



Faculty Members' Experiences of the Challenges and Facilitators of the Student Academic Guidance and Academic Counseling Process: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Academic guidance and counseling, while providing insights into the right decision-making methods and how to deal with life events, can increase the efficiency of the educational system and reduce academic failure. Given the importance of having in-depth knowledge of faculty members' opinions about counseling for evidence-based promotion, this study aimed to explore the challenges and facilitators of the academic counseling process.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted using Conventional content analysis to provide in-depth knowledge of the views of faculty members about the challenges and facilitators of the academic counseling process. The participants in this study were 24 faculty members from different schools of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences. They were selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants.

Results: The analysis of the data showed that the challenges and facilitators of the academic counseling process fall under six main themes, eight main categories, and eleven subcategories. The main themes that emerged in this study concerning the challenges of the academic counselling process were the organizational need to improve the conditions of academic counseling, the counselor's poor communication skills, and the student's failure to refer for counseling. Furthermore, the three main themes regarding the facilitators of the consulting process were the correct administration of the counseling curriculum, improving the counseling skills of the faculty members, and the separation of the counselor's role from the instructor's role.

Conclusion: The consultation process at the university needs to be improved both in quality and in quantity. Therefore, empowering and equipping the consultant faculty members with adequate knowledge, attitudes, and skills through conducting effective training courses and workshops, and organizing briefing sessions to adjust students' expectations of the counseling faculty members, seem to be necessary for the consultation process improvement.

Keywords: Counseling, Perspectives, Challenges, Facilitators, Faculty members, Students

Introduction

Counseling and guidance as a learning process takes place through a relationship between two people. In this mutual relationship, the counselor, having the necessary scientific and professional skills and competencies, tries to help clients with techniques that fit their needs so that they can get to know themselves better and use effectively the insights they gain about themselves to achieve certain goals. Effective provision of guidance and counseling is very important to improve the quality of life and progress in society, especially in educational centers during academic studies of students (1, 2).

Academic counseling is a dynamic and purposeful relationship between faculty members and students and helps learners to identify their abilities and talents, get to know learning, problem-solving, and planning techniques so that they can develop their abilities, solve their problems, and adapt to the educational environment (3,4). An academic counselor plays a very effective role in helping, guiding, and supporting students in achieving their goals, especially students from far and near cities and villages admitted to the university with issues such as being away from family, living in dormitories, and mixed-gender education, all of which affecting their educational process (5,6). Moreover, counseling students is one of the most important prevention strategies in universities because, while providing insights into the right decision-making methods and how to deal with life events, it expands insights, resolves internal conflicts contributing to developing constructive relationships with others, and ultimately leads to the higher efficiency of the educational system (6,7).

In fact, an academic counselor is a full-time faculty member who is responsible for academic guidance and counseling of students at different academic levels in educational, research, and personal fields (6). The support of supervisors and faculty members for students in all academic stages can play a significant role in reducing students' educational problems (1). According to studies, a person who takes on the responsibility of counseling should have characteristics such as self-awareness, credible education, self-confidence, availability, responsibility, empathy, and special skills such as communication skills, counseling skills, and time management skills (3). Karami et al. stated that communication and interpersonal, technical and diagnostic, and developmental and therapeutic skills are required to have good counseling (8). A

study by Baker et al. suggested that from the faculty members' point of view, students' knowledge of university counseling services and their access to these services are of great importance. They also believed that having the necessary expertise in consulting is required for academic counselors (9). Raisi et al. found that from the perspective of faculty members, the study of the student's educational status and solving their educational problems had the highest score for academic counselors and the study of the student's physical, mental, and emotional health had the lowest score (6). Ebrahimi et al. also showed that several factors affect the quality of academic counseling activities causally. Therefore, any effort to improve the quality of counseling activities requires systematic measures and deep identification of obstacles and challenges (4).

