

Original Research Article

The Perplex of Guidance and Counseling Services for Higher Education Students in Eritrea

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: June 18, 2020

Accepted: July 20, 2020

Volume: 2

Issue: 4

KEYWORDS

Guidance and counseling services, support systems, students' counseling needs, conservative attitudes

ABSTRACT

Students' wellbeing at colleges and universities lies at the center of higher education student services provided by the institutions. Personal, social, educational, and other mild mental and emotional problems are unavoidable and intertwined with the day to day college students' life burdens. The paper explored the state of guidance and counseling services and the support system provided to students, the major functions of the center at the colleges, the attitudes of the college students towards the guidance and counseling service, and the students' counseling needs in higher education institutions. The study involved 217 college students and 30 staff members from the College of Education, College of Engineering and College of Science. The study used descriptive survey design combining quantitative and qualitative research approaches using questionnaire and focus group discussion data collection techniques. The data are analyzed using thematic and descriptive ways of analyses. Coming from different socio-economic and academic backgrounds, the students are not receiving proper guidance and counseling services at the colleges. The study identified the core functions of the counseling center and the gaps of student support systems. The students' counseling needs are prioritized according to the students' ratings. However, counseling profession in the Eritrean socio-cultural context is very challenging task for multitude factors including the socio-cultural perspective towards the profession, the depth of the training of counselors, and challenge of conceptualizing and contextualizing the western theories of counseling to the Eritrean context.

Introduction

The higher education institutions (HEI) in Eritrea offer regular undergraduate diploma, degree and sporadic master's programs in certain areas of studies. The college students need professional guidance and counseling support to make them versatile experts to serve the society. Guidance and counseling services (GCS) at HEI assist students to acquire and use lifelong skills through enhancing academic and career planning, self-awareness, self-confidence, resilience, interpersonal communication skills, etc. Furthermore, high-quality GCS in HEI could have long-term positive effects in fostering the students' well-being, engagement in learning, academic achievement, decision making skills and preventing them from risky behaviors. Students' wellbeing at the colleges lies at the center of the student services provided by the institutions.

Currently, the HEI in Eritrea do not provide GCS for the students with exception of the former Eritrea Institute of Technology (EIT). The EIT started offering guidance and counseling for the students of the institution since 2013. The center was established to work under the auspice of the Office of the Student Affairs to provide GCS to the EIT students. The working document from the guidance and counseling center (GCC) of the EIT states the vision of the center is to "promote students' overall growth in academy and personal/social development." The center claims to serve focusing on personal wellbeing and career developments of students. It further stipulates that its mission is to empower students' moral and professional competence and make them responsible nationals and global citizens. This is because GCS escort people to strive and

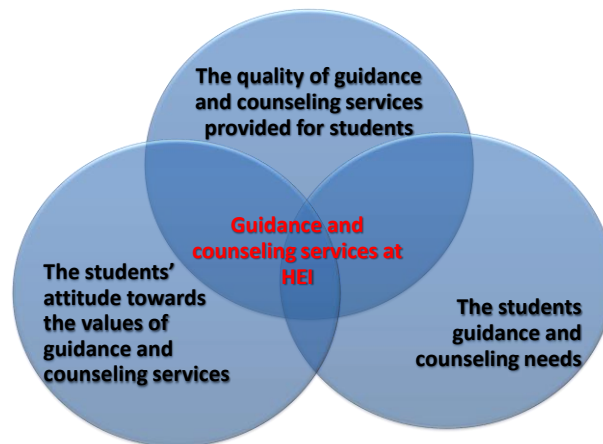
triumph personal and professional gains in the endeavor of living successful and meaningful life (Egbo, 2013). In a nutshell, the ultimate purpose of offering counseling services in educational institutions is part of the education itself (Wako, 2016).

The personal, social and educational issues and wellbeing of students intertwined with the day to day college students' life burdens and limited facilities require well-functioning GCC at the colleges. However, there is lack of empirical evidences of the guidance and counseling services in Eritrean learning institutions (Andegiorgis, 2019). The study was initiated to empirically understand the context and the quality of counseling services offered for the EIT student community. The study focused on exploring the state of the existing service, the core activities of the GCC, students' perception of GCS and the counseling needs of the college students.

Conceptual frame Work of the Research

The key factors in the study are extremely interrelated and interdependent to one another. The students' day to day challenges at the colleges reflect their counseling needs. Similarly the quality of the existing student services is the function of the complexity of the students' problems and the quality of guidance and counseling support services provided. In general, there is an overlapping interplay between the variables under study.

