral counselors' digital and scientific research literacy are significantly higher than bachelor's degree counselors.

3 . Employment type: Contract and temporary counselors' comprehensive competency is lower than tenured staff due to fewer training opportunities.

All interviewees state over 70% of working time is occupied by repetitive administrative reporting and inspection work, squeezing time for industrial knowledge learning, digital skill training and educational research, a universal restrictive factor for all counselor groups.

Interview Results

Political Literacy Dimension

Counselors finish mandatory political theory learning as required, yet learning forms are limited to centralized meetings and online sign-ins, disconnected from Lingang industrial development and students' port career planning. Local red cultural venues are rarely applied in thematic ideological activities; counselors lack systematic training on short-video platform public opinion early warning, and online ideological guidance mostly relies on passive post-event remediation.

Lingang Port Industry Adaptive Competence Dimension

Colleges only organize sporadic one-day enterprise sightseeing without standardized long-term temporary post training mechanisms. Counselors rarely obtain systematic port industrial policy and post demand information; daily employment guidance content is generalized without pertinence to port logistics, chemical and manufacturing posts, failing to stimulate students' willingness to stay and work in Qinzhou.

Management Service Literacy Dimension

Daily routine administrative tasks can be completed efficiently, yet professional psychological counseling training is insufficient; most student mental disorders can only be transferred to full-time psychological teachers. Unified "one-size-fits-all" management prevails, lacking classified growth guidance plans for students of different majors and personalities; redundant inspection and reporting tasks occupy massive student growth guidance time.

Digital Technology Literacy Dimension

The smart student affairs platform has low utilization rate; counselors only operate basic sign-in and form-filling modules. No systematic training is provided for big data analysis, generative AI auxiliary teaching and short-video ideological content production; middle-aged counselors resist learning new digital tools due to high learning costs.

Scientific Research Literacy Dimension

The campus research atmosphere is weak; most counselors misunderstand student management work requires no academic research. Schools rarely organize paper writing and project application training; no incentive policies link research achievements with title evaluation and performance rewards, and localized Lingang industry-education integrated student management research is nearly blank.

DISCUSSION

Overall Status of Counselors' Core Competency Development

Qinzhou vocational counselors' comprehensive competency remains at moderate level, presenting a structural feature of "strong political and management basic abilities, weak regional industry adaptation, digital and research abilities". This imbalance originates from institutional and individual dual factors.

Institutionally, existing training systems focus on political theory and daily management without exclusive modules for port industry knowledge, digital education and research; assessment indicators allocate low weight to enterprise internship experience and research achievements. Individually, most counselors regard administrative trivialities as core work, lacking internal motivation to learn industrial knowledge and carry out educational research; heavy daily workload further suppresses autonomous learning willingness.

Political and management service literacy develop maturely because national and Guangxi vocational education policies have long standardized supporting training and assessment mechanisms with complete daily operation norms. In contrast, Lingang industry adaptation, digital technology and scientific research are emerging competency requirements under industrial upgrading and educational digital transformation, lacking matched training platforms and incentive systems and resulting in widespread deficiencies.

Interactive Relationship Among Five Competency Dimensions

The five dimensions form an organic whole with clear internal interaction logic:

- 1 . Political literacy acts as the value guidance core, determining the value orientation of industry guidance, student management, digital education and research work.
- 2 . Lingang port industry adaptive competence serves as the regional characteristic carrier, distinguishing Qinzhou Lingang vocational counselors from general university counselors and realizing the school's mission of serving local industrial talent cultivation.
- 3 . Management service literacy provides daily operational guarantee, laying basic implementation conditions for ideological guidance and port employment services.
- 4 . Digital technology literacy is the innovative driving force, optimizing the execution efficiency of the other four dimensions through intelligent educational tools.
- 5 . Scientific research literacy delivers sustainable iterative power, continuously discovering competency defects from practical work and driving dynamic upgrading of the remaining four dimensions.

Currently, the three characteristic driving dimensions (industry adaptation, digital technology, scientific research) lag far behind the two basic guarantee dimensions (politics, management), breaking balanced operation of the competency system and restricting overall counselor team quality improvement and Lingang industrial talent supply capacity.

Comparative Analysis with Domestic and Overseas Literature

This study's questionnaire and interview conclusions are consistent with domestic mainstream research results (Wang Xiao, 2025; Zhu Na, 2026), which verify that heavy administrative burden, single training mode and insufficient research incentives are universal dilemmas of nationwide vocational counselor teams. Different from inland general vocational college research, this paper newly identifies the exclusive bottleneck of insufficient Lingang port industry adaptive ability in Qinzhou samples, which is a regional characteristic problem formed by Beibu Gulf port industrial positioning.

Overseas student affairs staff tiered training and school-enterprise collaborative development modes (ACPA & NASPA, 2025) have reference significance for this paper's strategy design, but overseas student management systems do not contain China's ideological and political education core requirement, so the promotion strategies proposed in this paper must be localized combined with national vocational education policies and Qinzhou industrial characteristics.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Targeting the dimensional imbalance and deep-seated restrictive factors found in questionnaire and interview data, this study constructs three-level systematic improvement strategies covering institutional mechanism optimization, school-enterprise collaborative platform construction and individual endogenous growth.

