

QEP Literature Review: Student Advisement

Introduction

The following literature review addresses the issue of student advisement. Two points should be noted prior to reading. First, nearly all of the studies discussed here were conducted with small sample groups, and many of the authors conclude by calling for more research. Second, while some of the research focuses on community college students exclusively or at least takes two-year programs into account, many of the studies and discussions covered concentrate on advisement in four-year institutions. Because community colleges encounter many of the same challenges as four-year schools in the area of advisement, this research is still relevant to the issue.

Much of the recent literature in the area of academic advisement concentrates on the challenges inherent in interacting with students who come from a variety of backgrounds and hold different views (positive and negative) on their academic and career trajectories. The research suggests that through collaboration between departments and use of technology, advisors can provide assistance to advisees in terms of immediate needs (class scheduling, program requirements, etc.) while at the same time leading advisees to a broader view of their academic and vocational future.

Exploratory (Undecided) Students

Several recent studies address how advisors should go about understanding the various attitudes and outlooks they encounter in their advisees. Starling and Miller's (2011) study delves into the pessimistic attitudes (with regard to career choice) of incoming community college students who are undecided on a major. In their survey of 60 community college students using the Career Thinking Inventory (CTI) assessment tool, the authors found that "community college students with undecided majors exhibited a significantly greater degree of negative thinking about career choices than did the average US college student" (p. 766). The authors state that while advisors should help students understand the basics of how academic statuses work (e.g., maintaining a minimum GPA, avoiding academic probation), a collaborative approach to advising may help to address the larger issue. They suggest that academic advisors and counselors work together to address not just students' academic statuses but their mindsets as they set career goals (pp. 765-766).

Scanner Students

Bloom, Tripp, and Shaffer (2011) define a "scanner" as a student who finds selecting just one interest or career path to be overwhelming (p. 55). Scanners have a relentless desire to pursue new interests or passions, and feel trapped by making just one career choice. These students feel that if they make that "one" choice of an academic major or career path, they may miss out on another, more rewarding option or a new, intriguing area of interest in the career world. This condition can be self-defeating since the student has an expanding set of interests which prevents him/her from concentrating on any one specific major, therefore ending in failure (p. 55). Advisors should encourage students with strong "scanner" tendencies to consider subsequent careers and jobs, rather than ultimate ones (p. 59).

Foreclosure Students

On the other end of the spectrum from the "scanner" is the "foreclosure" student. Shaffer (2011) discusses the task of advising "foreclosure" students, whose failure to explore personal and vocational identity may threaten their academic success. These students have prematurely committed themselves to an academic major or career path without exploring their options (p. 62). A foreclosure student's certainty of commitment to a specific major or career may mask an illusory and unsatisfactory state of identity development. Foreclosure students have committed to someone else's values, beliefs, and roles, and are blindly guided in that direction by others (e.g. parents, partners, peers, siblings). Therefore, because their identity is not based on self-exploration, but rather on someone else's views and dreams, these students tend to be less secure in their identities. Moreover, they lack the academic profile to achieve these false goals, and end in failure (p. 64). The authors recommend the use of probing questions to explore advisees' true feelings about the major they have chosen, and referral to a campus counselor if the situation warrants (pp. 72-73).

Combating Course Withdrawal

This issue of students' reliance on parents and peers as sources of information to the exclusion of advice from instructors and advisors is also illuminated by Wheland, Butler, Qammar, Bobkoff Katz, and Harris's (2012) study of students' feelings surrounding course withdrawal. In addition to revealing the feelings of failure that students experience upon withdrawing from classes, statements from follow-up interviews indicate that students often prefer to consult parents and peers over advisors and instructors when it comes to making decisions about whether or not to withdraw from a class. "Students rarely mentioned academic advisors as sources of information, seeing them as unrelated to immediate decisions but as consultants for future direction" (p. 22). The authors offer four recommendations to advisors facing the course withdrawal issue: 1) that they educate others on campus (administrators, instructors, and students) about the problems that accompany course withdrawal (e.g., negativity and feelings of failure in the student); 2) that they impress upon students the fact that course withdrawal is often an indicator that academic problems may continue in the future; 3) that they show students the value of advisors as sources of information; and 4) that they use the crises of confidence that accompany course withdrawal decisions as teachable moments-- that they "capitalize on moments of affective dissonance caused by course withdrawal and guide students through learning and development processes that positively inform their decision-making processes" (p. 24).