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework



Furthermore, the utilization of the available GCS by the students depends on their attitude towards the values of the support systems and services. On the other hand, the quality of GCS provided to the students at colleges determines the attitude and appetite of the students to make use of the services delivered. The study is expected to empirically contribute to the efforts being made to raise the students' awareness towards the significance of GCS at the colleges. Indirectly, the findings would have a positive impact on the GCS policy of the HEI and the reduction of the high attrition rate of the college students. The study is crucial in identifying the prioritized guidance and counseling needs of students at the HEI, to revitalize the existing counseling services at the colleges and to open new centers at the colleges without GCC. The findings will serve as a stepping stone and reference for further researches on the issues of GCS at college level.

Research Method

The study used descriptive survey design combining qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Several sources and means of information of primary and secondary data were collected. The primary data were gathered from different groups of participants and secondary data were retrieved from relevant offices and working documents. Students from the Colleges of Education, Engineering, Science and the Freshman Program as well as the teaching and non-teaching staff members of the colleges and the GCC at the EIT participated in the study. The student participants were randomly selected from each group. On the other hand, the teaching and administrative staff and counselors at the institute were identified through snowball sampling process participated in the study.

The main instruments used for data collection were questionnaires and FGD guiding questions. The team developed the instruments for the purpose of the primary data collection. The instruments were collaboratively developed by the team members of the research in consultation with other researchers in the HEI in Eritrea. The student community comprising 217 students, namely 72 students from the College of Education, 52 from the College of Engineering, 37 from the College of Science and 56 from the Freshman Program students participated by filling the questionnaire. In addition, 16 teaching staff comprising lecturers and students' academic advisor graduate assistants as well as 14 non-teaching staff from the guidance and counseling center and members of other service offering supportive and administrative offices of the EIT took part in the study through FGDs. The FGD participants were grouped according to their work type (as academic and non-academic) to ensure the homogeneity of views and ensure participatory discussions among the discussants. Thus, 4 FGDs were conducted, each FGD involved 8-12 participants and the FGDs were audio recorded. Thematic and descriptive analysis techniques were applied in the data analysis process.

In terms of ethical procession, the research was initiated in collaboration with the Finnish Church Aid in Asmara through the College of Education. The study is conducted with the formal permission of the former EIT authorities. Furthermore, participants showed their full consent of participation and willingly filled the questionnaire and took part in the FGD sessions.

Results

This section deals with the summary and organization of the quantitative and qualitative data of the study. The primary and the secondary quantitative data are summarized in tables and charts and the qualitative data are organized following the major identified themes.

Fig 2. Students' awareness counseling services

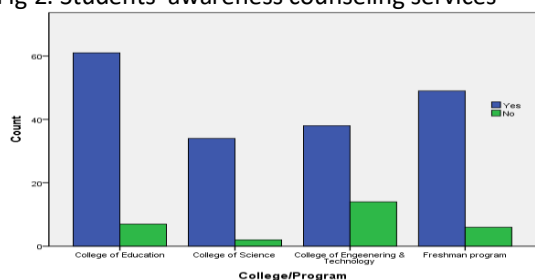
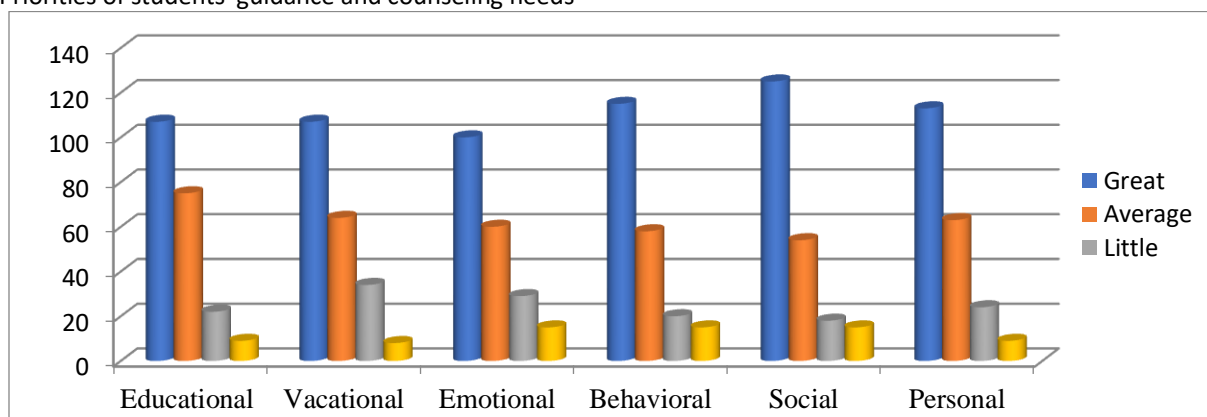


Table 1. Counseling reports at the EIT, 2016/17 A/Y

Issues reported	Number of cases
Educational issues	34
Career orientation	3
Personal affairs	8
Behavioural challenges	2
Social relationships	3

The above bar chart summarizes the student community's awareness of the GCS offered at the EIT. The data show that the students in the institute are very much aware of the GCC at least as a center. On the right side, table 3 portrays individual counseling reports in the institute (for three major colleges) in the 2016-2017 academic year reported by the center.

