

Faculty and Staff Attitudes towards Student Counseling Center and Its Services

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine attitudes of staff and faculty members towards the Student Counseling Center and its services. The sample included 224 faculty and staff members from different colleges and different years of experiences. The authors have developed a self-report, four point Likert scale questionnaire to evaluate the participants' attitudes. The findings showed high positive overall attitude towards the counseling center and its services and positive attitudes towards specific dimensions related to counseling. The participants who have already benefited from the SCC services manifested higher positive attitudes than those who haven't. Recommendations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Counseling centers have gained popularity and clear importance to all types of clients. College/university counseling center is a distinguished form of counseling services provided in higher education institutions which started operating since more than fifty years ago [1]. As a result of the modern economical and developmental changes in nations worldwide, counseling centers have started to appear in many Arab countries as well [2]. College student counseling centers have increased for their vital role in dealing with, primarily, students' problems and, secondary, with staff and faculty related issues. However, attitudes towards counseling centers have varied between people. The purpose of the current study is to examine staff and faculty attitudes towards Student Counseling Center (SCC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

The Importance of Counseling

College counseling centers have a great importance especially for students. As proposed by Suliman and Aldhadha [3] counseling services contribute to tackling students' problems such as difficulty of adjusting to university life, anxiety problems and inability to make decisions. Students start their university life with a new environment that brings up new challenges to them. Many studies have investigated the problems that students may suffer from during their university life. According to Saleem, Mahmood and Naz [4], university students suffered from "severe" or "very severe" mental health problems presented in anxiety, lack of confidence and low self-regulation. Lack of concentration and health problems were also defined among university students [5]. Moreover, teachers and counselors indicated that learning problems were the main challenges for their adolescent students followed by social issues and relationship with parents [6]. David and Estrada [7] revealed that students and faculty supported establishing a mandated counseling program as they believe in its significance for raising self-awareness of students, dealing with mental health symptoms, grief, trauma...etc that might encounter the students. In addition to tackling mental health problems, student counseling centers thoroughly contribute as well to students' academic performance and personal growth [8,9].

Students, who seek counseling services, usually suffer from one or more of these problems. For instance, Lucas and Berkel [10] found that students who attended counseling sessions were suffering from symptoms of depressions and anxiety as well as feelings of poor social relationships. Similarly, mental health problems such as worry of the future, academic grades, depression and adjustment were defined by counselees examined in previous research [11,12].

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As expected, after attending sessions of counseling, students usually become more able to handle their problems and they end up with a better mental health. Prosek et al. [11] found that after attending required counseling services, the students suffered from decreased depressive and anxiety symptoms and fewer problems. Furthermore, studying the longitudinal effects of a mandatory counseling programs for under probation students, Yang, Yon and Kim [9] found that students who attended this program had better academic performance than students who didn't attend this programs. Similar findings were found by Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes [13] as students received counseling services were more likely to remain enrolled in school and showed better academic outcomes.

Attitudes towards Counseling

Counseling, as other professions, has been going through many challenges. Since its beginning as a new profession in schools and universities, especially in Arab societies, many challenges have appeared that counselors needed to deal with. Some of these challenges are resistance raised by the students, teachers and principals in schools, and challenges within counselors themselves in terms of obtaining required skills and capabilities [14]. Moreover, barriers to school based counseling services was also identifies such as the significance of having a shorter waiting list for counselees, a longer time for counseling service and the need for early interventions [15]. As a result of these challenges, different attitudes emerged towards counseling. While some students, faculty, or staff perceive its importance and have good attitude towards it, others look at it as a strange practice that has no value and thus shape negative attitudes towards it.

Several studies have been documented in the literature that examined college or school students' attitudes towards counseling. Students' attitudes towards counseling centers are influenced by their awareness of counseling role and services provided. For example,

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Kahn, Wood and Weisen [8] found that 72% of students in their study sample reported awareness about the existence of the student counseling center on campus. Most of those students have clarified that they would refer to the student counseling center if they suffer from mental health symptoms whether they are at a mild degree "(e.g., test anxiety)", moderate "(e.g., relationship problems)" or severe "(suicide, depression)." The researchers concluded that the students were not aware enough with most of counseling services provided at the center. Clearly, the students were not aware about the role of student counseling center as a way of development and growth and not only as a service for mental health issues. Moreover, based on Bundy and Benschoff [16], the students' showed that having a counseling center on campus would be "very helpful or helpful"; some other students as well provided that they would "likely or very likely" visit this center. Similarly, a survey conducted in an academic health science center, USA, showed that despite of most students' lack of knowledge about academic counseling services and how to access them, 54% of them indicated its importance in their institution and 60% showed that they would benefit from academic counseling services if needed [17]. In addition, Prosek, Holm and Daly [11] found that students enrolled in a required counseling course, although it is a mandated program, showed willingness to attend its sessions and 46% of the students indicated a previous experience with a mental health specialist.

