Examining the role of the student-advisor relationship in a holistic, intrusive advising approach for student retention

Michael Levinstein
Shippensburg University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/jarihe

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Access, Retention, and Inclusion in Higher Education by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcressler@wcupa.edu.
Examining the role of the student-advisor relationship in a holistic, intrusive advising approach for student retention.

Dr. Michael Levinstein, PhD., Shippensburg University

ABSTRACT

Academic advising is one of the most effective institutional tools to support student persistence and graduation. Many institutions employ transactional advising approaches because these strategies are cheap and efficient. However, the literature suggests this approach is ineffective in supporting under-prepared students. More effective are advising strategies in which the advisor proactively catalyzes advisor-student relationships to support the transformation of high school graduates into successful, persistent college students. This article examines student perceptions of the role student-advisor relationships played in their academic success when advised in a program comprising a large cohort of under-prepared, first-year college students at a large, public, four-year research institution. Results indicate that students perceive the close advisor-student relationship key in their persistence and academic success.

Introduction

College student retention, persistence, and completion is of paramount concern to stakeholders at national, state, and institutional levels, as well as to individual students seeking a greater future for themselves. Student attrition is widespread across the United States with fewer than 60% of first-year students returning to the same institution for the second year (Hoover, 2015). Today, most high school graduates are encouraged to pursue a college degree because it is seen as the key to upward mobility and the American Dream (Barnes & Slate, 2010). Under-prepared students represent a significant proportion of the student body at many regional, public institutions; unfortunately, these institutions have made few strides in mitigating attrition and ensuring degree completion for this population (Bauer, 2015). Solving this attrition problem positively improves the lives of students and increases the stability of institutions because attrition represents not only a waste of the students’ time, money, and increased lifetime earnings but also an institution’s wasted distribution of limited financial and human resources (Barton, 2008; Day & Newberger, 2002; Dynarski, 2008).

Considering the high personal cost of degree incompletion with the high institutional cost of acquiring students and failing to retain them, attrition is a significant problem requiring the identification of effective solutions (Barton, 2008; Dynarski, 2008). One such solution, highlighted in this article, is the adoption of innovative, proactive, advising relationship-building strategies designed to provide academic and personal support from orientation to graduation.
This relationship-centered advising approach, as implemented by the advising program examined in this article, was perceived by the students to be a key component of their persistence.

**Literature Review**

This literature review provides a brief understanding of academic advising, student perceptions of advising, and insight into this study’s population: academically under-prepared college students.

**Academic Advising**

Academic advising is described as one of the most effective tools supporting retention, success, and degree completion (Habley & Crockett, 1988; Hunter & White, 2004; Kramer & Associates, 2003; Kuh, 2008; Metzner, 1989; Tinto, 1975, 2007). The literature lists several relationship-centered qualities of a good advisor including supportiveness (Long, 1987) and accessibility (Ryan, 1992). Studies seeking to correlate effective advising and increased persistence investigated the frequency and intensity of interactions (Gerholm, 1990), the impact of early interactions (Seidman, 1991), and student perceptions of advisor concern (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Walker, Zelin, Behrman, & Strand, 2017). Increased retention measures directly correlate with effective academic advisement due, in part, to the associated outcome of increased student satisfaction (Andrews, Andrews, Long, & Henton, 1987; Frost, 1993; Gordon, 1994; Heisserer & Parette, 2002), and, as Metzner (1989) found, are associated with student perceptions of advising quality.

Effective academic advisement mitigates attrition particularly by 1) providing students with the clearest path toward graduation through course and major advisement, 2) providing an institutional connection to break through bureaucracy while also reflecting the institution’s commitment to student success, 3) offering a set of high academic expectations and encouragement for academic performance, as well as, 4) providing referrals to other campus academic supports (Kimball & Campbell, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2007; Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorn, 2012).

Historically, academic advising has taken many forms from the lack of curricular advisement in the 17th century, transactional elective advising in the 18th century, ad-hoc prescriptive advising in the mid-19th and 20th centuries, and then developmental and intrusive advising beginning in the late 20th century (Folsom, Yoder, & Joslin, 2015; Thelin, 2011). The varying approaches to advising are a result of greater insight into student development in addition to a greater understanding of college students’ evolving needs. For example, most academically prepared students typically benefit from as-needed prescriptive advising while those less academically prepared typically benefit from frequent, mandatory developmental advising (Smith, 2002).

