AN ASSESSMENT OF ACADEMIC ADVISING IN DALE BUMPERS COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL, FOOD AND LIFE SCIENCES

Abstract

Academic advising was evaluated at a southern land-grant college, as part of an integrated approach to improving student retention. Undergraduate students (n=429) in a college of agriculture were surveyed to determine the style of advising (developmental or prescriptive) their academic advisors use in their current advising situations. Students also identified the style of advising (developmental or prescriptive) they prefer. Students (64%) identified their current advising situations as developmental in nature. Nearly 84% of respondents prefer their advisors to use a developmental advising style. Student satisfaction with advising was also determined. Respondents were satisfied with the advising they have received in Bumpers College.

Introduction

Student retention has long been a concern of higher education. Institutions have long desired to understand why students leave and if there is anything that can be done to influence the students to stay. Developing effective retention programs proves difficult for institutions due to the variable characteristics that influence student departure (Tinto, 1993). Universities must use a multi-faceted approach to increasing student retention. One area that should receive attention is academic advising.

Theoretical Framework

Student retention is a very important topic for institutions to understand yet its complexity does not allow for easy solutions. Many factors, such as race, gender, GPA, and social involvement, are related to student retention. It is a priority of most institutions to determine what factors cause their students to leave. They have long focused on things that they have no control over, such as high school GPA, socioeconomic status, and gender (Beal & Noel, 1980). Colleges and universities need to focus on aspects of retention that they can control (Beal & Noel, 1980).

There are numerous reasons that influence a student's decision to remain at in institution or to leave. There is no one factor that is responsible for student attrition. Due to its complex nature, it is very difficult to come up with a single solution that will increase student retention. Not only is student retention a mystery for most institutions, it also has a significant impact on the institutions and the students.

When a student leaves a college or university without earning a degree, it has a negative impact on both the school and the student. Remaining in school and obtaining a college degree helps students develop cognitive skills, as well as enable them to get better jobs and to make more money (Astin, 1993). Declining or poor retention rates at an institution can have a negative

impact on the way future students, legislators, and stakeholders view the institution (Lau, 2003). They can influence future contributions to the institution as well as lead to decreased overall funding. Besides gifts to the university or funding opportunities that may be affected by high attrition rates, colleges and universities lose thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition, fees, and future alumni contributions when students are not retained (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004). Having students that do not finish their degrees not only has detrimental effects on the institution, but also can have a negative impact on the student. Students who do not earn a college degree are in a position to earn much less over a lifetime of work (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004).

Before student attrition can be addressed and a solution formulated, the factors that influence attrition must be understood. There are numerous factors that have been associated with student retention. There have been countless studies conducted on student retention and the factors that influence it.

Beal and Noel (1980) found that inadequate academic advising as the major characteristic linked to attrition at their institutions. The also found that a caring attitude of faculty and staff as the single most potent retention agent on campus. Forrest (1982) reiterated this by saying that probably 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 graduation. Anderson (1985) suggests that individuals who take a personal interest in students and relate to them as persons can promote persistence in a variety of ways.

Effective advising is linked to improved student retention and is vital to students as they develop their educational and career goals (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). Low (2000) found that students ranked being satisfied with academic advising as important to very important in their college experience.

The advising process allows the development of beneficial relationships between the student and teacher, which as discussed earlier, has a positive impact on student retention (Crockett, 1985). Beal and Noel (1980) stated that improvement of academic advising is the most often cited action program undertaken by institutions to improve retention.

Student Satisfaction

Student dissatisfaction with certain aspects of college has been linked to attrition (Roszkowski & Ricci, 2005). Low (2000) found that 2-year institutions are out performing 4-year institutions in meeting student expectations. Four-year schools, like the University of Arkansas must work at meeting expectations and improving student satisfaction. It is important for schools to improve student satisfaction because “students whose needs are actively addressed by their institution are more likely to be successful in achieving their educational goals and more likely to persist” (Low, 2000, p. 3). It is important to keep students satisfied. From a business perspective it is less expensive to keep an existing customer than to recruit a new one, and satisfied customers are more likely to be retained than non-satisfied customers (Babin & Griffin,

1998). In higher education, the student is equal to the customer and student dissatisfaction with certain aspects of college has been shown to be predictive of attrition (Heverly, 1999). Student satisfaction is clearly linked with retention, however this connection is often ignored (Roszkowski & Ricci, 2005).

