The Impact of Advising on Degree Completion and Student Retention

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Abstract

Graduation rates remain at low levels along with low retention rates and diminishing rates of students feeling connected to their school, which continue to be a major challenge for universities across the nation. This study will investigate the link to these factors and student sense of belonging as it relates to advisement at a university in southwest Louisiana with a student population of roughly 10,000 students. In many instances, advising has become-it-yourself" advising process that has plagued advising for some time for schools across the nation. When students are permitted to set up their own class schedule, several problems quickly emerge, which range from them selecting the wrong courses to selecting courses to fit time, not degree programs. The proliferation of online platforms creates a greater opportunity for students into a self checklist process, which increases problems related to self-advising, choppy advising and a greater potential for a disconnected student. The amount of time students spend with advisors are clear indicators of degree completion and the level of retention of students, which has long and short term benefits. Money is not the main reason students leave school as opposed to issues related to advisement and connection with the school, which are factors that can be addressed as will be illustrated in this paper. The main sections of this paper will be the foundational aspects of advising, the general advising atmosphere, student retention.

Keywords: student retention; student graduation; student engagement; student turnover

Introduction

The opportunity to attend college is an important objective for students and an added value for society from a financial standpoint and various other aspects (Gentry 2014). The historically low rate has made student success a longstanding interest of educational researchers (Hu, McCormick, & Gonyea, 2012; Wang, 2009). Hence, retention and graduation rates as well as retaining students have served as key indicators of performance for institutions of higher education (Titus, 2004). The ability for schools to attain higher graduation rates is a perplexing problem and that many schools are not making a serious effort at addressing, which is evident by the weak advising programs. Even though, many studies tried to find the factors affecting student retention and graduation, the role of advisor has not been discussed in any insightful manner as it relates to stream of research in this area. Thus, this research would examine whether student advising plays a significant role in retaining students and completing their degree program. Specifically, we studied the impact of advising within the College of Business (COB) at McNeese State University (MSU) in terms of dropout intention and degree completion.

Degree completion, student advising, and student retention are the three factors that will serve as the foundation for this study. This research furthers the existing research regarding the need for advisors and the school to better engage students in the advising process. By better engaging students in the advising process, the school and adviser will be better able to build a productive relationship with the student to place them in a better position to be successful in their degree plan and career experience. The study focused on the need for more productive advisement programs to achieve higher student graduation rates, and increase student retention in the MSU COB. The first section will focus on the foundational aspects of advising and the general advising atmosphere. Student degree completion along with support factors from the COB and the school makes up the second section for this study.

Literature review

While there is, much literature pertaining to advising college students, it typically focuses on" how-to" advisement actions as well as general insight pertaining to general student advising. This is compounded by the fact that most universities lack a formal program related to student

advising or ones that measure the success in this area. To this point, most schools do not promote the program with a mission, vision, values or any other strategic guidance related to student advisement (Lassibille & Gomez, 2008). In 1992, only 60% of postsecondary institutions had a written policy statement on advising, and many of these published statements did not included well defined program goals, objectives, or methods of evaluation (Habley, 1993). More current literature illustrates that the percentage has remained relatively constant. At best, this suggests a lack of clarity about advising program mission and goals; at worst, it suggests that advising is not considered to be a bona fide program with an educational mission at a school (Hunt, 2004). A detailed process related to the overall advising program is a critical need to measure the success of the advisers and the overall program especially as it pertains to student graduation and student retention. Any statement of program purpose should be consistent with, and connected to the college mission statement, thus underscoring the centrality of the advisement program and its pivotal role in the realization of broader institutional goals (Cashin, 1990). Evaluating the effectiveness of academic advisors and advisement programs sends a strong and explicit message to all members of the college that advising is an important professional responsibility; conversely, failure to do so tacitly communicates the message that this student service is not highly valued by the school (Cuseo, 2003).

