Academic Advising: An Alternative Remedy to Student Retention and Persistence in Higher Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Academic advising is an information exchange process between the academic advisor and students. The objective of academic advising is to enable students to discover their interests, potential, values, and priorities and how these connect to their academic experience and future career plans. The ever increasing number of students due to new intakes, transfers, international students, students changing majors and repeating students requires challenging and unique advice to enable the students' retention and persistence. This study sought to define a theory of how Academic Advising can be effectively implemented in higher education. Qualitative research method and the case study research design were employed to build a theory in academic advising. Purposive sampling was adopted to select twelve respondents from four institutions of higher learning in Botswana. Unstructured interviews and document analysis were triangulated as data collection instruments. Further research was recommended to test the theory.

Keywords: academic advising, retention, perspective, attrition, counselling, mentoring.

1. INTRODUCTION

The research consists of background, problem statement, research proposition, literature review, methodology, research findings and analysis, conclusions and recommendations

1.1 Background of the Study

Higher educational institutions, the world over strive to provide the best educational experience to many students. This has led to the transformation of how students learn. The traditional teacher-centered approach has been replaced and in some cases combined with the expected student-centered approach. In this approach, students are expected to take the leading role and responsibility for their learning. However because most learners at tertiary level have more demands outside their education, the approach is often difficult to implement. The learners are also parents apart from being students meaning increased responsibilities which force them to divert their attention from education. The pressure to balance learning and other responsibilities has seen a number of them getting easily frustrated to an extent of quitting school. Some of the learners end up choosing a career path they are not sure they want to follow.In light of this, institutions of higher learning have introduced academic advising to address these issues. Academic advising is a support service offered by the institution to its learners to advise them on social, financial and academic issues amongst others. The main focus is for the institution to know the challenges faced by learners so that they may enlighten the learners of resources available to them, offer guidance with regards to their career paths and other study related skills. Advisors facilitate the discussions with the learners (advisees) either face to face or through available virtual technologies. The advisor and advisees discuss issues identified by the advisee, ensuring that they provide relevant information to address these concerns. The advisor must be available, knowledgeable, and accommodative to the various advisees who have different situations and needs. These discussions do not only involve curricula but may include other aspects like time management, stress management, computer literacy, study and writing skills. Ritter (n.d.) suggested that institutions must have professional advisors rather than using faculty members if they are to serve their learners better.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

1.3   Today's tertiary level students have different characteristics and behaviours which require support from the institutions they attend. Student academic advisors assist a uniquely myriad types of students like new intakes, international students, transfer students, students changing majors and repeating students. Some of them register for programmes without understanding the career path they are choosing. Some are not even sure of their majors to an extent that their performance is affected. The learners tend to perform below expectations because they are taking a programme which they do not even understand why they chose to pursue it. In some institutions, the advisors are also faculty members who are not trained on academic advising. This often leads to poor academic advising service, with students being dissatisfied thus making it difficult to retain them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The challenges faced by students at tertiary institutions the world over has forced institutions to provide support services like Academic advising in addition to the basic teaching, learning and assessment. Learners face challenges due to inadequate learning support, the social environment, insufficient financial resources and slow adaptation into the new academic setup. The challenges have been identified as the primary reasons for attrition (Habley, 2005). The academic advising service is aimed at ensuring that students' academic life balances with their personal lives so that students can achieve their academic, career and personal goals. In other words, Academic Advising is a well defined process that connects students's academic and personal worlds through discussions between the student and a representative of the institution, also called the advisor (Daller, 1997). The success of the process can be measured by considering the communication skills, questioning skills, and referral skills of the involved parties (advisors and advisees) (Nutt, 2000).

Academic advising helps learners view the learning process from a more informed perspective, where they appreciate the value of the learning process. Learners who are exposed to the best practices of academic advising tend to perform better as they apply the skills gained from the discussions in making wise choices. They are in a better position to use learnt skills in setting priorities, optimize usage of available institutional resources and make informed decisions, thus improving retention (Crockett ,1972).

