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Evaluating the academic advisors' communication skills according to the students living in dormitory

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: As revealed by previous research studies, stress, lack of problem-solving ability, and weakness may influence the academic performance of students who study medicine or relevant fields. It is necessary to provide students with consultation and academic advising to ensure their support and welfare.

OBJECTIVES: The present study was carried out to evaluate the academic advisors' communication abilities and skills based on the views of the students living in the dormitory of North Khorasan University of Medical Sciences, Bojnurd, Iran.

METHODS: The present analytical cross-sectional study was carried out on 155 dormitory-living students who were majoring in medicine, nursing and midwifery, and health. The required data were collected using a 17-item research-made questionnaire which evaluated the academic advisors' communication skills in "oral and written," "accepting and giving feedback," "understanding others," "being a good listener," and "effectiveness" fields. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation coefficient test were utilized to analyze the collected data.

RESULTS: In the students' opinion, as revealed by the results of the present study, the academic advisors gained the lowest scores in "oral and written" (8.33 ± 1.58) field and the highest scores in "accepting and giving feedback" (20.78 ± 9.36) and "understanding others" (22.73 ± 9.8) fields.

CONCLUSION: The students believed that the academic advisors had the lowest ability in "oral and written" field; therefore, paid more attention should be paid to their communication skills, and their "oral and written" skills should be evaluated.

Keywords:

Academic advising, communication, education, nursing, student

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Introduction

All over the world, with an increase in the number of students applying for higher education, seeking academic consultation and advising has become a challenge for the educational systems. In many cases, the provided facilities and the presence of academic advisors to provide the students with consultation are used to evaluate the supportive and welfare role of the higher education systems.^[1,2] O'Banion believes that the second important mission

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of universities is to support the students through their academic advising programs. Academic advising program is a dynamic process and has different dimensions such as help with discovering life and professional goals and selecting programs, lessons, and course schedules.^[3] Supporting the students can be accomplished formally if educational systems assign an individual to support them. This individual can be a faculty member or a professional to whom a group of students are referred, and he follow-up their academic processes and discusses their concerns and problems through the regular meetings.^[4]

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According to the global definition, academic advisor is an individual who is interested in the students' development and success, he is not only responsible for course schedules but also he is a skillful person who clarifies goals and values for the students in universities and help them to achieve higher goals, continue education, and get proper jobs. In addition to promoting professional and social skills, academic advisors create grounds for the students to help them establish the communication and make use of available resources in the society.^[5] One of the most significant factors in the success of academic advising systems in universities is establishing the strong relationships between students and academic advisors, which is a process through which students actualize their utmost academic capacity through their relationship and information exchange with their academic advisors.^[6]

Academic advisors are considered as the students' first-communication interface with the education system; therefore, it is necessary for the academic advisors to utilize consultation principles, and utilizing communication skills is one of the most important principles of consultation. The results of the study carried out in Iran by Sabbahi Bigdeli *et al.* show that academic advisors have average nonverbal communication skills which affect the students' satisfaction with the academic advisors' performance.^[7] Although the academic advisors' performance is different from one faculty to another, success in supporting students is greatly dependent on presenting appropriate and effective consultation. In their study, Ebrahimi *et al.* stated that interpersonal factors have the highest effect on academic advising programs; therefore, they recommend that factors which harm academic advising programs should be specified.^[8] Being away from the family, loneliness, and residence in the dormitory are among the reasons for the students' dire need for consultation and intellectual help. The results of the study conducted by Chan in Hong Kong show that relationships among academic advisors and freshmen need to be promoted. Developing the relationship between students and academic advisors is, in fact, the most crucial part of the academic advising program.^[8,9]

In most Iranian universities and colleges, academic advising is conducted by the faculty members. However, they have not been provided with relevant special training, whereas they have a lot of training and research related to their professional background. Moreover, due to their heavy work schedule and lack of specialized consulting skills, faculty members pay less attention to the quality of the consultation they provide.

In addition, in Iran, female students encounter more difficulties and obstacles in terms of cultural issues, and they experience more stress than men.^[10] As indicated

by the research studies, when the relationship with the counselor helps the students to achieve their career, academic, personal, and social goals, they will be more likely to find expert counselors satisfying and worthwhile and will schedule regular appointments with them.^[11] Academic advisors feel that they are under pressure due to the students' enormous requests and demands which requires the academic advisors to be more professional than before.^[12] Therefore, the present study was aimed at seeking answers to these questions: "From the perspective of students, in which areas of communication skills are academic advisors more capable?" And "In which areas are they weak?" Therefore, one of the most important potential outcomes of this study is the counselors' attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the communication skills. The success of the educational institutions and student satisfaction are influenced by the methodology that academic advisors use to communicate, understand, and process information. The present study was conducted to determine the academic advisors' communication skills according to the students living in dormitory of North Khorasan University of Medical Sciences.