Typically, the only assessment a school undertakes pertaining to advising relates to the accreditation requirements the schools must adhere to on an-going basis. While there are scattered use of evaluations and assessments used throughout the higher education sector, there little in the way of assessing adviser performance against key performance indicators (KPI's) and uniformed standards. This is one of the serious downfalls of trying to retain COB students and getting them engaged with the school as this process creates an ambiguous journey for the COB student. While the majority of schools "record" the history of the student advisement, in some form, very few of them assess their program, outside that of checking off classes. Advising students is a critical factor for COB students, regardless of whether they are advised by faculty members or designated advisers. Advisers often can have one of the most significant impacts on a COB student's academic journey by playing a critical role in the student's ability to graduate and to be retained by the MSU COB. Almost 30 percent of college students reported they did not have an advisor whether it faculty or designated advising staff (Hu, McCormick, & Gonyea 2012). This is a perplexing phenomenon given the impact on students versus the lack of advising depth.

This is a concerning number because it means, for one reason or another, these students are engaging in a "do-it-yourself" advising process. This is made more problematic with the proliferation of online access to course scheduling assets and the ability to advisers to direct students to this area as opposed to meeting with the student. This process has little, if any, value to the student during their degree plan journey, outside of allowing them to try correctly check off class needs and by its very nature doesn't encourage student retention with the school (Light, 2004). Even if a student has a designated adviser, they are not guaranteed to get the advising they need to make appropriate decisions about their courses, career and additional factors impacting their need for successful advising (Cashin, 1990). Less than 40 percent of university students felt their advisor kept them up to date on academic requirements, referred them to helpful sources, aided them identify obstacles, or helped them explore career options (Hu, McCormick, & Gonyea 2012). Approximately 60 percent of students reported that their meetings with advisors lasted 15 minutes or less and less than half thought this time was sufficient (Gordon, Habley, & Associates 2000). It is very difficult to adequately address opportunities and challenges related to the degree plan and connect facing the COB student in such a short time period or delve into a manner in which the student can explore school connection avenues or other critical aspects of their academic journey. Typically, the topics during an advising session focused on scheduling registration and general administration procedures, although students wanted to talk more about career planning and academic difficulties (Rumberger, 2006).

Among the biggest problems related to student advising is the dearth of formal and recorded adviser evaluation and training related to the impact of advising on the success of student graduation and student retention (Oja, 2012). Advising is based on a concern for the student's total education and academic journey, which entails teaching students how to deal with various challenges and opportunities that arise in a collegiate environment that may affect retention or graduation rates as well as how connected students feel to the university. Research repeatedly points to the conclusion that students value most highly academic advisors who are seen as: (1) available/accessible, (2) knowledgeable/helpful, (3) personable/approachable, and (4) counselors/mentors (Gordon, Habley, & Associates, 2000). This study supports these types of advisers have higher student graduation rates and higher student retention rates. Thus, academic advising should *not* primarily be an administrative function, *not* obtaining a signature to schedule classes, *not* a conference held once a term and not a "paper" relationship (Ender, et.

al., 1983). Yet, many schools follow this process while not paying close enough attention to degree completion, student retention factors or level of connectivity to the university until it is typically too late in the process to make a difference for many students, if at all. The formation of relationships that assure that at least one educator has close enough contact with each student to assess and influence the quality of that student's educational experience is realistic (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, & Associates, 1984).

About a third of college students entered without a clear career goal and often struggle to find their way (Chen, 2012). According to Tinto (1993), academic reasons represent only 20-30% of those who drop out of college with the remaining 70-80% of students leaving for various reasons. These numbers fall into line with the lack of retention of students at the COB. Students who are inadequately prepared for the magnitude of academic and social change required of them become overwhelmed and drop out as they fail to adjust to college as do those who often change goals or majors while in college (Tinto, 1993). This can be mitigated through a robust student advising program that can assist with focus and getting students connected to the school. Students who have difficulty determining what they want to pursue academically will fall into a state of indecision are likely to withdraw from college. This is a critical area in which more effective advising will have a productive impact on student degree completion. When a student fails to be adequately advised on an on-going basis, they are not likely to persist as does those who become mismatched between student interests and needs and the institutional mission, course loads, program offerings, etc. that often results in a student leaving school (Tinto, 1993). When students don't interact with the institutional population, particularly faculty, they will feel alone in the learning process and are more likely to drop out (Chen, 2012).

