

Assessing Perceived Problems and Academic Counseling Benefits for Students and Teachers in Madda Walabu University, South East Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Survey

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ABSTRACT

Academic counseling is a collaborative process that addresses the needs, problems, and interests of higher education students. The objective of the study was to investigate perceived problems and academic counseling benefits for students and teachers at Madda Walabu University in Ethiopia. Cross-sectional research design using quantitative methods was applied. The study selected 605 students as participants using a multi-stage sampling method. Results showed that nearly half of the students (49.9%) reported that they could benefit from academic counseling services. According to them, educational counseling improves anxiety management (66.3%), educational goal setting (69.4%) and time management (66.6%). Moreover, academic counseling turned out to be predictive for students' academic success. However, the strength of the relationship also depended on the students' socio-demographic factors. This study indicated that more than half of Madda Walabu University students had problems related to managing their time. Additionally, the students believed that academic counseling would benefit students and teachers in enhancing interpersonal relationships, improving study skills, goal setting, and understanding and managing diversity. The Ethiopian Ministry of Education and Madda Walabu University administrators, need to understand the significance of academic counseling for students' academic performance. They should introduce a necessary intervention strategy that ensures students' academic success.

Key words: Academic Counseling, Perceived Benefits, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Education can bring about behavioral changes on students. It impacts on the thoughts, attitudes, values, knowledge, and skills of the learners. Higher education institutions are at the top of rank to realize these changes. It provides opportunities for students to reach their full potential in terms of educational, vocational, social and emotional development (Lunenburg, 2010).

Academic counseling is emerging as a crucial component of higher education. The terms 'advising' and 'counseling' are often used interchangeably. Regardless of the search term used, research articles mainly address topics such as adult learners, choice of an academic program and in addition to the many personal and social problems faced by students. Central to this research is the importance of collaboration between faculty, counselors and students. The importance of academic counseling for both the faculty and the students cannot be taken lightly. The faculty play a key role as educational advisors do; and therefore, benefit from resources that teach them to advise their students, conveying academic expectation and the rubrics for success (Lees, & Dietsche, 2012; Lowenstein, 2011; O'Banion, 2013).

Hence, academic advising can be seen as a collaborative process, where various advisors cooperate in bringing the

educational, career, and personal development of the students (Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006). Lunenburg (2010) described academic counselors as promoters of personal growth who prepare students to become motivated workers and responsible citizens. The academic counseling program is an integral part of a university's total educational program; it is developmental by design focusing on needs, interests, and issues related to various stages of students' growth (Cooley, 2010; Gaines, 2014).

In Africa, the modern form of school guidance and counseling service was started in post-colonial time. For example, in Kenya, guidance and counseling services were started in the 1970s to provide academic counseling for high schools, colleges and universities (Muola & Mwanja, 2013). In contrast, the Ethiopian tertiary education system only looks for students acquiring minimum scores on university entrance examinations. Some argue that advising does exist for disadvantaged groups like females, persons with disability and socio-economically backward. However, there is no structure for academic counseling in universities to help students to overcome academic and non-academic problems.

Scholars in the field of education recommend that academic counseling must be available at various educational

institutions to address the diversified needs of the students (Bilgin, 2016; Cooley, 2010; Dibia & Obi, 2013). Seyoum (2011) stated that academic counselors should allot time to address the various educational needs of the students (Getachew, 2016). The needs can be related to academic goal setting, developing academic skills, scoring good grades, understanding career goals, finding appropriate jobs, and tackling the psychosocial problems of the learners (Muola & Mwanja, 2013).

Some educational institutions in Ethiopia recognize academic guidance and counseling as an unnecessary service, others offer limited services and very few have fully incorporated it into their system (AlFaris, Naem, McAleer, Qureshi, van der Vleuten, Irfan et al., 2014). Many studies show the importance of academic counseling to solve personal, social and academic-related issues (Namale, 2018). A study of undergraduate medical students suggested that personal and academic problems such as ineffective time management, poor study skills, and personal issues reflect the need for academic counseling. A very common problem seems to be procrastination that is severe among students. They often wait until the last minute to study what has been thought in the class (Abdi, 1998; West, & Sadoski, 2011).

