

## Counseling Needs of Medical Students at the Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Iran

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### **Abstract**

Consultation needs assessment for medical students is the first step to identify, plan and organize students advising process at universities. The aim of this study was to assess the consultation needs of medical students at Ahvaz Jundishapur University of medical sciences in Ahvaz, Iran. This cross-sectional study was conducted on 270 medical students. We collected data by a questionnaire including 30 questions in five areas. The most important of counseling needs for medical students were as: personal needs, educational needs, mental and emotional needs, family and marriage needs and occupational needs. The results showed significant differences in consultation needs of medical students with respect to gender and place of residence. The findings may provide useful information and options for policy makers, planners and decision makers to provide advisory services to medical students at universities more appropriately.

**Key words:** Consultation, guidance, Needs assessment, Medical students,

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## Introduction

Academic advising and consultancy is an individual and group relationship that helps students to identify their talents, interests, potential learning styles and teach them how to plan and develop their logical thinking and assist them to think in problem-solving and disciplinary way. Moreover, academic advising supports them to solve their educational problems and get along with educational environment in order to attain personal, mental, emotional, and social development (Sam, 2012). Indeed, universities undertake great responsibility to train and grow up students in multi-dimensional way. Students may face educational, behavioral, emotional, family and community difficulties after university entrance and later on due to coming up events during their study at the university. These problems are highly imperative for students to be addressed and solved; otherwise, this may effects students' education, scientific level and efficiency and consequently creates greater damages for the community. Thus, guidance and consult provision are essential parts of student life (Diba, 2012; Shakurnia, 2013).

Counseling services availability should not be limited to urgent and catastrophe situations; because due to daily increasing number of complex situations in various areas of life, students may require variety of consultation services. Therefore, needs assessment to identify the areas in which students should be advised comprehensively is a major issue to be paid attention by the university policy makers (Dadgostarnia 2014; Prajapati 2007)

Needs assessment is the first step to identify current requirements and one of the key steps in educational planning. It is due to its role to recognize the exact training needs, and subsequently to recognize basic axis of educational program. Hence, to avoid energy and resources wasting and for proportionality of manpower with training plan's objectives, there is fully understanding of the educational needs in different dimensions requirement (Dogar 2011).

In Iran, a few quantitative studies about students consultancy needs assessment have been conducted. Rabiei et al. (2007) at Shahrekord Azad University found students advising and counseling needs in five domains including academic, occupational, family, personal and mental needs. In another study conducted by Rafiei et al. (2007), occupational guidance and counseling needs were investigated among students of Isfahan University. The familiarity with job skills and career interests of students were reported as the most significant priorities for students' consultancy service.

Several studies have been carried out in relation to the students' counseling needs. Most of these studies have addressed the needs of students in various areas (Newton, 1984; Giovazolias, 2010; Atik, 2010; Karimi, 2014; Dogan, 2012). For instance, Newton et al. investigated students' counseling needs and reported the depression and stress control as the most important student advising and counseling needs (Newton, 1984). Another study in Greece showed that student communication needs, time management, decision-making and life problems solving skill are the most important priorities in student counseling needs (Giovazolias, 2010). Furthermore, Atik et al (2010) at the University of Ankara determined that problems solving skills related to educational, communication and prospective carrier are the most priority of student consulting needs. Karimi and colleagues (2014) introduced the most crucial student consultancy needs in Kenya as carrier, educational, personal and life skills. Meanwhile, studying the changes of student consultancy needs over the 11 years of investigation conducted by Dogan in 2012; revealed that student's consultancy needs changed during the study years. Also, assessment the available patterns of student consulting needs at some universities and academic centers showed alteration of student needs based on place of residence and different periods of time (Guner, 2003). Because different needs appeal different and appropriate advices; to improve student consulting services, it is required to carry out needs assessment of their problems and demands. Thus, due to students' needs differences based on various areas and quality of consulting services, a consultancy need assessment in every university should be exist. It may lead to quality improvement of consulting services and make them in accordance with the student particular requests. Since there is no study to assess medical students' needs and priorities at the Ahvaz Jundishapur University, the present study was conducted to meet these study aims.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were 291 medical students enrolled in Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences in 2014. They were recruited with using a convenient sampling procedure (Krejcie and Morgan' formula, 2014). Out of those subjects, 61% were female, 39 % were male. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 34 years ( $M = 22.52$ ;  $SD = 2.39$ ). The most of participants (94.6%) were single; and more than half of them (58.8%) lived at dormitory. From total study samples, 17.4% was studied in the first, 18.1%