Methods

In the present analytical cross-sectional study, a sequential sampling method was employed to select 155 students studying in North Khorasan University of Medical Sciences living in dormitories of medicine, paramedicine, nursing and midwifery, and health faculties from June 20, 2015, to December 21, 2015. The study was carried out after the necessary permission was obtained from the 7th Ethics Committee (March 9, 2015). Reviewing previous studies^[13,14] focusing on the academic advisors' capability which was reported to be <60%, and given $P = 0.6$, $\alpha = 0.05$, and $d = 0.05$, the sample size was determined using the following formula:

$$n = \frac{pqz_{1-\frac{\alpha}{2}}^2}{d^2} = \frac{0/6 \times 0/4 \times 3/8614}{0/05^2} = 368$$

Since the sample size is bigger than 5% of the population size, the following formula was employed to reduce the sample size to 242.

To collect the required data, a researcher-made questionnaire entitled, "Assessment of Communication Skills of Counselors" was used which was previously used in the study conducted by Dehnavi *et al.*^[13] The questionnaire has 17 items that are designed to evaluate the skills of counselors from the perspective of students in five areas. As for the present study, its validity was confirmed by seeking and utilizing the opinions of eight

experts and professors of the field, and its reliability was checked by the test-retest method ($r = 0.82$).

To assess the validity of the questionnaire, a qualitative method was employed, in which the questionnaire was sent to ten experts, and their comments were applied to the questionnaire. To assess the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was utilized. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was 0.97.

A total of 242 questionnaires were distributed among the students who had the inclusion criteria and were provided with an academic advisor for at least one semester. A total of 155 questionnaires were answered and returned to the researcher. To complete the questionnaires, four questioners who had received necessary training were employed. The questioners were provided with necessary guidelines on how to complete the questionnaires. Afterward, they referred to the dormitories and explained the study's aims to the students and delivered the questionnaire to those students who were consent to participate in the study. The students were asked not to write their name on the questionnaires, and they were ensured about the confidentiality of their information. In the beginning, the study's aim was explained, then the participants' demographic information excluding their names was collected, and finally, the academic advisors' capabilities were examined. The questions of the questionnaire were designed based on the different communication skills of academic advisors in the fields of "oral-written," "accepting and giving feedback," "understanding others," "being a good listener," and "effectiveness." The "oral-written" field is related to the academic advisors' ability to use the sentences and words in oral and written forms. The questions were scored based on a 10-point Likert scale.

In the present study, descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) and Pearson's correlation coefficient test were utilized to analyze the collected data. In so doing, SPSS version 18 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, USA) we used, and the level of statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

Results

According to the results, 73% of the students were men and 82% of women, 7.7% were studying for an associate's degree, and the rest for a bachelor's degree. The results also showed that 11.6% of the students studied medicine, 74.2% nursing and midwifery (nursing, operating room, anesthesiology, and midwifery), and 14.2% health. It was observed that 18.1% of the students were married, 76.1% single, and 5.8 divorced.

Different communication fields

Among the five fields that were studied, based on the students' opinions, "accepting and giving feedback" and "understanding others" obtained the highest scores [Table 1].

Different communication fields in the faculties

Based on the students' views, the "oral and written" field obtained the lowest score in the faculties, and the fields "accepting and giving feedback" and "understanding others" received the highest scores [Tables 2 and 3].

Discussion

The present study was carried out to evaluate the academic advisors' communication abilities and skills based on the views of the students living in the dormitory of North Khorasan University of Medical Sciences. The results indicated that the fields of "accepting and giving feedback field," "understanding others," and "effectiveness" obtained the highest scores based on the students' views. Other similar studies indicated that "mutual respect between professors and students" and "the academic advisor's expression power" have priority according to the professors and students, respectively.^[15] The results of the study carried out by Rezaee *et al.* in Shiraz show that access to academic advisors is a characteristic that affects the quality of the advisory services and the students' satisfaction.^[16] The results of the study conducted by Drusin in the US suggest that satisfaction with the academic advisors' activities depends on an increase in the frequency of the students' referral to the academic advisors. Most of the students who do not regularly visit their academic advisor personally try to establish communication with their academic advisor.^[17] Another result of the present study, in the students' opinion, was the academic advisors' low score in "oral and written" field. This field means the academic advisors' ability to use sentences and words in oral and written forms. The academic advisors' weakness in this skill can be attributed to the different factors.