Low (2000) concluded that successful institutions share three basic attributes. “They focus on the needs of their students, they continually improve the quality of the educational experience, and they use student satisfaction data to shape their future directions” (Low, 2000, p. 2). It is important for institutions to determine if students are satisfied with various aspects of their educational experience. Student satisfaction measures how effectively campuses deliver what students expect, need, and want (Low, 2000). When student expectations are met or exceeded by the institution, the result is higher satisfaction with the institution, which positively influences retention (Low, 2000).

There are several factors that can influence student satisfaction. The quality of the relationship between students and their professors is of critical importance in determining satisfaction with the institution (Toy, 1985). These relationships can be developed through activities such as academic advising. Astin (1977) found that student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other variable. Astin also found that students who interact frequently with faculty are more satisfied with all aspects of their institutional experience. Positive experiences with faculty, as well as effective academic advising are related to student satisfaction. Students receiving effective academic advising tend to feel positive not only about the process but the institution as well, and this positive attitude can be a strong contributing factor to student persistence (Crocket, 1978).

The Dale Bumpers College has a goal of increasing student retention and in turn increasing graduation rates. The College’s goal is to have a 66% 6-year graduation rate. To obtain this goal, factors affecting retention, including academic advising, must be addressed.

Advising Theory

Academic advising services are one key to student retention (Glennen, 1976; Noel, 1976; Carstensen & Silberhorn, 1979). Carstensen and Silberhorn (1979) found retention rates increased 25% or more for some institutions that improved academic advising programs. Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites (1984) believe that many college leaders and administrators are beginning to look to the advising process as a place to begin to affect student satisfaction and retention, as well as total student development. “Academic advising, effectively delivered, can be a powerful influence on student development and learning and as such, can be a potent retention force on the campus” (Crockett, 1985, p. 244). Effective advising is clearly linked to improved student retention, and good advising is vital to students as they develop their educational and career goals (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). According to Grites & Gordon (2000) an academic advisor’s role should be to facilitate student learning, hopefully in: educational, career, and personal areas.

While there are many theories on advising, one that is widely accepted is developmental

and prescriptive advising.

Developmental

Ender, Winston, and Miller (1984) defined developmental academic advising as "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. It both stimulates and supports students in their quest for an enriched quality of life. Developmental academic advising relationships focus on identifying and accomplishing life goals, acquiring skills and attitudes that promote intellectual and personal growth, and sharing concerns for each other and for the academic community (p. 19). The use of developmental advising is linked to student retention. Anderson (1985) said that faculty who take a personal interest in students and relate to them as persons can promote persistence in a variety of ways. Developmental advising is based on a personal relationship between the student and advisor, and integrates academic, career, and personal goals into advisement, rather than focus only on academic or career goals (Jordan, 2000; Winston & Sandor, 1984). As stated earlier, Astin (1993) found that a strong faculty-student relationship influences retention.

Developmental advisors help students with personal growth. They can stimulate student growth by questioning students about their goals and progress, as well as by listening to what students say and how they say it (Jordan, 2000). Developmental advisors emphasize positive strengths, abilities, and skills of students rather than focus on limitations or failures (Jordan, 2000). Developmentally trained advisors encourage self-reliance in students by helping students set realistic goals and make informed, responsible decisions (Jordan, 2000).

Winston and Sandor (1984) found that students rated teaching, how to register for classes, problem-solving approaches, processes for deciding on an academic major, and goal setting strategies as important advising activities. Problem-solving, major selection, and goal setting strategies are all factors that fall under developmental advising. Other developmental factors that students rated as important were that advisors assist with class selection but allow students to make decisions; form a relationship of sufficient closeness that the student is known beyond his/her file, test scores, and grades; and relate the advising process to selection of academic majors and future careers (Winston & Sandor, 1984). Winston & Sandor (1984) recommended that colleges seek to implement a developmental concept of advising.