in the second, 17.8% in the third, 15.9% in the fourth, 6.9% in the fifth, 10% in the sixth , and 11.1% in the seventh academic year.

### *Instruments*

The instrument used for this study was a questionnaire title “*counseling needs assessment questionnaire*” developed by Shakurnia and colleagues in 2014 to assess student counseling needs at the Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences. The instrument was content Validated by professors in counseling and guidance. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked through the Cronbach alpha coefficient. The reliability test yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.945. This questionnaire consists of two sections first, demographic data such as age, sex, marital status, place of residence and year of entry to the university. The second section consists of 30 items which measure various counseling needs of medical students (e.g. information about educational, mental and emotional, personal, career items). Students were asked to specify rate of each items on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “no need = 0” to “very high need = 3”. The lowest and highest scales for each counseling needs area such as personal, educational, mental and emotional, Family and Marriage and career were 6 and 18 respectively.

The questionnaires were distributed among all 291 students. In order to care about research ethics, students’ participation was voluntary and their Anonymities were totally assured. After taking instructors’ approval from university, the researchers applied the surveys to students who volunteered. Before the administration, participants were informed about purpose of the study.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed by SPSS software (version 16) through descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, relative and absolute frequency) and analytical statistics. Gender and grade level differences for each item were examined through t-test and one-way ANOVA.

### *Findings*

The average and total medical students counseling needs collected in this study are shown in Figure 1.

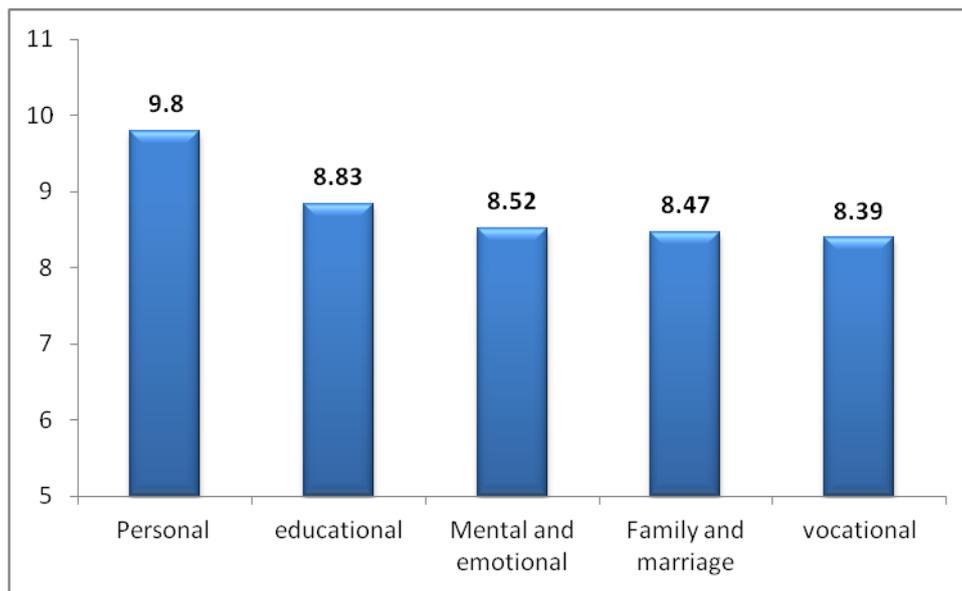


Figure1. Mean of counseling needs of medical students

The most important counseling needs of students were in the field of personal needs and educational needs with the mean of 9.80(SD=4.23) and 8.83(SD=4.11). The least important counseling needs were in the fields of vocational and family needs with the mean of 8.39(SD=4.17) and 8.47(SD=4.18) respectively. The study findings are presented in Table 1 briefly.