However, some students are prone to intense and extensive psychological and social problems (Getachew, 2016). These include academic and learning-related problems, environmental maladjustment, psychological maladjustment, and risky behavior. In the university setting, these problems manifest themselves as academic failure, interpersonal relationship problems, and poor decision making. In general, these students lack effective study habits, time management skills, critical thinking skills, creativity, and they are unable to cope with exam anxiety.

The limited academic counseling services that exist in Ethiopia are restricted to high schools (Abdi, 1998). According to Zeleke (2000) even when available, students, teachers, and principals do not consider academic counseling to be valuable. Similarly, in the university context, most students don't understand the contribution of academic counseling for students and also its contribution for higher education teachers. However, literatures indicate, students do not achieve good grades unless their psychosocial and emotional problems are addressed through academic counseling (Davis, 2015; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013; Zeleke, 2000). Thus, the value of research in this area is imminent. It is, thus, necessary to characterize the needs and attitudes of students regarding academic counseling services.

Objectives

In this context, the general objective of this research was to perception of Madda Walabu university students' perception towards the benefits of academic counseling is to respond to the personal, educational and psychological needs of students at the Madda Walabu University in Ethiopia. In addition, the study will try to see the general the perception students have regarding the benefit of academic counseling provides for higher education teachers.

More specifically, we want:

- to assess perceived academic problems of students requiring academic counseling.
- to find the benefits students see if counseling was made available for students and teachers.
- to determine whether academic counseling service needs are dependent on the socio-demographics of the students.

METHODS

In order to assess the perceived benefits of academic counseling for teachers and students along with the perceived problems faced by students, a descriptive survey design study was followed. According to Jackson (2016) a descriptive survey research design is recommended to use when a questionnaire is used as an instrument of data collection.

Setting

Data collection occurred in March 2017, at Madda Walabu University, which is located at a distance of 430 km to the southeast of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. Madda Walabu is a public university that hosts a total of 12190 post-graduate and undergraduate students under 41 departments distributed in 8 colleges, an institute, and a school (Madda Walabu University, 2019). The colleges and schools include: - college of social science and humanities, education and behavioral studies, business and economics, agriculture and natural resources, natural and computational science, health sciences; school of law, and institute of technology. Moreover, it is important to indicate that the university has one health science campus in Goba and another non-health science campus in Robe town.

Participants

The sample size was calculated using the *single population proportion formula* (Kothari, 2004; Rossi, 2012).

Accordingly,

$$n = \frac{(Z)xp(1-p)}{(m)^2}$$

where: **n**= required sample size, **z** = **z statistic** for confidence level at 95% (1.96), **p** = estimated prevalence of the variable within the research population (50%), **m** = margin of error at 5% (standard value of 0.05).

$$n = \frac{z^2 p(1-p)}{m^2}, n = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.49)(1-0.49)}{(0.05)^2} = 384$$

Multi-stage stratification was carried out. From each of the colleges, school and an institute; 21(twenty-one) departments were randomly selected with proportion to the total number of the students. The total sample size was divided proportionately across the departments.

Considering non-response and fewer female students, we collected data from about 605 randomly selected undergraduate students.

Data Collection

The data for the present study came from self –reported, paper-based questionnaires administered to undergraduate regular students at Madda Walabu University. An Academic Counseling (AC) questionnaire was used. The questionnaire contained 28 (twenty-eight) items; three items were prepared to gather age related information, year level, and residential (urban/rural) status of the students. The remaining 25 (twenty-five) items were prepared to assess perceived benefits of academic counseling to students and teachers and perceived problems faced by university students.

The scale consisted of 25 (twenty-five) items, rated on a five-point Likert scale. The scale was adopted from research conducted in universities of southeast Nigeria that used a three-point Likert scale (Dibia & Obi, 2013).