**Retention of Students Possessing Attrition Risk Factors**

The literature is replete with research evaluating academic advising outcomes with student satisfaction as the lens (Habley, 2004), though most lack a significant focus on students possessing attrition risk factors at large, four-year public institutions with specific retention rate improvements in focus. Heisserer and Parette (2002) and Laskey and Hetzel (2011) provide broad definitions for this population’s risk factors: 1) ethnic minority background, 2) academic under-preparedness requiring developmental coursework in math, reading, and/or English
composition, 3) students with disabilities, 4) those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, 5) first-generation college students, and 6) probationary continuing or transfer students.

Oseguera, Locks, & Vega (2008) note that despite decades of increased focus on college student persistence, the greatest significant limitation in the literature is the continued focus of retention on traditional college students and the lack of attention to the diversity of the modern college student-body. The negative impact felt by minority students on majority campuses demonstrates how a lack of social integration is a barrier to success. For example, most students of color attending HBCUs are successful while those attending predominantly white institutions often struggle due to identity marginalization and discrimination (Torres, 2003). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) states that the nationwide college-bound population is projected to continue increasing its diversity well into the next decade suggesting a need for novel retention initiatives targeting a diverse student population.

Theory of Student Departure

This study is guided by Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1975) which posits that a student’s commitment to the institution and to degree completion is influenced by the student’s academic and social integration. Tinto suggests that the greater a student’s academic and social integration, the greater the student’s commitment to degree completion and institutional loyalty and, therefore, the greater the likelihood the student will complete their degree and complete it at that institution (1975). Tinto’s (1975) theory proposes that college communities are both academic and social in nature and that student attrition is the result of positive and negative interactions, both formal and informal, occurring within the institution. The student’s experiences progress through three stages beginning with separation (when leaving their high school environment and relationships); then transition (when the student identifies the institutional cultures, including the norms and patterns of behavior, but hasn’t acquired them yet); and finally, incorporation (when the student establishes both social and academic behaviors and connections). The student-advisor relationship, which at most institutions, remains a constant throughout the student’s academic journey, may be the student’s strongest institutional relationship and a key variable in the student’s decision to persist.

The Holistic Intrusive Advising Approach

The Holistic Intrusive Advising Approach (HIAA) is an advising strategy specifically designed to support the needs of students possessing attrition risk factors with the goal of increasing the students’ retention to their third semester, a benchmark agreed on in the literature as an early indication of future academic success (Bowler, 2009; Tinto, 2012). The advising approach was created at the institution under study that, for the sake of anonymity, is referred to as Crooked River University (CRU). The HIAA was designed for and implemented with an advising center’s entire population of 2,400 students. CRU’s Provost created this advising center to specifically address the persistence challenges of the population and dramatically turn around its 63% retention rate (CRU, 2017). The center’s population profile comprises several attrition risk factors including but not limited to first-generation, Pell Grant eligible, traditionally underserved minorities, and college under-preparedness, as a majority place into developmental courses (CRU, 2017). Seven academic advisors analyzed past institutional data, developed, and then piloted several iterations of the HIAA before rolling out the full implementation.

The HIAA comprises six overarching strategies designed to support students’ academic and social needs:

1. Developmental intervention
2. Advising and counseling
3. Academic counseling
4. Social counseling
5. Personalized support
6. Community building

The HIAA is designed to support students’ academic and social needs by providing a comprehensive approach to retention and persistence.
1. **Relationship Building** between advisors and their advisees and amongst advisees;  
2. **Prescriptive Scheduling** in the first semester and mandatory advising appointments;  
3. A **Caseload-Teaching Model** first-year seminar course taught by the students’ advisors focusing on just-in-time skills, relationship-building, and proactive interventions;  
4. **Enrollment Holds** placed on the students’ records to prevent intentional or accidental enrollment changes that impact degree progression and/or financial aid harm;  
5. An **Intrusive Advising Approach** that is both proactive and holistic in identifying and addressing issues before they negatively affect academics; and  
6. A **Developmental Goal-Driven Process** beginning with the advisor and student drafting the student’s Individual Success Plan: a short and long-term academic and personal goal setting document.