Academic advising goes beyond the clerical functions of scheduling classes and preparing degree plans. Good academic advising assists students in clarifying personal and career goals, developing consistent educational goals, and evaluating the progress toward established goals. Academic advising utilizes the resources of the University and refers students to the appropriate academic support services.

Academic advising can encompass any or all of the following:

1. helping students understand and comply with institutional requirements, academic policies, and school-related procedures
2. identifying systemic and personal conditions that may impede student academic achievement and developing appropriate intervention
3. fostering a positive interaction/relationship between the adviser and the advisee.

Graduates need to be empowered with the critical skill of decision making as today's corporate world is not looking for just subject-matter experts but for well-rounded leaders. Academic advisers are expected to assist students in connecting their curricula choices to the extra-curricular choices (Lowenstein, 2000). This link is important for developing the decision making skill.

A. Who is involved in Academic Advising

Academic advising is an institutional process, which is designed and structured by the institution in view of their student community. Various institutions have different models of implementing the process such that the nature of the service determines who is involved. Oertel (2006) mentioned that the organisational model for Academic Advising is the one that determines the parties involved in advising. Generally, the institution identifies faculty members who are assigned a group of students as the advisees. The three main participants are the advisors, advisees and the institution represented by various support services like financial and student career services.

Advisors are facilitators of the communication between the learners and the resources available for improving their academic and social requirements. The role of advisor differs by institution, some institutions appoint and train personnel specifically for the advising role yet others select their faculty members to advice students (Cuseo, 2007). The main responsibility of an advisor is to assist learners to identify and assess alternatives available for them to have a successful learning experience. The advisor facilitates the discussions with the learners and does not prescribe the issues to be discussed. Advisors coordinate, provide mentoring and facilitate communication with the learners and other institutional service departments. The success of academic advising can be evaluated using feedback from advisors who are also responsible for identifying resources required for the advising program. They must be knowledgeable and available to learners whenever they need assistance so that they may guide the students and assist them to develop realistic career goals.

Appleby (2001) proposes that academic advising is an extension of teaching. Like effective teachers, effective advisors are well-prepared, are able to engage students, provide feedback, create an environment that is conducive to learning, serve as a resource to students, utilize available technology appropriately, and help students become self-directed.

The advisee role is played by the learners who are most important in the academic advising process as they are the ones who receive support from this institutional endeavor. They take part in the academic advising through discussions with the advisor assigned to them. Every learner is assigned an advisor who is expected to listen to their concerns and give guidance on how to deal with situations they are facing. The situations tabled for discussion are not limited to vocational but also cover their environmental and interpersonal interactions (Crookston, 1972). Academic advising is structured to help learners and they must access the service so that they can understand issues that are unclear as well as achieve their academic, career and personal goals.

Institutions also take part in Academic Advising from a planning and implementation perspective. The

model for implementing academic advising is defined by the institution, the resources required are provided and the success of the program is evaluated by the institution (Cuseo, 2007). The institution is represented by different departments which provide different services to address the learner's needs. The common departments that take part in the Academic Advising process include financial, career, welfare, housing and health care services. Each department offers learner support in their dimension and work together to ensure that the student learns and attain a qualification within the stipulated programme duration (Habley, 2005). Although the institution provides the support resources required, training for both the advisor and advisee remains their major responsibility. If both parties are not well trained, academic advising will be ineffective and will continue to lead to students' attrition.

Irregardless of the design of academic advising in an institution, there must be an advisor and advisee. Figure 1 below shows the link amongst the 3 major players in academic advising, with the service departments shown separately.
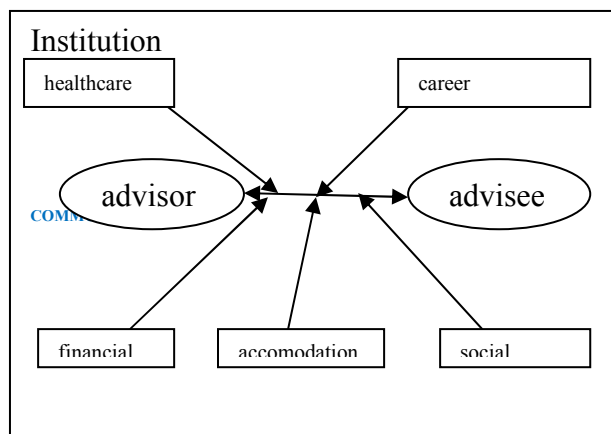

Figure 1: Parties in AA

The institutions provide the support resources like healthcare, financial, accommodation, social and career which are communicated by the advisor to the advisee during the meetings/discussions.