Table1

The comparison of mean score of counseling needs in Students University by gender

Items	Counseling needs	Total M (SD)	female M (SD)	male M (SD)	t	p	
Personal development	1	The way to increase concentration	1.87(0.96)	1.96(0.97)	1.71(0.92)	2.09	0.037
	2	The way to cope with intrusive thoughts	1.71(1.02)	1.82(0.98)	1.54(1.06)	2.18	0.030
	3	The way to welcome criticism	1.63(1.01)	1.73(0.99)	1.48(1.02)	2.05	0.041
	4	The way to increase self confidence	1.63(1.09)	1.79(1.05)	1.37(1.10)	3.11	0.002
	5	The way to reduce uncertainty and indecisiveness	1.56(1.06)	1.71(1.06)	1.32(1.03)	2.94	0.004
	6	The way to boost creative thinking	1.40(0.97)	1.45(1.02)	1.33(0.88)	0.951	0.342
	<b>Total</b>	<b>9.80(4.23)</b>	<b>10.68(4.30)</b>	<b>8.89(4.26)</b>	<b>3.35</b>	<b>0.001</b>	
Educational	1	The way to correct study methods	1.71(1.01)	1.75(1.04)	1.66(0.94)	0.706	0.481
	2	The way to improve timing method	1.61(0.99)	1.67(1.02)	1.54(0.94)	1.27	0.203
	3	The way to manage self scheduling	1.61(1.04)	1.73(1.06)	1.42(0.98)	2.45	0.015
	4	The way to grow skills of giving exam	1.49(0.99)	1.57(1.01)	1.35(0.94)	1.76	0.079
	5	The way to get familiar with educational rules	1.49(0.78)	1.63(0.78)	1.26(0.73)	3.94	0.0001
	6	The way to control exam anxiety	1.39(1.04)	1.33(1.04)	1.47(1.05)	1.02	0.308
	<b>Total</b>	<b>8.83(4.11)</b>	<b>9.26(4.31)</b>	<b>8.16(3.71)</b>	<b>2.15</b>	<b>0.032</b>	
Mental and emotional	1	The way to cope with stress	1.63(0.95)	1.77(0.90)	1.42(0.98)	3.01	0.003
	2	The way to cope with depression	1.54(1.05)	1.57(1.02)	1.49(1.09)	0.642	0.552
	3	The way to live happily	1.49(1.05)	1.62(1.03)	1.29(1.04)	2.57	0.011
	4	The way to cope with anger and aggression	1.45(0.94)	1.52(0.91)	1.34(0.98)	1.47	0.143

