Advising undergraduate students: An exploration of how academic advising impacts student success

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Abstract

Academic advising is a common student success and retention strategy, but most research focuses on student satisfaction rather than traditional measures of student achievement, such as grade point average (GPA). The current study examined how academic advising predicts student GPA. The findings support the idea that Advisor Accountability and Advisor Empowerment are important predictors of student success, along with Study Skills and Perceived Support. Additional analyses revealed that students who scored higher on Study Skills and Perceived Support reported better grade point averages.

Keywords: academic advising, academic achievement, study skills, perceived support, student retention

INTRODUCTION

The importance of higher education is increasingly in the public eye with calls to provide a free or debt-free college education for two and four-year colleges (Camera, 2019; Halper, 2019). With this increased focus on the need for higher education comes an increased scrutiny of the downsides to seeking a college degree. Chief among these concerns is the high non-completion rates and prolonged completion time many students experience, with only 62% of students finishing their bachelor's degrees within 6 six years (or 150% of the expected completion time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). State legislatures are pushing initiatives to tie government funding to retention and completer rates (Lynch & Lundgrin, 2018). Thus, universities are increasingly tasked with finding ways to support students and ensure their overall success. Academic advising has the potential to solve this issue.

Since the 1970s, academic advising has been a unique part of university life, providing a guide for students who may be struggling to select a major, who are unsure about how best to proceed towards their end goals, or who simply have little idea about how the college process works (Thomas, 2017). Academic advising serves many roles. Advisors inform students about course and program requirements, help them locate needed resources, and provide guidance on navigating college culture (Suvedi et al., 2015). Academic advisors also provide a means for keeping students engaged in their education experience, a factor which promotes persistence to graduation (Marcus, 2012). According to Tinto's theory, students who are engaged in the campus community are more likely to complete their education (Tinto, 1993; Chrysikos et al., 2017).

Quality student-faculty interactions are key in predicting student success. Studies found that interactions with faculty benefit students socially; through this interaction, students feel a greater connection to the college and sense of belonging (O'Keeffe, 2013). Faculty-student interactions and academic advising are both significant contributors to a college student's success. Quality advising plays an important role in assisting student success because by helping students understand and navigate the institution, making connections between academics and future goals, and helping students to feel connected to the institution. Faculty often serve as primary advisors and are uniquely positioned to affect a student's learning and educational experience. Indeed, Tinto (1975) identified three conditions for maximized student retention, including programs that support students both academically and socially, and specified academic advising as being central to successful efforts to educate and retain students.

At many colleges and universities, advising is done wholly or in part by the faculty, adding onto the work load already required for teaching courses and conducting research. According to Robbins (2013), the typical means of advising is one-on-one meetings that can range in time consumption from 15 minutes up to an hour per student, depending on the academic level (i.e. freshman, sophomore...) of the particular student, the demands of the program, and the need for follow-up communications. Add in the demands of preparation for advising a student, documentation of the advising session, and assessment of the advising outcomes, and student advising represents a significant demand on faculty members' already limited time.

With students, faculty, and higher education institutions having such a stake in advising outcomes, Young-Jones et al. (2013) asked the question "does it really impact student success?" Overall, the answer was a qualified 'yes' and a call for continued exploration of the impact of advising on students' academic experience. A search of the APA PsychInfo and Academic

Search Complete databases revealed a total of 43 peer-reviewed journal articles on academic advising and student success for the years 2013-2020.

This comparatively small number of articles serves to underscore Kelley (2008)'s assertion that the assessment of academic advising is not as advanced as the assessment of areas such as classroom performance. Historically, assessment of advising has focused on student satisfaction with the advisor or advising system. Although student satisfaction is important to retention and student success (Propp & Rhodes, 2006), measuring the effectiveness of advising involves more than an understanding of student satisfaction and academics to include social satisfaction and overall satisfaction with a college experience (Williamson et al., 2014). Therefore, the current study draws on work by Young-Jones et al. (2013) and seeks to replicate and expand literature on advising by identifying factors that help or hinder students in attaining their academic goals.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Undergraduate students at a mid-sized university in the southern United States were recruited to participate in the study providing a sample size of 719 participants. (See Table 1 for demographic variables, Appendix).

Materials

Three instruments were used to assess students' advising experience (McCain et al., 2018; Young-Jones et al., 2012).

