

EDUCATION - ACADEMIC ADVISING

It Begins Where the Students are ...

"I think I can find my own way," said Milo, not at all sure that he could. But, since he didn't understand the little man at all, he decided that he might as well move on—at least until he met someone whose sentences didn't always sound as if they would make as much sense backwards as forwards.

—Juster (1961, p.19)

Unquestionably, institutions committed to the goal of increasing student persistence, especially among excluded groups, seem to find a way to achieve that end. Beyond institutional commitment, students are more likely to persist when they find themselves in settings that hold high expectations for their learning, provide needed academic and social support, and actively involve them with other students and faculty in learning. Students value support that connects and integrates their experiences into a meaningful whole. This integration includes the melding of purposeful and frequent interactions—inside and outside the classroom in formal and informal settings—with faculty and academic professionals (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996) and integrates academic, career, and life goals.

Prominent researchers have consistently noted the single most important factor linking student retention and success is the quality of faculty/staff contacts. Astin (1977) reported that students who interact more frequently with faculty report significantly greater satisfaction with the college environment. Nearly a decade later, Astin (1985) strengthens his position, commenting, "Frequent interaction with faculty members is more strongly related to

satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or indeed any other student or institutional characteristic" (p.147). Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfe (1986) emphasize the influence of faculty involvement on student retention and satisfaction with education. Kramer and Spencer (1989) state:

Overall, faculty-student contact is an important factor in student achievement, persistence, academic-skill development, personal development, and general satisfaction with the college experience (p.105).

Involvement, Astin (1984) relates, influences learning and defines effective institutions as those having the capacity to involve students. Echoing a similar sentiment, Tinto (1987) wrote, "The more frequent and rewarding interactions are between students and other members of the institution, the more likely are individuals to stay. This is especially true for those contacts which take place between students and faculty" (p.150).

Frequent and meaningful contact in and out of the classroom with faculty members, especially contact focusing on intellectual or career-related issues, seems to increase students' motivation and involvement (Astin 1984; Chickering & Gamson, 1995; Pascarella 1980, 1985; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Lorang, 1982; Tinto 1987). With respect to student-faculty interaction, the data suggest the single most important factor in student decisions to continue or withdraw is their relationship with a faculty adviser. Indeed, "Good advising—as the mechanism to best help students integrate their whole university experience (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994)—may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (Light, 2001).

The Role of the Advisor. "[A]dvising, effectively delivered," suggests Crockett (1985), "can be a powerful influence on student development and learning and as such can be a potent retention force on campus" (p.244). To be effective, advising must be more than dispensing information and aiding in course selection. It must include the traditional functions of questioning, guiding, and planning with students. In addition, effective advising must include an open-door environment whereby students are made to feel comfortable in seeking out their adviser for consultation about both academic and personal problems. Purposeful intervention, or intentionally seeking out a student, is another element of quality advising which enhances retention.

Students want an advisor who while providing the necessary help and expertise, and will also give them the opportunity to try their own ideas. Students want advisors who are approachable, and who can relate to students outside the realm of the discipline. They also want advisors who are empathetic of their needs and difficulties. The ideal advisor trusts and respects his/her students while treating each one as an individual. O'Banion's (1994) model is a study in simplicity: "The process of advising includes the following dimensions: (1) exploration of life goals, (2) exploration of vocational goals, (3) program choice, (4) course choice, and (5) scheduling courses" (p.10).

The first four dimensions are highly complex operations and require a great deal of skill and knowledge on the part of the adviser. But O'Banion (1994) asserts, "Contrary to those systems in which advisers make decisions for students, this writer believes that students are responsible for making decisions throughout the process. It is the responsibility of the adviser to provide

information and a climate of freedom in which students can best make such decisions” (p.11). Undeniably, advising is a comprehensive process. It is a multi-faceted, continuous process of clarification, evaluation, and decision making that has the establishment of meaningful contact between a student and his/her advisor as its first agenda. Establishing a meaningful relationship between students and advisors is one important way to help students achieve the academic and social integration critical to improved retention (Frost, 1991).

Formal definitions of advising do exist. Crockett (1978), a nationally recognized authority on academic advising in higher education, defined advising as “assisting students to realize the maximum educational benefits available to them by helping them to better understand themselves and to learn to use the resources of the institution to meet their special educational needs and aspirations.” In short, advisors mediate the dissonance between what students expect from the educational environment and what they experience in that environment (Habley, 1981). Winston, Miller, Ender, Grites, and Associates (1984) offer the following definition of advising:

a systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the utilization of the full range of institutional and community resources (p.19).