Prescriptive

Prescriptive advising is on the other end of the advising spectrum. Prescriptive advising is authority-based, answering only specific questions and not taking individual development into consideration (Jordan, 2000). Prescriptive advising is relatively impersonal in nature (Jordan, 2000). Often times, advisors new to the profession may function mostly on the prescriptive end of the advising continuum (Jordan, 2000). As students are able to access more of the prescriptive type information from the web, students' expectation of advisement will be raised. This expectation will in turn motivate effective advisors to develop better communication skills and move to more developmental advising (Jordan, 2000).

Academic advising is one area that has been related to student persistence, and it is an area that institutions can actually do something about. Beal and Noel (1980) found that inadequate academic advising was the most important factor that negatively influenced student retention. Crockett and Levitz (1984) found that the majority of institutions have not implemented an evaluation system of their advising program or individual adviser performance. If advising is one of the most important factors that influences student retention (Beal & Noel, 1980), then there should be some sort of evaluation of the system to determine if it is meeting students' needs. There is a clear need for institutions to develop more formal methods of assessing the effectiveness of their advising programs (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). Student dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their college experience, like academic advising, has been linked to attrition (Roszkowski & Ricci, 2005).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to evaluate academic advising in the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences. The advising style of advisors in the Dale Bumpers is unknown. Furthermore, the preferred advising style of students is unknown. The advising in Bumpers College may not be the style that students want and need. This may be an incongruence that causes students to leave the institution (Tinto, 1984). Knowing how advisors advise, and how advisees want to be advised, will allow the College to better meet the needs of the students. Crockett and Levitz (1984) suggested the need for institutions to formally evaluate their advising programs to determine their effectiveness. The research objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine the style of advising (prescriptive vs. developmental) that is used by College advisors as determined by the Academic Advising Inventory.
2. Determine the preferred advising style (prescriptive vs. developmental) of students enrolled in Dale Bumpers College as determined by the Academic Advising Inventory.
3. Determine students' satisfaction with academic advising as determined by the Academic Advising Inventory.

Procedures

The population for this study consisted of all undergraduate students enrolled in the Dale Bumpers College during the Spring 2006 semester (N=1187). The Academic Advising Inventory (AAI) was used to assess academic advising in Bumpers College. "The AAI was designed to measure three aspects of academic advising: a) the nature of advising relationships, seen along a developmental-prescriptive continuum (Part I), b) the frequency of activities taking place during advising sessions (Part II), and c) satisfaction with advising (Part III). Part IV of the AAI was designed to gather demographic-type information about the student and his or her advising situation" (Winston & Sandor, n.d.). Part V of the AAI determines the student's ideal academic advisor.

The AAI was administered to intact classes of students. A list of all undergraduate classes in Bumpers College was obtained from the Bumpers College Dean's office. A purposeful sample of classes was chosen in order to have a representative sample of departments (Animal Science, Interior Design, Biological Engineering, etc.) and course level (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior).

Instructors of selected classes were contacted and asked if they would be willing to allow class time to be used for the study. The researcher arranged to visit each class to administer the instrument. Before administering the instrument, the researcher read a standard set of instructions. Students completed the instrument and then placed them in a manilla envelope. There was no student identification on the instrument, in order to maintain confidentiality.

Part I of the AAI assessed how the student and their advisor approach academic advising. The students were instructed to respond to the statements in terms of their current advisor. There were 14 pairs of statements in Part I of the AAI. The student had to decide 1) which one of the two statements most accurately described the academic advising they received in the past year, and then 2) decide how accurate or true that statement is (from very true to slightly true). The scale describes the nature of the advising relationship and the breadth of topics and concerns addressed during advising sessions. It represents a continuum between prescriptive and developmental advising—as perceived by the students (Winston & Sandor, 1984).

Part III of the AAI was used to determine students' satisfaction with the advising they had received during the studied academic year. Students' responded to five items using a four-place Likert-type scale. Part IV of the AAI was used to collect demographic information such as age, academic level, and academic major.

