Changes in Counseling Center Client Problems across 7 semesters in Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Ahvaz, Iran

Abdolhussein Shakurnia
Department of Immunology, Faculty of Medicine, Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Ahvaz, Iran
shakurnia@yahoo.com

Mohammad Reza Afshar
Department of Linguistics, PhD students of Linguistics, Faculty of Medicine, Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Ahvaz, Iran
mr_afshar@yahoo.com

Mansour Amin
Department of Microbiology, Faculty of Medicine, Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Ahvaz, Iran
mnsamin@yahoo.com

Abstract

Examining the changes in the problems of the students referring to the university counseling center can help authorities to figure out the students' problems and seek a remedy. The purpose of this study was to investigate changes in counseling center client problems at a university in southwest Iran. Participants were 1935 students who utilized counseling center services consulted in University during seven semesters from August 2011 to Feb 2014. The data were collected from the archive of the university counseling center. Of 1935 students referring to the counseling centers, most of them had Adaptive and Individual problems (33.6%), and some had psych-emotional problems (28.8%). Our finding revealed that all types of problem areas have reduced during this period. This decrease is probably due to the attempt of the adviser professors in identifying and referring vulnerable students to the counseling center, and supporting role of this center in preventive measures. The finding showed that the problems of the students referred to counseling center of University have decreased in all areas. These changes might affect counseling service in the university.

Keywords: Student problems, counseling center, student counseling and guidance services

Provision of counseling services to students at universities and colleges throughout the world is the duty of counseling service centers. The aim of the centers is to give educational, psycho-emotional and social support to the students and help them to succeed in their educational, personal and social life (Ulusoy, 2014; Lucas, 2005). In Iran, counseling service centers have been established in medical science universities since 1994. The goal of the centers is to provide a healthier environment for personal development and enhancement of the students' social and educational performance, the result of which is the improvement of the students' social, physical, and psychological health (Asadollahi, 2011; Shakurnia, 2011; Paykari, 2012).

It has been reported that more than 20% of the students refer to the counseling centers for solving problems (Dogan, 2012). This has caused researchers to pay much attention if the level of damage or severity of the symptoms is increasing among the referrals to the center (Much, 2010). The results of some studies have shown that the students' psycho-emotional problems are increasing and probably this is why more students refer to the centers at the universities recently (Gunn, 205; Benton, 2003). Examining the frequency and type of students' problems can be employed as a significant index in the primary evaluation, and help the authorities in their proper supporting planning. Because of this, there have been a lot of studies about the frequency and types of problems of the students at the universities in recent years (Basha, 2016; Acro, 2005; Giovazolias, 2010). In the studies carried out by the author of this article about counseling need assessment of students, it was revealed that the most important counseling needs of students were; adaptive, personal and psycho-emotional needs (Shakurnia, 2016; Shakurnia, 2013; Hoeppner, 2009).

Researchers believe that problems and counseling needs of the students change due to the change in their living condition (Acro, 2005). Hence, cross-sectional study of referrals to the center is not adequate to identify the students' problems completely. Therefore, a longitudinal study is necessary to obtain accurate information about problems during their study period. Dogan has examined the problems of the student in Turkey in a period of eleven years and showed that problems change by the passage of time (Dogan, 2012). Benton in the Kansas State University has also reported the same results (Benton, 2003). However, in 12 years' longitudinal study carried out by Heppner et al, no change was observed in the students' problems (Hoeppner, 2009). Regarding this discrepancy in the results, a more accurate survey is necessary.

Advising and helping students in solving their problems and preventing educational failure were important duties of the counseling service centers of universities. Providing information to implement this program and student supporting, a need analysis is required to determine the students' priorities. As it is expected that counseling students' needs are continually changing due to the changes in living conditions, these types of studies are mandatory in different universities, specially, since there have been conflicting results in the studies performed in different areas. It is axiomatic that different needs require different and proper counseling for students. It is necessary to identify the problems accurately in order to improve the provision of appropriate counseling services. The purpose of this study was to analyze the changes and variations in the referral number and problem areas of all students who consulted by Ahvaz Jundishapur University of medical sciences (AJUMS) Counseling Center during seven semester period between 2011 and 2014.

Method

Participants

Participants were 1935 students who consulted AJUMS counseling center during seven semesters from August 2011 to Feb 2014. AJUMS is one of the main universities located in south west of Iran admitting 5000 students annually. The data were collected from the archive of the university counseling center. The profiled information of all the students who referred to this center at least one time during this period was considered as sample of this study.