Since universities are responsible for educating students as potential human resources, there is a great need for a counseling and academic guidance program for university students from their admission to the university and starting their studies to the time they attain higher goals (10,11). Despite the need for counseling, unfortunately, students do not recognize academic counselors as a reliable source of reference to meet their needs during their studies, and they pay little attention to the vital role of academic counselors in medical universities (6). Unfortunately, the counseling system in Iran has not produced brilliant results due to educational difficulties, lack of necessary expertise, lack of interest in solving students' problems, and unavailability of full-time instructors, and any activity in this field has been restricted to helping students select courses (3). Previous studies emphasized the importance of counseling and guidance for creating a balance between the individual life of the student and public life (7). Good and effective counseling in different societies, apart from the commonalities, also has distinct aspects and elements, and it is never possible to identify a set of general and definite components for counseling in all societies (12). There are many descriptive-analytical and quantitative studies on variables affecting academic counseling. However, there is no in-depth qualitative study on the opinions of academic counselors and faculty members. Accordingly, this study aimed to provide a qualitative evaluation of the challenges and facilitators of the academic counseling and guidance process by exploring the experiences of faculty members of Hamadan

University of Medical Sciences.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted using conventional content analysis from April 2017 to February 2018 to explore the views of faculty members of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences about the challenges and facilitators of the psychological, academic, and research counseling and guidance process. The data were saturated after interviewing 24 faculty members from different faculties of this university. After obtaining permission from university officials, the researchers selected participants using purposive sampling with maximum variation in terms of service and academic records, academic degree, and department from among the faculty members who were willing to participate in the study as interviewees. The inclusion criterion for faculty members was to have at least one year of counseling experience. The requirements to comply with ethical considerations in this study were obtaining informed written consent from the participants by explaining the objectives of the study, obtaining permission from the participants to audio record their interviews, and ensuring the participants' freedom to leave the study at any time they wished. Some faculty members did not agree with the interview and audio recording and refused to participate in the study.

The interviews were conducted individually at a place suggested by the participants, which was mostly their office, and continued until the data were saturated and no new information was observed. The interviews were also conducted as semi-structured interviews which allowed the participants to talk about their experiences of the problem at hand in addition to responding to a set of predetermined questions. At the beginning of the interview, demographic questions (such as age and work experience) were asked, and then the interview process began with more general questions. However, as the interviews progressed and the data were analyzed simultaneously, more specific questions were also asked. In addition to describing the counseling process, the participants were asked to answer the following questions:

Based on your experience, what is the counselor's job?

In what areas does the counselor help?

For what reasons have you referred to the academic counselor so far?

How do you evaluate the performance of academic counselors?

What factors affect the performance of an academic counselor?

Who do you think can give better advice to students?

What are the current problems with counseling?

What suggestions do you have for improving the current situation?

How do academic counselors follow up on students' problems?

Finally, the content of the interviews was summed up by the interviewer and read to the interviewees, and the interviewees were asked to confirm if it was correct and if there was a discrepancy. All interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face by a member of the research group who was a Ph.D. student in Health Education and Health Promotion, in a private environment and upon the coordination of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 70 minutes. All participants' responses were written by another student, and at the same time, their voice was recorded by a tape recorder if they agreed. Then, collected data were read word by word to derive codes by first highlighting the exact words from the text that appear to capture key thoughts or concepts. Next, the researcher approached the text by making notes of her first impressions, thoughts, and initial analysis. As this process continued, labels for codes emerged that were reflective of more than one key thought. Those often came directly from the text and then became the initial coding scheme. Then, the codes were sorted into categories based on how different codes were related and linked. These emergent categories were used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters (13). To ensure the credibility of the data, the interview manuscripts were reviewed by the participants to eliminate any ambiguity in the coding. Furthermore, to increase the consistency of the findings, they were reviewed by two experts who were not members of the research team. The confirmability of the data was ensured through systematic data collection, avoiding researcher bias, and the consensus of all members of the research team on the interviews. Finally, the transferability of the data was improved through interviews with different participants, providing direct quotations, and explaining the findings in light of similar studies in the literature (14). Besides, to increase the robustness and validity of the data, adequate time was assigned to collect the data, the researcher established effective communication with the

participants, and two researchers recorded and collected the data. Immediately after each interview, the research team matched the written notes word for word with the recorded voice and assigned the initial codes to the statements made by the interviewees. It should be noted that to improve the accuracy of the extracted codes and validate the interview results, the data extracted from the interviews and the contents of the interviews were reviewed and coded separately by two members of the research team and they reached a consensus by having the data reviewed by the third researcher.

