



## EMERGING NEED FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING IN SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

*It is not easy for the overburdened student counselors in schools, colleges and universities to adequately address students' needs in all areas. This has led to the establishment of academic advising in Western countries and recently in some Kenyan institutions. The three common types of academic advising are developmental, prescriptive and strength-based. Findings from various studies concur that students need academic advising in time management, maintaining high grades and setting academic and career goals among other areas. Academic advising has been associated with improved academic performance and retention. Academic advising is recommended as a means of supplementing existing counseling programmes and maximizing full realization of students' potential.*

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**Keywords:** Academic, Advising, University, and Need.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Guidance and counseling in schools, colleges and universities in Kenya has been in existence for many years. The guidance and counseling programme in many institutions of learning addresses 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 and colleges 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 (Sindabi, 2007). There is no evidence to show that academic advising is

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ISSN(e): 2224-4441/ISSN(p): 2226-5139

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entrenched in learning institutions in Kenya. It is against this background that the aspect of emerging needs in academic advising in Kenya is discussed in this article. The discussion is a combination of literature review and discussion of the findings of an ongoing research on the topic.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

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). 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.

Academic advising as an independent component of the general counseling in schools is based on the fact that 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 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 (Saving and Keim, 1998; Schreiner and Anderson, 2005). 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 and 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 and Trachte, 2005).

The second type of academic advising is what is referred to as prescriptive advising which involves a more authoritarian relationship between advisor and student where the advisor provides information and directs the student in meeting institutional requirements (Saving and Keim, 1998; Schreiner and Anderson, 2005). 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 (Schreiner and Anderson, 2005; Abelman *et al.*, 2007).

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 and 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.

### **3. THEORETICAL BASIS OF ACADEMIC ADVISING**

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 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 and 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 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 academic related problems as well as a basis for psychotherapy.

### **4. NEED FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING PROGRAMME FOR STUDENTS**

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the guidance and counseling programme in schools, colleges and universities focuses on many issues affecting learners. It is therefore possible for some learners' needs to be given less emphasis during counseling. Students in secondary school are faced by a number of problems that may affect their academic development such as subject and career choices and lack of time management, test-taking, note-taking and writing skills. In schools, colleges and universities, counseling is managed by a few full-time employees who hardly have enough time for each individual student. Academic advising unlike professional counseling can be offered by teachers who in addition to serving as mentors to the young people will also be their role models.

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.

In a recent survey on a sample of 187 university students on the need for academic advising, it was revealed that the highest ranking need for academic advising is on how to maintain high academic grades (77%) (Muola *et al.*, 2012). 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%) and test-taking skills (60.4%). These findings have important implications on areas that should take priority in academic advising in high school and other institutions of higher learning.

In a survey of 920 undergraduate students in Nigeria, it was revealed that there is need for counseling on time management, drug concerns, family problems, career needs, relationship problems, finance, sexual harassment, academic ability, personality types and anxiety/depression (Aluede *et al.*, 2006). Among other areas, students seek help 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 *et al.*, 1992). Fear (lack of self-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 *et al.*, 1992). Guneri *et al.* (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 *et al.* (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 discussion and research findings seem to show a lot of concurrence on the general academic areas in which students need assistance. Academic advising programmes in Kenyan schools, colleges and universities can benefit from past research findings in planning for academic mentorship.

## 5. FACTORS AFFECTING ACADEMIC ADVISING

Although research tends to show that there is a growing need for academic advising in institutions of learning, the programme may be hindered by a number of factors. In situations where advisors carry a heavy student-to-advisor load, the success of the programme may be limited. Institutional factors that affect the type of advising offered include large enrollment, type

of programme, religious affiliation, institutional mission, and private or public status (Abelman *et al.*, 2007).

Kennedy-Dudley (2007) found that senior students had a more positive evaluation of advising than their juniors. This may imply that they are in more need and may tend to seek academic advising more. A study by Wolfe (n.d) on 350 students in post secondary institutions revealed that students in older classes paid more visits to their mentors. Students who are about to complete their studies would want to get information related to their future educational and career goals and therefore will be more likely to seek the advice of their academic mentors among other sources.

Gender has been identified as a factor that affects students' tendency to seek academic advising. Generally and traditionally, males have been less willing to seek help in dealing with academic difficulties (Daubman and Lehman, 1993; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997) and career counseling (Rochlen *et al.*, 1999; Di Fabio and Bernaud, 2008). Such lower rates of help seeking among males transcend racial and national limits (Neighbors and Howard, 1987; Oliver *et al.*, 2005).

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 (Kessler *et al.*, 1981; Wisch *et al.*, 1995; Lee, 1997; Möller-Leimkühler, 2002). Kennedy-Dudley (2007) found that women were more likely than men to have been advised professionally.

In a study by the National Science Foundation (2008), it was found that female respondents at the bachelor, master's and doctoral degree programme levels considered all types of mentoring roles to be significantly more important than male respondents. The exception to this trend was the Academic/Career factor, which showed no significant differences in gender for the masters' level respondents. These findings imply that gender is likely to influence perceptions on academic advising and the tendency to seek the service. 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 *et al.*, 2004). These findings imply that gender should be one of the factors to consider when planning for academic advising with the possibility of instituting an "intrusive" form of mentoring (Redmond, 1990) for male students. In intrusive mentoring, the advisor takes the lead and contacts the student on a periodic basis rather than waiting for him or her to initiate contact.

The availability of academic advisors is crucial for the success of the student-advisory programme, especially in colleges and universities. At the university, students may fail to make contact with their faculty advisors due to their own tendency to leave immediately after class, lack of extracurricular involvement, the lack of on-campus residence, lack of on-campus employment, and the large number of adjunct instructors that do not have office hours (King, 1993). All these factors may hinder interaction between students and their mentors.