Data collection and analysis

The data of this study were collected from the archival data of the counseling center in a 7- semester period. Each client's intake records, as reported by the intake counselors, were examined. The data were collected through Individual Counseling Evaluation Form which was prepared by counselors who worked in the counseling center. Counselors who work at the counseling center are required to complete a form for each student-client they have counseled. This form was developed to obtain personal information and problems area of the referrals such as: gender, year of study, number of referral to counseling center and problem area. To respect the privacy of referrals, the forms have been filled anonymously by the personals in counseling center and submitted to the researchers.

The students have referred to the counseling center for various problems. In this study, with regard to the kind of problems, the data were grouped under four headings to get proper conclusion and analysis. Problems related to study skills, exam stress, exam anxiety, absenteeism and probation were grouped under the heading Educational Problems". Problems related to communication skills, interpersonal relationships, loss of concentration, lack of self-confidence and decision making were grouped under the heading "Adaptive & Individual Problems". Problems related to study obsession, nostalgia; stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, attention deficit, concentration impairment and mania were grouped under "psycho-emotional problems". Finally, pre-marriage consultation, espouse selection, married life, and incompatibility with spouse or parents were grouped under "Family and marriage problems".

Data were analyzed to determine if there were significant changes across them during seven semesters. The chi-square test was used to analyze the data. The data have been analyzed by the software SPSS-18 and significance was declared at $p < 0.05$.

Results

In general, the number of female students visiting the counseling center was more than the number of male students. Of all the referrals, 69.8% were female and 30.2% were male. Most of the students refereed to counseling center (80.4%) were living in the dormitory and only 19.6% were not.

Overall, the percentage of student-clients who consulted the center during seven semester period varied between 11.1% and 17%. The chi square test showed that there is a significant change in the referrals during the period of study ($\chi2=28.79$, P=0.001). The trend of change in the number of referrals has been showed sequentially in figure 1. As indicated in this Figure, relatively linear trends were observed in the problem areas; and the frequency of referrals has been reduced during this period.
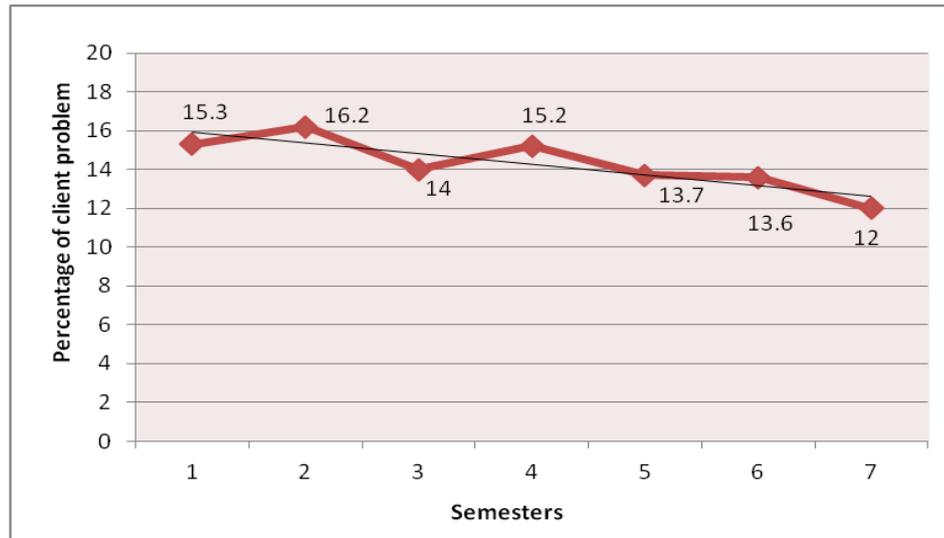
Figure 1. Frequency of students' referral with linear decrease over time

The second subject was the study of the frequency of problem areas of the students referring to the university counseling center. As indicated in figure 2, the most problems of students referred to the counseling center were as follows: Adaptive & Individual problems (33.6%), psycho-emotional problems (28.8%), educational problems (20.5%) and family-marriage problems (15.8%).
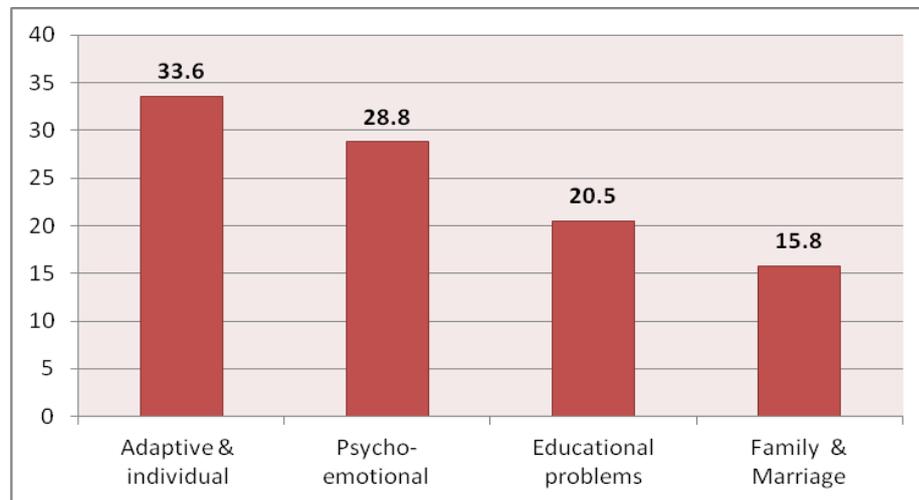