In addition to knowing students' attitudes towards counseling, understanding staff and faculty attitudes is important as well. Different studies in the literature, have examined faculties' and staff's awareness of counseling and their attitudes towards it. Gaughf et al. [17] found that about 59% of faculty members recognized the importance of academic counseling as a part of the institution. Although about 40% of faculty reported that they were familiar with academic counseling services and they would refer their students in the future to these services, significantly a fewer percent of faculty (18%) indicated that they previously referred students or they knew how to refer a student (26%). David and Estrada [7] found that faculty showed supportive attitude towards establishing a mandated counseling program for master students in social work. Participants reported different reasons for supporting a counseling program. They suggested that a counseling program would contribute to raise self-awareness of students, dealing with mental health symptoms, grief, trauma...etc that might encounter the students.

While those studies have examined faculty and staff attitudes towards counseling in higher education institutions, many other have examined attitudes in a school setting. Atwejri [18] found that the Saudi school's teachers showed positive attitudes towards the clarity of counselors' role in the school. Also, they showed positive attitudes towards the importance of counselor's job to help students dealing with their problems. Moreover, positive attitude towards the cooperation between the counselor and teachers in the school was reported by the teachers as well. Similar to those findings, Nafi [19] found that school principals and teachers indicated positive attitudes towards school guidance and counseling. Other school teachers from USA have also perceived school based counseling services as "helpful and valuable" and as leaving positive impacts on students' mental health and emotional well-being [15, p 479].

The Student Counseling Center at Sultan Qaboos University

One of the first established student counseling center in the Arab world is the Student Counseling Center (SCC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) which was launched in 1999. The center provides

a lot of supportive services that help the university students adjusting to their university life and gain healthy wellbeing. The SCC works in accordance with the internationally accredited ethics and principals of counseling profession and it is a member in the world association of counseling centers [20]. The center's services are primarily directed to the university students; yet, some supportive programs are also offered to staff and faculty members at SQU. The main counseling services provided in the SCC are individual counseling, group counseling, and career counseling. Furthermore, supportive counseling services are offered as well; which are developmental program, outreach program, discussion sessions, counseling consultations, student workshops, and staff training courses [21].

The Importance and Rationale of the Study

Positive or negative attitudes of staff and faculty members towards counseling may positively or negatively affect the quality of counseling services. Gaughf et al. [17] suggested that if the faculties have a lack of knowledge about the available academic counseling services and they didn't recommend these services to the students, it will be a very rare chance that the student benefit or seek these services. In addition, according to Amaar [14], investigating faculties' attitudes towards mental health counseling contributes to recognize the obstacles that hinder the benefit from psychological and educational counseling. Similarly for school counseling, Atwejri [18] indicated that for counseling process to be effective inside the school, it is important to have support through positive attitudes of the students and others who may directly or indirectly benefits from counseling services such as teachers, school administration and parents. If those agents show negative attitudes towards counseling programs, it is most probably that counseling programs would be less effective because of the lack of cooperation.

Therefore, examining and understanding staff and faculty members' attitudes towards counseling in any university is as important as understanding students' attitudes. Staff and faculty members' attitudes may affect the way in which they support the counseling center and counselors, the way they cooperate with them and urge students to benefit from counseling center's services. If those agents appeared to have negative attitudes towards counseling, in general, or a specific counseling center, in particular, it means that awareness programs or steps should be taken in order to raise their awareness about counseling which indirectly influence students' awareness as well.