B.   *How AA is mplemented*

In order to understand the importance of specific communication skills in the advising process, one must first consider models that provide the foundation for academic advising. The literature supported four models of implementing academic advising as depicted in the following table 1.

Model	Description
Prescriptive advising	Based on authority and handing down advice related to courses and degree requirements. The student assumes no responsibility for decision making.
Developmental advising	Based on equal and shared problem solving with a focus on personal growth of the whole student
Integrated advising	Based on equal and shared responsibility on issues related to courses and personal growth aspects. Addresses concerns in relation to a student's total needs.
Intrusive advising	model recognizes the unique needs of students at risks. The advisers and the institution take the initiative in providing support services to help these students succeed.

Table 1: Academic Advising models (Crookston (1972) Heisserer, 2002))

It is important for faculty members, to select an advising model which is appropriate for their advising sessions and student needs. Once faculty members have selected a model on which to base their academic advising, they also need an operational definition of academic advising that it can be used to suggest a set of skills necessary to become an effective adviser.

Implementation of Academic Advising largely depends on the type, governance, size, mission, programmes, administration and financial requirements of the institution (Oertel, 2006). This is mainly because the diverse learners would have different needs which require varied types of support. Traditionally, Academic Advising was done face to face but has transformed due to technological innovations to include virtual advising and email enquiries. As a result, institutions choose the implementation model that best suites their operations and diverse student body.

Students may access the advising service by walk-ins, appointments and through virtual advising (Gudep, 2007). Other institutions provide Academic Advising to students based on their specialized needs

(Crockett, 1985). Advisors have specialization areas and are allocated students who need help in that special area. For example, students with academic difficulty may be assisted by the advisor who is an expert in that area.

Oertel (2006) described seven structures of implementing Academic Advising, some of which involve faculty advisors whilst some are coordination between faculty and professional advisor. She however mentioned that a few institutions have adopted these structures as they are expensive to run.

This means that the AA program may be structured according to the way students can access the service. It is important to maintain manageable advisor-advisee ratio so that the programme remains effective.

C. Evaluation and monitoring of AA

There are commercially developed instruments like the American College Testing Survey of Academic Advising, the Academic Advising Inventory and the Development Advising which have been defined to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of Academic Advising. The instruments have parameters which must be evaluated in an institution in order to determine the effectiveness of their academic Advising service (Cuseo, 2007). He mentioned that there are institutions which focus on assessing the advisor on availability, knowledgeability, approachability and counseling skills. However, the advisee is not part of this assessment.

D. Best Practices of AA

Institutions must define a clear academic advising policy that is explained to all the stakeholders. The advisors and advisees must understand the policy so that they can effectively play their role in the process. Successful academic advising may be attained by defining a clear advising policy.

Ritter (n.d.) suggested that institutions must have professional advisors rather than using faculty members if they are to serve their learners better. Professional advisors are specially trained for the advisory role and are often experts in specific domains. As a result, their discussions with advisees are more effective since the information shared will be from an expert's perspective unlike faculty members whose major role is teaching and assessments. It is therefore important for institutions to select knowledgeable staff members as advisors to avoid misinforming the advisees.

It is important to maintain manageable advisor-advisee ratio so that the programme remains effective. They also need an operational definition of academic advising that can be used to suggest a set of skills necessary to become an effective adviser. It is therefore best practice for the institutions to define a clear academic advising policy and ensure that it is coordinated and collaborated across the whole advising programme (Cuseo, 2007). He also mentioned that continuous clarification and re-evaluation of the policy is important in ensuring that the programme remains effective.