More simply, advising is the only structured service on the campus in which all students have the opportunity for on-going, one-to-one contact with a concerned representative of the institution (Habley, 2002). Habley and Crockett (1988, p.9) offer a more operational definition:

[A]dvising is a developmental process which assists students in the clarification of their life and career goals and in the development of

educational plans for the realization of these goals. It is a decision-making process by which students realize their maximum educational potential through communication and information exchanges with an advisor; it is ongoing, multifaceted, and the responsibility of both students and advisors.

And in 1994, Gordon, an educator and author of books on the undecided student, adds that advisors should be, "helping individuals discover who they are in the context of making educational and occupational decisions and setting life and career goals." If students are to succeed in college and in life, the principles of advising must be considered essential to all phases of the institution. "Advising cannot be done in isolation. This process must be integrated among all constituents of the institution" (Grites, 1979, p.6). Advisors are in a unique position to champion and monitor this integration.

Two approaches to advising appear to be prominent in the literature. Inherent in each is an assumption about the nature of students. The first is a prescriptive approach that assumes that students are immature and irresponsible. Prescriptive advising makes students peripheral, not integral, to the educational planning process. The role of the advisor is not to facilitate and guide decision-making but, rather, to make decisions for students. Broadbridge, a well-known British author on issues in higher education, describes traditional advising this way:

The traditional/prescriptive advising scheme is a single-directional didactic activity: advisers limit their activities to providing information about courses, explaining registration procedures and ensuring students enroll in appropriate courses. The advising relationship is based on authority and provides little opportunity for the student to exercise control. This results in a relationship which is highly convenient and desirable to some advisers, allowing them to control yet remain relatively uninvolved in the relationship (1996).

The emphasis is clearly placed on providing professional services for students rather than engaging in any kind of personally transforming relationship. Rather than a prescriptive approach, educators have suggested advising be viewed from a student development theory perspective and seen as a form of teaching; encouraging students to develop their thinking skills and addressing long-term as well as short-term goals (Broadbridge, 1996).

Developmental advising, on the other hand, assumes that students are striving, responsible, and capable of self-direction and should be integral, not peripheral, to educational planning (Gordon, 1994). Through such advising, advisors help students to become integrated into the academic and social fabric of the institution; this integration has proven to contribute to student persistence and success (Tinto, 1993). The influence that advising can have on student retention can be most positive when those involved (both faculty and staff) view it as a developmental process, rather than a technical one synonymous with course registration. Advising, in this sense, is viewed as a partnership between the student and his or her advisor, with the advisor's role being defined as facilitator, educator, and integrator, rather than prescriber.

Undergraduate advising. Findings consistently link advising directly and indirectly to contact between faculty and students and persistence in college. Indeed, advising as a means of promoting student persistence is mentioned in the literature more often than any other student service, and empirical studies confirm the importance of advising to student retention (Thomas, 1990, p.193). Habley (1981), an internationally recognized author of books and articles on academic advising and a founding member of the National Academic Advising

Association (NACADA), touts academic advising as the “cornerstone” of student retention. Implicit in the advisement-retention connection is the assertion that quality advising provides the most significant mechanism through which students are able to clarify their educational goals and relate those goals to the post-secondary educational experience (Habley, 1981). An advisor is not solely responsible for the development of a student; however, when you stop to consider why advisement can have such a profound impact, the answer is clear.

Advisement centralizes the student’s goals and objectives and ties them to the educational experience. Classroom interactions can not, on average, bring the student’s wants, needs, and desires to the forefront. The one-to-one nature of advising opens the door for a connection to be built that fosters honesty and trust and allows for the use of best teaching practices that promote critical thinking and self-efficacy (Broadbridge, 1996).

Advising's place in undergraduate retention was first established with Beal’s and Noel's publication, *What Works in Student Retention* (1980), wherein inadequate academic advising was the greatest impediment to student retention. From a positive perspective, a "caring attitude of faculty and staff" was the strongest positive correlate with persistence (Beal & Noel, 1980). Forrest (1982) points to the efficacy of advising for achieving general education objectives and increasing student persistence: "the single most important move an institution can make to increase student persistence to graduation is to ensure that students receive the guidance they need at the beginning of the journey through college." While institutional integration has since been more broadly defined to address both social and academic connections with the college (Tinto, 1987), the

presumptive link between advising and retention remains. Effective retention programs have come to understand that greater faculty-student contact and sound advising are the very core of successful campus efforts to educate and retain students (e.g., Clark, 1989; Tinto, 1987b).