**Purpose of the Study**

Advising approaches and strategies utilized on campuses vary nationally depending on student body needs and advisors’ skill sets; however, one thing is clear: academic advising is fundamental to student success (Campbell & Nutt, 2003). Advising leaders who understand how to successfully engage, retain, and graduate their student populations improve the viability of their institutions, the economic vitality of their region, and of utmost importance to this study, the lives of their students (Goldin & Katz, 2009). This research seeks to fill a gap in the literature through an understanding of student perceptions of the advisor-student relationship and the role this relationship played in the students’ academic success.

**Methods**

This research is designed as a single, descriptive, holistic case study at one university focusing on students and their experiences in the 2013-2014 academic year. Descriptive case studies, as this case is, provide the reader with “rich and revealing insights into the social world of a particular case” (Yin, 2012, p. 49). Case study methodology was utilized to provide a rich narrative description of the program, its setting, historic enrollment figures, and current student population as a context for understanding the need for the HIAA. Because case studies “benefit from having multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2012, p. 10), research data comprises participant observations, the researcher’s journal, semi-structured interviews with ten student advisees and two advisors, institutional enrollment data, and departmental advising records.

The researcher, who previously advised in this advising center during the HIAA design and implementation, acquired understandings about the participants’ academic experiences through direct interpretation of the data as well as through an aggregation of all of the participants’ data (Stake, 1995). To increase the validity of this case study, triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was employed for each interview to verify that the researcher is hearing and understanding the participants' experiences as described. The believability and trustworthiness of this study’s findings will be further buttressed through a data collection technique termed, “data saturation” by R. C. Bogdan and S. K. Biklen, in Qualitative research in education (1998). Data obtained in the forms of interviews, observations and document analysis, were collected until any additional data does not provide novel experiences to diversify previously collected data. At the point of data saturation, an understanding of the case under study is complete.
Results

Description of Sample

Participants were students assigned to the advising center based on an algorithm of high school GPA (between 2.0 and 3.0) and ACT Composite score (between 16 and 36). The participant sample of ten students comprises: eight males and two females; one international student and nine students from within the region; eight first-time and two probationary or previously dismissed students. Participants were also given aliases (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>First-time, Previous probation or dismissal?</th>
<th>Retained?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Al</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Previous dismissal</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Charlie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>First-time</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Kevin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>First-time</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Steve</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>First-time</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Tony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>First-time</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Aaron</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>First-time</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Christine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>First-time</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Justine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Previous probation</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Scott</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>First-time</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Jonny</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>First-time</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Composition of Sample, 2015

The Setting

The university under examination is a regional, public, research institution situated forty miles south of the state’s largest city. There are no other public or private, non-profit, higher education institutions in the county, though there are three for-profit institutions and the surrounding counties contain several community colleges, large public universities, private institutions, and several career and technical centers. CRU is located in a rust-belt region that has experienced a population decline of more than 46,000 since 2010, exacerbating an already declining enrollment (Armon, 2017).

Students with attrition risk factors attend CRU, in part, because of its 95.7% acceptance rate (NCES, 2016) and for convenience purposes due to a long commute and lack of public transportation to other institutions. While CRU is essentially non-selective, it boasts several highly competitive and prestigious majors while also having a dual mission of serving the needs of locals who might attend a less expensive and more supportive area community college if one existed. Despite its open access, CRU’s programs and policies are appropriately rigorous and are designed for more academically prepared students, yet many support services lack effectiveness. These challenges are some of the factors contributing to the abysmal retention rate for this population.

Advising at CRU is typically transactional in nature with students seeking out advisors once a semester to discuss course scheduling. Advising in the HIAA advising center, conversely,
aims to be transformative. Advisors proactively engage students frequently throughout the semester. Conversations focus on students’ development with course selection taking a backseat to topics such as time management, study strategies, social development, and finances among others.

The advising center also differs physically from other student-serving offices across campus. Upon entering the center, one’s senses are hit with the sights and sounds of a very lively, student-focused space. Two large flat screen televisions, one just outside the doorway where overflow seating is staged and one inside the main waiting area, are tuned to MTVu and the Game Show Network respectively. The longest wall in the waiting area is decorated with a large mural depicting the Tree of Success whose green leaves comprising the word “success” in more than 40 different languages. The opposite corner of the room, aptly called the “dorm,” features commonly seen, inexpensive dormitory furniture and accessories, a small TV, and an old PlayStation. Wall outlets blossom with phone charging wires and students are huddled together charging their phones while watching their friends play video games.

