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Academic Advising Needs among University Students in Kenya

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Abstract

It is not easy for the overburdened student counselors in universities to adequately address students' needs in all areas. Hence, the establishment of academic advising Western countries and recently in some Kenyan institutions. Academic advising should be need-centered for it to be popular with students and to succeed. This study aimed at evaluating students' academic advising needs so as to enable academic advisors and universities to be able to prioritise when planning for academic mentorship. The study applied the descriptive survey method in which subjects were asked to indicate the areas in which they thought they needed help. A questionnaire was used to collect data. A random sample of 187 (53, 41 and 93 first, second and third year students respectively) participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select Laikipia University College of Egerton University which is one of the seven public universities in Kenya. The findings showed that the top ranking academic advising needs were maintaining high grades, handling heavier academic workload, setting career goals, and setting academic goals irrespective of the year of study and gender. It was recommended that students' needs should be taken into account when planning for academic mentorship activities.

Key words: Academic, Needs, Advising, University, Year of Study and Gender

Introduction

Academic advising is viewed as the process of "assisting students to realize the maximum educational benefits to them, by helping them to better understand themselves and to learn to use the resources of the institution to meet their special educational needs and aspirations" (Crockett, 1978 p. 3). According to Sindabi (2007), the purpose of academic advising programme is to assist students in the development of meaningful educational and career goals. Academic advisors assist students in developing educational plans consistent with their life goals. They provide information about academic progress and degree requirements and carefully review students' academic and educational needs, performance, and challenges.

When students join university for the first time, they are exposed to a lot of freedom which is a big contrast to the strict discipline and restriction that characterize many secondary schools and homes in Kenya. It is assumed that these students are above the age of 18 and therefore mature enough to make decisions independently. Unfortunately, they might engage themselves in behaviors that may compromise their studies. Peer influence sometimes entices them into antisocial behavior like drug abuse and irresponsible sex which eventually interrupt their studies. Some students might not have been admitted into programmes of their choice and therefore may lack motivation to concentrate in their current programmes.

Students begin university education with limited knowledge about career prospects related to the courses they are enrolled in. The job market is dynamic and keeps on changing every so often that unless students get up to date information they find difficulties after completion of their studies. Students who need to pursue further education also need information on opportunities for academic advancement.

Guidance and counseling in universities has been in existence for many years in Kenya. The guidance and counseling programme in most of the universities address a wide range of issues affecting learners such as financial, psychological, social, academic, career, developmental and drug abuse. When counseling deals with so many issues at the same time, it is possible to overlook some areas at the expense of others. This is why in many Western countries academic advising or mentorship in schools, colleges and universities is addressed as a separate entity of the guidance and counseling programme. This is in recognition of the fact that setting of academic goals is critical to educational and career development of learners. Academic advising as a separate entity from the general guidance and counseling programme exists in some universities in Kenya such as Egerton University (Sindabi, 2007). If students' academic needs are not properly addressed, they may fail their examinations or drop out from college. As a result, they may lose out on the tuition spent and minimize their chances of educational advancement and employment (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Brower, 1992).

The teaching style in secondary schools is different from the instructional methods applied in university settings. At the university level, students are expected to do a lot of academic work and research independently. By the time students adjust from secondary school to university, they may encounter difficulties. They may need skills related to setting career and academic goals, research, time management, coping with university life and so on. It is the many problems that are related to academic work that made universities in many parts of the world including some Kenyan universities to introduce academic mentoring. Whether or not students will seek academic advising services from their academic mentors will depend on whether they feel a need to do so or not among other factors.

The need for this study was stimulated by a desire to evaluate students' academic advising needs so as to enable universities to know which areas need to take priority when planning for academic mentorship. In addition, the study tried to look at whether the needs vary with gender and year of study. Specifically, the study attempted to provide answers to the following research questions:

i. What are the areas of priority in academic advising among university students?
ii. Do the areas that students need academic advising vary with the year of study?
iii. Does academic advising needs vary with gender?

Literature Review

According to George and Neale (2005), mentoring can be defined as an interaction between a more experienced person and a less experienced person whose aim is to provide guidance that motivates the mentored person to take action. Academic advising is a dynamic relationship between a student and an advisor with a shared responsibility for a coherent education plan that incorporates personal, social, academic and career considerations. It focuses on helping students identify life goals, acquire skills and attitudes that promote intellectual growth, and become academically successful. Sindabi (2007) argues that the purpose of academic advising programme is to assist students in the development of meaningful educational and career goals. Academic advisors provide information about academic progress and programme requirements and carefully review students' academic and educational needs, performance, and challenges. Research on mentoring indicates that it has a positive impact on the personal and professional development of young adults (Levinson, 1978).