This study was approved by Ethics Committee of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences under the code: IR.UMSHA.REC.1395.63.

Results

In this study, 14 faculty members were female and 10 were male. The average age of the participants was 38.65 ± 7.70 years and their work experience was 10.79 ± 7.85 years. Besides, 15 participants were faculty members from basic science faculties and 9 from clinical science faculties. The analysis of the interviews showed the challenges facing the counseling process were conceptualized in the form of three main themes, three main categories, and six subcategories (Table 1).

Another participant stated:

"I do not blame counselors. The exact scope of counselors' authority must be clearly defined by university officials so that they can assist students" (Participant 11).

The third challenge leading to the quantitative and qualitative shortcomings of counseling was the negligence of some faculty members in offering

counseling services:

"When there is no control on counselors' performance and all of them have to select students, it is obvious that some of them engage in the counseling process reluctantly" (A faculty member with 13 years of counseling experience).

B: The counselor's poor communication skills:

According to the participants, a good counselor needs communication skills in the first place. Besides, not knowing the psychological principles of counseling and not believing in the effectiveness of counseling do not allow the full development of the skills needed to do counseling. The participants also suggested that insufficient knowledge of the principles of psychology and compulsion to accept the task of counseling would lead to inadequate counseling skills:

"We are not psychologists in our field of study. A faculty member who does not have any knowledge in psychology cannot perform well" (A faculty member with 5 years of counseling experience).

"Faculty members have to provide counseling and advice to several students. This indeed has an executive privilege, but the faculty member may state that they are not interested in this privilege or they do not feel like offering counseling services. Such a faculty member cannot be a good counselor" (A faculty member with 11 years of counseling experience).

Another reason for poor counseling skills was the time-consuming process of counseling, which led to disbelief in the effectiveness of counseling, especially among faculty members in basic science faculties.

Table 1. The challenges facing the counseling process

Code	Subcategory	Category	Main theme
Students' insufficient information about the academic counselor	Less frequent visits to the counselor	Defects in the quantity and quality of counseling	The organizational need to improve the conditions of academic counseling
The inability of the university to provide academic counselors, counselors' being too busy	The dissatisfaction of academic counselors and students with the counseling process		
Lack of complete supervision over the performance of academic counselors, inattention of some faculty members to counseling	The negligence of some faculty members in providing counseling services		
Low awareness of the psychological principles of counseling	Insufficient knowledge of the counseling process	Not having enough skills to do counseling	The counselor's poor communication skills
The compulsion to accept the task of advising students	Disbelief in the effectiveness of counseling		
The privacy of most problems faced by students	Students' fear of disclosure of their secrets by the counselor	Student's distrust in the counselor	The student's failure to refer for counseling

“Any counseling, if to be effective, requires the student to refer to the counselor several times, and each time takes at least half an hour. Now consider that the faculty member has not taken any psychology courses during his/her studies. Even if such a person is interested in this, his/her counseling won't be effective as he/she has no skill” (A faculty member with 3 years of counseling experience).

C: The student's failure to refer for counseling:

According to the participants, an effective counseling process requires the student's trust in the faculty member. The student's fear of disclosure of their secrets by the counselor makes them distrust the faculty member and not refer to him/her. The participants also believed that most of the students' problems were private and family issues and that the students' fears seemed reasonable.