Optimize Tiered Classified Training and Institutional Guarantee System

Schools shall build tiered differentiated training for new, middle-aged and senior counselors, setting exclusive modules for Lingang port industry knowledge, digital education and academic research, and stipulating mandatory annual enterprise temporary post training hours for all counselors. Authorities need to sort out positive and negative duty lists for counselors, transferring repetitive statistical and inspection work to special administrative personnel to guarantee at least four hours of independent learning and research time weekly. Colleges shall revise annual assessment and title evaluation standards, raise the weight of enterprise internship experience, digital education achievements and research papers, and set special rewards for counselors who complete Lingang industry education research projects.

Build Lingang Port Industry Adaptive Competence Cultivation Platform

Establish long-term school-enterprise exchange bases cooperating with local port logistics, green chemical and advanced manufacturing enterprises, arranging counselors to work in frontline enterprise posts for one to two months annually to master real post standards, salary systems and promotion channels. Invite enterprise HR directors and industrial technical experts to deliver regular special lectures; schools and enterprises jointly compile localized port industry employment guidance teaching cases. Integrate port enterprise culture and craftsmanship spirit into thematic class meetings and ideological education activities, realizing organic integration of industrial policy interpretation and student value cultivation.

Digital Technology Literacy Upgrading Strategy

Carry out phased systematic digital training divided into four modules: basic platform operation, big data student portrait analysis, new media short-video creation and AI-assisted career guidance, organizing monthly practical workshops. Set up counselor digital education studios, matching young digitally skilled counselors to provide one-on-one tutoring for middle-aged and senior counselors with weak digital foundations. Upgrade the smart student affairs platform, opening automatic student learning and psychological risk data analysis modules to realize data-driven precise student guidance.

Scientific Research Literacy Promotion Strategy

Launch special vocational education research projects oriented to Lingang industry student management, providing special research funds and supervisor guidance for frontline counselors. Hold regular research writing salons and project application training, inviting university vocational education professors to conduct targeted tutoring on papers, cases and research projects. Build an internal counselor research sharing platform, linking research output with performance rewards and promotion priority to foster a research-oriented campus atmosphere.

Stimulate Individual Endogenous Lifelong Learning Motivation

Guide counselors to formulate personal five-dimensional competency self-improvement plans based on self-evaluation questionnaire results to make targeted up for weak competency items. Implement a mentor-mentee pairing system between outstanding senior counselors and new recruits to inherit experience in ideological education, student management and port industry guidance. Popularize lifelong learning concepts, encourage counselors to participate in industrial exchange conferences, digital education competitions and academic seminars, accumulating enterprise practice and research materials in daily student management work.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Research Limitations

First, the sample only covers two vocational colleges in Qinzhou; data representativeness is limited to local Lingang port vocational colleges and cannot be fully generalized to all vocational college types across Guangxi. Second, this study only adopts cross-sectional static survey data without longitudinal tracking of counselors' dynamic competency changes over years. Third, this research mainly focuses on five internal competency dimensions, without quantitative analysis of external environmental factors such as school financial investment and regional industrial policy support intensity.

Future Research

Subsequent research can expand samples to multiple port and inland vocational colleges in Guangxi, conducting comparative research on counselor competency differences among different institutional types. Carry out 2-3 years of longitudinal tracking research to test the actual implementation effect of the proposed improvement strategies. Introduce external variables such as school-enterprise cooperation depth and educational financial investment into quantitative models, exploring interaction mechanisms between external factors and counselors' five core competencies. Develop refined standardized quantitative evaluation indicators for Lingang port vocational counselors to form universal assessment tools for Guangxi education administrative departments.

CONCLUSION

This study takes two Lingang port-service vocational colleges in Qinzhou as research objects, constructing a localized five-dimensional core competency system (political literacy, Lingang port industry adaptive competence, management service literacy, digital technology literacy and scientific research literacy) via mixed questionnaire and semi-structured interview methods. Survey data from 92 frontline counselors reveal their overall moderate comprehensive competency level with severe dimensional imbalance: political literacy and management service literacy develop relatively maturely, while Lingang industry adaptation, digital technology and scientific research abilities are prominent weak links, restricted by single training systems, heavy administrative burdens and insufficient school-enterprise collaborative platforms. This study proposes three-level systematic optimization strategies covering institutional training reform, school-enterprise industry platform construction, digital and research capacity upgrading and individual lifelong learning motivation stimulation to resolve structural defects in counselors' competency development. The research fills the empirical blank of Beibu Gulf port vocational counselor team construction, provides abundant empirical data and operable optimization paths for local vocational colleges and regional education administrative departments to build professional, industry-oriented and research-based counselor teams, and supports sustainable high-quality supply of technical skilled talents for Qinzhou Lingang industrial upgrading.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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