Academic advising as an independent component of the general counseling in schools is based on the fact and students have special needs that cannot be adequately addressed in the normal guidance and counseling programme. Just like there is need for specialized counseling in spiritual, marriage, trauma, drug and stress issues, there is a case for academic counseling as a special area of interest in institutions of learning.

Scholars in academic advising tend to distinguish between three different types or styles of academic mentorship. Traditionally, academic advising tended to be focused mainly on helping students choose courses, especially after joining college or university. This focus changed in the 1970s and took a developmental approach in which academic advising was seen as an important experience meant to contribute to a student's personal growth (Crookston, 1972). Using this approach, advisers ask students to become involved in their own college experiences, explore with students the factors that lead to success, and show interest in both the students' academic progress. This is what is referred to as developmental advising in which students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning, college experience and academic and career goals (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005; Saving & Keim, 1998). As students take responsibility of what is going on, they improve their skills in problem-solving and decision-making. The student-mentor relationship is seen as a medium for the advisor to assist the student in becoming more aware of his or her personal goals, values, learning styles, and requirements (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). An advisor working from a developmental framework will assist students in finding out where they are in the process of learning, in setting and achieving goals, developing critical thinking skills, and developing decision making skills (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005).

The second type of academic advising is what is referred to as prescriptive advising which involves a more authoritarian relationship between an advisor and student where the advisor provides information and directs the student in meeting institutional requirements (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005; Saving & Keim, 1998). This is the type of advising which is most likely to be found at some profit-based institutions which may be concerned about academic results and not student personal growth. This type of advising is also common in situations where advisors carry a heavy student-to-advisor load (Abelman et al., 2007; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

The third category of mentorship is the strength-based advising. Strength-based advising is a type of developmental advising where the focus is on the student and what he or she does well. The advisor and student work to develop and apply the strengths to academic and nonacademic goals (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

Academic advisors in schools, colleges and universities can choose any of these three categories depending on student needs and institution. However, the developmental and strength-based advising may be more beneficial to students than the prescriptive one.

When students join colleges and universities for the first time, they are exposed to problems related to transition, orientation, career choice, adjustment, and few disciplinary restrictions. Students need frequent updates on the dynamic job market. Students who need to pursue further education also need information on opportunities for advancement. If students are not well guided in the new environment they will experience problems. The success of an academic advising programme in any institution will depend on whether students feel the need for help or need.

In a survey of 920 undergraduate students in Nigeria, it was revealed that there is need of counseling on time management, drug concerns, family problems, career needs, relationship problems, finance, sexual harassment, academic ability, personality types and anxiety/depression (Aluede, Imhonde, & Eguavoen, 2006). Among other areas, students seek help and not in: improvement of their study skills; career uncertainty; self-confidence problems; lack of motivation; fear of failure; depression; lack of purpose in life; anxiety and nervousness (Gallagher, 1992). Other areas include: academic and school related problems, study skills; time management; overcoming fear about taking examinations; meeting academic and career needs (Bertocci, Hirsch, Sommer & Williams, 1992). Fear (lack of sell-confidence, lack of assertiveness, anxiety about test taking skills, worries about getting a job) seems to be a common theme in many of the highly ranked

concerns of students (Gallagher, Golin & Kelleher, 1992).

Guneri, Aydin and Skovholt (2003) in their study on university students in Turkey showed that students' academic related needs ranked as follows:

- Managing time (60%),
- Identifying and planning goals for life and concentrating on studies (53%),
- Getting a job after school (50%),
- Getting better grades (46%) and
- Completing assignments on time (45%).

In Spain, Arco, Fernandez, Heilborn & Lopez's (2005) study of the profile of university students, revealed that students rated academic needs such as getting easily distracted, need to improve their study skills, problem of time management and problem of test taking anxiety as the areas desiring significant attention. Despite the context and location of study, the foregoing research findings seem to show a lot of concurrence on the general academic areas in which students need assistance. Academic advising programmes in Kenyan colleges and universities can benefit from these findings in planning for academic mentorship.

Students at different years of study experience different and unique problems and therefore are likely to perceive the need for help differently. The differences can be manifested in the areas they think need to be prioritized in the academic advising programme. For example, first year students are expected to need a lot of help in subject and career choice than students in the subsequent years. Once students settle down and acquire a lot of information about university life, their needs for academic advising may change. After getting the results for the first year of study students needs may change from subject and career choice to maintaining high grades and setting career and academic goals.