Students tend to be more successful if they have a distinct academic goal in mind with a focus on a particular career after college (Alkandari, 2012). This can be successfully achieved if schools created advising programs that extended beyond basic checklists of course loads and other basic administrative functions. Further a focus on degree-to-career exploration and advising efforts on the unsure and unclear aspects that they uncover during the advising relationship along with on-going discussions about the student career focus. Hu (2011), argues that setting up early alert system related to student advising will enhance student retention, which yet another process that can be part of the advising relationship. Students who received advisement about their courses, academics, and career goals where more engaged and more likely to be retained by the school

(Dartmouth 2007). Those who have identified a career goal are more successful and return for the next semester at a higher rate along with being more connected to the university. Instead of demanding that students renounce their previous relationships and cultural norms, faculty should assist students in making modifications in their relationships and enable them to become bi-cultural (Gordon, Habley, & Associates 2000).

Hypotheses

Based on the above arguments, we propose:

H1: The quality of advisor will decrease the students' intention to quit.

H2: The quality of advisor will increase the students' intention to complete the degree

Methodology, data collection and Measurement

The authors conducted this research at McNeese State University, which is an AACSB accredited college of business in southwest Louisiana. The reason we chose on the college of business (COB) is that a more homogenous population can better assess the analytical aspects of the study. We focused on the traditional, on-campus student excluding the online students. Online students tend to be non-traditional students. We believe that the motivations between traditional and non-traditional students are very different. Focusing on traditional students could eliminate the potential effects of cohosts. Only full time students who were taking 12 or more hours were classified as part of the traditional on campus students were eligible to participate in the study survey. The survey was collected in the fall of 2016. Students were requested voluntarily to participate the online survey. Incomplete and invalid responses were eliminated. As a result the final sample in this study is 229, which is over 40 percent of targeted students.

The study survey tool was created based on studies within this field along with expert level consultation through a quasi-Delphi Technique. Once the survey was drafted, it was subjected to two (2) pilot studies. Though the survey covered different areas of inquiry, they were deliberately discombobulated to get the purest response possible from the study population. Each question was based on a forced-choice Likert Scale model in which there were 4 selections per question. This survey was selected based on the premise that students would have to take a defined position as opposed to gravitating to the central, non-commital, selection.

The control variables

Because dropout and completion may be subject to the influences of other factors, several control variables were included that have been found to influence two dependable outcomes:

- Advising
- Course work
- College support
- The relation with other students
- Instructor
- Personal support
- Financial support
- Student organization
- College atmosphere
- Financial difficulty

Analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted factor analyses in order to test the measures' discriminant validity. First, the items of multi-items variables were submitted to a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation. Ten factors emerge with eigenvalues greater than 1. Each item loaded on its supposed factor. Second, the items of two independent variables also were submitted to a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation. The two factors had eigenvalues greater than 1 and each item loaded on its appropriate supposed factor. Table 1 presents the correlations for the variables used in the regression models. Several of the independent variables are significantly correlated with two dependent variables. The results of reliability measures of all the variables are provided in Table 2. The multi-items variables are all above the commonly accepted reliability threshold (.70). A hierarchical regression was employed to test the impact of advisor. Two separate hierarchical regressions were tested (one for each dependable variable), with the Intention to quit and Complete the degree as the dependent variable. In both regressions, independent variables were entered in two blocks, with control variables entered first. Having noted the proportion of variance explained (r^2), the advisor was added as a second block. Subsequently, the change in variance explained. The r^2 change was used

to determine the impact of advisor on quit and complete over and above that accounted control variables incorporated in our test. Support for each individual hypothesis was then determined through an inspection of signs and significance of regression weights.