Advisor and Advisee Relationships

The notion of "challenging" students in the course of the advisement process is a common thread throughout the research discussed to this point—that is, helping students to broaden or narrow their focus and to change course as needed. Hughey (2011) discusses this issue explicitly in her study of the qualities that make for successful advisors, pulling together research on effective interpersonal relations and offering suggestions tailored to the advisement process. She pays particular attention to the types of probing questions advisors may need to ask in order to help advisees set and achieve goals, and urges advisors to delve into advisees' personal stories and to help students build confidence in their own skills in order to set up a more positive outlook for the future (p. 26). Advisement sometimes also involves confronting students with unpleasant truths (such as unwelcome changes in academic offerings or career requirements) or

pointing out issues with an advisee's habits or thinking (such as failure to seek help or tutoring even when facing possible failure in a class). Hughey addresses the potentially confrontational interactions that may stem from such challenges and stresses the importance of creating a non-judgmental attitude and environment (p. 28).

In her speech to the 2011 National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Annual Conference Pamela Shockley-Zalabak (2011) also discusses the advisor-advisee relationship. She suggests that advisors focus on interaction design--that is, that they take a closer look at what actually happens in interactions between students and advisors, be it in one-on-one sessions, orientations, or online meetings, and come up with creative options for how best to connect with students (pp. 15-16). Shockley also contends that many institutions are not designed to facilitate communication between departments and services (academic advisement, financial aid, career planning, etc.), that they “do not meet modern efficiency and productivity standards. More importantly, they do not meet effectiveness standards because they do not help students with a whole experience. Simply put, most institutions are not designed correctly” (p. 14).

Advising Traditional Students

Much of the literature points to differences between various groups of students and how an understanding of these differences may help advisors to provide more effective guidance. Montag, Campo, Weissman, Walmsley, and Snell's (2012) study on the advisement expectations of millennial students in a four-year institution has implications for any school catering to this particular generation. The authors propose a split model of advising, with a staff advisor to help students adjust to life on campus and a faculty advisor to help students determine a major. The study also points out several key traits of millennials that are more broadly relevant, such as an expectation of individualized attention from advisors (p. 29), an appreciation of teamwork (leading the authors to suggest that peer mentors might be a useful part of the advising process), and a continued dependence on their parents (p. 33).

Peer Advising

Latino and Unite (2012) suggest a collaborative relationship between academic advisors and peer advisors. The authors discuss a variety of ways in which peers mentors may be valuable to incoming students--as part of the orientation process, as tutors, and as academic coaches. The authors focus on four-year institutions, but note that a system of peer advisement may be useful at all institution types and sizes, particularly where faculty members have a full course and advisement load. Peer advisement is not intended to replace faculty advising but to enhance it: “Common components of a peer advising program include peer advisor-advisee partners within the same major, [and] regular communication between peer advisors and faculty partners” (p. 37). Using peer mentors in the advisement process might prove one viable strategy in helping students to view the advisement process as holding as much value as advice from parents and friends.

Advising Non-traditional Students

Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) discuss the Schlossberg's Transition Model in effectively advising veterans and nontraditional students. Military veteran enrollment at two-year public colleges exceeds enrollment than at any other type of higher education institutions (p. 55). Advisors at two-year colleges will likely have increased contact with the student-veteran

and nontraditional student population compared to other academic institutions because of recent military actions and the deflated economy. Under the Schlossberg model the four factors which influence the quality of the transition for these students are: *situation, self, support, and strategies* (p. 56). Academic advisors can ask specific questions when advising these students. Topics of discussion may include demographic characteristics; forms of social and economic support; and how the transition into higher education is viewed (i.e., positively or negatively, with confidence or apprehension) (p. 56). Nontraditional and student-veterans may need to experience a specialized orientation to relearn study skills and become reacquainted with the classroom and academic load (p. 57).

In his address to the 2011 NACADA Annual Conference, James Applegate (2012) of the Lumina Foundation argues that advisement programs should fit the needs of the 21st century student, who may commute rather than live on campus and who often has work and family responsibilities to contend with in addition to academics (pp. 7-8). Given the financial challenges facing this type of student, advisors should advocate for their institutions to become more adult-learner friendly. Applegate's five suggestions for advisors are 1) that they advocate for adult learners; 2) that they push for thorough and open reporting of advisement data in their institutions; 3) that they investigate how the institution spends financial aid money and suggest that it be channeled into avenues that support student completion; 4) that they steer the campus toward a primary focus on completion and success rather than enrollment rates; and 5) that they revamp their own advising with the 21st century student in mind. This final point is broken down into further steps, including setting up partnerships with high schools so as to start the advisement process as early as possible, and simplifying academic options for students who become frustrated with complex course catalogs (pp. 9-10).

Hanover Research (2013) in its *Academic Advising for Adult Students* report summarizes how the needs of adult students differ from those of "traditional students," emphasizing the time and work pressures that face adult learners. "Perhaps to a greater extent than even traditional students, adult students place a very high priority on achieving their degree in the least amount of time possible" (p. 9). Suggestions for working with adult students include preparing advisors to address issues such as financial aid and career goals in addition to providing more traditional academic advisement (p. 11).