Examining a specific counseling center, such as the SCC in this study, would help getting a clear idea how people perceive counseling especially in an Arabic context. As mentioned previously, counseling centers in Arab countries are relatively new, when compared to Western or some Eastern countries, and not all people believe in its importance. The SCC at SQU was the first counseling center in Oman. It is considered as the most professional counseling center in Oman to which many people from the society refer to it. Thus, knowing how people inside SQU perceive the center would help to improve its services and popularize the center inside and outside the country. Moreover, the current study adds previous studies that examined staff or faculty attitudes towards either a specific counseling centers or towards counseling services in general [18,17,15].

The Current Study

Unlike school contexts, attitudes towards counseling in higher education contexts were poorly investigated, as it was clear from the literature review. Considering the importance of faculty and

staff attitudes towards counselling in higher education institutions, the current study aimed to examine the attitudes of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) staff's and faculties' attitudes towards counseling services provided by the Student Counseling Center (SCC) at SQU. The descriptive design was used in this study to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most frequently used methods by staff and faculty members to know about the SCC services?
2. What is the level of staff's and faculties' attitudes towards the SCC services?
3. Are there statistically significant differences on staff's and faculties' attitudes towards the SCC services based on benefiting from the service or not and attending services or not?
4. Are there statistically significant differences on staff's and faculties' attitudes towards the SCC services based on their gender, work experience, and academic rank?

Methodology

The population of the study included all Omanis and expatriates faculty members and staff at SQU, except for SQU hospital staff, whose total number equaled 3441 by the end of 2015 based on the statistics provided by planning and statistics department at SQU [22]. Data collection took place on spring 2016 and involved 6.5% of the population (n= 224). Male represented 45.10% and female represented 54.9% of the sample.

Instrument

The researchers developed the questionnaire of "Faculties' and Staff's Attitudes towards SCC Services." To develop this questionnaire, the researchers reviewed some related studies and instruments such as Altwijri [18], Amaar [14], and Gaughf et al. [17]. The first part of the questionnaire asks for participants' demographic variables (i.e., gender, college, department, academic rank, work experience). Moreover, participants were asked about the means by which they got to know about the SCC (e.g., student orientation week, SCC website, colleagues ...etc).

The participants were also asked whether they had already benefited from SCC counseling services. Benefiting from SCC counseling services means the main services provided by the counselors in the center which are individual counseling, group counseling, and career counseling; in which the staff or faculty member have to come to the center and get some sessions in these counseling services. Another question asked about whether the participants had attended some of SCC services. Attending services refers to supportive services only, not main services, such as attending one or more lectures in the developmental program, outreach program, or discussion sessions or receiving counseling consultations, or attending one or more staff training courses. These types of the services were provided as options in the instrument to make them clear for the participants.

The researchers found it important to distinguish between benefiting from SCC main services or only attending some supportive services which are usually in a form of lectures or brief seminars that last to a maximum of two hours. First, it was important to draw the participants' attention that the researchers were targeting both who benefited from the counseling services and those who just attending some lectures or seminars. Second, for participants who

have benefited from the SCC services, it means that they visited the center, spent some time in it, dealt with the professional counselors and had some sessions with them, like individual or group counseling sessions that may last for weeks or months. Therefore, it is possible that those participants, who have benefited from the services, would show positive attitudes towards the center. However, those who just attended some of its supportive services, may not show positive attitudes or may not show statistically significant differences when compared with the participants who have not attended any services.

In addition to the demographic and general information variables part, the questionnaire included four main parts which are: (1) attitudes towards the importance of counseling (7 items) (Example item: Student counseling center provides an important role for university students' lives), (2) attitudes towards the counselor (5 items) (Example item: Counselors are highly skilled in giving counseling services), (3) attitudes towards counseling services (11 items) (Example item: Student counseling center's services contribute to solve students' social problems), and (4) attitudes towards cooperation with SCC (8 items) (Example item: I refer students who have problems to the student counseling center). All responses to these parts were scored in a 4 point Likert-Scale ranging from *totally disagree* (1) to *totally agree* (4). Only the last part of the questionnaire "attitudes towards cooperation with SCC" involved a fifth scale "*not applicable*". This is because for some participants, especially staff, their job doesn't require them to deal with the SCC but they could evaluate their attitudes towards its importance and the other parts of the questionnaire. Yet, the fifth scale in this part was not included in calculating the mean score of the responses because it was given a zero value.