Figure 2. Frequency of students' problems in duration of study

The study also explored whether the problem areas of student-clients had changed during seven semester period. A significant difference was found in the problem areas of students seeking counseling at the counseling center during the period of study (Table 1). As indicated in table 1, significant changes in percentages were observed in all problem areas. The highest percentage of problems was seen in more of problems area in the first period of

study; and during the final period of the study, there was a decrease in every problem area (figure 3).

Table 1

Comparison of Clients Problem Area across seven semester Periods

Client problem	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	7 (%)	χ^2	P
Educational	23.2	16.9	13.9	11.1	12.6	9.8	12.6	33.84	.001
Family & Marriage	24.7	21.1	8.7	13	12	12	8.4	57.17	.001
Psycho-emotional	9.7	16.6	11.6	16.6	13.7	17.6	14.2	21.69	.01
Adaptive & individual	12.6	15.4	16.5	18.8	13.3	11.7	11.7	24.67	.001
Total	16.4	17	13.9	15.9	13.1	12.6	11.1	92.31	.001

As indicated in Figure 3, relatively linear trends were observed in four of the problem areas. As it can be observed, the students' problems have changed significantly in all the scopes of the study. The psychological problems of the students had a nonlinear trend, that is, it increased in some years and decreased in other years. However, the most increase was observed in the psycho-emotional problems.
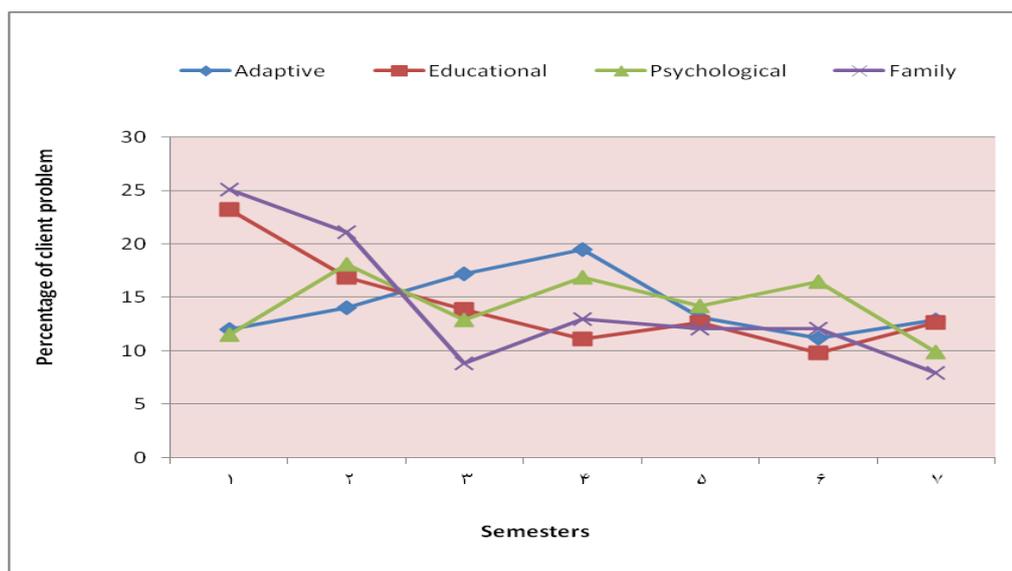

Figure 3. Frequency of clients problem area across seven semester periods

Discussion and Conclusion

We investigated the students' frequency and reasons for referring to the university counseling center on the basis of the archived history during seven consecutive semesters. The aim of this study was to find if the causes of referrals were changed. The results of this study indicate a linear trend in the students refer during this period. Figure1 shoes a significant reduction of the referrals to the university counseling center.