Oertel (2006) mentioned that institutions must be active in reaching out to the students so that all students may benefit from the advising initiative. Generally students may not be aware of this service at their institution and it is the mandate of the institution to ensure that learners know about the service.

E. How AA helps in student retention

Academic advisors provide student connection to the institution which is of primary importance in student retention and persistence (Nutt, 2000). Student satisfaction, academic and career planning, as well as goal-setting in general, are expected outcomes of good quality advising. These activities also impact a student's likelihood of staying in college. 75% of students who join university have indecision about choices on majors and careers (Cuseo, 2000). So most students are making these decisions while they are in college, and this exploration can and should be part of the academic advising experience. Since prolonged indecision about a major is associated with a higher rate of student attrition (Astin, 1977), it stands to reason that advising which includes effective academic and career planning can have a positive impact on retention.

Academic advising assists students to realize the maximum educational benefits available to them. They understand themselves better and learn to use the institutional resources to meet their special educational needs. Advising helps students to integrate to the academic environment which is required for the successful completion of their studies. If students feel academically and socially integrated, they become more committed, yet those who have poor interactions with college are less likely to persist (Ritter, n.d.).

3. METHODOLOGY

Data Collection is an important aspect of any type of research study. This section of the paper seeks to explain how information used in this research was gathered, what was gathered as well as the different sources of the information. The data gathering techniques triangulated in this study are documents review and unstructured interviews.

The study methodology was basically qualitative research whereby data was obtained from a natural setting with the researcher being the key instrument. The study was conducted on four tertiary institutions in Botswana. The study was basically descriptive, was concerned with processes rather than outcomes.

The main data collection instruments used in this study was unstructured interviews and document analysis. Unstructured interviews were conducted for twelve respondents. The objective behind using unstructured interviews was to find out what kind of things are happening rather than to determine the frequency

of predetermined kinds of things that the researcher already believes can happen. In the unstructured interview, the researchers simply had a list of topics that they want the respondent to talk about. Interviews were conducted with those involved in academic advising at the selected institutions. This was in an effort to understand how they are doing Academic Advising as well as their implementation procedures.

Document research also known as documentary analysis, was also adopted in data collection. This method involved the study of existing academic advising documents, either to understand their substantive content or to illuminate deeper meanings which may be revealed by their style and coverage. The policy documents on student advising from 4 higher education institutions in Botswana were analysed. The institutions' advisor reports, Academic Advising records, academic advising meeting minutes, academic advising training curriculum were analysed. Academic Advising policies and guidelines were reviewed to give an insight of how Academic Advising has been successfully and effectively implemented in these institutions. Document research was particularly useful where the history of events or experiences has relevance.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 12 respondents on the basis of their involvement in academic advising at the various higher education institutions in Botswana. They were mainly academics who have the role of academic advisor as well as policy making for academic advising. In the participating institutions, these advisors are known by one of these names: academic advisor, team leader, module leader, head of department or lecturers. The sample comprised of advisors from the different faculties in 4 higher educational institutions in Botswana.

3.1 Research Limitations
Any study undertaken tends to have its own limitations, and for this research, the following were some of the limitations:

- Consideration of other colleges and universities in the region around Botswana could have added a lot of value in understanding how they have implemented Academic Advising. This means further research must be conducted, considering other colleges and universities.
- Small size of the sample.
- The proposed model was not tested.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS
Figure 2 shows the summarized results of this study using a model which has been called SAA Best Practice Model.