According to Gordon (1995), three out of four students entering the university for the first time have no clear career/occupational goals,

and only 8 percent of declared students have an understanding of their majors. First-time freshmen need and expect a roadmap for successfully resolving indecision, a roadmap typically provided through contact with an academic advisor. In this study, it was expected that the priority areas in which students are in need of academic advising will vary with the year of study.

Generally and traditionally, males have been less willing to seek help in dealing with academic difficulties (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Daubman & Lehman, 1993), psychological problems (Möller-Leimkühler, 2002; Cook, 1984; Padesky & Hammen, 1981; Kligfield & Hoffman, 1979), career counseling (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008; Rochlen, Mohr, & Hargrove, 1999), and retirement planning (Joo & Grable, 2001). Such lower rates of help seeking among males transcend racial and national limits (Oliver, Pearson, Coe, & Gunnell, 2005; Neighbors & Howard, 1987).

Men do not fail to seek help because they do not have problems but because social norms of traditional masculinity frowns on help seeking by men (Möller-Leimkühler, 2002; Lee, 1997; Wisch, Mahalik, Hayes, & Nutt, 1995; Kessler, Brown, & Broman, 1981). Unfortunately, males appear to be reluctant to avail themselves of services even when the helper is a peer rather than some authority figure. With males, it may be prudent to institute an "intrusive" form of mentoring (Redmond, 1990), in which the mentor takes the lead and contacts the male student on a periodic basis rather than waiting for the student to initiate such communication. Kennedy-Dudley (2007) found that women were more likely than men to have been advised professionally. This could imply that, female students are more likely to manifest a higher need for academic advising in different areas than men who have been found to be more reluctant in seeking help (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Daubman & Lehman, 1993).

In a study by the National Science Foundation (2008), it emerged that Female respondents at the bachelor, masters and doctoral degree

programme levels considered all types of mentoring roles to be significantly more important than male respondents. For all degree levels, the level of significance was stronger for undergraduates (p < .001) than for the more advanced students (p < .01). The exception to this trend was the academic/career factor, which shows no significant differences in gender for the masters' level student respondents. These findings imply that gender is likely to influence the areas in which students need academic assistance.

Guneri et al. (2003) found that gender differences in counselling needs among students exist. Male students were found to express a significantly greater concern for family issues, while female students were more concerned about self-control and personal issues. Women have been found to have greater needs than men in the vocational, social, academic and moral issues (Tahhan & Eitah, 2002), and emotional issues (Gallagher, Golin & Kelleher, 1992).

In another study of 238 students (Clark et al., 2005), it was reported that females had a higher perception of being mentored. Male students have less social support in university settings and are less likely to reach out for educational support (Hernandez, Cervantes, Castellanos, & Gloria, 2005). Male and female students may experience different problems that affect their studies and therefore their areas of priority in academic advising may differ. Gender differences in the need for academic advising in different areas were expected in this study.

Academic advising has a basis in psychological theories just like psychological counseling. Classical conditioning theory by Pavlov assume that academic problems arise when students get conditioned to believing that it is not easy to pass certain subjects which they associate with failure (Cobb, 2001). According to Piaget's cognitive theory, inappropriate attributions and faulty beliefs such as being convinced that there are no jobs after graduating from college can be the cause of academic problems.

The cognitive-social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling of behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others (Bandura, 1989). It also considers cognitive evaluation and environmental factors important in the influence of behaviour. In academic advising, it is assumed that students' need for counseling will be dependent on self-evaluation and observing others and the immediate environment. Academic mentors provide exemplary role models who can be emulated by learners in addition to the one on one counseling.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is also relevant to academic mentorship since it assumes that learners are assisted by others who are more knowledgeable and skilled to function intellectually and independently on their own as individuals (Hetherington & Parke, 1999). In Vygotsky's view, the child grows and changes as a function of his/her efforts and support, guidance and help from others who are more skilled. Students improve academically when significant others such as parents, teachers and so on help them to identify and solve problems related to learning. Academic advisors are expected to be well informed on academic and career development issues to an extent of being very resourceful to students. Students who recognize the fact that academic mentors are more knowledgeable, experienced and can assist them will tend to seek their assistance and will benefit from their guidance. These theoretical perspectives can be used to account for the perceived need for academic advising as well as a basis for psychotherapy.

Research Methodology

Research Design
This study applied the descriptive survey method in which subjects were asked to indicate the areas in which they thought they needed help. Students were required to indicate their opinion in as many areas as possible. From the information provided, the study also sought to establish whether the need for academic advising in different areas vary with the year of study and gender.