Fig 3: Priorities of students' guidance and counseling needs

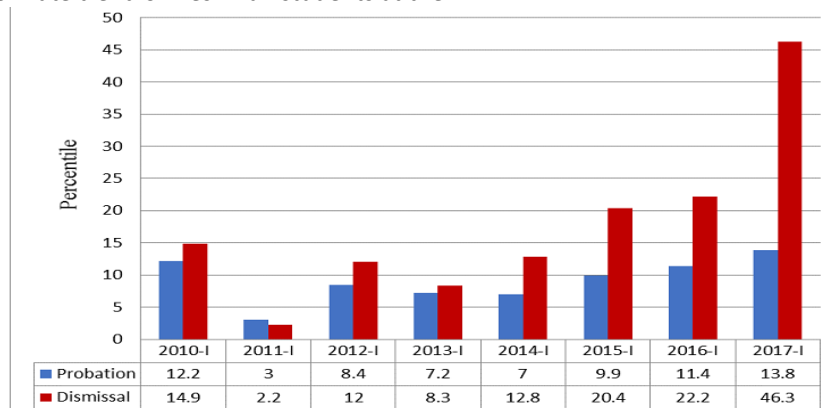


The participant students were asked to rate the above needs of students that require counseling intervention at the colleges. The above indicated needs (Fig 3) are among the major guidance and counseling needs point out by the college students. The figure represents the students' rating ranging from 'great' to 'no' in a decreasing order of their importance.

Challenges of students at the colleges

- New way of teaching mainly the lecture method (for Freshman students)
- Massive assessment loaded learning context and unreliable grading system
- Lack of seriousness in educational activities due to forced placement to fields of study
- Substandard accommodations and support systems at the colleges
- Study skills, time management and other types of college life coping skills
- Lack of well-established counseling center and experienced counselors
- Conservative attitude of students towards the values of counseling services

Fig 4. Eight years attrition rate trend of freshman students at the EIT



Source: EIT ad hoc committee report (2018)

Fig 4 portrays the attrition rate in the Science Stream of the freshman students during the first semester of eight academic years in the College of Science. The report was obtained from the Freshman Program Office of the EIT. As the legend of the graph indicates, the report does not include the probations and dismissals in the 2nd semester other attrition rates such as dropouts and suspensions among the freshman and the 2nd year and above students in the academic years.

Discussion

Student life in colleges and universities is full of multifaceted academic, personal, social, economic and other challenges related to students’ backgrounds. Educational institutions attempt to entertain the diverse needs and values of learners on equal basis. Especially GCS for students plays an important role in facilitating the learners’ day to day academic and social lives as well as shaping their career orientation and professional development.

Major challenges of the students and the higher education institutions

Tuition fee and related financial expenses are among the major sources of stress for college and university students worldwide. Financial payment for education purposes is not a burden for Eritrean college students. In Eritrea, education is free at all levels, including tertiary education. The colleges are boarding colleges that offer all basic accommodations for free while students are in campus during the academic semesters. However, it is common sense to say life is full of ups and downs and college students are not immune to challenges. Needless to say, stress and discomfort of students in higher education institutions are unavoidable part of college students’ life. The context of students’ life in higher education is characterized by tension because students’ life is sandwiched between many complementary issues of personal, social and academic life.

College students in the Eritrean HEI live in groups in the student dormitories and dine together for free in the students’ cafeterias. The students are in their early 20s and communal life at a young age requires discipline and determination for personal and common purpose. Furthermore, these young people are still under the immense pressure of their peers and important issues in life such as academics, professional identity, economics, politics, love relationships and religion. In addition, it is a tradition that the students feel pressure out of the high absolutism and expectations from families in terms of their academic achievements that fuels the anxiety of the students. There is a lot of pressure exertion not only from family, but also from instructors and administrative staffs, the nature of learning and accommodation situation at the institutions. The FGD participants explained that academically the nature of campus life is tense and hectic for the student community.