Fig: 2 SAA Best Practice Model
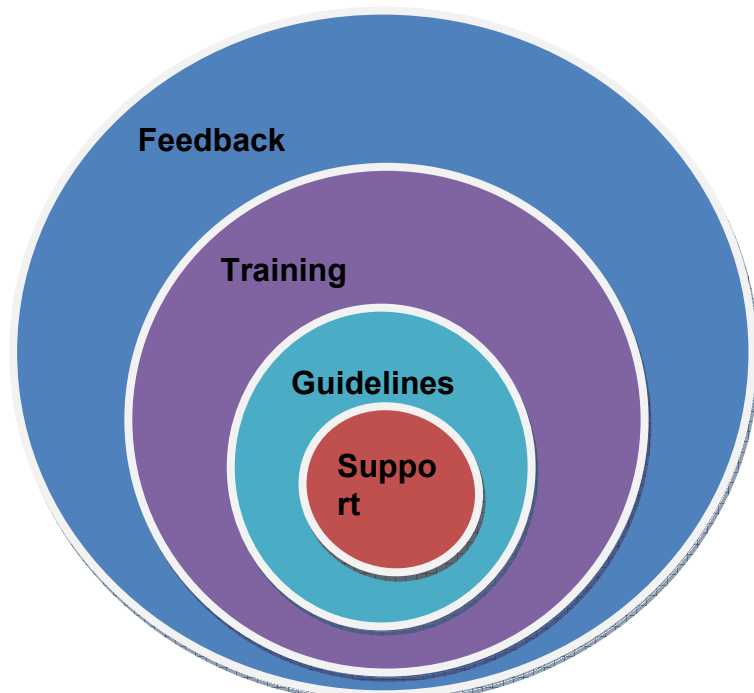
The findings of the study on student academic advising in selected Botswana tertiary institutions has uncovered some of the best practices that enabled us to generate SAA Model that can be put on board to ensure the effectiveness of the programme.

1. Institutional support of academic advising.

The academic advising practice needs more commitment from the institutional leaders to formalize the system by incorporating policies and procedures to facilitate its implementation. This will also entail the development of guidelines for staff and students, as well as assessment instruments, which will assist in determining the effectiveness of the system. The Performance Management System for staff members needs to embrace academic advising as a core area of performance for academic staff participating in academic advising. More-so institutional support is needed to ensure capacity building through training of academic advisors. The research discovered that academic advisors carry heavy teaching loads and are expected to participate in research and provide normal service.

2. Clarification of the meaning and purpose of academic advising.

Institutions have written policy statement on advising, and many of these published statements do not included well defined program goals, objectives, or methods of evaluation. This suggests a lack of clarity about program mission and goals implying that advising is not considered to be a useful practice with an educational purpose.

3. Provision of incentives, recognition, and reward for effective academic advising.

Faculty contracts and collective bargaining agreements need to mention advising as a faculty responsibility. Institutions need to recognize and reward staffs who are genuinely committed to advising for instance if advising is incorporated in performance management systems or consideration for promotion.

4. Recruitment and selection of academic advisors.

There is need to have a criteria for selecting academic advisors. This is of vital importance to avoid absence of attention to professional preparedness, and failure to identify advisors who would be most qualified to work with high-risk students or students with special needs, such as first-generation college students, academically under-prepared students, undecided students, transfer students, and re-entry students.

5. Orientation, training, and development of academic advisors.

Capacity building on advisors should pay attention to identifying the goals or objectives of advising, and the development of effective advising strategies or relationship skills.

6. Student advising feedback.

There is need for advisor evaluation through feedback from students. This has major implications for student satisfaction and retention. The student feedback data will also provide some insights on how best to review policy and procedure guidelines on academic advising.

5. CONCLUSION

Academic advising need to be given more recognition and be seen as a specialized function that is critical in the running of the university to promote student retention and persistence. Students as the main beneficiaries of academic advising need to be put on board to appreciate and participate in academic advising.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing conclusions, a few recommendations can be made:

- Institutions must define clear Academic Advising policies. These policies must be explained and clarified to all the stakeholders in order for the advising to be effective.
- The Performance Management System for staff members needs to embrace academic advising as a core area of performance for academic staff participating in academic advising.
- Institutions need to recognize and reward staffs who are genuinely committed to advising for instance if advising is incorporated in performance management systems or consideration for promotion.
- There is need to have a criteria for selecting academic advisors
- Capacity building on advisors need pay attention to identifying the goals or objectives of advising, and the development of effective advising strategies or relationship skills
- Further research to test the model is recommended.

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