Participants

The purposive sampling technique was used to select Egerton University out of the seven public universities in Kenya. One university college (Laikipia) was purposively sampled for this study because it had an operational academic advising programme out of the five campuses of Egerton University. The (187) participants who included first (53), second (41), and third (93) year students were selected through the simple random sampling method from an estimated total population of 950 regular students. Fourth year students who were completing their studies did not take part in the study.

Instrumentation

Data was collected using the Student Academic Advising Questionnaire (SAAQ) developed by the researchers. The questionnaire sought information about gender, year of study, and students' opinion on academic related areas in which they needed help among other related details.

Results and Discussion

The first research question sought to establish the areas of priority in academic advising among university students. An analysis of the responses from the respondents revealed that students need academic counseling in a variety of issues as indicated in Table 1.

The results in Table 1, clearly and shows that students need more advising in some areas than others. The findings revealed that the highest ranking need for academic advising is on how to maintain high academic grades (77.0%). This was followed by handling of academic workload (74.3%), setting career goals (71.1%), setting academic goals (64.2%), acquisition of computer skills (62%), test-taking skills (60.4%), examination preparation (55.6%) and quantitative skills (51.9).

These findings have important implications on areas that should take priority in academic advising in universities and other institutions of higher learning. It appears that students attach a lot of importance to academic performance and would wish to maintain high grades. As they set their career goals, they seem to be aware that the kind of career they would wish to settle for depends on their academic performance. Academic advising should be geared towards assisting students to realize the maximum academic potential.

The findings of this study support previous research results which have shown students to be in need of help in more or less similar academic related areas. Students in Nigeria were reported to be in need of counseling on time management and academic ability (Aluede, Imhonde, & Eguavoen, 2006). In a study (Guneri, Aydin & Skovholt, 2003) on university students in Turkey on academic related needs, managing time (60%) was the highest ranking need followed by identification and planning goals for life and concentration on studies (53%), getting a job after college (50%), and getting better grades (46%). Other studies have identified study skills, career uncertainty, overcoming fear about taking examinations, time management, meeting academic and career needs (Arco, Fernandez, Heilborn & Lopez's, 2005; Gallagher, 1992; Bertocci, Hirsch, Sommer & Williams, 1992; Gallagher, Golin & Kelleher, 1992;) as areas that need to be addressed. In a study of undergraduate nursing students in Ibadan, Nigeria by Omgbodun, Yusuf, Odukogbe, and Omigbodun (2004) found that common stressors included excessive schoolwork, financial problems, inadequate recreational facilities, and overcrowded accommodations. Nearly 60% of the respondents felt counseling would help them and most of them desired counseling in academics, finances, and relationships. Although the ranking of the needs may differ from one student to another and from one part of the world to another, the issues are very similar. Previous studies concur with the current study on the need for counseling in setting academic and career goals, getting better grades, preparation for examinations, and dealing with excess workload. Further study may be necessary to find out areas of departure between Kenya and other parts of the World where research has documented a wide range of student needs.

The second research question sought to find out whether the areas that students need academic advising vary with the year of study. The results are presented in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 show that the academic advising needs of students in different years of study do not seem to differ very much. The highest ranking need for academic advising for first year students was on how to maintain high academic grades (81.1%). This was followed by handling of academic workload (79.2%), setting career goals (71.7%), setting academic goals and test-taking skills (67.9%), acquisition of computer skills and examination preparation (66.0%), quantitative skills (62.3), organizational skills and time management (52.8%).

The highest ranking need for academic advising for second year students was on how to maintain high academic grades (73.2%). This was followed by acquisition of computer skills (63.4%), setting academic goals (63.4%), handling of academic workload (61.0%), setting academic goals (61.0%), and test-taking skills (61.0%), setting career goals (56.1%), organizational skills (53.7%), and time management (51.2%).

The highest ranking need for academic advising for third year students was handling of academic workload (77.4%) and setting career goals (77.4%). This was followed by maintaining high grades (76.3%), setting academic goals (63.4%), test-taking skills (55.9%), acquisition of computer skills (59.1%), and examination preparation (52.7%).

This study seems to contradict an earlier finding (Muola, Maithya & Migosi, 2012) which showed first year students to be more likely to have a positive perception on academic advising than second and third year students assuming that positive perception of academic mentorship should be reflected in the manifestation of a strong need for the service.

Although the priorities on academic advising are generally similar from first to third year, there is a slight shift to focusing more interest in career and managing workload when students get to their third year of study. This is

understood because as students are about to complete their studies they need more information about the job market.

The third research question tried to establish whether academic advising needs vary with gender. The results presented in Table 3 did not reveal major variations in the priority of needs.