"A major factor in increasing student retention rates," suggests Clark (1989), "is the establishment of advising systems which take into account the developmental and academic needs of the students." As Noel (1978) posits,

An effective advising program is one prime factor in increasing student retention. Advising assists students in many ways, and each campus must make a concerted effort to develop a strategy to retain students. Students who receive effective advising tend to feel positive about the institution as a whole.

Services that help students develop skills in maneuvering and managing the complex higher education environment are critical (Attinasi, 1989). Effective advising assists the student in making sense of and negotiating the "physical, social, and academic/cognitive geography" (Attinasi, 1989, p.262) of the University. In this way students can make sound choices among alternative pathways they could travel in attaining academic and career goals.

Anderson and McGuire (1997), writing in *Academic Advising for Student Success and Retention*, asserts, "Advising is a key to student retention. The best way to keep students enrolled is to keep them stimulated, challenged and progressing toward a meaningful goal. The best way to do that—especially among new students—is through informed academic advising." Moreover, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, p.405), summarizing twenty years of research findings, concluded that a high quality advising program influences grades, student satisfaction, and student intentions, all of which have been shown to

affect student persistence. Tinto (1999), posing the question, 'What distinguishing characteristics would best promote student persistence?,' suggests,

advising should be an integral part of the [college] experience, not an adjunct to it. Advising should be woven into the fabric of the [Academy] in ways that promote student development and that provide clear, consistent, and accurate information that is easily accessible to students. It should reflect the best professional knowledge of the day. Quite simply, good advising should not be left to chance.

The most important factor determining faculty access seems to be competing demands for faculty time, including the number of graduate student advisees per faculty member and the size and relative instructional importance of an undergraduate program or second graduate track. This applies to all graduate divisions, whether laboratory sciences or Humanities, because of student expectations of genuine relationship and technical apprenticeship.

Graduate advising. In their research on graduate student retention and the eventual completion of their degree, Girves and Wemmerus (1988) conclude that the graduate student's relationship with the faculty, particularly with his or her advisor, can determine success in an academic program as well as in a professional career. When contact is missing or faculty supervision becomes a painful experience, the student is less likely to finish his or her coursework.

Girves and Wemmerus (1988) continue:

It is certain that a student's commitment to earning a degree in a particular discipline is continually modified by his or her experiences in that department. What the faculty do to stimulate the student's interest and to strengthen the student's commitment may ultimately determine the level of degree progress achieved by students in that department (p.186).

Although the faculty is unquestionably the first line of defense, advisors, in particular, play an equally significant, and growing, role. Ideally, an advisor

serves as a role model and becomes the primary socializing agent in the department. He/She establishes the standards of performance and the behavioral norms for his or her advisee. These standards are then reinforced by the advisor her/himself, by other faculty, and by more experienced graduate students.

The relationship between the graduate student and the graduate advisor is said to be an important component in the educating of graduate students (Brown-Wright, Dubick, & Newman, 1997). Since graduate education is meant to develop professional skills in the student and to socialize the student into the academic culture, it is logical that the student's advisor would be an important factor in this process. Research into doctoral education, for example, consistently emphasizes the importance of student-faculty relationships. Widnall (1988) points out that because the Ph.D. thesis is primarily an apprenticeship in research, a graduate student's success greatly depends on the nature of the relationship with her/his advisor. According to her, "the advisor is the primary gatekeeper for the professional self-esteem of the student" (Widnall, 1988, p.1743). Numerous reports in the literature spanning three decades have pointed to the importance of faculty-student interactions and early academic integration into the department as key factors in retaining doctoral students (Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Golde, 1996; Green, 1991; Harnett & Katz, 1977; Lovitts, 1997; Tinto, 1993). Specifically, faculty-student interaction directly affects whether students complete degrees, the time to degree, and student satisfaction with the experience of obtaining a doctoral degree.

Previous studies, among them Baird (1993), Bowen and Rudenstine (1992), Hodgson and Simoni (1995), Nerad and Cerny (1993), and Tinto (1993), have cited the advisor-advisee relationship as crucial to successful undergraduate degree completion. Moreover, these same studies indicated that students' satisfaction with doctoral programs was directly related to satisfaction (i.e., the quality of the student-faculty relationship) with their graduate advisors. A number of other research efforts, including Golde and Dore's (2001) study, *At Cross Purposes*, the National Doctoral Program Survey conducted by the NAGPS (2001), and Nyquist's *Revisioning the Ph.D.* project (2000), also suggest most students are satisfied with their advisor and report positive relationships, including the quality and quantity of time they spend together.