	5	The way to reduce the problem of suspicion & distrust	1.21(0.98)	1.27(1.04)	1.13(0.89)	1.08	0.208
	6	The way to cope with environment	1.20(1.02)	1.27(1.06)	1.09(0.93)	1.48	0.140
	<b>Total</b>		<b>8.52(3.99)</b>	<b>9.01(3.98)</b>	<b>7.75(3.89)</b>	<b>2.55</b>	<b>0.011</b>
<b>Family and marriage</b>	1	The way to deal with life's problems	1.74(0.96)	1.89(0.94)	1.50(0.93)	3.29	0.001
	2	The way to cope with spouse after marriage	1.47(1.03)	1.52(1.07)	1.40(0.98)	0.892	0.373
	3	The way to cope with fiancé during the engagement	1.40(1.06)	1.43(1.09)	1.35(1.01)	0.588	0.557
	4	The way to play parenting role	1.31(1.03)	1.38(1.02)	1.21(1.02)	1.34	0.180
	5	The way to make harmony between spouse and part	1.30(1.03)	1.39(1.02)	1.17(0.89)	1.79	0.075
	6	The way to interact with the opposite sex	1.24(1.01)	1.35(1.03)	1.08(0.8)	2.16	0.031
	<b>Total</b>		<b>8.47(4.18)</b>	<b>8.95(4.42)</b>	<b>7.71(3.67)</b>	<b>2.39</b>	<b>0.017</b>
<b>Vocational</b>	1	The way to get familiar with job opportunities	1.60(1.05)	1.77(1.02)	1.33(1.04)	3.39	0.001
	2	The way of job hunting	1.57(1.01)	1.70(1.03)	1.38(0.93)	2.55	0.011
	3	The way of entrepreneurial approach	1.44(1.04)	1.55(1.04)	1.29(1.01)	2.02	0.044
	4	The way of job compatibility	1.36(0.94)	1.48(0.95)	1.16(0.90)	2.72	0.007
	5	The way of getting familiar with available jobs	1.36(0.98)	1.47(1.02)	1.18(0.88)	2.36	0.019
	6	The way to identify his/her career interests	1.10(1.03)	1.22(1.03)	0.90(1.01)	2.47	0.014
	<b>Total</b>		<b>8.39(4.17)</b>	<b>9.12(4.23)</b>	<b>7.25(3.81)</b>	<b>3.68</b>	<b>0.0001</b>

It shows students counseling needs classification and rank as well as the requirements mean for each sex. The most imperative priorities and counseling needs of male and female students in five different consulting domains including personal, educational, psychological, family and vocational have been illustrated. For female students, "increase in concentration" (1.96), "correct approach of study (1.75), "methods of stress coping" (1.77), "deal with life's problems" (1.89) and "familiarity with employment opportunities" (1.77) were revealed as the major priorities. For males, "increase of concentration" (1.71), "correct approach of studying" (1.66), "coping with depression" (1.49), "deal with life problems" (1.50), and "employment" (1.38) were found as their most crucial consultancy preferences.

The results of Independent t-test showed that there is difference between counseling needs of male and female students in all aspects of the study aims (Table 1). Female students express more needs than males in all areas.

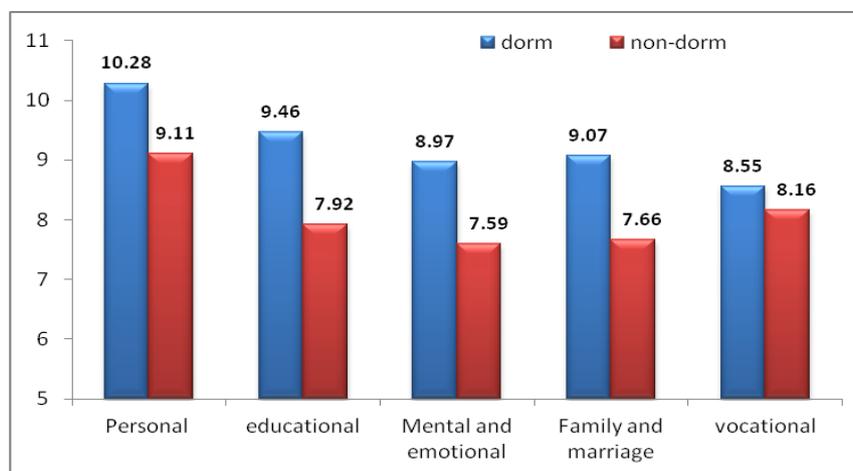


Figure2. Mean of counseling needs of medical students by living in dorms

Figure 2 presents the average of total students' consultancy needs based on their place of residence. Except vocational needs, there is significant difference between students needs who are living at dormitory and other students ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Furthermore, comparison of student counseling needs according to their study year was revealed that only the "personal needs" had a significant difference ( $P < 0.05$ ). The mean personal needs of first-academic year students was significantly higher than last year students 10.85 and 7.70 respectively ( $p = 0.036$ ). Finally, student counseling needs based on their marital status showed no significant differences ( $P > 0.05$ ).