Greeting students as they enter are two student workers (supervised by a full-time departmental secretary) staffing a reception desk. The highly trained student workers check students in, answer phone calls, and schedule appointments in addition to assisting in creating a warm and welcoming environment. Behind the reception desk are large tutoring labs where students work in groups while on-duty tutors revolve around the rooms. Just outside of the tutoring labs, difficult to miss, is a wall of colorful graffiti and a large 10-inch brass bell. Upon closer inspection, one can discern that the graffiti contains hundreds of signatures with a date and a major. Above the signatures is a large title reading, “Inter-College Transfer Wall.” Students must fulfill certain requirements prior to transferring out of the advising center and into their major’s degree-granting college.

The Inter-College Transfer (ICT) Wall tradition turns the daunting and sometimes nebulous transfer requirements into a celebrated rite of passage, on display for all students in the tutoring labs, waiting room, and advising offices to see. Student participants Al and Kevin reported that the experience of seeing peers reach the ICT milestone, while waiting for their advising appointments, was motivational and primed the subsequent advising appointments to include working toward that goal for themselves.

**Relationship Building**

Relationships are found to be fundamental to college success. Chambliss (2014) shares that relationships with faculty, staff, and peers are a prerequisite for retention and integration and often need encouragement to germinate. Relationship-building is interwoven throughout this advising approach, beginning before orientation. As orientation registration fills, advisors are assigned a caseload and begin establishing student contact. Advisors have an average caseload of 300 students with first-year students, the population needing the most attention, comprising around 100. As a point of first contact, advisors use the excuse of calling pre-orientation students to welcome them to the university and assist them in checking-off various requirements such as placement testing and financial aid processing. These brief conversations may seem trivial but for the students they are useful in building anticipation, setting initial expectations, reducing anxiety, or merely getting to know someone they’ll soon meet. Justine shared that she came to see her advisor as her go-to person for questions and concerns in the weeks leading up to her orientation.
Relationship-building continues at the day-long orientation in which nearly three hours comprises academic advising. Much of this time is dedicated to relationship-building between students and advisors and amongst students in an attempt to form a community of learners. Jonny recalls the awkwardness and benefit of one of several orientation group-building activities:

I remember being really excited and nervous about going to orientation and being overwhelmed once there. I didn’t know anyone and I didn’t know what we were going to spend the day doing so I just followed the group from place to place. While it was weird tossing a ball from person to person in my advising group, the name game helped me relax and feel more comfortable. I’m still friends with two people in my group from orientation. (M. Levinstein, personal communication, October 18, 2017)

Relationship-building continues between orientation and the fall semester. Through follow-up calls, emails, and a wide-reaching Twitter chat initiative, advisors and the advising center continue engaging with students, answering questions and disseminating relevant content.

In the students’ first semester, one of the greatest relationship-building strategies implemented is the first-year seminar course taught in the Caseload-Teaching Model (Ruff, 2018). Ruff (2018) describes Caseload-Teaching as a strategy in which students are enrolled into the first-year seminar course taught by their own academic advisor to facilitate instructional, proactive interventions. This mandatory, credit bearing seminar provides students with the formal opportunity to check-in with their advisor, ask academic related questions, learn college-level study skills and relevant academic requirements, catalyze the transition to college student, and become familiar with the various student support services offered across campus. The seminar also addresses other topics found in the typical curriculum of a first-year seminar. Delivered in the classroom environment rather than in the environment of an office, caseload-teaching engages students through contextualized support. An aspect of the course that both participants and advisors echoed is the benefit of regular contact between student and advisor. Aaron shares that enrollment in the course taught by his advisor was beneficial:

It allowed me to check in with my advisor twice a week to stay on track. [I] didn’t need to set up an appointment. During attendance, my advisor would call a name and then ask, ‘How did the speech go? Did you go to tutoring for Algebra? Were you able to change your work hours?’ it was an easy way for him to keep up with us and for us to know that he cared. (M. Levinstein, personal communication, July 5, 2017)

Struggling student participants sought help from their advisors whom they felt were non-judgmental, cared about their success, and focused on providing solutions to problems inside and outside of the classroom. Charlie shares his perspective when meeting with his advisor after his poor interim grades were released:

Having an advisor that knows me, says ‘hey you’re struggling, I see where you’re coming from, let me give you my perspective,’ was so helpful. Having an advisor that checked in on me was good because when I did do something good like getting an A on a test, I would race to tell him so that I can impress him. And when I was struggling, I had someone who made time to see me, asked questions, didn’t judge, and helped me figure out what to do. (M. Levinstein, personal communication, July 20, 2017)