Many advisors bear additional responsibilities to advising students, including teaching, marking, performing committee work, working at institutional events, and undertaking various other duties that take time away from direct advising with students. Institutional duties may differ from institution to another, thus allowing plenty of time to advise for some academic mentors while leaving others with very little time for advising.

The capability of some institutions to utilize and manage the student-academic advisory programme may affect the expected outcome. Research evidence suggests that many post-secondary institutions are underutilizing and poorly administering their academic advising programmes (Habley, 2004). Many colleges and universities have been reported to have failed to capitalize on the benefits of quality advising, particularly, in relation to helping students stay in school or college.

Failure by students to utilize academic advising services affects the success of the mentorship programme. Research findings have revealed that students often meet academic advisors for reasons other than academic issues and concerns (Edwards and Murdock, 1994; Brown, 2003).

## 6. EFFECTS OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

In institutions where guidance counselors are overburdened and individualized attention is not always the norm, advisors play a critical role in answering questions, writing recommendation letters, and ensuring that students are on track to graduate. Malone (2009) noted that advising is key to students' success. According to him, high school students need diverse support to gain skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college including academic content competencies, college application guidance, cognitive and critical thinking skills, civic awareness, time management and teamwork strategies, and healthy social-emotional coping abilities.

In the view of Poliner and Lieber (2004), students' academic skills can grow through academic advisory which is a structured programme built into the school/college day through which an adult and a small group of students meet regularly for academic guidance and support. Advisory programmes aim to lower individual students' barriers to success.

Mentoring is seen as a means for promoting student retention (Walker and Taub, 2001), particularly the retention of first-year students (Johnson, 2008). Research findings suggest that academic advising improves retention (McArthur, 2005; Sayles, 2005) (McLaren, 2004) through improved academic performance among other benefits. Research findings also indicate that mentoring has a positive impact on the personal and professional development of young adults (Levinson, 1978).

According to Habley (2004), one of the primary factors affecting college retention is the quality of interaction a student has with a concerned person on campus.

Hester (2008) found that students who had increased interactions with their advisors had higher grade point averages (GPAs). In a study of 69 freshman students by Haught *et al.* (1998), it was found that students who received academic advising had a higher semester GPA at the end of the semester, and a higher cumulative GPA at the end of the following semester as compared to a control group. These findings imply that students who utilize advisors will benefit the most from the advising relationship.

A study by Pargett (2011) reported a positive relationship between academic advising and student development and student satisfaction with college. Students who are satisfied with college life are likely to be adjusted and focused as a result of which they may do well in their studies.

The failure by some students to complete their college degrees in four years or failing to graduate at all has been attributed to decreasing standards in high school education and lack of college preparedness Greene and Winters (2005) which could be partly addressed through

academic advising in high school. Adelman (1999) found that 40% of students enrolled in institutions of higher education require at least one remedial course that not only adds time to the degree process but also decreases the likelihood that they will graduate.

Several studies have indicated that the quality of academic advising can directly affect a student's chances of graduating (Backhus, 1989; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Steingass and Sykes (2008) highlighted a positive relationship between effective academic advising and student retention, especially for first-year students. Students who receive quality professional academic advising tend to have better retention and graduation rates (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Steingass and Sykes, 2008).

Studies have indicated that academic advising tends to rank among the lowest areas of higher education satisfaction for college students (Keup and Stolzenberg, 2004). Possibly the reason for this problem is the fact that many institutions do not formally compensate, reward, or recognize academic advisors for their responsibility (Habley, 2003; Habley, 2004).

## 7. THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC ADVISORS

The role of the advisor is to assist students in making academic choices, discover learning styles, practice goal setting and problem-solving techniques, and gain access to the necessary support services offered by the institution (Love, 2003; Schreiner and Anderson, 2005). Sindabi (2007) outlined a number of academic advisors' roles that include:

- Answering all sorts of academic questions.
- Referring students to someone who can answer their questions.
- Providing information and guidance on academic and curriculum matters.
- Referring students to heads of department or deans of faculties for answers to curriculum and academic programme questions.
- Exploring students' academic and career goals and providing guidance where needed.
- Maintaining results of academic performance that can serve as a basis for advising.
- Advising students on and channeling them to diverse resources that will enhance their overall intellectual development.
- Providing reference for jobs or further education to aspiring student advisees.
- Addressing any academic issues or problems that arise.
- Referring students to specialized advising available from within and without the institution.
- Making follow up to assess whether students benefited from previous contacts and referrals.

The roles and responsibilities of an academic mentor are therefore enormous and would require commitment, up-to-date information, and a lot of effort to meet the needs and concerns of students to deliver optimum results. With modern technology in communication, students can easily submit e-mail inquiries which can be answered by their academic advisers depending on the nature of the problem instead of seeking extended hours for academic advising. Group advising can efficiently impart important information to many students at once (King, 2008), therefore making

the role of the academic advisor easier. For example orientation of new students typically involves group advising.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Academic advising should not really be seen as an isolated component of the general counseling programme in institutions of learning but as an innovative way of addressing the complicated unique educational needs of learners. The establishment and strengthening of academic advising is necessary because it is emerging that the guidance and counseling programmes in learning institutions cannot adequately address students' academic needs. Research evidence points towards the benefits accruing from enhanced academic advising efforts in institutions of learning and hence the need to initiate new and strengthen existing programmes. The academic advising should be a programme whose main aim is to supplement what is already going on in the well known institutionalized school and college guidance and counseling programme. The sole purpose of academic mentorship is to maximize the realization of students' academic potential.

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