Since no previous national data are available about the cause of change of referrals in Iranian university counseling centers, it is difficult to offer a comparison. There are similar studies in other universities which have reached to different results. Although Dogan (2012) in the University of Baskent in Turkey and Benton (2003) in the University of Kansas in America have studied the students' problems and noted an increase in the referrals to the university counseling center, not any change of referrals in an American University has been reported in the studies performed by Hoeppner and Erickson (Hoeppner, 2009; Ericson Cornish, 2000).

This disparity in the results of studies can be due to several reasons. One of the probable reasons is the period of the study, the other one is sampling methods and another reason is the research methodology. In some studies, sampling was based on client self-report (Ericson Cornish, 2000). In this regard, Benton, et al (2003) has suggested that the period of such studies should not be less than 10 years. In our study, it was impossible to have access to more sample data are to limitation of data archive because of our study period.

Moreover, the reduction of referrals in this study can be due to the commitment of university counseling center to perform preventive and supportive methods and the administration of the "Counseling and Adviser Plan" in recent years. In the adviser plan, students are referred to advisers' professors as they are admitted to the university. It is the duty of these professors to monitor the students' educational progress and manage their educational, individual, and psycho-emotional problems. In addition, if it is necessary, they refer them to university counseling center. The advisers are accountable to report about the educational progress or failure of the students under their supervision to the university counseling center at the end of each semester (18). It seems that the administration of this plan has a significant role in the reduction of referrals to the university counseling center in recent years.

Our study also revealed that the most frequent reason for referral was Adaptive & Individual problems followed by psycho-emotional problems. The same results have also been obtained in Turkey, America and England (Dogan, 2012, Benton, 2003, Motlagh, 2008). In the study in Iran it has been reported that the most important reason of the referral to counseling center was due to the psycho-emotional and Adaptive & Individual problems (Shakurnia, 2013).

Regarding the studies performed in different universities in the world, the students' referrals problems are relatively to some extent similar. Living away from family in a new urban area, being unaware of rules has made life a challenge for students, the result of which is psycho-emotional problems and educational failure. Therefore, it is essential for the authorities to consider the priorities in counseling services at the universities in order to facilitate the students' success in their educational performance.

As it is indicated in Figure 3, there is a linear trend in the four areas of study during the research period. In recent years, the percentage of educational and family and marriage problems has decreased considerably. This is mainly due to the university authorities in administering the "Counseling and Adviser Plan" in the Faculties in the preceding years. Ease of access and more consultation during the term have helped the student to solve their problem with the support of their adviser. In addition, the reduction of the students' problems is due to the compulsory supervision of the adviser and their periodical reports. However, the adaptive and individual problems reduced at the beginning of the study but gradually increased and then decreased during the study period. This is perhaps due to the personality of student accepted at the university. For instance, the students from rural areas have less experience and as a result they had more communication, adaptive and individual problems which evoked a lot of consultations.

However, the pattern of the psycho-emotional problems was different during the period. The percentage was nonlinear during this period. This indicates that problems were chronic and hence the recovery was elongated. Psycho-emotional problems have been introduced as the most significant problems of the students and as the most influential factor in educational failure and drop out (Shams, 200; Najimi, 2013). The results of various studies have shown that the percent of these problems among students has increased (Dogan, 2012, Much, 2010; Gunn, 2005).

One of the interesting finding of this study is that the students request for counseling increased significantly during the research period. This indicates that the counseling center

has been active and serious in locating the vulnerable students and accurate supervision. The advisers find the vulnerable students and refer them to counseling center to obviate their problems. In addition, counseling center invite these students in order to support them to solve their problems. In fact, it can be said that the reduction of the students' problems in recent years is because of establishment of the "adviser plan" and the diligence of university counseling center. Similarly, Benton has reported that the students' problems have decreased since the establishment of university counseling center and provision of guiding services (Benton, 2003).

This study suffers some limitation; one is that the population of our study was selected from one university. Hence, the finding cannot be generalized to other areas. The other limitation is the short period of study, as our data belong to the recent seven semesters, it was impossible to do a comprehensive study.

The finding of this study showed that the problems of the students referred to counseling center of AJUMS have decreased in all areas. The decrease of the referrals to counseling center indicates that advisers and counseling center accurately monitor, locate, and follow up the vulnerable students' problems. Therefore, the influential role of the counseling center can be acknowledged. Previously; there has been more screening test on the referrals. The advisers supported these students and paved the way to solve their problems and prevented them to be chronic problems, as a result, the number of referrals decreased considerably. Regarding the important role of the adviser and university counseling center, it is advisable to hold a sandwich course for the students at the beginning of educational year. It is also recommended to hold short courses periodically to make adviser familiar with the principles of counseling.

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