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Academic advising and student support: Help-seeking behaviors among Saudi dental undergraduate students



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KEYWORDS

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Abstract *Objective:* The purpose of this study was to assess the use of and satisfaction with the academic-advising and student-support systems available to undergraduate students in the College of Dentistry at the University of Dammam. In addition, the study aimed to also identify factors that explained the help-seeking behavior of students which they used to solve academic issues.

Materials and methods: Students enrolled in the five-year Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) program in 2012–13 and 2013–14 first-year students were invited to respond to a self-administered questionnaire.

Results: The results showed that 66.2% of students had discussed academic issues with their advisor at least once, with a frequency ranging from zero to six times. Most students reported that their advisors were readily available, listened intently to their needs and questions, and helped them solve their problems. However, only 7.6% of students relied primarily on advisors for help with academic issues, whereas 51% depended first on colleagues and 13.8% did not seek help and relied on themselves. In total, 17.2% of students were very or somewhat satisfied with the academic advising system. Males had lower odds of discussing issues with their advisors, and the odds were higher with

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advisors who were more available (OR = 0.25 and 3.74, respectively). Alerting students to important dates in the academic calendar significantly increased the odds that a student would depend primarily on academic advisors for advice related to academic issues (OR = 6.53).

Conclusions: Few students were satisfied with the academic support system. We need to train advisors to help them develop their skills and knowledge and to enable them to provide the support needed by the students.

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1. Introduction

An increased demand on higher education and student welfare has stressed the role of academic advising and student support (Divaris et al., 2008; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000). National (National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment, 2013) and international (Commission on Dental Accreditation, 2013) agencies responsible for accrediting higher-education institutions have formed standards to ensure that students have adequate support to alleviate stress, solve problems, and address weaknesses that may reflect negatively on their academic performance. In dental schools, student support is particularly important to address the characteristically high level of stress that dental students usually face (Burk and Bender, 2005). Student support can be formal, where the management creates systems for this particular purpose, and it can also be informal using existing social-support networks among students or between students and instructors. Support can be administered by peers, faculty members, or professionals (Burk and Bender, 2005). For example, a group of students may be assigned to a faculty member who follows their academic progress through regular meetings, during which problems and concerns are discussed. The success of this model was documented by Romberg in 1993. When support is provided by professionals, a psychiatrist, psychologist, or other trained professional helps the students with specific psychological, personal, or social problems. This model is needed when help is required beyond what faculty members can provide (Henning et al., 1998).

The important factor for the success of an academic-advising system is to establish a strong rapport between students and advisors, which facilitates an open discussion that is productive for identifying and solving problems. The perception of an efficient support system that addresses needs and provides expert advice is instrumental in reducing stress and managing problems that interfere with academic performance. The aim, however, of these support systems should be to empower students to take responsibility for their own learning and to develop autonomy in making decisions (Sayer et al., 2002). The more the students feel empowered to manage their education, the more improved their educational experience will be (Divaris et al., 2008). Students can then arrive at solutions to modify some of their practices, such as learning strategies, preparation for exams, time management, language difficulties, etc., in addition to many others.

There is an inadequacy in reporting on academic-advising and student-support systems in dental schools in general and particularly in the Middle East. In addition to the general concerns facing dental schools, student-support systems in Middle Eastern schools have to address additional problems that are

specific to their students, such as those related to the culture, differences in pre-university education systems, and significant gender issues. These features raise concerns that make generalization from studies conducted at schools in the Western societies impractical. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the majority of students graduate from public secondary schools and usually find it difficult to proceed into an English-based instruction system at the college level. The conservative nature of this society mandates the segregation of male and female students, and is another feature that indicates the need for a tailored student-support system. The present study reports on students' satisfaction with and use of the student-support and academic-advising systems at the College of Dentistry in the University of Dammam. It is intended to determine if academic advisors are the primary source of advice on academic issues and also to delineate the factors that lead students to seek their advisors' help.

2. Materials and methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted at the College of Dentistry in the University of Dammam among male and female students who are in their first to fifth year of the Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) program. All students enrolled in the program in the academic year 2012–13 were invited to participate in the study, in addition to new, first-year entrants joining the program in 2013–14. Data were collected from the 2012–13 cohort for one week in the last month of the academic year and the same was done for the new entrants in 2013–14. Thus, each student in each of the two cohorts responded once to the questionnaire. The academic-advising and student-support systems at the college are based on assigning five to six students to a faculty member, who is then required to meet regularly with the students during the academic year and to submit a summarized report of these meetings using a standardized form. Each student is assigned to the same advisor throughout all years of study at the college, so that the advisor has the chance to follow the student's progress through the program and to build a trusting relationship with the student.

