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The Effect of Academic Advising on Academic Performance of University Students in Kenyan Universities

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Abstract

Although academic advising in Kenyan universities exists, no research has been done to find out how it impacts on students' educational and career goals. This research aimed at establishing the effect of academic advising on academic performance and the influence of year of study and gender on students' tendency to seek academic advising. The ex-post facto research design was used. 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. No significant relationship ($r = 0.099$) was found between academic advising and academic performance. The findings showed that, first (21%) and second (27%) year students are more likely to seek academic advising than third year students (4%). An equal and low percentage (14%) of male and female students sought academic assistance from their academic mentors. The findings were attributed to the low percentage (11%) of students seeking academic advising and students' needs at different years of study irrespective of gender. It was recommended that academic advising should actively involve more students.

Key words: Academic performance, advising, 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 (2001), 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. Academic advisors at the university level 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. Consequently, they might engage themselves in behaviors that may interfere with their studies. Peer influence sometimes entices students into antisocial behavior like drug abuse and irresponsible sexual behaviour which eventually interrupt their studies. Some students might not have been admitted into programmes of their choice and therefore may find it difficult to create interest and concentrate on their current programmes.

Generally, students begin university education with limited knowledge about career prospects related to the courses they are enrolled. The job market is very 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 advancement. The guidance and counseling programme in many Kenyan universities may not adequately tackle academic advising since it mainly focused on social and psychological issues affecting students. If students' academic needs are not addressed, they may fail their examinations or drop out from college and lose out on the tuition and resources spent and thus minimize their chances of employment (Brower, 1992; Habley & McClanahan, 2004).

The teaching style in secondary schools is different from the instructional methods applied in university settings. Students are expected to do a lot of academic work and research by their own. By the time students adjust from secondary school to university, they will experience difficulties. In many Kenyan secondary schools, academic advising is part of the general guidance and counseling programme. Students are introduced to academic advising as a separate entity from guidance and counseling in the university. 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. It is against this background that the current study was envisaged. The study attempted to provide answers to the following research questions:

- i. Is there a significant relationship between the rate at which students seek academic advising and their academic performance?
- ii. Are first year students more likely to seek academic advising than second and third year students?
- iii. Does gender influence students' tendency to seek academic advising?

Literature review

Mentoring is viewed as a means for promoting student retention (Walker & Taub, 2001), particularly the retention of first-year students (Johnson, 1989). The availability of exemplary, caring role models is important for all students, but may be especially critical to the retention and success of college students who do not have role models at home. Research on mentoring indicates that it

has a positive impact on the personal and professional development of young adults (Levinson, 1978). Research evidence suggests that there is an empirical link between student mentoring and student retention (Campbell & Cambell, 1997; Wallace & Abel, 1997). Academic advisers assist students with decision making as a means to maximize student potential (Creamer, 2000; Grites, 1979).

Research shows that students value most highly academic advisors who are accessible, approachable, and helpful in providing guidance that connects their present academic experience with their future life plans (Gordon, Habley, & Associates, 2000; Frost, 1991). In a study of 69 freshman students by Haight, Hill, Walls, and Nardi (1998), it was found that students who received academic advising had a higher semester grade point average (GPA) at the end of the semester, and a higher cumulative grade point average at the end of the following semester as compared to a control group.

Research findings also suggest that academic advising improves retention (McArthur, 2005; Sayles, 2005; McLaren, 2004) through improved academic performance among other benefits. Students who do not receive advising services may take more time to graduate, or have lower GPAs because they lack knowledge of campus resources (Flaga, 2006; Hunter & White, 2004; Gelwick, 1974). Interaction with faculty members through academic advising can positively affect a student's "intellectual, academic, and personal development" (Alexitch, 2002, p. 5). Similar findings were reported by Terenzini and Pascarella (1991).

Students at different years of study experience different and unique problems and therefore are likely to perceive the need for help differently, and vary at the rate at which they seek academic advising. For example, first year students are expected to need a lot of help in subject and career choices than students in the subsequent years. Once students settle down and acquire adequate information about university life, they may not require a lot of assistance from their academic advisors. In this study, it was expected that the need for help at different years of study will be revealed through the rate at which students seek academic advising.