Students are bombarded by assignments, term papers, senior essay projects with strict deadlines, scheduled exam dates and associated exam pressure.

The 21st century higher education teaching methodology is transforming to technology assisted (Inoue and Bell, 2006). However, the participants noted that the classroom practices in the Eritrean colleges are still traditional that require the students to recite contents from handouts and softcopy teaching materials. The traditional way of teaching and lack of continuous assessment are among the confirmed problems. The student evaluation methods and grading system at the colleges are other challenges for the students. There is a lot of secrecy for students around the assessment procedures including lack of access to the evaluated exam booklets and final scores of their performances except the converted grades ('official grade reports' in the form of A, B, C, D & F). Staff members remarked that students' grades are subjected to the teacher's subjective and stereotyped judgments and the absolute influence of the 'Dean' and his/her clique.

The atmosphere in the assessment loaded current education context in Eritrea, including the assessment procedures, promotes competition rather than cooperation among learners. Though education is freely provided to Eritreans, it is very hard for students if they are academically dismissed from the colleges. The system in the HEI, especially the recently formulated guideline gives little chance to students to readmit and continue their studies once they are academically dismissed. The assessment strategies and the related mean grading system at the colleges are among the major sources of stress for students. An ad hoc committee comprising members from the EIT set to study the issue of attrition rate at the institution recommended that "observing the trends [of attrition rate] triggers more questions, hence we call on respective departments and colleges to conduct a retroactive assessment of attritions and provide explanations for trends" (EIT ad hoc committee report, 2018). The bar graph (Fig 4) above shows that the number of dismissals in the institution is increasing alarmingly. The FGD participants remarked that students seem to have developed phobias of certain subjects mainly related to mathematics and physics (ibid). The freshman students indicated that personalities and teaching methodology in the whole education system are the key contributing factors.

The colleges in Eritrea are governed under the auspices of the National Higher Education and Research Institute (NHERI). The NHERI recently ratified some of the existing rule and regulations of HEI in the country. In a 12 pages document of 'Student's Code of Conduct' endorsed in August 2019 by the NHERI, there are 38 words pertaining to temporarily or/and permanently dismissing students from the colleges for "misbehaving." In addition, the "rules and regulations pertaining to academic performance of students," another guideline formulated by the NHERI in August 2019 has become more stringent than it was previously in terms of students' academic freedom. In this context, it is common experience for examination invigilators to encounter fainting students during the mid and final exams at the colleges. The students' academic advisors confirmed that students of the institutions have mosaic academic challenges, exam anxiety, placement to areas of study, inadequate system of teaching and laboratories. Despite the situation, the students receive neither exam anxiety coping strategy related supports nor relaxation techniques to deal with the tense weeks of mid and final exams.

Students complain for accommodations and uncomfortable lodging challenges and other services in the campus environment. The participants reported that the library services in terms of time and space at the colleges are too traditional and very inconvenient for college learning. They further indicated that the community libraries in the cities and high schools offer much better service for students than the college libraries. In the same way, there are no indoor and outdoor sport facilities and entertainment areas at the college. This situation has contributed for students' frustration in search of relaxation opportunities. The participants complained for the lack of human dignity for students in the service offering offices (like the registrar and freshman offices) usually rude communications via the 'window service.'

The living conditions of the students at the colleges are described as substandard accommodation services and there are limitations of resource and supportive services. The teacher participants noted that the institution has huge resource gaps that frustrate the students and the staff equally. The students and staff members are highly concerned about the sanitation problems and malfunctioning bath and toilet at the colleges. Students and the staff members complained and described the colleges as uncomfortable, "unfriendly" and unattractive teaching-learning environments. For most of the colleges are established outside cities, once the staff leave the colleges after the working hours of the day, nobody is around to feel the student's pain except the aged police campus and the cafeteria service who could provide a little help about the complex students' problems. Usually the "student-house fathers" take in charge of the colleges during the weekends. The academic staff noted that the curriculums in practice at the colleges are not engaging, "challenging and rewarding" for students. The

lessons are further described as very much congested lectures usually extending from Tuesday up to Thursday where Monday and Friday are almost seen as part of the extended weekends.

Where there is competition in education, inevitably there is tension that causes uncomfortable learning situation. This is likely to negatively affect the campus life of students and their educational success. The significance of functional GCC to offer professional support for students to cope with their challenges and to go beyond is unquestionable mission for the HEI. The challenges entail concerted efforts and creating conducive learning environment for the student community. Odeke (1996) noted that in the absence of functional GCS in HEI, students would find it difficult to cope with their everyday challenges. As a result, students would deviate from their academic goals and indulge in risk behaviors.