In order to check the scale’s reliability, a pilot test was carried out among students of a department that was not part of the sample for the study. The reliability was established using Cronbach alpha. Alpha coefficients for the different dimensions of the academic counseling questionnaire are as follows: $\alpha=0.89$ for students’ benefit, $\alpha=0.85$ for problems faced and $\alpha=0.82$ for perceived benefits for instructors. Questions pertaining to each of these dimensions were divided into different sections in the questionnaire that was administered.

Ten items of the scale deal with the perception of students regarding the benefits of academic counseling. The students were asked if they think the student community would have benefited if there was a counseling service that assists students in 1) *Improving study techniques?* 2) *Developing note-taking skills...* etc. The responses ranged from 1= *Disagree*, 2= *Not Sure*, to 3= *Agree*. Additionally, 10 items were used to assess perceived student problems that need academic counseling. The students were asked problems they faced as a student in the university related to, 1) *Difficulty to take lecture notes?* 2) *Difficulty in managing test anxiety and others*. Similarly, the responses followed the three-point Likert scale. The sub-scale also contains 5 items in order to assess students’ perceived academic counseling benefits for instructors. The items ask what would their instructors benefit if there were counseling services that assist them in: 1) *improving academic advising?* 2) *Identifying and addressing student needs...etc*. As stated earlier, the response of the students ranged from 1= *disagree* to 3= *agree*.

Before data collection, ethical approval for the study was obtained from Madda Walabu University research review committee. Soon after that, the schools and colleges included for data collection were informed about the study. Prior to administering the questionnaire, the objectives of the study were clearly explained to the participants and oral informed consent was obtained. This means that participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and that it would not affect any service or benefit that they were to get from their institution. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the execution of the study. This was also the reason why the informed consent was given orally and not signed by the participants as they feared to be not anonymous anymore.

Finally, data entry was carried out using SPSS 20. The data analysis involved the use of tables, mean, frequencies and standard deviations. In addition, *t*-test, one-way ANOVA, and Post-Hoc tests were used.

RESULTS

Respondents’ Socio-demographic Background

The samples of the population were regular students from Madda Walabu University. Table 1, indicates the detailed socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1 indicates that 74.7% (n=452) of the participants were male, whereas the rest (25.3%) of participants were female. The majority of the respondents (n=353, 58.3%) were between 21 and 25 years. The number of participants in the two highest age categories, 26-30 and 31-35, was low.

The majority of the respondents were rural residents (n=361, 59.7%). With regard to their current academic year, participants in their first studying year accounted for the majority of the respondents 244 (40.3%) while only a few students in their fourth year responded (3.6%).

Madda Walabu University Students’ Problems that need Counseling Services

University students have different perceived needs that require counseling services. The following table shows their own perceived needs.

Table 2 shows that students faced different challenges in their academic life. More than half of the students, 58.7%, 56.5%, and 63% encountered difficulties with selecting departments, taking lecture notes, listening and concentration in their learning respectively. Similarly, students suggested the need for assistance with deficits in their ability to write term papers (56.2%) and manage time effectively (70.2%). However, the absence of educational counseling services

Table 1. Socio-demographic of respondents

	N	%
Sex		
Male	452	74.7
Female	153	25.3
Residential status		
Urban	239	39.5
Rural	361	59.7
Age		
16-20	194	32.1
21-25	353	58.3
26-30	47	7.8
31-35	11	1.8
Academic year level		
I	244	40.3
II	203	33.5
III	138	22.7
IV	20	3.6

was not cited as a reason for problems with studying skills (55.2%) or initiating and maintaining relationships (40%).

Some students were not sure whether the absence of educational counseling services in MWU caused problems with assertive communication and educational goal-setting (30.9% and 47.1% respectively). Additionally, a few students (20%) did not agree that educational counseling would aid them in managing their time effectively.