Tables 3 & 4 presents two of separate regressions intended to test our hypotheses employing dropout and completion as the dependent variables. The two regression had the same set of control variables. The first step for these two regressions was to enter the control variables. For the retention(dropout), the control variables contribute to an adjusted r^2 of 0.257, and the F-statistic is highly significant ($p < 0.001$). For completion of degree, the control variables contribute to an adjusted r^2 of 0.405, and the F-statistic is highly significant ($p < 0.001$). The impact of control variables on these two dependable variables were different. The control variables explained more about the completion of degree than dropout intention. The factors affect two dependable variable were different. Only financial issue is significantly related to drop out. For completion, instructor and personal support, two control variables proved significant. The second step was to enter the variable of advisor to test the main effects of advisor. We added advisor to the model. In dropout model, the regress is significantly ($r^2 = 0.288$, $F = 16.877$, $p < 0.001$). The r^2 change is significant ($p < 0.01$). The results reveal that for dropout model the main effect is significant. The impact of advisor on dropout intention is significant (P<.01). So, in intention to quit, the addition of advisor brings about a significant change in the proportion of the variance explained. This confirms that advisor does have an impact on intention to quit, even when the influence of control variables is controlled for. Therefore, Hypotheses 1 is supported.

However, for the completion model, the results reveal that the r^2 change is not significant. That means that the addition of advisor did not bring about a significant change in the proportion of the variance explained. Also the impact of advisor on completion is not significant. It means advisor did not really contribute to students' motivation to complete the degree. Hypotheses 2 was not supported In summary, our analysis has established that (1) the correlates of variables are significantly different in the two dependable variables; (2) the control variables explained more in the completion that dropout intention; and (3) the hypothesized associations with find empirical support in dropout intention but not in completion.

Advisors should still receive assessment summaries of their own advising, so they are in a position to see how it compares with the norm (average) for all advisors—on each item comprising the instrument (Glennen & Vowell, 1995). A comprehensive assessment of academic advising programs should include a variety of qualitative and quantitative assessment tools; however, most assessment programs rely heavily, sometimes solely, on student satisfaction surveys (Hurt, 2004). The assessment of academic advising should incorporate several dimensions of the advising process and not focus merely on student satisfaction. These dimensions (which also include student satisfaction) are listed and discussed below (Glennen & Vowell, 1995). The specific items that comprise the content of an advisor evaluation instrument should be grounded in research on common characteristics or qualities of advisors that students seek and value (Winston, Ender, & Miller, 1982; Winston, Miller, Ender, Grites, & Associates, 1984; Frost, 1991; Gordon, Habley, & Associates, 2000). This study will provide an opportunity for schools develop a strong advising program that is not only assessed as part of a critical job function. Using aspects from this study to develop successful strategies to increase bot student graduation and student retention. The last and possible most significant aspect related to further research related to this paper is using the student with a different population to increase the reliability of this topic.

Discussion and conclusion

The foundation of this research project is supported by work done at Dartmouth University (Dartmouth, 2007) in which they found that students are likely to graduate, and stay in school if they receive adequate advising. The paper examined the impact of related variables on students' retention rates and the desire to complete the degree. The dependent variables included advisor, course work, college support, the relation with other students, instructors, supports from family and friends, financial support, student organization, college climate, financial pressure and outside interest. A regression was run to test the impact of the variables on two independent variables. These two models yielded significant models. The models shown in Table 2 have significant F-values, and the variables used explain 29-39% of the variance in their respective models. When students contemplate whether to drop out the school or complete the degree, the factors are different. Generally advising programs emphasize registration and record

keeping of course checklists, while neglecting attention to students' educational and personal experiences in the institution, are missing an excellent opportunity to influence directly and immediately the quality of students' education and are also highly inefficient, since they are most likely employing highly educated (expensive) personnel who are performing essentially clerical tasks" (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, & Associates, 1984). Further, the checklist is often the only formal checklist kept the school pertaining the advising relationship. This process has a significant impact on student retention and connection with the school. Balancing advisement with other academic functions tends place this function at the lower end of priorities for faculty members (Rumberger, 2006). By concentrating on helping students identify career choices as early as possible so they could follow the proper academic paths to reach their goals will not only increase retention, but make the student more to graduate.