Students' placement to fields of studies

College studies require students' long hours of active engagement and make them prone to stress and anxiety. Motivation and interest play very great role in students' engagement and meaningful learning in career oriented higher education. Though hard to tell statistically, instructors complain that students are not actively engaged in their learning. The instructors noted that the students have low motivation and learning interests and do not enjoy their learning. The future oriented aspiration and motivation of the young does not seem encouraging due to lingering personal, institutional, national and global challenges.

Students at the colleges do not have proper advisements on the issue of career selection. There is what students call "rushed orientation" for the to-be-freshman students. This orientation is related to placement to departments in the colleges offered once after matriculation, before the students join the colleges. It is given to all students who participated in the high school leaving certificate examination, including those who fail score passing marks. The students complain that the orientation familiarizes them only with the list of degree and diploma offering departments at the colleges. Once students join the colleges, they know about their services at the colleges through a general orientation and the student booklet about the colleges. The general meeting arranged only for the freshman students takes place usually after the students knew the colleges through self-discovery. Furthermore, the orientation unnecessarily focuses on familiarizing personalities of service offering offices. The students indicated that they learn about the higher education and their career through a hard way.

The nature of student placement of the HEI is very controversial issue. Students' career choice at the colleges is determined by placement committees outside the colleges. Freshman students take common courses and decide their career at the end of the first year study. The freshman students are challenged to choose their future career at the end of their first year program. At the end of the freshman program, students have high pressure to choose their fields of studies. Students in this situation, added to other daily challenges, are likely to have tough questions. The placement is very competitive and students usually choose the non-teaching professions, despite there is high demand of teachers in the country. Only few of the students are competitively admitted into their areas of interest by choice. The main criteria of admission of the HEI freshman students to departments or fields of studies is the candidate's GPA² (Zemichael, Idris, & Demoz, 2017). Students have stress and uncertainty driven from placement to career development against to their choices. The admission and placement procedures of the higher education in Eritrea is merit based and gives priority to interest and academic performance of the students depending on the quota of the departments expected to enroll. The GCS can play a constructive role in the career decisions made by the students; but it is not yet ready.

Especially in certain subject areas, students' lack of interest and engagement in learning is observed in the institution. The EIT ad hoc committee (2018) warned that "an alarming dismissal rates especially in mathematics (still increasing trend) and Physics (decreasing trend) appeals for an appropriate intervention." This happens for different reasons including the fact that placement of students into departments is a big challenge for them than the academic hardship itself, especially for students forced to join fields in which there are "not good at." As a case in point, assigning students to mathematics or physics department while having "F" grade in either or both courses in the freshman program expedites the students' chance of academic dismissal.

Students' attrition rate at the institutions of higher education

Research conducted on students' attrition rate in the EIT in 2016 by the office of Students' Affairs shows that student attrition rate was progressively increasing. The unpublished report demonstrations an attrition rate of students in EIT is

² GPA – Grade Point Average

dramatically on the rise since the year of 2014/15. The increase reads about 22% in the degree and 27% in the diploma programs respectively. In spite of the worthlessness of the students' efforts and doomed future when dismissed for good, the high number of attrition rate at the colleges is wastage for the institutions due to the fact that the colleges are highly dependent on expats faculty highly paid in hard currency. Though it is not fair to blame the students, the wastage is common challenge for all the stakeholders. Thus, the challenge is personal, familial, institutional, communal and national issue. Reports from the institutions show that the issue of increasing attrition rate still seems lingering challenge for the colleges. The 2018 official academic report of the EIT for the first semester alone shows a warning call of the academic situation of the 3 colleges in EIT:

The average attrition rate in EIT during 1st semester of 2017/ 2018 Academic Year, in all the Undergraduate Degree, Diploma and Freshman Degree and Diploma Program was 31.14% (total attrition rate for Undergraduate Degree students was 15.10%, for Diploma students was 23.85%, for Freshman Degree Students was 43.51% and that of Freshman Diploma Students was 2.09%. This has shown an average increase of 12.71% (an increase of 3.09% in Undergraduate Degree, an increase of 2.78% in the Diploma and an increase of 21.31% in the Freshman Degree Programs) compared to last year first semester's rate of attrition. (EIT stat Report, 2018)

The students at the colleges in Eritrea are subjected to academic dismissal and other forms of attrition rates in every semester. However, the number of dropouts and suspension cases reported in the years are not reflected in the bar graph above as Fig 4 selectively displays dismissal and probation rates only. Though what is already observed is staggering challenge, imagine the level of attrition rate if the actual cases including dropouts and academic suspensions pertaining to both semesters in the academic year were reported.