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). A similar trend of unwillingness to seek help was expected in the current study.

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 for 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 student on a periodic basis rather than waiting for the student to initiate such communication.

Whether male or female, students 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). Academic advising is a voluntary service to students and they are expected to seek the service at their own will. All these factors may hinder interaction between Kenyan University students and their mentors. In addition, the academic advisor-student ratio (which was higher than 1:50 in the current study) prohibits effective student mentoring.

Heavy drinking is estimated to occur among two in five students, resulting in negative consequences. Heavy drinking among college students increases the risk of physical, psychological, health, academic, and legal troubles (Wechsler, Lee, Nelson, & Kuo, 2002). It also increases the probability of engaging in risky behavior, such as unprotected sex and dangerous driving. Heavy drinking, furthermore, may have a negative impact on academic achievement due to the effects that last beyond the initial drink, such as nausea, hangovers, blanking out, and either attending a course intoxicated or missing class (Engs & Hanson, 1994). As a result, this may directly influence the retention and completion rates of university students. This problem is more common among male than female students in Kenyan universities and is likely to reflect gender disparities when it comes to help seeking.

The social learning theory by Bandura emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling of behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others (Bandura, 1989). In this study it was assumed that academic mentorship provides exemplary role models who play a critical role in the retention and success of university students. The operant theory associated with Skinner assumes that the consequences that follow behavior determine whether it will persist or not (Cobb, 2001). Students who have gained from or view academic advising as a beneficial undertaking are likely to continue seeking the service.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is also applicable in this study 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). 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 guidance.

Research methodology

Research design

This study applied the *ex-post facto* research design which involves studying the relationship between variables that cannot be manipulated by the researcher because their manifestation have already occurred (Frankel & Warren, 2000). The researcher endeavoured to investigate the effect of academic advising on academic achievement among university students in Kenya.

Participants

The purposive sampling technique was used to select Egerton University out the seven universities in Kenya. One university college (Laikipia) was purposively sampled for the purpose of 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 method from an estimated total population of 950 regular students.

Instrumentation

Data was collected using the Student Academic Advising Questionnaire (SAAQ) developed by the researchers. The questionnaire sought information

about gender, year of study, academic performance and the rate at which students consult their academic advisors. The students' cumulative average score was used as an index of their academic performance. The respondents were also asked to provide other general information that assisted in the interpretation of the data.

Results and discussions

The first research question sought to establish whether there is a significant positive relationship between academic advising (as measured by the frequency at which academic advising is sought) and the student's academic performance. A Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.099 was reported. This low correlation was attributed to the fact that only 11% of the students (134 second and third year) whose academic grades were available sought academic counseling at one time or another. In this case, there is need to find out how the performance of students would vary in a situation where all students seek academic mentorship at varied rates. The reasons as to why few students avail themselves for academic advising should also be established.

These results do not support earlier findings by Haught *et al.* (1998) who in a research of 69 freshman found that students who received academic advising had a higher semester grade point average at the end of the semester, and a higher cumulative grade point average at the end of the following semester as compared to a control group. A total of 144 (77%) of the students involved in this study indicated that they needed help to maintaining high grades. This could mean that if they were to get academic advising, their scores could possibly improve.

The second research question sought to establish whether first year students are more likely to seek academic advising than second and third year students. The findings of the study are presented in table 1.

The data analysis showed that 21% (11 out of 53) of the first year students sought academic advising services as compared to 27% (11 out of 41) of the second year students sampled. Four percent (4 out of 93) of the third year students who participated in the research sought academic advising. The relatively larger number of first year students seeking advise on academic matters as compared to third year students can be explained by the fact that, first year students need information on career and academic goals as they make decisions on the programmes and subjects to choose. First year students may also need information on many issues concerning life in a

university. Surprisingly, more second year students seek academic advising compared to first and third year students. Possibly at second year, students may begin to realize that they assumed a lot of things while in first year. This is the first time they are getting their academic transcripts for first year. When they realize that they are not performing as they expected and that some of the subject areas they chose for study are not as easy as they thought, they begin to seek help from their lecturers. Although many students did not go for academic advising, a reasonable percentage of students indicated that they need academic advising on various issues as shown in table 2.