In the 2012–13 academic year, 187 students were enrolled in the BDS program and 93 more students began the program in 2013–14. Of those, 146 and 75 responded, respectively. Thus, a total of 221 responded of the 280 that were solicited (78.9%).

Approval of the Research Unit was obtained and a questionnaire was developed to assess how students perceived the academic advising system in the college. The questionnaire was reviewed by the Vice Deanship of Academic Affairs and the Vice Deanship of Quality and Development to ensure the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire and its face validity. It included questions about whether the student discussed

academic issues with his/her academic advisor and, if so, how many times; what were the sources the student relied on to obtain advice about academic issues other than their academic advisors; and, how the student perceived a set of six attributes in their academic advisors; availability when needed, listening intently, helping with academic problems, making students aware of important dates, helping understand rules and regulations, in addition to providing important information about courses. At the end, the student was asked to rate his/her satisfaction with academic advising on a five-points Likert scale ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied.

Close to the end of the academic year, students completed the paper-based, self-administered questionnaire anonymously and in-between lectures, with the instructors' permission. Completed questionnaires were collected in the same session and data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet after coding, after which the processed data were imported into SPSS version 17.0 for statistical analysis.

Descriptive statistics were calculated and displayed as frequencies and percent or median and range (for quantitative variables). Logistic regression analysis was used to assess the effect of various independent variables on dependent variables in separate models. The two dependent variables were: (1) whether students discussed academic issues with their advisor, and (2) whether students relied on their academic advisor as the primary source of advice in academic issues. The models included the following independent variables: program level (years 1–5), gender, and the presence of the six advisor attributes. The models were run once univariately, and then another time multivariately. Variables that demonstrated a significant effect in the univariate models were further entered into multivariate models. Odds ratios and confidence intervals were calculated. Bar and pie charts were used for graphical presentation.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the sample description. Most students were in their 1st through 3rd-year (86%) and male (69.2%) and the majority (66.2%) reported that they have discussed academic issues with their advisors. The median number of visits to academic advisor was one, ranging from zero to six.

Variables	N (%)	
Cohort	2012–13 (years 1–5)	146 (66.1)
	2013–14 (year 1)	75 (33.9)
Program year	1st (two cohorts)	133 (60.2)
	2nd (one cohort)	29 (13.1)
	3rd (one cohort)	28 (12.7)
	4th (one cohort)	14 (6.3)
	5th (one cohort)	17 (7.7)
Program level	Junior (1st–3rd year)	190 (86)
	Senior (4th and 5th years)	31 (14)
Gender	Male	153 (69.2)
	Female	68 (30.8)
Discussed academic issues with the advisor		88 (66.2%)
Number of advising sessions	Median (min, max)	1 (0, 6)

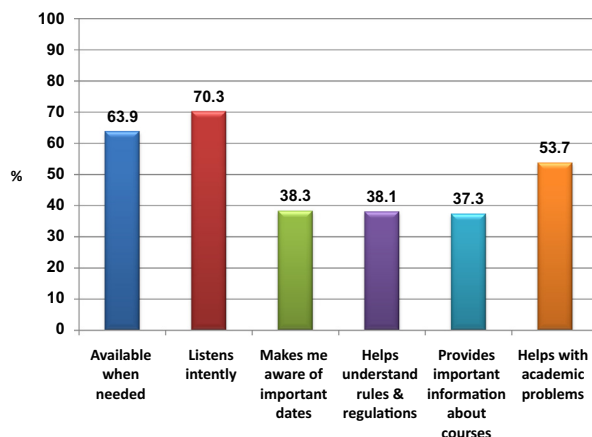


Figure 1 Students perception of academic advisor attributes.

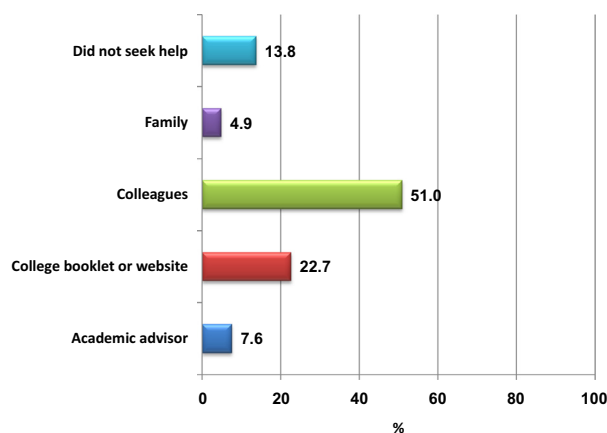


Figure 2 Sources of advice for academic issues.

Fig. 1 shows how students perceived the importance of various attributes of their academic advisors. The attributes that were most favorably perceived were: availability when needed, listening intently, and helping with academic problems. The attributes that students least positively perceived were: making students aware of important dates, helping understand rules and regulations, and providing important information about courses.