Researcher have also tried to investigate if Madda Walabu University students' perceived problem varies based on their academic year level, parental residential status, and gender. The result indicated that there was no significant difference among the students in terms of problems they face based on their academic year, $F(3, 600) = 1.36, p = .250$. Similarly, an independent t -test revealed that female and male students had no significant difference in problems that need academic counseling, $t(604) = 1.24, p = .200$. However, in terms of residential background, students from urban backgrounds had relatively higher problems that need academic counseling ($M = 21.77, SD = 5.9$) compared to students from rural areas ($M = 20.45, SD = 5.0$), $t(444.33) = 2.82, p = .000$.

Perceived Benefits of Academic Counseling Services

Perceived benefits of academic counseling for students

This study shows the students' perception of what academic counseling service offers to university students. The students' response is described as follows:

Table 3 revealed that Madda Walabu University students agreed that counseling services offer a number of benefits. A majority of students agreed that they would receive the following benefits: about 67.4% have reported educational counseling service could enable them to identify their interest in a study subject, which in turn helps them

Table 2. Perceived problems that need academic counseling

Problems of students	Agree		Disagree		Not sure	
	N	%	N	%	n	%
Selecting the right study subject	355	58.7	150	24.8	100	16.5
Study skill (technique) problem	185	30.6	334	55.2	86	14.2
Taking lecture notes	342	56.5	129	21.3	137	22
Listening and concentration	381	63	128	21.2	96	15.9
Managing test anxiety	186	30.7	263	43.5	156	25.8
Writing term papers	342	56.5	129	21.3	156	25.8
Initiating and maintaining relationships	226	37.4	242	40.0	137	22.6
Assertive communication	200	33.1	218	36.0	187	30.9
Setting educational goals	198	32.7	122	20.2	285	47.1
Managing time	425	70.2	121	20.0	59	9.8

in subject selection. Moreover, they believed that academic counseling helps to improve their studying techniques (68.1%), note-taking skill during the lectures (66.1%), and their listening skills as well as classroom concentration. In addition to the benefits mentioned, the data also supports that educational counseling services can help students with anxiety management (66.3%), term paper writing (69.3%), relationship skills (71.2%), educational goal setting (69.4%) and time management (66.6%).

About 21–24% of students were not sure whether they would benefit from counseling services and a few students (7.6 - 9.6%) reported that they see no benefits from educational counseling.

Additionally, the researcher tried to assess students' perception of the benefit of academic advising varies based on their academic year level, parental residential status, and gender. The result has shown that there was no gender difference concerning students' perception towards the benefits of academic counseling for students, $t(603) = .33, p = .73$. On the other hand, an independent t -test revealed that students from urban areas ($M = 26.66, SD = 4.17$) had a better perception about the benefits of academic advising for students compared to students from the rural ($M = 25.42, SD = 4.87$), $t(599) = 3.22, p = .00$.

In addition, one way ANOVA was computed to find out perception of the students changed based on their academic year level. The result is described below in Table 4.

Table 4 displays that there was no significant difference in the perceiving the importance of academic advising among first, second, third-year students of the university, $F(3, 601) = 2.53, p = .057$.

Table 3. Students' perceived benefits of academic counseling services for students

Students' perception of benefits	Agree		Disagree		Not sure	
	N	%	N	%	n	%
Identifying interest in department selection	408	67.4	57	9.4	140	23.2
Improve study techniques	412	68.1	50	8.3	143	23.6
Taking lecture notes	400	66.1	58	9.6	147	24.3
Improving listening and concentration in the class	412	68.1	49	8.1	144	23.8
Help students in anxiety management	401	66.3	56	9.3	148	24.5
Writing term papers	419	69.3	56	9.3	130	21.5
Initiating and building relationships	431	71.2	46	7.6	128	21.2
Develop assertive and confident behavior	418	69.1	55	9.1	132	21.8
Educational goal setting	420	69.4	58	9.6	127	21.0
Time management	403	66.6	61	10.1	141	23.3

Perceived academic counseling benefits for instructors

With regards to how students perceived the benefit of educational counseling services to instructors, Table 5 shows that the majority of the students (67.1%) believe that an educational counseling service would help instructors to understand multi-cultural differences among students.