How can the highest national academic institution ignore "an average increase of 12.71" attrition rate of students across its diploma and degree programs in consecutive academic years? The campus environment is characterized by harsh and pressurizing living condition and learning atmosphere. The findings demonstrate that there are suicidal incidents among the student communities that reveal the academic climate at the HEI is not healthy with overwhelming challenges of students' unsatisfactory performances and institutional inefficiency that require strategic intervention. Needless to say, one of the major interventions should be empowering and supporting students at the colleges through the provision of efficient GCS before it is too late. An ad hoc committee established to orchestrate the possible solutions for the alarming attrition rate stated in its report of 2018 that "the role of the recently staffed Guidance and Counseling office is yet to be visible."

Attitude of students towards the significance of guidance and counseling

Attitude plays significant role in determining the lifestyle and standards of living of people. The attitude of the student community and the staff members towards the values and roles of GCS is very crucial. The students' attitude towards the significance of guidance and counseling in their everyday lives defines their decision to seek "professional" help from the center. Despite the students have multitude personal and environmental challenges; the students do not visit the GCC at the EIT. The report of the GCC at the colleges indicates that very insignificant number of students show up in the center seeking for help (see Table 1). There is misperception of students about the services delivered in the GCC. The students' attitude towards the GCS at the EIT is highly embedded in the diverse socio-cultural milieu they grew in.

Whenever students are challenged and feel that they need support, the GCS is not in their list of priority for help. A FGD participant from the service offering offices noted that "the students are frequently observed visiting religious places and other cultural practice sites in the area whenever they face with problems." The faculty members agreed that the students look for spiritual supports to ease their temporary frustrations and chronic problems. The students go to the nearby churches/mosques or other religious practices to reduce their tension through prayers. The preference of students to visit religious and traditional practice institutions for educational and psychosocial help exemplify their attitude towards the role guidance and counseling and their low confidence in the GCC at the institution.

A counselor from the EIT noted "our society has conservative attitude towards exposing one's inner perspectives of life and problems to other people, including professionals." It is somehow a culture in the Eritrean communities that a person is not expected to reveal one's problem to others, rather, would keep it secret. Often the students prefer to share their problems with friends or keep it in private. A teacher discussant explained that the attitude of students towards the values of GCS is constructed from their background embedded in their conservative culture. Therefore, the students' understanding of the

significance of counseling in their psycho-social, educational, career development, etc. is the reflection of the society's attitude. Participants explained that "students share academic, social, family or personal problems with peers and not with the counselors." The main duty of the GCC is to minimize psychosocial and academic pressure among the student community, however, even if the problem gets worst, students look for spiritual "healings" than psychological guidance. A student participant said that "praying to God is a form of counseling." The student underlined that it is necessary for students to go to religious places.

There is misinformation about and misinterpretation of the GCS among the college community associating it with "abnormal" students. The distortion of students' attitude towards the values of guidance and counseling in the colleges is not limited to the student community alone. The FGD participants explained that like the students, the staff members at the colleges do not have an in-depth understanding of the role guidance and counseling for college students. There is lack of clear understanding among the college students about GCS (Senior Essay Project, Department of Psychology, 2014). Although the counselors working at the EIT described the students' awareness as below their expectation, the study found out that the students' awareness about the existence of the GCC is relatively fine (Fig. 2). However, the participants agreed that there is low level of attitude and even it is almost negative outlook among the student and staff community of the colleges alike. Students believe that counseling centers serve for students who lost reality contact. Students stereotypically perceive those who visit the GCC as deviated from the "normal" campus community life. However, the students' distorted attitude towards GCS is highly dependent on the quality of coordination and collaboration between stakeholders, professional inefficiency and initiatives to serve the students' needs (Wako, 2016).

The counselors participated in the FGD noted that the main service of the center at the colleges is largely guidance than counseling. However, the counselors indicated that support is needed on both guidance and counseling areas at the colleges. One of the counselors stated that "our assumption is the more the guidance service is delivered, the less counseling service is required. Students need to be aware of study skill, time management, raising and fostering their self-esteem and self-confidence." This is helpful mechanism to help students before they are challenged. But the emphasis of the center on guidance is not strategic rather it is because there are no customers visiting the office seeking counseling help.