### Conclusion and Discussion

This study provided a comprehensive insight into the counseling needs of medical students at the Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences. Results of the study showed that "Personal needs" is the most frequency student counseling need which indicates that policy makers and authority should pay more attention to this priority in the university educational planning. In this domain, the way to increase concentration, deal with troublous, and grow self- confidence had high levels of priority. Many students' problems at university and academic environment originated from their personal defects along with their growth and communication imperfections; thus, there is strong need to human skills and communication training. Hence, it is necessary that health systems' policy makers and stakeholders pay more attention to this issue.

These results are consistent with the finding of similar studies. Rabiei (2007) reported that increasing confidence and concentration are the most important students' counseling needs. He emphasized that self-confidence and concentration with frequency of 68.6 and 56.8% respectively had the highest superiority among students counseling needs. This is consistent with the result of the present study. Finding of Giovazolias (2010) and Newton (1984) also suggested that student developmental needs had the highest priority.

The second counseling needs priority in our study were educational needs. The correct way to study, time management and correct scheduling of subject curriculum were the most importance priorities. The results of some studies have shown that study and learning approaches and time management are more fundamental problems; and as well as the cause of the failure of students in the university (Motlagh, 2008; Shakurnia, 2013; Shahrabadi, 2014). This emphasizes on the authorities role to solve this problem. Bishop (1998) et al showed that students' needs are time management (54%), study method (49.6%), and anxiety control

(48.2%). In Turkey Guneri reported that educational need is the second consultancy needs priority; however, it was the first priority based on Egbochuku study results conducted in Nigeria (Guneri, 2012; Egbochuku, 2008). In studies conducted by Giovazolias and Newton also educational needs had high priority (Newton, 1984; Giovazolias, 2010), which are consistent with this findings. It suggests that educational consultancy has high priority, and planning to solve student study problems is another advisory priority in more universities. In fact, students' academic success is their most important concern, so they obviously need to provide guidance and advice about the study methods, time management, and subject scheduling ranging from low to high degree of intensity among them.

The third priority of medical student consultancy need was mental and emotional needs. In this domain, stress control, the way to cope with depression and make happy life had higher priority. Different researches have prioritized the emotional need as the first and the most important category and the others put it in medium or low priority (Rabiei, 2007; Newton, 1984; Atik, 2010; Egbochuku, 2008). As Newton reported (1984) psychological and emotional needs are the first student consultancy needs; other investigators such as Dogan (2012), Atik (2010) and Rabiei (2007) have proved the same results. The difference in the findings of different studies can be due to social and cultural factors overriding the university and, the size and gender composition of the samples or study tools including questionnaires or self-reporting method by students. Probably, for various reasons, some of the emotional-psychological needs of their students have not been fully reported. Giovazolias reported that among Greek student who had have emotional problems, were more negative attitudes toward counseling centers and their referral less to this center for problem solving (Giovazolias 2010).

In this study, other students' counseling needs including needs of family, marriage and career are at the lower rank of priority. Family and marriage need for consultancy is very crucial and should be put in the high priority particularly for married students and who are going to graduate. Because there are limited numbers of students who are married and in the last years of study, this area has not been at the top attention for numerous researches (Giovazolias, 2010; Atik, 2010; Karimi, 2014; Dogan, 2012).