Table 2 clearly shows the areas in which students critically need guidance such as maintaining high grades (77%), handling academic workload (74%), setting academic goals (64%) and setting career goals (71%). This information can act as a guide in planning academic advising priorities. The high need for academic advising compared to actual number of students who seek for the service could imply that there are other reasons that prevent students from seeking the service.

A higher percentage (27%) of second year students is likely to seek academic advising as compared to four percent of third year students. At third year, students may realize that they do not seriously need academic advising since they have been in college long enough to know what is required of them as far as career and academic goals are concerned.

These results imply that a big percentage (79%, 73% and 96% of first, second and third year students respectively) of students do not seek academic advising. Out of the 187 student who were involved in this study, only 87 (47%) knew their academic advisors as compared to 100 (53%) who did not know. This means that although all the students were allocated academic advisors at the beginning of the academic year and the information displayed on student notice boards in the departments, only about half of them took it as their responsibility to check the information. The large number of students without knowledge about who their academic advisors are explains why a small number of students are seeking academic advising. The concept of academic advising as a separate service from guidance and counseling is new to first year students and may take time to embrace.

The low number of students seeking academic advising implies that the problems of student retention and poor academic performance may remain unresolved in Kenyan universities because previous research findings

(McArthur, 2005; Sayles, 2005; McLaren, 2004; Haught et al., 1998; Campbell & Cambell, 1997; Wallace & Abel, 1997) have shown that there is a link between academic advising and these two factors. Further research is necessary to find out why students at different years of study vary in the rate at which they seek academic advising.

The third research question sought to establish whether gender influences students' tendency to seek academic advising. The findings showed that 14% (13) of the 91 female students sought academic advising within the period of one academic year. Similarly, an equal percentage (14%) of the 81 male students who responded to the relevant item sought help from their academic advisors. This means that female students would likely seek academic assistance from their academic mentors just like their male counterparts. Gender differences may not be prominent with the low turn out of students.

These finding are in contrast with earlier research findings that have tended to show that men are 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), and career counseling (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008; Rochlen *et al.*, 1999). The number of male and female students seeking academic advising is surprisingly low which means that it may be sensible to institute an "intrusive" form of mentoring according to Redmond (1990), in which the mentor takes the initiative to reach out the students in need on a periodic basis rather than waiting for them to come for help. The mentorship programme could also be made mandatory as part of student's experience in their academic growth.

Conclusion

The following conclusions were made from the study:

- i. Academic performance in university is more likely to be affected by other factors other than academic mentorship.
- ii. Students' need for academic advising varies with the year of study with students being more likely to seek academic advising during their first and second year of study.
- iii. The need for academic mentorship does not seem to be influenced by gender.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

- i. There is need for universities in Kenya to device methods of actively involving as many students in academic advising as possible.
- ii. Academic advising should be intensified at the time of registration when students are making decisions on subject and career options and in second year when students are stabilizing in their academic and career decisions.
- iv. Universities should establish comprehensive academic advising programmes.
- iii. There is need to improve on the student-mentor ratios for effective academic advising.
- iv. Academic mentorship could be introduced in high school to ensure smooth transition to university education and career life.
- v. Further research is necessary in this area to provide more conclusive evidence.

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Table 1: Percentage of students' who seek academic advising

| Year of study | N | Frequency | Percentag |
|----------------------|----------|------------------|------------------|
| 1 | 53 | 11 | 21 |
| 2 | 41 | 11 | 27 |
| 3 | 93 | 4 | 4 |

Table 2: Areas in which Students Need Assistance (N=187)

| Areas of need | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Writing skills | 46 | 25 |
| Reading skills | 52 | 28 |
| Note taking | 46 | 24 |
| Organizational skills | 91 | 49 |
| Examination preparation | 104 | 56 |
| Time management | 87 | 47 |
| Quantitative skills | 97 | 52 |
| Maintaining high grades | 144 | 77 |
| Handling the academic workload | 139 | 74 |
| Setting academic goals | 120 | 64 |
| Setting career goals | 133 | 71 |
| Computer skills | 116 | 62 |
| Understanding university rules | 62 | 33 |
| Test-taking skills | 113 | 60 |