“The counselor must be someone other than the instructor. Students do not go to their instructor to express problems because they are embarrassed and do not want to face the instructor because of personal issues” (A faculty member with 7 years of counseling experience).

“A small percentage of students come for academic counseling and much less for non-academic counseling ... because they feel their issues are private or they think we cannot do anything to help them, or because they are ashamed” (A faculty member with 12 years of counseling experience).

The facilitators of the consulting process were conceptualized into three main themes, five main

categories, and five subcategories as shown in Table 2.

A: The correct administration of the counseling curriculum: According to the participants, one of the ways to improve the quantity and quality of counseling is the correct implementation of the counseling curriculum, which can lead to more students referring to the counselor and increasing faculty members' commitment to counseling.

“If the counseling process is carried out well according to a clear framework, students will become more aware of the counseling centers and their performance, and as a result, they will refer more frequently to receive counseling services. Good implementation of these rules will also increase the faculty member's commitment to counseling” (A faculty member with 7 years of counseling experience).

B: Improving the counseling skills of the faculty members: Most participants stated that the counseling skills of faculty members should be reinforced. According to them, creating effective communication skills in counseling and holding in-service courses can contribute to improving the counseling skills of faculty members.

“Some faculty members have difficulty communicating with students, and this causes students to be dissatisfied with their behavior and to stop referring” (A faculty member with 5 years of counseling experience).

“In-service training courses must be held periodically and regularly for faculty members. These courses enhance faculty members' counseling skills” (A faculty member with 14 years of counseling experience).

Table 2. The facilitators of the counseling process

Codes	Sub-category	Category	Main theme
Defining academic counseling according to the authorities and duties of the faculty member and student	Informing the student about the counseling process	Students' higher frequency of referring to counselors	The correct administration of the counseling curriculum
Considering counseling points in faculty members' service records	Evaluating the counseling performance of faculty members	Increased commitment of faculty members to counseling	
Students' higher tendency to refer to good-tempered faculty members	Proper treatment of students by faculty members	Improving effective communication skills in counseling	Improving the counseling skills of the faculty members
Challenges of psychology in the modern world	Up-to-date information and knowledge of faculty members	Holding in-service courses	
Faculty members' inadequate knowledge of successful counseling components	Raising the psychological information of faculty members	Turning counseling into a specialized field	The separation of the counselor's role from the instructor's role

C: The separation of the counselor's role from the instructor's role: From the participants' point of view, counseling is a specialized matter and specialized personnel should be employed for this purpose:

"A good counselor should specialize in psychology because providing effective solutions to the student is a difficult and specialized task. I think faculty members should provide academic counseling and psychologists must provide non-academic counseling" (A faculty member with 11 years of counseling experience).

Discussion

The present study explored the views of faculty members of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences about academic counseling. The challenges facing academic counseling were conceptualized into the organizational need to improve the conditions of academic counseling, the counselor's poor communication skills, and the student's failure to refer for counseling. Furthermore, the facilitators of the consulting process were the correct administration of the counseling curriculum, improving the counseling skills of the faculty members, and the separation of the counselor's role from the instructor's role. One of the challenges of academic counseling was the organizational need to improve the conditions of academic counseling. Supporting student counseling centers in universities is essential and can help improve family relationships, acquire or promote social skills, and acquire and promote positive self-concept, professional & personality growth, and job satisfaction. It can also help solve educational problems leading to effective academic achievement (15, 16). A study by Wanja showed that the low motivation of educators for guidance and counseling and their poor professional skills, busy schedule, and lack of facilities and time are the main obstacles that prevent counseling services in educational places such as schools and universities. Accordingly, the design and implementation of effective educational programs for instructors and faculty members such as the development of new methods of counseling, holding in-service training courses, and distributing educational booklets at both schools and universities can greatly help improve the conditions of academic counseling (17).