Across the participant group, students consistently shared that one explanation for their positive academic experiences was the relationship they had with the advisor as Scott explains:
There was one time when I met with a different advisor [in the same advising center] back in my first semester. There was nothing wrong with her but since then I made a point to only see my advisor and would sometimes wait for more than an hour to see him because I felt that he knew me and my story. He knew me as a high school student [at orientation] and now as a college student. He helped me make good decisions and adjust to college. I was able to be successful because I knew that someone was there for me and cared about me doing well. (M. Levinstein, personal communication, July 11, 2017)

The student-advisor relationship carries into how advising takes place. Advisor Jessica described HIAA as, “intrusively-holistic. We are looking at the whole student and all of their moving pieces to determine what it would take for them to be a successful student” (M. Levinstein, personal communication, November 17, 2017) which requires the advisor to understand the student beyond pre-enrollment data. Christine and Tony shared their comfort with the intrusive nature of their advising both owning initially that they often share honest aspects of their lives through social media and that, over time, trust has grown between them and their advisors allowing them to openly and honestly discuss barriers to their academic success. “I had no issue talking to my advisor about myself and what was going on in my life. I wanted to be a successful student and knew my advisor was there to help” (M. Levinstein, personal communication, July 6, 2017).

In sum, the student-advisor relationship, the student-centered advising office, and the holistic viewing of the student combine in a relational advising approach perceived by students to be a significant component of their success and retention to the following academic year. The fall-to-fall retention rate of the HIAA cohort (see Table 2) also increased by nearly 10%. In subsequent years, the retention rate significantly dropped possibly due to several factors including decreasing admissions standards for this pathway and an organizational change to advising. These dramatic retention rate fluctuations create possibilities for statistical analysis in future research.

Table 2: Cohort Fall-to-Fall Retention Rates
Discussion

Relationship-building aims to facilitate student-advisor and student-student relationships that aid in the students’ evolution in the first year. Data analyzed in this case study support much of Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1975). Fundamental to Tinto’s theory and central to the HIAA are “the interactions between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college” (Tinto, 2007, p. 3).

As was expected, given the role of advisor-student relationships in this approach, the data support Tinto’s theory that retention is facilitated through ongoing, intrusive transitional support in the areas of social and academic integration. Tinto (1975) suggests, and this study supports, the theory that student development and learning depend on the student’s level of involvement and engagement and that a student’s active engagement within formal and informal social and academic environments increases the likelihood of persistence.

Through a personal, advisor-student relationship, many success and assistance barriers were mitigated. Students were less reluctant to ask for help and be held accountable because they perceived that their advisor cared about their success and well-being and were non-judgmental. The relationship-building infused orientations, advising appointments, and caseload-taught method first-year seminar together were perceived by participants to be a component of their success.

Practitioners interested in producing a relationship-centered advising program must prioritize the selection of enterprising advisors with strong interpersonal skills and partner with departments that may control the first-year seminar and orientation programs. The advising center’s investment in on-going training, grassroots problem-solving and empowerment, and the distinctive backgrounds and experiences of its diverse staff combine to create and implement its successful advising approach. Lastly, successfully transforming any advising approach to yield better student success outcomes requires leadership with a vision and an effective implementation strategy, comfort in taking risks, and the full support of their superiors.

Conclusion

The HIAA is an innovative, proactive, advising relationship-building strategy designed to provide academic and personal support from orientation to graduation. Student participants perceive it to have positively impacted their persistence and success. Through the infusion of relationship-building into existing advising touchpoints, students transitioning from high school to college are provided a more personal, holistic and intrusive support that benefited their success. The HIAA extended relational engagement from orientation to the first semester and brought relational advising into the first-year seminar classroom. While this case study is limited to just one case, this relationship focused approach is replicable in whole or in part so long as the students perceive their advisors know them, are accessible, and approach problem-solving from a non-judgmental position. Practitioners who successfully leverage their interpersonal skills to develop a holistic relational academic advising approach will see improved outcomes in their students, their institution and their region.
References


**Biography**

Michael Levinstein is an Assistant Professor at Shippensburg University earning his PhD in Higher Education Administration at Kent State University. A researcher practitioner, he has worked in student life, student affairs, enrollment management, and academic affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, Harvard University, Kent State, and the University of Akron.