

Academic advising's impact on student retention

Higher education experts have long stressed the link between solid academic advising and retention rates. Is this still the case in 2017?

by Alan Weeks

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In a 1978, academic advising academic David S. Crockett wrote that advising was "the cornerstone of student retention." In the 40 years that have passed, has anything changed?

Four decades of research into student persistence and retention says not, according to Jayne K. Drake, ex-president of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), in her 2013 review of the existing literature. While it's almost impossible to whittle down academic advising's direct impact on retention rates given myriad variables and factors at play, countless surveys, studies and theses have demonstrated the positive association between advising programs and retention rates.

In his 2001 guide of practical advice for students, faculty and administrators, Richard Light dedicated an entire section to advising, deeming it to be the "most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience."

More recently, a report by Hanover Research published in 2014 looked at three universities in the US and Canada and concluded that academic advising was the first of seven constructs identified that influence retention. Many of the other constructs, from student support services to faculty and staff approachability, relate to advising.

Higher education retention rates in the US are disarmingly low, and over the past decade discussions in the media and by policy makers have shifted from focusing on enrollment numbers to persistence and retention rates.

Given the strong correlation between advising and retention, there is more need for advisors now than ever before.

However, in order to have their crucial impact on retention rates, advisors need to be able to perform their task efficiently. Drake repetitively emphasises the fact that advising must be "solid" in her article.

But what is "solid advising"?

Few current-day institutions have a written statement that outlines the purposes and procedures for academic advisement.

Wary of the problems caused by the lack of universal definition, in 2003 the National Academic Advising Association scoured different institutions' definitions of academic advising to create a shortlist that relayed the complexity of the role and that could guide administrators.

They found that while most institutions were in agreement that academic advising involves record keeping and course registration, the role stretches far beyond these necessary tasks.

To facilitate solid and effective advising, Cuseo emphasized that incentives should be provided for students to meet with advisors at times other than the "hurried and harried period of course registration," so advisors have the opportunity to "explore or clarify students'

contributor to student success rates. A 2013 Educational Policy Institute study that surveyed 2,400 ex-students that had dropped out of college or university found that scheduling issues – not being able to find the courses that suited their needs - was one of four main causes for their departure.

In an era of tightening budgets, shifting demographics and 'non-traditional students,' how can advisors fulfil their crucial role without laborious scheduling tasks eating up all their time?

Where VSB comes in

The latest iteration of our class scheduling software Visual Schedule Builder (VSB) has been created with advisors in mind.

The new Smart Recommendation feature allows advisors to effortlessly connect with individual or groups of students outside advising sessions. This way advisors spend less time building student schedules and more time

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broader, long-term educational plans—rather than focusing narrowly, myopically, and episodically on the imminent, deadline-driven task of class scheduling."

Advising programs that prioritize registration and record keeping instead of students' educational and personal experiences not only neglect a fundamental part of their mission, but are also not making good use of their highly-trained staff.

This is not to say that the more gruelling administrative tasks are not crucial to the advisors' role. Helping students find their optimal schedule is time-consuming, but a key

driving quality advising interactions tailored to students' particular needs.

Advisors can also take advantage of new early alert metrics by tracking students' course demand and registration intentions, even during pre-enrolment.

By rendering the 'myopic' task of class scheduling simpler, VSB will free up time for advisors to prioritize the other critical elements of their role. This in turn will allow advisors to remain that crucial cornerstone to an institution's retention and success.