Research has identified that it typically takes several advising sessions to help move most students towards graduation, provide broader impact advising and to define a potential career path as well as creating a strong student retention program within the COB (Dartmouth, 2007) Yet as detailed above, advisors may spend approximately four (4) hours with a student during their entire academic journey, which is clearly not enough time to successfully address the graduation and retentions needs of the student. The advising process students should not only obtain information on how to graduate in a timely fashion, but also develop independent thinking skills, good understanding of career paths in their chosen fields, as well as gain knowledge about available campus recourses designed to address their needs as well as critical in the field of their degree (Rumberger, 2006). This study addressed the overall impact of advising as related to increasing the historically low graduation rates and illustrative factors related to increasing student retention. It also explored ways to create an atmosphere in which students feel more connected to the college of business. The "do-it-yourself" advisement process was also assessed as a relates to diminishing this problematic self-advising process. This was addressed by using technology to actually enhance the experience along with recording the "history" of the advising relationship. This would allow COB advisors to better understand each corresponding advisement session and how can make adjustments to make it better for the student pertaining to the three critical factors in this study. The ability to diminish the impact of the self-advisement process and

using technology will assist the COB advisors and ensuring that the students do not find themselves in a problematic situation or taking unnecessary classes.

Examining the overall advisement program was a main focus of this study and one that provided a number of interesting aspects. First, by creating a more engaging advisement process, the COB can go a long way in eliminating the current choppy and vague advisement process. It can also promote a environment of in-depth engagement whereas COB advisors talk more about the journey and how the student can better connect with the COB to enhance their ability to complete their degree program. Specifically, advising in the college of business plays a critical role in the overall success of the COB. Nurturing the student through to degree repletion and spending more time engaging the students to keep them in the college of business are critical factors that were exposed in this study and those that need to be part of the corrective action process. The study also showed a clear connection between time spent with the student and the student's retention, degree completion, and feeling of connection to the college of business, which was also supported by the previous research in this field. The researchers feel confident that the three main areas of inquiry related to this study were addressed and provided for several opportunities to better the advising to college of business students as well as serving as a model for the rest of McNeese State University as well as universities across the nation.

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Table 1: Construct Intercorrelations

	Dropout intention	Completion of degree	Advisor	Coursework	School support	Other students	Instructor	Personal support	Financial support	Financial difficulty	Student organization	College atmosphere.
Dropout intention	1											
Completion of degree	.359*	1										
Advisor	.006	.256**	1									
Coursework	.220**	.480**	.525**	1								
School support	.175**	.472**	.588**	.735**	1							
Other students	.120	.356**	.423**	.558**	.551**	1						
Instructor	.243**	.490**	.531**	.680**	.709**	.525**	1					
Personal support	.238**	.567**	.257**	.484**	.457**	.349**	.437**	1				
Financial support	.071	.083	.148*	.142	.132*	.260*	.161*	.157*	1			
Financial difficulty	-.396**	-.056	-.060	-.025	-.032	.055	-.080	-.144*	-.293**	1		

Student organization	-.025	.203**	.281**	. .381**	.391**	.641**	.295**	.170**	.202**	.170*	1	
College atmosphere.	.220**	.454**	.573**	.745**	.745**	.682**	.673**	.449**	.225**	-.037	.529**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: reliability of constructs

Construct	Reliability
Advisor	.927
Coursework	.874
Personal support	.672
Instructor	.865
Relation with other students	.900
Student organization	.805
Financial difficulty	.922
Dropout intention	.722
Completion of college intention	.744

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Dropout Intention

Variables	Model 1	**Model 2**
Course work	.067	.084
College Support	-.081	-.017
Other students	.040	.048
Instructor	.118	.151
Personal support	.080	.060
Student Organization	-.062	-.071
College atmosphere	.127	.180
Financial difficulty	**.434****	**.433****
Financial support	-.104	-.096
Advisor		**-.224****
Model *F* Statistic	9.642**	9.801**
Adjusted R^2	.266	.296
Change in R^2 from Model 2		0.030**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Completion

Variables	Model 1	**Model 2**
Course work	.076	.082
College Support	.074	.098
Other students	.033	.036
Instructor	**.181***	**.193***
Personal support	**.394****	**.386***
Student Organization	.006	.002
College atmosphere	.026	.046
Financial difficulty	.037	.037
Financial support	-.055	-.052
Advisor		-.083
Model *F* Statistic	16.630**	15.155**
Adjusted R^2	.383	.384
Change in R^2 from Model 2		0.004

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).