Based on this study results, career and prospective job are in the least priority of consultancy needs. In this particular domain, job hunting methods, available prospective job opportunities and entrepreneurial approaches have the highest levels of importance. This finding is consistent with the results of Rabieis' and Atik studies conducted in Iran and

Ankara respectively; in these two researches, in them, vocational needs has been reported at the least priority (Rabiei, 2007; Atik, 2010). However, this is different from Dogar study in Pakistan and Egbochuku investigation in Nigeria which revealed that students` job prospective need is in the first and second priorities (Dogar, 2011; Egbochuku, 2008). This difference could be due to the social and cultural characteristics of the studies population. Our study participants were medical students who have optimistic prospective job marketing condition after graduation both in public and private sectors and they are not too concerned about their future job. Thus, this need differ based on students` study subject and their social and economic status across various regions and countries.

Other findings of the study showed significant difference between male and female students counseling needs; that is, females` students had more counseling need than male students. The results of the present study are similar to findings of Giovazolias and Newton studies that indicated more girls demand for consultancy service than boys which might be due to this fact that female students are less satisfied with life condition, so they experience more stress and low level of mental health (Newton, 1984; Giovazolias, 2010). Dogan (2012) studied the counseling needs of students over a period of 11 years in Turkey, and it revealed those females are more likely to use counseling services. He introduced positive attitude of female student towards consultancy centers as a reason of their higher demand; whereas, male students believed that refer to counseling centers is a weak sign and their negative attitude towards the student counseling centers leading them to less referring to these centers for solving their problems (Dogan, 2012).

Our findings showed that students living at dorms have expressed more counseling needs in all areas except job prospective needs. Most of the students problems occur for those who live at dormitory and this might be a sign of family oriented society in Iran and its highly position in their mental health. Separation from family after university entrance creates some personal, communicational and financial problems and puts students in an improper and vulnerable situation. This requires a proper plan and special attention to students` dorms and creates a pleasure station close to family life as well as providing available consultancy service. The results of the previous study indicated that students who live in dormitories have more refers to the university counseling centers (Shakurnia, 2013). Student`s life which is along with living away from their family and staying at dormitory impose particular conditions and create many problems; consequently, these students feel that they need more consultation services.

The findings of this study also showed that first year students have more psycho-emotional counseling needs compared with second or higher year students. Passing university entrance exam successfully along with new and unfamiliar atmosphere experience create stress and anxiety. Atik et al (2010) addressed that students` mental-emotional needs and their adaptation to university life particularly for the first year students and new entry cases are at the highest priority. According to Hyun et al, first year students declared that they had faced much more difficulties during their student life (Hyun, 2006). Besides, Flisher et al (2002) reported that new entry students experienced much more mental health problems and they referred more to consultancy services. Obviously, at this stage more help to adjust students to university environment and solve their individual, mental and emotional problems will assure their success in education.

Student guidance and helping them to solve their problems are the most crucial tasks of academic institutions. To provide necessary information for the implementation of this program, needs assessment and priority setting are required; this might be due to the rapid change of students life style over time and their living conditions as also confirmed by Dogan (2012).

The researchers believe that getting continuous feedback from students about the quality of counseling services and periodic assessment as basic approach to achieve student counseling center success should be considered seriously (Motlagh, 2008; Shakurnia, 2011; Shahrabadi, 2014). Advice to students and offer the proper treatment will have important effects on the students' lives as prospective physicians and their future patients (Givens, 2002; Eckenfels, 1984). The need assessment at universities to achieve this aim should be an integral part of the action plan.

In this study only students of one university have been considered and only medical students were the study population. Therefore, generalization of the study results to other students of other universities in different areas should be conducted carefully. Hence, further study need to be done at the national level for students counseling needs at other Iranian universities.

At the end of present research it has been concluded that the personal and educational counseling needs for medical students have high priorities; and family/marriage and career counseling needs have fewer priorities of the consultation needs of medical students at Ahvaz Jundishapur University of medical sciences in Ahvaz, Iran. First year and female students

significantly demand more consultation needs in all areas. Our findings suggest that female and first year students should be especially targeted during planning counseling program. The findings of this study can provide the stakeholders reliable information for planning the effective consulting services at universities.

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