Fig. 2 shows the sources of advice for academic issues. Most students reported they relied on colleagues for advice (51%), with others reporting that they referred to a college booklet or website (22.7%). A portion of students (13.8%) reported they did not seek help for academic issues during the period covered by the study. Only 7.6% of students reported relying on academic advisors alone. Furthermore, only 17.2% of students reported being very or somewhat satisfied with their academic advisors, whereas 47.7% indicated they were very or somewhat dissatisfied (See Fig. 3).

Table 2 shows the factors affecting whether students discussed academic issues with their advisors and whether they relied primarily on advisors for advice related to academic issues. In univariate analysis, males were significantly less likely than females to discuss academic issues with supervisors (OR: 0.13; CI: 0.06, 0.29). The odds for discussing issues with academic advisors increased if the advisor was available when needed, if he/she listened to questions and needs, and if he/she provided help with academic problems (OR: 5.16, 5.02, and 2.22, respectively). When these four variables were included in multivariate analysis, males still had significantly less odds of discussing issues with their academic advisors compared to females and the odds for discussing issues increased if the advisor was available when needed

Table 2 Factors affecting discussing academic issues with the advisor and relying on the advisor as a primary source of advice in academic issues.

Variables	Discussing academic issues with advisor		Relying on academic advisor as primary source of advice in academic issues
	Univariate	Multivariate	Univariate [†]
	OR (CI)	OR (CI)	OR (CI)
Program level: junior vs senior	0.65 (0.30, 1.24)		0.55 (0.22, 1.41)
Gender: males vs females	0.13 (0.06, 0.29)*	0.25 (0.09, 0.64)*	1.20 (0.46, 3.14)
<i>Advisor attributes</i>			
Available when I needed to communicate with him	5.16 (2.41, 11.04)*	3.74 (0.99, 14.02)*	2.95 (0.61, 38.73)
Listens intently to your questions and needs	5.02 (2.26, 11.16)*	2.92 (0.70, 12.17)	4.85 (0.83, 7.88)
Makes you aware of important dates	1.84 (0.84, 4.09)		6.53 (2.30, 18.53)*
Helps you to understand rules and regulations	1.08 (0.54, 2.15)		2.38 (0.72, 7.84)
Provides you with important information about courses	1.33 (0.66, 2.66)		2.11 (0.86, 5.20)
Helps you if you have academic problems	2.22 (1.06, 4.66)*	0.50 (0.14, 1.85)	2.36 (0.92, 6.06)

OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval.

* Statistically significant at $P \leq 0.05$.

[†] Only one significant variable was identified in univariate analysis, no multivariate analysis was performed.

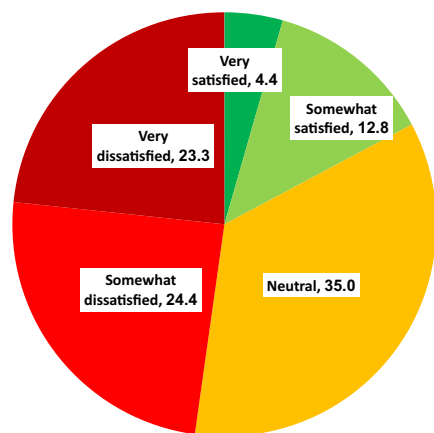


Figure 3 Satisfaction with academic advising.

(OR: 0.25 and 3.74, respectively). Making students aware of important dates was the only factor that affected whether students relied on their advisor as the primary source of advice for academic issues (OR: 6.53; CI: 2.30, 18.53).

4. Discussion

The present study assessed the satisfaction of Saudi undergraduate dental students with the College of Dentistry, University of Dammam's academic-advising and student-support systems. The study fills a gap in the knowledge of academics and student-support officers, related to these systems in dental schools in the Middle East. The study included male and female students, which allowed us to assess the effect of gender on students' perception of academic advising. This is particularly important in the Saudi higher-education system because of the practice of segregating male and female students, although both groups are taught by the same teachers and sit for the same examinations. Females have been accepted only in the last two years and thus are all juniors. If gender is related to seeking help, wherein females had higher odds, and given the fact that most of the study's participants were male, then we do recognize that there is a possible bias and that the nature of the cohort and specific school profile may have affected the main findings. The results can therefore be generalized only to dental schools with similar gender profiles, until further studies are conducted to confirm or contradict the present findings.