The higher education private consulting firm Noel-Levitz (2011) finds in its survey of adult learners (using data from 29,679 students at 61 four-year institutions and 4,749 students from 18 two-year institutions) that adult students see advisement as in need of improvement. Satisfaction is high when it comes to understanding expectations for individual classes, but low with regards to receiving information that encompasses the many elements that guide the college experience, such as financial aid information and program requirements (p. 9).

Articulation with Four-Year Colleges and Universities

This theme of dissatisfaction is echoed in Gard, Paton, and Gosselin's (2012) research into the role advisement plays in the successful transfer of community college students to four-year institutions. The authors interviewed and surveyed a small group of students in the process of transferring from community colleges to an upper-level program in a research university. Responses were mixed on the subject of advisement, with some students reporting negative experiences. "Advisors would tell students that they could take certain courses but when it came time to transfer to the university, the credits were not accepted. In addition, some felt that, because of the poor quality of advising and being told to take whatever courses they wanted, it took four years to finish at the community college" (p. 834). A follow-up survey showed that a

majority of the students were dissatisfied with the advisement process within the community college, at least as it pertained to the transfer process (pp. 843-844).

According to the Noel-Levitz (2010) *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report*, which focuses on responses from 229,000 students at 248 two-year community colleges, "Perceptions of academic advising are more critical at community colleges than they are typically at four-year private and public institutions." Community college advisors often do not forge a strong connection with students that allows them to be seen by their advisees as more than simply the bearers of course schedule information (p. 7).

Collecting Advisement Data

Tracking student satisfaction in the area of advisement must be part of any plan to improve an advisement program. Bitz (2010) discusses the use of a survey to determine students' level of satisfaction with their advisor. Bitz's survey of freshmen attending a small four-year university focuses on "perceptions of the advising relationship, including advisor concern, advisor contact, and advising relationship quality" (p. 54). The survey itself is included in the article, and may be a useful tool in measuring student perceptions of their advisors.

Online Prerequisite Registration Systems

The advising process may also benefit from registration and planning technology, particularly as online registration systems provide students with the chance to examine their options prior to seeing an advisor. Soria and Mumpower (2012) posit that "prerequisite registration systems can lay a foundation for developmental advising opportunities between advisors and students" (p. 32). The authors observed the grades and retention status of students in a four-year university with no mandatory advisement system before and after the institution of a prerequisite registration system and found that GPA's and re-enrollment likelihood both increased the semester after the system's implementation (pp. 34-35). It should be noted that other factors may have played a role in this positive result, and a correlation between online enrollment systems and grades cannot be assumed without further study. The authors also found, however, that students who were kept from enrolling in a desired class due to failure to complete necessary prerequisites often sought out their advisors. "As a result of the prerequisite system, advisors said they could spend more time in a developmental advising capacity," meaning that advisors were able to concentrate more on the student's overall educational plan (p. 37). It should also be noted that this positive outcome depends on the student being directed to speak to an advisor after an unsuccessful attempt to register for a class.

In his examination of the Virginia Community College System (VCCS)'s development and use of the [Virginia Education Wizard](#), an online career and educational planning tool, Herndon (2011) presents self-service technology (SST) as a way of meeting the needs of students in a time of shrinking budgets and resources. The career and academic planning component of the system's SST has proved a popular application for successful students and a valuable timesaver for staff. "In looking exclusively at community college students, an examination of the first-term grade point average (GPA) among Wizard users and nonusers identified that 46 percent of users earned a GPA of 3.0 or greater while only 38 percent of nonusers earned a GPA of 3.0 or greater" (p. 24).

Summary

Several threads run through the research discussed here. First, advisors should gain an appreciation for the different attitudes, situations, and backgrounds of the students coming to them. Second, a satisfactory advisement experience involves both a grasp of immediate needs (e.g., courses and program requirements) and an ability to help students see the big picture in terms of their careers and academic future (as well as how this fits with their financial options). The "academic" piece of advisement must fit with a holistic advisement package that pays attention not only to the next step in the student's path through the institution but to the student's financial situation, career goals, and general life circumstances. Third, collaboration between departments (and even other institutions, such as high schools) and the use of advisement technology may ease some of the burdens of the academic advisor.

Collectively, the research suggests that one size does not fit all--some students may expect and need a great deal of personal time and attention. Others may simply need accurate information about courses but may be able to take care of much of the registration process themselves. Each student's situation is different. Nothing can replace people skills – the ability to listen and offer non-judgmental guidance, and the ability to ask the right questions – but advisors should maintain contact with multiple departments (financial aid, student support services, career planning, etc.) in order to help students reach a full understanding of their educational and career options.

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