

Practitioner Profile

An Interview with Erin Wirth, AFC®

Erin Wirth is an Accredited Financial Counselor and the Director of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Student Money Management Center, a financial education program for college students. The program offers one-on-one money management education and counseling sessions, money management workshops, and a variety of other interactive educational activities aimed to help college students understand the importance of financial literacy. The program recently won the Outstanding Financial Counseling & Planning Education Award from the Association for Financial Counseling & Planning Education.

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Q. Tell us a bit about yourself.

A. I was hired by the University of Nebraska – Lincoln three years ago to spearhead a peer-to-peer financial education program for college students. Throughout my three-year adventure at the University, my passion for helping others through financial education has grown stronger. I live for the moments when I see students gain confidence in their ability to successfully manage their financial lives. I am happiest when I know I have helped others achieve overall well-being.

I have a strong background in problem-solving, customer service, education, and marketing, a combination of skills which has proven to be important in our program's success. Because of our program's passion for helping others, and our personalized financial counseling and education sessions, innovative education methods, and creative marketing techniques, we have been able to help our students gain

financial knowledge, change their financial habits, and start on the path to achieving their financial and life goals.

Q. Define what you do professionally.

A. Overall, I am responsible for finding ways to help college students gain the money management knowledge and skills they need to be successful, both while they are in college and throughout their lives. One way my team does this is through one-on-one financial counseling and education sessions. We help students find solutions for their financial challenges and inspire them to improve their financial behaviors. Additionally, we also develop financial workshops and educational activities that are relevant to our target market. Marketing is also a critical part of the success of a financial education program, so we concentrate on finding innovative ways to market the message that financial literacy is important.

Q. What activities encompass your professional responsibilities?

A. I am responsible for developing and growing our financial education program. This includes a variety of activities, including: resource development - financial education workshops and events for various audiences, print resources, and electronic resources; program evaluation; recruiting and managing student workers and program volunteers; building relationships with university and community organizations in order to further program opportunities; performing target market research and assessing financial education trends; developing the program's brand and strategic marketing plans; representing the program among University and community organizations; and meeting with students and performing detailed research in order to find the best solutions for client situations.

Q. How long have you been engaged in your professional activity?

A. I have been involved in financial education and counseling for 3 years.

Q. What led you to your professional calling?

A. I have always felt that if I am not working for the greater good and using my talents to help other people, I am wasting my time. Three years ago, I was working in the information technology industry and felt empty. I sought a position which would allow me to positively impact the lives of Nebraskans and found it in my current position.

Throughout my own life, I have had many people help me improve myself by improving my professional and personal skills, including my money management skills. I want to do the same for other Nebraskans. I believe that if more Nebraskans become financially literate, they will experience an increase in their overall well-being and create opportunities for themselves that will help them become more successful, both personally

and professionally. Additionally, a higher level of state-wide financial literacy would lead to a more prosperous Nebraska.

I believe that if an individual becomes financially literate, the most important effects on the individual's life cannot be measured by numbers or figures – the most important effects are the increases in the person's overall well-being and the level of confidence they have in themselves. From single moms, to families, to college students - I have seen firsthand that being able to correctly handle finances is vital to a person's overall health and happiness. For example, I recently worked with a young woman who felt like her life was out of control – she couldn't pay her bills, her grades were low, and she was having trouble with her relationships. She worked to establish good financial habits, which started a domino effect throughout her life. Once her financial life became healthier, she experienced a decreased level of stress over her finances which helped her concentrate more on school. Additionally, when she felt more in control of her own life, she became more confident in herself, allowing her to find the strength to mend her personal relationships.

Q. How are you compensated?

A. My program relies on grants. We rely on our creative thinking to build and grow our program on a meager budget. We feel we are positively impacting the lives of many



students so we hope we are a long-term fixture at the University of Nebraska.

Q. Do you work alone or do you have a team? Please explain.

A. I work with a team of student employees and volunteers. We incorporate the opinions and perspectives of our current college students into everything we do, including our program strategy and all our program activities.

Q. What theoretical framework guides your work when dealing with clients and/or conducting research (e.g., some practitioners use a solution-focused theoretical framework while others are more eclectic)?

A. I would describe my theoretical framework as rooted in inspiration. I do not only supply financial education, but I also help inspire students to change their financial habits and increase their confidence in themselves and their abilities to manage their financial lives. I focus not only on helping students understand why it is important to build good financial habits, but also help them recognize how these habits can positively impact their entire lives.

Following are the guiding principles I follow as I approach a counseling session:

1. Provide a supportive, safe environment where students can receive non-biased help with making financial decisions.
2. Help students understand their current relationship with money and what steps they can take to improve their relationship with money. Help students gain confidence in themselves and in their ability to manage their financial lives.
3. Help students understand how financial knowledge is a powerful tool that can help prevent them from making financial mistakes and make good decisions that will positively impact their financial futures.
4. Help students understand why it is important for them to practice good financial habits so they can meet their financial and life goals.
5. Make all information relevant to the student and easy to understand. Make all suggestions for behavioral changes very practical and relatively easy to implement.

Q. What needs to happen so that 10 years from now we can say that financial therapy is a respected field of study?

A. I have found that many people in the financial education field in the Midwest do not recognize that there is a difference between traditional financial education and financial counseling and therapy - considering the emotional & psychological factors that play into financial decisions versus traditional financial knowledge transfer. Professionals in the financial counseling and therapy fields need to be more involved in increasing awareness of the difference between traditional financial education and financial counseling and therapy. Research efforts in financial therapy and counseling need to be more widely publicized and need more national media attention.

Q. What benefits can the Financial Therapy Association provide to others doing work that is similar to your professional activities?

A. Financial education practitioners would benefit from research addressing the importance of helping students understand their own emotional and psychological factors that influence their financial decisions. It would also be helpful to have dynamic, easy-to-understand educational materials that would help students understand their relationship with money.

Q. If others are interested in finding out more about you personally and professionally, where can they obtain this information?

A. My program's website is: www.unl.edu/smmc.