Part V of the Academic Advising Inventory (AAI) was used to determine students' preferred advising style (Winston & Sandor, n.d.). This section evaluated students' perception of their ideal academic advisor. This is their preferred advising style. Students responded to 14 pairs of statements. The students decided 1) which of the statements from each pair best described their ideal academic advisor (what they would want an advisor to be like) and then 2) how important that statement is for an ideal advisor. Each pair of statements included a developmental statement and a prescriptive statement, but they were not identified as either. The students were reminded that this section is not an evaluation of their present or past advisors, but their perception of their ideal advisor.

Findings

A total of 429 instruments were completed. A majority of respondents were female (64.8%) and white/Caucasian (87.6%). The respondents were fairly evenly distributed by classification with Freshmen-27.4%, Sophomores-23%, Juniors-24.4%, and Seniors-22.5%. Respondents represented all 15 academic majors in the Bumpers College.

Scale reliability was assessed by calculating coefficient alpha. Reliability estimates were

.80 and .79 for current advising style and preferred advising style, respectively.

Nearly two-thirds (64.3%) of the respondents described the advising style used by their current advisor as developmental, as determined by Part I of the Academic Advising Inventory. Nearly 84% of respondents described their ideal advisor as one who uses a developmental style, as determined by Part V of the Academic Advising Inventory. Scores for advising style could range from 14 to 112, with the higher the score the more developmental the nature of the advising, whether practiced or preferred. Scores for prescriptive advising style range from14-56, and scores for developmental advising style range from 57-112. Table 1 shows the scores for advising style.

Table 1
Respondents' Mean Score (± SD) of Academic Advising Style as Reported by the AAI

Variable	n	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Current advising style	346	71.6	16.8	25	111
Preferred advising style	377	85.6	16.2	37	112

Both sets of scores fell in the developmental advising style range. The preferred advising style scores were higher on the developmental scale than the scores for the current advising style.

Students reported that they were satisfied with the academic advising they have received. Table 2 displays the mean scores for the five questions rating satisfaction. Satisfaction was rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, and 4-Strongly Agree.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Satisfaction with Advising

Variable	Mean	SD
1. I am satisfied in general with the academic advising I have received.	3.0	.94
2. I have received accurate information about courses, programs, and requirements through academic advising.	3.0	.83
3. Sufficient prior notice has been provided about deadlines related to institutional policies and procedures.	2.8	.82
4. Advising has been available when I needed it.	3.1	.84
5. Sufficient time has been available during advising sessions.	3.2	.83

Note: n=424

Conclusions

While nearly 84% of respondents indicated they would prefer for their academic advisor to use a developmental approach to advising, only 64% of respondents reported that their current advisor uses a developmental approach. The advising style scores were higher for preferred style than for current advising style. The higher score indicates the preferred advising style is more developmental in nature than the advising students are currently receiving. Not only did more students prefer developmental advising than received developmental advising, but the preferred advising style is farther down the developmental-prescriptive continuum than the advising style received. This incongruence in preferred and received advising may be a factor in student attrition.

Students responded that they are satisfied with the academic advising they have received. Respondents agreed with all five of the questions evaluating student satisfaction of academic advising. While many students are not receiving the style of advising they would prefer, they are still satisfied with advising.

Discussion and Recommendations

Academic advising and students' satisfaction with advising can not alone explain student retention, but it is one factor that can impact student retention. Due to respondents' preference for developmental academic advising, faculty in Bumpers College should work toward a more developmental style of advising. Increasing students' satisfaction with their advising experience and ultimately their college experience can have a positive impact on student retention (Low, 2000). In order to have the most effective academic advising, students' preferred advising style and advisors' advising styles should be matched. Therefore, the major recommendation from this study is for the College to identify advisors and their advising style and match them with advisees with similar preferred advising style.

This subject warrants further investigation. Specific studies on the academic advising in individual departments and majors within Bumpers College could yield insight into varying retention rates within the College. Further analysis could identify if matching preferred and received advising style increases students' satisfaction with advising.

This evaluation of academic advising reveals that most students are receiving the type of advising they prefer and are satisfied with academic advising. Knowing this, administration and faculty can presume academic advising is not a major factor in student attrition in Bumpers College.

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