The highest ranking need for academic advising for female students was handling of academic workload (78.9%). This was followed by maintaining high grades (76.7%), setting career goals (67.8%), setting academic goals (64.4%), test-taking skills (61.1%), computer skills (60.0%), examination preparation (58.9%), quantitative skills (55.6%), and time management (51.1%).

The highest ranking need for academic advising for male students was maintaining high grades (77.3%). This was followed by setting career goals (74.2%), handling academic workload (70.1%), setting academic goals and computer skills (63.9%), test-taking skills (59.0%), and examination preparation (52.6%).

The findings of the study show that the top ranking needs for both female and male students are maintaining high grades, setting career goals, handling academic workload, and setting academic goals. It is interesting to note that although female students have earlier been shown to be more willing to seek help in dealing with academic difficulties (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Daubman & Lehman, 1993), and career issues (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008; Rochlen, Mohr, & Hargrove, 1999), it doesn't imply that their needs are different from those of their male counterparts as revealed by this study. The willingness can only be attributed to other factors and not to differences in counseling needs. Earlier research has shown that men do not fail to seek help because they do not have problems but because social norms of traditional masculinity frowns on help seeking by men (Möller-Leimkühler, 2002; Lee, 1997; Wisch, Mahalik, Hayes, & Nutt, 1995; Kessler, Brown, & Broman, 1981). Despite being equally in need of help, out of

all the students who had at one or another time sought academic advising in the current study, 54% were females as compared to 46% males.

Conclusion

The following conclusions were made from the findings of the study:

i.   Majority of students have pressing academic needs that need to be attended to through a comprehensive and effective academic advising programme.
ii. Academic counseling needs among students in different years of study are basically similar with slight variations.
iii. Although the academic advising needs for male and female students

are not varied, more females tend to seek advising services.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

i.   There is need for universities in Kenya to have academic advising programmes focused on students' needs.
ii. Academic advising should be intensified in the university with emphasis on the unique needs in different years of study.
iii. Deliberate attempts should be made to reach more male students who have a low tendency of seeking help when in need than their female counterparts

Table-1: Areas of Priority in Academic Advising among University Students (N = 187)

Area	Frequency	Percentage
Maintaining high grades	144	77.0
Handling academic workload	139	74.3
Setting career goals	133	71.1
Setting academic goals	120	64.2
Computer skills	116	62.0
Test-taking skills	113	60.4
Examination preparation	104	55.6
Quantitative skills	97	51.9
Organizational skills	91	48.7
Time management	87	46.5
Understanding university rules	62	33.2
Note taking	46	24.6
Writing skills	46	24.6
Reading skills	52	27.8

Key: F = Frequency

Table-2: Areas of Priority in Academic Advising among Students in different Years of Study

	Year 1		Year 2	Year 3
	(N = 53)	(N= 41)	(N = 93)	
Area	**F**	**%**	**F**	**%F%**
Maintaining high grades	43	81.1	30	73.271 76.3
Handling academic workload	42	79.2	25	61.0	7277.4
Setting career goals	38	71.7	23	56.172 77.4
Setting academic goals	36	67.9	25	61.0	5963.4
Computer skills	35	66.0	26	63.455 59.1
Test-taking skills	36	67.9	25	61.052 55.9
Examination preparation	35	66.0	20	48.849 52.7
Quantitative skills	33	62.3	18	43.946 49.5
Organizational skills	28	52.8	22	53.7	4144.1
Time management	28	52.8	21	51.238 40.9
Understanding university rules	15	28.3	15	36.0	3234.4
Note taking	12	22.6	9	22.025 26.9
Writing skills	17	32.1	8	19.5	2122.6
Reading skills	18	34.0	11	26.8	2324.7
Key: F = Frequency				

Table 3: Gender differences in Areas of Priority in Academic Advising among University Students

	Female (N = 90)			Male (N = 97)	
Area		**F**	**%**	**F**	**%**
Maintaining high grades		69	76.7	75	77.3
Handling academic workload	71		78.9	68	70.1
Setting career goals		61	67.8	72	74.2
Setting academic goals	58		64.4	62	63.9
Computer skills		54	60.0	62	63.9
Test-taking skills		55	61.1	58	59.8
Examination preparation		53	58.9	51	52.6
Quantitative skills		50	55.6	47	48.5
Organizational skills	44		48.9	47	48.5
Time management		46	51.1	41	42.3
Understanding university rules	28		31.1	34	35.1
Note taking		22	24.4	24	24.7
Writing skills	22		24.4	24	24.7
Reading skills	29		32.2	23	23.7

Key: F = Frequency

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