The center seems to mainly focus on waiting the students to visit the guidance and counseling office instead of taking thoughtful initiatives to proactively reach the student community. The contribution of the GCC at the colleges is very discouraging. The students are not making use of the service (see, Table 1). The report revealed that despite the challenges and the guidance and counseling needs the students have, the number of visitors to the GCC out of the entire student population shows the underutilization and underperformance of the GCC. Students report their problems to the office of Students' Affairs and other offices than to the GCC. Furthermore, the issue of love affair is an important part of college students' lives and affects their psycho-social, behavioral, emotional composure and academic performances. However, there is no single report of love related issue in the guidance and counseling center. The respondents noted that the students are not to be blamed; rather it is the leniency of the GCS at the colleges. The counselors do seem to pass the year idle without any measurable work at the GCC (Andegiorgis, 2019).

The major guidance and counseling needs of the students at the higher education institutions

Guiding students at the colleges starts in the department where an academic-advisor is assigned to closely assist students in every aspect of their college life. Students are advised to consult their academic advisors in their respective departments in order to get accurate information about their academic requirements and progress and other support systems (EIT, student hand book, 2015). However, the students' academic-advisors disclosed that the students very rarely consult their respective advisors in the departments especially for non-academic consultations. However, students have even academic issues that require the support of counselors are related to educational needs especially exam anxiety. Participants noted that there are students with exam anxiety and subject-matter related phobias. Particularly the teacher participants emphasized the "observable" lack of effective learning and studying skills. According to the teachers, students believe that the more time a student spends memorizing a learning material, the better learning outcomes will have including better performances or exam results.

The perceived significance of GCS for the students has been very much recognized by the former Nation Board for Higher Education (NBHE), currently NHERI. Guidance and counseling is structurally situated in the organizational chart of the colleges affiliated to the office of student affairs. However, the colleges do not have functional guidance and counseling offices to serve the needs of the student communities. Relatively speaking, the EIT had been in a better position with respect to the

provision of GCS for its students. The Colleges of Education, Engineering and Science had counselors working at the colleges but it is not yet a tradition in other colleges to provide counseling services for students. Even in the colleges where counseling office exists, coming from different socio-economic and academic backgrounds, the students are not receiving proper GCS at the colleges.

The FGD participants noted that the colleges have serious lack of guidance and academic advisement services. Especially for the freshman program, college life is challenging because the time is crucial hallmark transition period for the students from high school to higher education. The students have to deal with a number of issues including adaptation to the new learning environment and college learning styles. At this stage, students require guidance to adjust the new environment (Thuryrajah, Ahmed and Jeyakumar, 2017).

Timely and continuous contact with the student community through orientation programs, action based research, relevant information disseminations mechanisms play significant role in reorienting students attitudes. The GCC at the EIT offers only a 15 minute's orientation lecture in a year during the general orientation for freshman students about career choice, adjustment to the college environment, disciplinary issues and familiarization with the counseling service at the institute. Contradictory to the counselors' disclosing that the center focuses on awareness campaigns and preventive strategies, the communities in the colleges revealed that little is known about the office itself and the GCS offered.

GCC is the major source of reliable information and the powerhouse of professional guidance for student communities to cope with academic, vocational, social and emotional adjustment in the day-to-day demanding college life (Thuryrajah & Jeyakumar, 2017). The students at the colleges face a lot of academic, behavioral, emotional, personal and social challenges in their everyday life in the institution. The lack of well-established counseling center and experienced and professionally trained counselors at the colleges are very visible. In order to ease the congested daily academic lives of the students in HEI, establishing GCC that addresses the needs of students is of an utmost importance. Therefore, the integration GCS into the educational system and process is highly required in educational institutions. However, expertise offering the service matters to professionally understand the students' diversified counseling needs in line with the society's norms and values (Mapfumo and Nkoma, 2013).

The counseling need of the student community is huge and the expectations of the students from the GCC include educational, vocational, emotional, social and personal matters. Attrition rates at the colleges exemplified by the report in Fig. 4 and similar previous reports is a clear-cut evidence for counselors, educators and administrators to act and take viable intervention to boost the students' academic success. As the data in Fig 3 indicated, the student at the colleges reflected their interest in career guidance and counseling that would prepare them for the present and future career related challenges. The support systems for students at the colleges have the responsibility to promote learners' emotional wellbeing, emotional resilience, serenity amidst of difficulties and to cope with the hectic and demanding campus life and to build the students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication skills to help them control their emotions and understand other people that is humanly essential for survival.