Face validity of the questionnaire was checked through some specialized reviewers in the Psychology Department at SQU. Reliability coefficients of the questionnaire items were also tested using Cronbach's alpha. Coefficients were very good and ranged from 0.80 to 0.66 (see table 2).

Procedures

The questionnaire was sent online via e-mail to all staff and faculty members at SQU during spring 2016. The participants were assured for confidentiality of their information and were informed that all data would be used only for research purpose. A total number of 165 online filled questionnaires were retrieved. Second, staff and faculty were reached through center's activities or workshops, and in some departments at SQU. Hard copies of the questionnaire were distributed for them in order to increase the number of participants. A total of 59 hard copies were retrieved. Thus, a total number of 224 staff and faculty members participated in this study.

Data Analysis and Results

Prior to data analysis, data were screened for outliers and non were identified. Some missing data were found due to items left blank. To answer the first question pertaining to methods by which the participants knew about the SCC and its services, descriptive statistics were used as they are presented in Table 1.

As it is clear from Table1, a total of 399 participants have indicated the ways by which they got familiar with the center. The SCC website (23.89%) was the most frequent method by which the participants knew about the center and its services followed by SQU advertisement (23.60%) and colleagues (20.35%). However, the least

frequent method was social media (3.83%); in addition to some other means reported by the participants such as being an ex-student in the university or through dealing with the center for some students' cases.

No	Methods	n	%
1	SCC website	81	23.89
2	SCC advertisement	80	23.60
3	Colleagues	69	20.35
4	Student orientation week	43	12.68
5	SCC publications	27	7.96
6	Others	26	7.67
7	Social Media	13	3.83
	total	339	100

Table1: Descending order of Methods used to know about the SCC.

To answer the second question that is related to the level of attitudes staff and faculty members show towards the SCC and its services, one sample t-test [23] was utilized through comparing the actual means of each dimension on the questionnaire and the total mean with the theoretical mean. Since all questionnaire parts were scored in a 4 point Likert-scale, the theoretical mean equals 2.5. Table 2 shows the findings.

Dimensions	Items No.	α	M	SD	t	p
attitudes towards the importance of counseling	7	0.66	3.31	0.40	30.12	<0.001
attitudes towards the counselors	5	0.75	3.12	0.44	21.24	<0.001
attitudes towards counseling services	11	0.80	2.94	0.37	17.51	<0.001
attitudes towards cooperation with SCC	8	0.74	3.00	0.46	16.08	<0.001
Total attitude	31	0.89	3.09	0.33	27.03	<0.001

Table 2: Reliability coefficients, and one sample "t" test.

Note: the actual mean equal 2.5 for all variables.

As it is seen from Table 2, 't' values were statistically significant at all of the questionnaire dimensions and the actual means were higher than the theoretical mean (M=2.5). These findings reflect high positive attitudes for the participants towards the different counseling aspects (i.e., attitudes towards the importance of counseling, attitudes towards the counselor, attitudes towards counseling services and attitudes towards cooperation with SCC). Moreover, the findings show that 't' value of the total score (i.e., total attitude) was statistically significant as actual mean was higher than the theoretical mean which suggests a high overall positive attitude towards counseling.

In addition to examining attitudes at dimension level, attitudes at item levels were also examined as presented in tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the [supplementary materials](#).

The third question related to the differences in the participants' attitudes towards counseling based on their previous benefit from SCC services (e.g., receiving individual, group, or career counseling sessions), or previous attendance to some of SCC supportive services/ activities such as developmental or outreach counseling lectures or staff workshops. To answer this question an independent sample t-test

was used for the two groups (i.e., participants who benefited from the services or not, and who attended some services or not). Tables 3 and 4 show the results of the third question.

Variable	Yes/No	n	M	SD	t	P
Benefit from the services	Yes	101	3.17	0.30	3.18	0.002
	No	123	3.03	0.33		

Table 3: Differences in attitudes based on benefiting from SCC services or not.

Variable	Yes/No	n	M	SD	t	P
Attending the services	Yes	100	3.15	0.31	2.17	0.031
	No	124	3.05	0.33		

Table 4: Differences in attitudes based on attending SCC services or not.