Another challenge related to academic counseling was the counselor's poor communication skills which can be due to lack of in-service counseling

courses, lack of knowledge about the psychological principles of counseling, and disbelief in the effectiveness of counseling. Studies have suggested that faculty members who completed counseling training courses have a more positive attitude towards counseling (6). Mortazavi et al. showed that the instructor's intimacy and empathy with students can be effective in improving the relationship between the instructor and student and thus increase and improve the efficacy of the counseling process (18).

Another challenge pointed out by the participants in this study was the lack of student referral for counseling which can be due to the students' distrust in faculty members. According to Holland et al. mistrust between counselors and students develops due to a lack of shared understanding of expectations and roles (19). Moreover, the results of similar studies on the reason for the low number of students referring to the counselor showed that students do not consider the supervisor effective in solving their problems and they believe that the presence and availability of counselors, their disciplinary knowledge, and continuous communication are considered as the most important characteristics and strengths of an academic counselor (20, 21).

The present study suggested that counseling is more related to academic affairs from the students' point of view. Similarly, a study by Huda showed that the main reason for medical students seeking more counseling for personal, educational, psychological, and emotional problems included signature forgery during class, lack of discipline, theft of money, place of residence, etc (22).

Concerning the facilitators of the counseling process, the participants in this study acknowledged that the correct implementation of the counseling curriculum will lead to more student referrals to the counselor and increase the commitment of faculty members to counseling. The results of various researches have indicated that the counseling process, despite the emphasis of the educational system and relevant regulations, is suffering from an executive gap that has not been seriously welcomed by both academic counselors and students and this makes students' access to support and guidance more difficult (6). The second facilitator of the counseling process was the improvement of the counseling skills of faculty members. Studies have shown that self-awareness, communication skills, self-confidence, responsibility, empathy, and time management skills are the main

characteristics of a good academic counselor (6). The results of a study in Neishabour suggested that from the perspective of faculty members, "mutual respect between the faculty member and student" was the most important factor influencing the quality of counselor services. Emphasis on this feature can indicate that the counselor must be free from prejudice to gain the trust of the clients and accept and treat them warmly, all of which are among the counseling skills of the faculty members (23). The results of a study in Hamedan showed that the organization of the training workshop programs was effective in the behaviors of the supervisors. Besides, implementing the role-playing programs and group discussions along with group activities leads to active and considerable learning outcomes. Moreover, such training programs change instructors' attitudes and improve their counseling skills. However, providing educational materials for faculty members was found to be ineffective due to the lack of influence on their behavior (24).

The third facilitator of the counseling process was the separation of the counselor's role from the instructor's role. According to the participants, counseling is a specialized matter, and counseling services must be provided by psychologists. The sensitivity of adolescence, its needs and developments, and the requirement to make serious decisions that determine the future outlook on life such as education, employment, and changing social roles reveal the need to use professional services offered by experts such as psychologists (7, 25).

One of the limitations of this study was that its findings, like other qualitative studies, have little generalizability. Besides, the sample in this study was limited to the faculty members of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences. However, the purpose of qualitative studies is not generalizability but to provide more in-depth knowledge of the problem and help to develop hypotheses to be tested via quantitative studies. Therefore, it is suggested that similar studies in

other cities as well as quantitative studies with larger sample sizes be designed and implemented and their results be compared with the findings of the present study. Another limitation was the unwillingness of some faculty members to participate in the study. Accordingly, the researchers tried to solve this problem by establishing communication with them and appointing the interview time upon the faculty members' agreement.

Conclusion

This study showed that the quantity and quality of academic guidance and counseling need to be improved. Accordingly, university officials and planners are recommended to empower the academic counselors and promote their knowledge about performance issues and the low number of students who receive counseling services. Besides, they can provide material and spiritual facilities to provide better services, make the role of academic counselors more prominent, and achieve desired outcomes. They can also improve the academic counseling process by holding training and in-service courses and workshops to improve the abilities and knowledge of academic counselors, as well as holding briefings to adjust students' expectations of faculty members. The findings of this study can provide a basis for more effective interventions to improve the status of academic counseling. Future studies can also focus on students' perspectives.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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