Most students relied on colleagues for advice with academic issues, and only a minority depended solely on academic advisors. [Burk and Bender \(2005\)](#) studied first-year student-support systems provided by the Arthur Dugoni School of Dentistry, University of the Pacific. They similarly reported a greater reliance on peers to solve academic issues, compared to advisors. In their study, 39% of students used professional support systems provided by advisors, with an average frequency (SD) of 1.17 (2.36). Conversely, 87% used informal peer support through classmates, with an average (SD) frequency of 3.40 (3.40). In the same study, 80% reported relying on themselves to solve problems for an average (SD) of 3.80 (4.02) times. The higher percentages in the [Burk and Bender \(2005\)](#) study could be related to the higher age group of their study sample, although their entire cohort consisted of first-year students. This difference in age is likely attributed to the fact that Saudi high school graduates immediately enroll in college and are, thus, younger than the average Western cohort.

The present study showed very low satisfaction with the academic-advising and student-support systems at our school. By contrast, [Burk and Bender \(2005\)](#) reported much higher perceived mean (SD) effectiveness scores given by students for their advisor-based support system [2.12 (0.85) out of 4, which is > 50%]. In their study, the level of reported effectiveness of formal advising by faculty members was lower than the mean (SD) effectiveness scores given to informal peer support (i.e., through classmates) and reported for relying on oneself to solve problems [3.04 (0.74) and 3.11 (0.70), respectively]. Social congruence is a construct that is related to the psychological distance between individuals. The distance between colleagues/peers is less than that between student and teacher/advisor, with greater social congruence between the first than the second pairs. This, in turn, makes peers more approachable

and requires a bit more building of rapport to facilitate communication between students and teachers (Silbert and Lake, 2012). These results can also be interpreted in light of how students perceived their academic advisors in the present study. According to the students, most advisors listened intently and were available when needed. These two features would also be expected to exist in colleagues. The characteristics that distinguished academic advisors in a formal system from students' colleagues are: (1) alerting students to important dates in the academic calendar, (2) helping students understand rules and regulations, and (3) providing important information about courses. All these features were reported only by a minor portion of students to be present in their academic advisors. In the absence of these features, seeking advice from colleagues and relying on oneself would be a better alternative. This situation stresses the need for training and skills development in academic advisors in order to provide more efficient support and help for their students. Burk and Bender (2005) reported that students may be unwilling to disclose problems that may affect how faculty members think of them. This is an important issue to address since it can be linked to students' academic performance. It was reported that there was a negative correlation between medical students' GPA and their avoidance of help-seeking for fear they might "look bad" (Artino et al., 2012).

In both univariate and multivariate models, the present study showed that females have higher odds for seeking help from and for discussing academic issues with advisors, which may be explained by their desire in general to follow the system and conform to the rules. However, there was no difference between males and females with respect to relying on advisors as a primary source of advice for academic issues. These findings were also reported in other studies (Burk and Bender, 2005; Oliver et al., 1999).

Many more students reported discussing issues with their academic advisors than those who relied solely on advisors as a primary source of advice for academic issues. This may have occurred when students discovered that not every discussion with advisors helped to reinforce their confidence and comfort in the faculty members-based advising system. Students may have initially tried approaching their advisors, but eventually relied on colleagues and/or other resources for help. Since students kept approaching advisors, even though they tried other venues as well, it seems that students did not intend on acting on the advice they got, but rather explored the formal viewpoint of the college, as represented by the advisors.

Discussing academic issues with advisors was affected by several advisor attributes in univariate analysis. However, in the multivariate setting, the only attribute that significantly increased the odds that a student will seek his/her help was advisor availability. By contrast, these factors did not affect the odds that a student would depend on his/her advisor as a primary source of advice for academic issues. This was affected only by whether the advisor alerted the student to important dates in the academic calendar (such as registration, withdrawal, etc.). Thus, ensuring advisors' availability through scheduled office hours does not by itself indicate that the objectives of the system are met. Similarly, requiring students to attend a number of sessions with advisors would not necessarily translate to the desired outcomes, since the results

already show that most students do visit their advisors. Based on the present study findings, it seems that empowering advisors to act in the students' best interest in a timely manner and providing training for them would be the biggest facilitator for providing the needed advice to students.

5. Conclusions

Academic advising and support systems in health-profession education institutions are particularly important because they address problems affecting the academic performance of students who are already identified to be high achievers. The system involves resource-intensive activities (Sayer et al., 2002), such as teaching, research and administrative duties, which compete for faculty time. These considerations necessitate careful planning to address problems in the academic-advising and support systems that may jeopardize their success. Female students are more likely to seek advisors' help, and students are more likely to do so as the advisors make themselves more available, listen carefully, and solve problems. However, more students appear to depend on colleagues or their own selves as primary sources of advice for academic issues, except when advisors alert students to critical issues and dates in academic life. The low satisfaction with academic-advising and student-support systems can be addressed through increased advisor training, which would give them the needed skills and knowledge to better help students.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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