As it can be seen from Table 3, there were statistically significant differences in the participants' attitudes towards counseling based on their previous benefit from counseling services or not since staff and faculty members who had already benefited from the services had higher positive attitudes towards counseling than those who didn't benefit from SCC services. Similarly, Table 4 shows statistically significant differences in the participants' attitudes towards counseling based on their previous attendance to counseling services or not since staff and faculty members who had already attended some of the services showed higher positive attitudes towards counseling than those who didn't attend any SCC services.

The fourth question regarding differences in the participants' attitudes towards counseling based on their gender, work experience, and academic rank (for faculty only). First, to examine gender differences in attitudes, an independent sample t-test was utilized as it is shown in Table 5.

Variable	Gender	n	M	SD	t	P
Attitudes towards counseling	Male	101	3.05	0.33	1.61	0.109
	Female	123	3.13	0.32		

Table 5: Gender differences in levels of attitudes towards counseling services.

As it is clear from table 5, there were no statistically significant gender differences between males and females in their attitudes towards counseling.

To find differences in attitudes based on staff and faculty members' years of work experience (i.e., from 1 to less than 5 years, from 5 to less than 10 years, from 10 to less than 15 years, from 15 years and above), a one way ANOVA was used as it appears in Table 6.

Variable	Source	Sum of squares	Mean square	F (3, 142)	p
Attitudes towards counseling	Between groups	0.42	0.14	1.30	0.275
	Within groups	23.91	0.10		

Table 6: One way ANOVA for differences in attitudes based on the work experience.

As it is clear in Table 6, there were no statistically significant differences in the participants' attitudes towards counseling based on their work experience Likewise, a one way ANOVA was used to

explore differences on attitudes based on faculty members' academic rank (ie., Administrator, assistant professor, associate professor, and professor) as it is displayed in Table 7.

Variable	Source	Sum of squares	Mean square	F (3, 72)	p
Attitudes towards counseling	Between groups	0.18	0.06	0.50	0.681
	Within groups	8.87	0.12		

Table 7: One way ANOVA for differences in attitudes based on the academic rank.

Similarly, Table 7 demonstrates no statistical significant differences in faculty members' attitudes towards counseling based on their academic rank.

Discussion

The current study aimed to evaluate faculty members' and staff's attitudes towards the Student Counseling Center (SCC) and its services. The findings revealed that the participants had high positive overall attitudes towards the SCC and its services. Moreover, high positive attitudes were found for the specific aspects of counseling which are: Attitude towards the importance of counseling, attitude towards the counselors, attitude towards counseling services and attitudes towards cooperation with SCC. These finding goes in line with previous studies which found positive attitudes by teachers, faculty or staff towards counseling as well [7,17,18].

The findings showed statistically significant differences in the participants' overall attitude towards counseling based on their previous benefit from counseling services or their attendance of some supportive services provided by the center. Staff and faculty members who had already benefited or attended some of the SCC services showed higher positive attitude than those who didn't neither benefited from the services nor attended some of the services. These results emphasize the importance of familiarizing the staff and faculties at SQU about the SCC and involve them in its activities and services in different ways. Being aware about the student counseling center and its vision, mission, and objective implements positive attitude towards counseling and counseling services and increases the participation and cooperation of the faculty member and staff with the center and its activities.

Positive attitudes along with readiness for cooperation between counselors and faculty and staff, lead to higher benefit from counseling services. Gaughf et al. [17] recommended that faculty should be better prepared to encourage and refer students with academic difficulties to seek academic counseling. Moreover, Tatar and Bekerman [6] have emphasized the importance of collaboration between school teachers and counselors in order to help students deal with their concerns.

The results showed no statistically significant differences on the participants' attitudes towards the SCC based on their gender, work experience, and academic rank. This may imply that being male or female, and being an old staff or a new one at SQU is not as much important in getting a positive or a negative attitude as being aware about the center itself and its important services.

Future studies are recommended to examine different attitudes either from staff, faculty or students towards counseling services since very few studies, especially, in Arabic context are existing.

The findings of this study came out with some recommendations for SQU and SCC administration, staff and faculty members. First, awareness about the SCC and its services should be increased as much as possible with different approaches and throughout the year. Second, colleges and deanships should familiarize the staff and faculty members with the communication channels with SCC. Third, it is very important to create a help seeking culture of counseling services inside the campus that become acceptable and popular among staff, faculties, students and others. Finally, the SCC needs to increase the services that could be provided to the staff and faculty members.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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