The students living in group hosting dormitories that deter their privacy and comfort, GCC at the college level can boost the students' moral values in line with the ethical values and solve problems at the college setting and the socio-cultural menu in the larger society. The students need to enhance their personal choices and decision making skills, self-image, self-esteem, self-confidence, discipline and other private issues. However, working as a counselor in the Eritrean socio-culture context by itself is very challenging task. Among the multitude factors that make counseling tough task in the Eritrean school context are the socio-cultural perspective towards the profession, the training of the counselors, and challenge of contextualizing the western theories of counseling to the Eritrean context. This daunting task as Shayo (Eliamani et al., 2014) put it "is an impossible and unrealistic burden on these untrained personnel." Attrition rate reports and the participants' claims show that the need for efficient guidance and counseling intervention at the colleges is of urgency.

The institutional capacity of the GCC at the EIT, shouldered by inexperienced first degree graduates, is seriously limited in terms of human resource, professional competence and required facilities. Professional counseling is not an easy task because it requires well established professional expertise gained through rigorous training and long-time work experience. In counseling, the counselor's professional training, work experience and age matter to promote their "sensitivity to individual and cultural differences" (Lasode, Lawal & Ofodile, 2017, p. 171). In the few counseling centers at the colleges in Eritrea, fresh graduates almost the same to the student community are assigned as counselors. Recruitment of counselors in

the colleges is not based on competency and prior experiences of counselors. The staff profile of the guidance and counseling at the EIT shows that the center is not yet well equipped. The counselors are all BA holders having only the theoretical understanding of the glimpse of the scope of counseling profession. The participants noted that to work as a counselors in the colleges, candidates must have at least Master's and above formal education in school counseling psychology. The counselors are in their late 20s working without mentor or guide and strategic plan of action.

The faculty members and the service offering office representatives described the counselors as "less competent and inexperienced." The FGD discussants revealed very little expectation and expressed their distrust in the competence of the GCC at the colleges. The counselors themselves noted that they need professional support from experienced counselors and further focused training and experience to locally conceptualize and contextualize the western concept of counseling. Thus, the counselors are required to take intensive training and further exposure in the areas of counseling. The counselors need to participate in relevant workshops to foster their professional knowledge effectively serve the student community.

Currently, the GCC office is not fully functioning to serve the student community. Participants unanimously agreed that the students at the colleges are not using the counseling service provided to them because of their attitude towards the role and the values of guidance and counseling. However, the problem emanates from the organizational limitations of the center itself and the students' community's conservative attitude to visit the GCC for service. Regardless of the reasons behind, counselors are not observed taking initiatives of well-designed awareness campaigns and action oriented interventions. The GCC has not developed any appropriate toolkits for counselors' practice. The need of all types of support and service for students evidently require establishing, revitalizing and empowering the GCS at the institutions.

In the efforts being made to shape the student community's attitude and behavior to utilize the GCS, revitalizing the organizational capacity of the GCC and the enhancement of the professional competence of the counselors are essential. The trained manpower of the center needs serious attention to professionally satisfy the students' need for professional help. Wako (2016) revealed that among other things, the main reasons for students' "underutilization of the [counseling] service is related with professional competencies of the school counselors, lack of policy direction about the service and administrative problems" (p. 27).

The counselors at the center in EIT admitted that "the center is not fully functioning to properly guide the students because of its institutional inefficiency and the students do not seem to properly utilize the GCS provided to them." The GCS has to work proactively with its limited resources rather than waiting to react in response to students' problems and expecting conducive working conditions. What's more, the center should extend its services to all the community members of the colleges who seek professional assistance. According to the FGD participants everyone in the institute is a counselor and guidance worker. Particularly the academic staff indicated that every teacher is a guider. Thus, the counseling center should act as facilitator in every activity of the campus and a concerted effort is required to strengthen the GCS in partnership with other stakeholders including the instructors, the students, administrative and other service giving offices.

Conclusions

Though GCS is not a common practice in the HEI in Eritrea, few colleges have GCC that require restructuring and capacity development empowerment. The students and the faculty members at the institutions complained about the support systems provided to the students at the colleges describing the service as "substandard." Despite the students face multitude challenges of academic, vocational, social, emotional, accommodation issues and the like, the major activities of the GCC is limited to once in a year few minutes' general orientation to freshman students. The students' attitude towards the values and roles of the counseling profession are characterized by misconception that is highly embedded in the socio-cultural practices of the larger society. Students visit religious places and cultural instructions outside the colleges to ease their problems through prayer than to visit the GCC in their campus compound. The colleges and the GCC in particular, should take proactive initiatives to reverse the attitude of the students and to better serve their counseling needs than waiting in their offices to retroactively respond to fix reported problems of students. However, working as a counselor in the Eritrean socio-culture context by itself is very challenging task for the socio-cultural realities in line with the profession and the hard work required to conceptualize and contextualize the western theories of counseling to the Eritrean context.

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