A little less than half of the students agreed that the benefit of counseling service would enable the instructors to identify the needs of the learners (47.4%), deal with the psychological distress of students (49.9%), and work with students with disabilities (48.9%). According to a few students (10.9%), counseling services do not help instructors in understanding multi-cultural differences. On the contrary, some students (36.9%) were not sure whether it benefited the instructors or not in working with students with disabilities. In the same manner, few students were unsure on the importance of counseling services to instructors in identifying the needs of the students (29.4%), dealing with psychological distress in students (37.4%) and understanding multi-cultural differences.

Academic counseling benefits not only the students but also assists the teachers in various ways. The researcher tried to examine students' perception of the benefits of academic counseling for instructors varies based on their gender, residence background, and academic year level. Accordingly, on the benefits of academic counseling for instructors, a *t*-test analysis indicated that students from the urban origin ($M = 12.46, SD = 2.79$) had significantly higher perception than students of rural origin ($M = 11.91, SD = 2.58$), $t(599) = 2.49, p = .010$. However, no significant difference was found between male and female students, $t(592) = .54, p = .080$.

As shown in Table 6, analysis of variance was calculated and the result indicated that there was a statistically significant difference among first, second, and third year students in their perception regarding the benefits of academic counseling for instructors, $F(3, 601) = 4.39, p = .005$. Tukey HSD post hoc analysis indicated that third year students had a better perception about benefits academic counseling gives for instructors than second year students. This is expected because third year students are more likely to be informed compared to second year students. However, inconsistently, first year students' perception of academic counseling benefit for teachers was higher than second year students. It needs further investigation to find out the reason.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that the students of Madda Walabu University perceived the use of academic counseling services beneficial both for students and teachers. They reported that academic counseling helps in department selection, improving academic skills including note-taking skills, time management and other related skills (nearly 66%-71%). Consistent with our result, Sink (2005) showed that guidance and counseling interventions are effective in students' academic pursuits during school and for later educational accomplishments after school (Sink, 2005). The influences of the guidance and counseling program

Table 4. Perceived benefit of academic counseling for students across year level

Source	SS	MS	df	F	p
Between groups	162.21	54.07	3	2.53	0.057
Within groups	12881.32	601	601		
Total	13043.53	604	604		

Table 5. Students' perception of academic counseling benefits for instructors

Benefits of counseling to instructors	Agree		Disagree		Not sure	
	n	%	f	%	f	%
Identifying the needs of students	287	47.4	140	23.1	178	29.4
Dealing with psychologically distressed students	302	49.9	77	12.7	226	37.4
Working with students with disabilities	296	48.9	86	14.2	223	36.9
Understanding multi-cultural differences	406	67.1	66	10.9	133	22

Table 6. Perceived benefit of academic counseling for instructors across year level

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	93.234	3	31.078	4.395	0.005
Within Groups	4249.966	601	7.071		
Total	4343.2	604			

strategies range from improved academic scores, enhanced study skills, increased motivation to learn to effective educational planning in school and beyond the school. Some studies found that in addition to the roles of the counselors, university teachers' play an important role in advising university students (Getachew, 2019; Madhuku, 2005; Shuaibu, 2004). Consistent with their research, this research revealed that about 67.1% of the students in our study agreed that academic counseling service would enable instructors to better understand multi-cultural differences within students. About half of the students reported that academic counseling services would enable instructors to identify students' instructional needs and work more effectively with learners.

However, some respondents did not understand the value of counseling services. This may be because of lack of information and a limited number of counselors at the university.

The other objective of the current investigation was to identify problems and academic counseling needs of MWU students. It was confirmed that the students had problems with time management (70.2%), listening and concentration (63%), and department choice (58.7%). Similarly, students felt that academic counseling services might assist on how to take lecture notes and write term papers. The result also suggests that nearly 30% of the students experience problems related to test anxiety, interpersonal communication, initiating and maintaining relationships, and academic goal

setting. Studies showed that various guidance and counseling interventions can help students to reduce test anxiety and improve test scores (Abel & Oliver, 2015; Getachew, 2019; Quinn & Peters, 2017).