The results of the study conducted by Chan in Hong Kong show that the relationship between students and advisors needs to be improved because students are usually inactive in establishing the relationships;

Table 1: Mean distribution of different fields of the academic advisor's communication skills in the student's opinion

Communication field	Mean±SD
Oral and written	33.8±1.58
Accepting and giving feedback	20.78±9.36
Understanding others	22.73±9.8
Being a good listener	11.39±5.13
Effectiveness	15.43±7.74

SD: Standard deviation

Table 2: Distribution of the academic advisors' skills in communication fields in different faculties

Faculties	Oral-written field	Accepting and giving feedback field	Understanding others field	Being a good listener field	Effectiveness field
Nursing and midwifery	8.39	19.89	21.76	11	14.9
Health	8.45	26.13	29.32	14.36	18.5
Medicine	7.83	19.88	20.88	10.33	15.11

Table 3: The coefficient of correlation between different communication skills of the academic advisors

Fields	Oral-written field	Accepting and giving feedback field	Understanding others field	++
Accepting and giving feedback field				
Correlation coefficient	-0.253**	-	-	-
Significant	0.001	-	-	-
Understanding others field				
Correlation coefficient	-0.241**	0.892**	-	-
Significant	0.003	<0.001	-	-
Being a good listener field				
Correlation coefficient	-0.217**	0.832**	0.898**	-
Significant	0.007	<0.001	<0.001	-
Effectiveness field				
Correlation coefficient	-0.298**	0.795**	0.782**	0.740**
Significant	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001

**<0.05

therefore, advisors should be creative and flexible, seek methods to enhance the students' interest, and be the patient in creating a close relationship with the students. In this study, both students and academic advisors believed that establishing a friendly and fruitful relationship is significant.^[9] In the study conducted by Gasper, it is stated that the advisor's role is known as a supportive critic who needs to create a caring relationship with his clients, hence that the students can develop their necessary skills to make effective decisions. An important part of the relationship between advisors and students is sharing their expectations from each other. Faculties are mostly expected to select qualified professors as academic advisors and have them provide advisory services to the students.^[18]

Regarding the advisors' weakness in this skill, Peykari *et al.* recommend that peer-group education should be utilized to promote this skill.^[19] Group advising and using peer advising help to reduce the pressure caused by the limited number of advisors to the number of students and extend the time for the academic advisor who spends with the students.^[20] The results of the study conducted by Filson and Whittington show that most students are willing to meet with their academic advisors through e-mail or based on a schedule appointment table. Different technological applications can also be utilizing to establish an electronic relationship between the students and advisors. Telegram, for example, can facilitate the communication between the academic advisors and the students, and hence that the advisors can send the necessary information to the students' cell phones.^[21]

The results of other studies show that there is a positive significant relationship among effectiveness, being a listener, accepting and giving feedback, and understanding others. In agreement with the present study, Shellenbarger–Hoffman suggested that in order for the students to succeed, academic advisors need to be able to communicate with students, other faculties, administration, and they need to have effective communication skills. In so doing, the advisors can send a welcome message to the students in the beginning of each semester and provide the students with information on how to have access to the academic advisors during each semester. Regular contact with the students helps the advisors to monitor the students' progress and performance and apply necessary intervention when a problem occurs to them. In some universities, meeting with academic advisors is mandatory, such that the reluctant students receive advisory services and their identity is recorded.^[22]

The present study involved some limitations. The small size of the sample that was chosen from one university was one of the limitations, which restricts generalizability of the results. The second limitation of the study was that data collection was carried out only once, whereas some studies collect and follow-up the required data over a long time. However, the present study has other implications for academic advising programs in universities. To promote the academic advisors' ability to use appropriate sentences and words in both oral and written forms, the universities can adopt efficient strategies and develop the positive communication characteristics in their academic advisors.

Conclusion

Due to the importance of academic advising programs in universities, the present study was carried out and the results showed that the academic advisors had higher skills in fields "understanding others," "effectiveness," "being a good listener," and "accepting and giving feedback," while they had limited ability in the field of "using appropriate words and sentences in oral and written forms."

In this context, universities should establish training plans in which academic advisors participate actively. They should provide special support to the new academic advisors to achieve educational, personal, and professional goals, and to improve oral and written skills of faculty members. In this regard, workshops should be organized with the help of experienced professors, and at the same time advisors should be encouraged to participate in such workshops. These plans will inspire academic advisors to gain knowledge, understanding, and skills in their communication practices. Beyond academic studies, oral and written communication skills can be provided in the form of a "ready-to-use" guide leaflet. In this way, the faculty members who have the role of counselor and have more face-to-face communication with the clinical students could achieve more by receiving more education.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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