Specifically, Golde and Dore (2001) surveyed doctoral students in eleven arts and sciences disciplines at twenty-seven leading research universities. Their *Survey on Doctoral Education and Career Preparation*, a national study funded by Pew Charitable Trusts, feeds into a growing debate about doctoral education in the higher education community by adding the voice of students. The survey's title, *At Cross Purposes: What the Experiences of Today's Doctoral Students Reveal about Doctoral Education*, is illuminating. Citing a number of studies (e.g., AAU, 1998; NCES, 1999; NORC, 1999), it drives home the point that almost half of U.S. faculty members are part-timers, nearly one-third work at 2-year colleges, and only one-quarter of full-time faculty members work at research universities (Golde & Dore, 2001, p.20). Moreover and, perhaps, quite consequently, "the training doctoral students receive is not what they want, nor does it prepare them for the jobs they take," and "many students do not clearly

understand what doctoral study entails, how the process works and how to navigate it effectively" (Golde & Dore, 2001, p.3).

At the graduate level, advising has also been identified as impacting a student's success; however, the relationship is qualitatively different. The National Association of Graduate and Professional Students conducts annual web-based surveys of graduate students based on the *Graduate School Survey* conducted by Davis and Fiske at www.PhDs.org during the spring of 1999. The 2000 NAGPS survey (2001) involved over 32,000 graduate students and recent PhDs from 1,300 different programs at 399 universities in the US; many of the findings confirmed the earlier research of Golde and Dore (2001). The survey's executive summary draws our attention to the obvious. Simply put, "The common thread is that satisfaction is strongly linked to choice: Students want curricula broad enough to give them a choice of careers, they want information to ensure that their choices are informed, and they want the choices they make to be respected" (NAGPS, 2001). Golde and Dore (2001) "encourage faculty to take their advising responsibilities seriously and to undertake them deliberately" (p.45). Specifically, Golde and Dore (2001) define quality advising as consisting of providing relevant information for students about their training and what happens to graduates, placing more emphasis on teaching, encouraging more courses outside one's field, actively working with students, and being good mentors (pp.43-48) [see [Academic Mentoring](#) position paper here].

It's my sense ...

... all effective [academic] programs have effective advising at their very core.

From the graduate student's perspective, is the hands-off approach to graduate studies prevalent in higher education a *force-majeure*—a result of imbedded uncertainty—or is there something we can do? The tone of the research indicates much remains for us to do; focusing on the needs of our students is a step in the right direction. Colleges are systematic enterprises comprised of linking and interactive parts, and people and programs working together are important in achieving positive outcomes (Tinto 1987). “If academe is to go to the root causes of our problems,” contends Tierney (1998), “we need to rethink and, of consequence, restructure what we do. Change ought not come from around the edges, but rather go to some of our core activities” (p.3). Using Taine's analogy, it is incumbent upon us to get out of our room.

Research consistently finds that advisors are an important key in understanding why graduate students succeed to degree completion. The same research indicates that a graduate student's relationship with faculty advisors is the single most important element when assessing the quality of their graduate experience. Unfortunately, students also report that the single most disappointing aspect of their graduate experience is the quality of their relationship with their advisor. These findings clearly articulate the difference an advisor can make—not only in a student's persistence but, equally important, in their satisfaction with the overall doctoral experience. With that said, the challenges undoubtedly will be met, and will be met well, if advisors focus both

on gaining a greater understanding of the students they serve and on expanding their roles as mediators, interveners, and advocates for constructive change.

Tierney (1998b, p.8; 2000, pp.213, 218-219), writing from a “cultural perspective informed by critical theory,” is to the point in his recognition of the institution’s evolving, if not long overdue, responsibility:

In the past, researchers have suggested that students need to be integrated into the fabric of the institution, that both academic and social integration needs to take place, and that we ought to view college as a ritualistic transition point from one stage to another. In large part, the onus in such a model is on the individual. The individual integrates; the individual undergoes the ritual; the individual finds ways to fit into the academic and social milieu of the institution. What I am suggesting is that we turn the model on its head—that we develop a framework which has the negotiation of identity in academe as central to educational success.

Indeed, the burden of adaptation must shift from the students to the institutions.

“The challenge,” Tierney (2000) asserts, “is to develop ways in which an individual’s identity is affirmed, honored, and incorporated into the organization’s culture” (p.219). Perhaps the best way to increase our understanding is to hear what the students have to say to. Continuing, Tierney posits the obvious: “We begin by working from where the students are” (2000, p.221).

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