In recent surveys, it was indicated that university students needed academic counseling for academic and school-related problems; achieving good grades, dealing with academic loads, career goal setting, study skill, time management, academic goal setting, developing computer skills and improving exam-taking skills (He & Hutson, 2016; Muola, Maithya, & Migosi, 2012; Vianden & Barlow, 2015). Likewise, the finding suggested that students needed academic counseling to tackle their problems related to academic goal setting, test anxiety, and developing a good study skill. In addition to above-listed issues, the students mentioned assertiveness and interpersonal communication problems as their major concerns that require the assistance of academic counselors.

In Spain, and Saudi Arabia, studies identified that university students rated distractions, lack of study skills, time management, test-anxiety as significant problems that need immediate intervention (Al-Ansari, ElTantawi, AbdelSalam, & Al-Harbi, 2015; Salem, Al-Mously, Nabi, Al-Zalabani, Al-Dhawi, & Al-Hamdan, 2013; Simpson, 2013). Despite the context and location of the studies, various research findings came up with similar findings. Similarly, students of Madda Walabu University identified problems related to time management, listening and concentration, choice with a field of study and taking lecture notes as their top problem that requires academic counseling intervention.

Unlike Madda Walabu University students, a study conducted in Nigeria has shown that Nigerian students' prime concerns were related to family issues, substance abuses, anxiety, depression, academic achievement, financial and relationship issues (Oduro & Antwiwaa, 2015). Students also needed academic counseling for improving study skills; self-confidence, motivation to learn; and overcoming academic failure, depression; anxiety and nervousness (Fussy, 2018).

Though there were minor deviations, most students from different parts of the world face similar problems. For example, fear, lack of self-confidence, lack of assertiveness, test anxiety, and worries about getting a job seems to be a common theme in many of the highly ranked concerns of students in the USA (Suvedi, Ghimire, Millenbah, & Shrestha, 2015). Similarly, a study from Turkey found that university students' academic-related needs were ranked as follows: time management, goal setting, scoring good grades, and getting a job after graduation (Bilgin, 2016).

The students in Madda Walabu University perceive academic counseling is important both for teachers and students. More than two-thirds of the students believed that academic counseling help university students in enhancing interpersonal relationships, making a career choice, developing assertiveness, managing test anxiety, developing academic goal setting, writing term papers, enhancing concentration and listening skills, and time management. In addition, about two-thirds of the students of Madda Walabu university students believed that academic counseling can

also help instructors to appreciate multicultural differences. Furthermore, nearly half of them believed that if academic counseling is made available teachers will be benefited in helping students with disability and psychological problems.

Nevertheless, Abera and his colleagues indicated the counseling center of the university is not in a good position to address the needs of the students and help teachers to effectively advise their students (Getachew, Daniel & Abayineh, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study indicate that more than half of Madda Walabu University students had problems related to managing their time, listening and concentration, taking lecture notes, and making the right department choice.

Besides, most of the students had good knowledge about the benefits of counseling services. and they believe that absence of the services leads to difficulties such as managing time, selecting a department, taking lecture notes, and writing term papers.

The students indicated that counseling service is also important for instructors to understand multi-cultural diversity, identifying student needs, and helps a lot in dealing with students. The respondents agreed that the academic counseling plays an important role in students' academic life and if such counseling.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are put forward for the practice of academic counseling. The university should ensure that the academic counseling service is properly run by providing sufficient rooms for advisors, giving incentives for advisors, and if necessary, supervising the service to check its implementation and take proper actions. Given its advantages, academic counseling services should be promoted, rewarded and be part of the duties and responsibilities of academic advisors. Training is a key element in building a good educational counselor. All educational counselors, in addition to having a degree in psychology, ought to undertake a post-graduate Diploma course in school counseling in order to provide better services. Opportunities should be provided for educational counselors to develop and update their skills through attending refresher courses, in-service training, and participation in workshops. Educational counselors must recognize their own responsibility for the image of the academic guidance and counseling service and must take steps to ensure that other parties are kept informed of available services.

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