Student Self-Assessment

This instrument asked students to evaluate their behaviors and attitude related to responsibility, future planning, decision-making, and habits potentially affecting their studies. Additional items addressed student engagement and perceptions of social support.

Student Expectations of Advising Assessment

This survey gave students the opportunity to clarify what they expect from themselves, their advisors, and the general advising process.

Student Demographic Information

This form was used to collect objective and descriptive information about students who participate in the advising process (e.g., frequency of meetings with advisor, classification, gender, and grade point average).

Procedure

After receiving IRB approval, the surveys were made available to students taking undergraduate psychology courses. Responses were collected through an online data management system (SONA). The surveys were self-paced and took approximately half an hour to complete.

RESULTS

The survey responses were divided into 6 factors (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2012): Advisor Empowerment, Student Expectations, Student Responsibility, Student Self-Efficacy, Study Skills, and Perceived Support. A regression analysis using the Entry method showed that the model was significant, $F(6,718) = 6.18.27$, $p < .001$, accounting for 15.3% of the variance in student GPA ($R^2 =. 152$, $R^2adj =. 144$). Of the six factors, Advisor Empowerment, $\beta = .250$, $t = 3.25$, $p < .001$, Study Skills, $\beta =. 2523$, $t = 4.68$, $p < .001$, Perceived Support, $\beta =. 113$, $t = 2.24$, $p = .025$ and Advisor Accountability, $\beta = .209$, $t = 2.51$, $p = .012$, were significant predictors of GPA (as indicated in Table 2, Appendix).

To further explore the effects of these variables on student GPA, a median split was done on each of the three variables. Data for participants scoring at the median was removed and the remaining participants were coded as having high or low scores on the variable. Then a series of t-tests were conducted with GPA as the dependent variable and Advisor Empowerment, Study Skills, Perceived Support and Advisor Accountability. To limit the possibility of Type 1 error, a Bonferroni correction was made, giving a p-value of. 012 as the criterion score. Of the four variables, Study Skills showed a significance difference between the high (N = 341,) and low (N = 362) score, groups, $t(701) = 5.28$, $p < .001$, *Cohen's d =. 401* with students who reported higher levels of study skills reporting better GPAs (mean = 3.23, sd =. 593 vs. mean = 2.98, sd = .653). Similarly, there was a significant difference in Perceived Support based on group, $t(685) = 3.941$, $p < .001$, *Cohen's d = .300* with students who reported greater levels of perceived support having better GPAs (mean = 3.20, sd =.634 vs. mean 3.01, sd = .630)

In summary, the results of a multiple regression analysis were similar to Young-Jones et al. (2013) in identifying Study Skills as being predictors of students' GPA. However, the current study also identified Advisor Accountability, Advisor Empowerment, and Perceived Support as important contributors to student success. Additional analyses revealed that students who scored higher on Study Skills and Perceived Support reported better grade point averages.

DISCUSSION

In unpacking the implication of this study, it is perhaps best to start by considering the variables which significantly predict student GPA. Young-Jones et al. (2013) describes advisor empowerment as being related to student expectations of their advisors regarding assistance in planning for the future, learning about academic expectations, and providing feedback about academic choices. Similarly, advisor accountability relates student expectations about the advisor's professionalism, availability, and preparedness. As these are connected specifically to advising, they are examined first.

Advisor Empowerment and Advisor Accountability

Improving the effectiveness of academic advising involves understanding the purpose, process, and development of the advising relationship. Students are unlikely to be as concerned with advising as a retention strategy as they are with the quality of interaction between themselves and their advisors. Many students enter college with little knowledge about what to expect from the experience, how to navigate their new world, or how to be successful. They lack knowledge about academic programs, degree requirements, and what skills they need in order to reach their educational and career goals (Smith & Allen, 2014). Advisors make recommendations for students to map out their academic career and stay on the right track toward their graduation. Allen and Smith (2008) and Allen et al. (2013) demonstrated that students place great value on advisors' ability to guide and mentor them and therefore stand to benefit greatly from academic advising when their advisors strive to ensure access, equity and opportunity for all students (Burge-Hall et al., 2019).

Advisors often contact students to schedule appointments to have course selections approved and to be released for registration, but students may not be aware of additional assistance advisors can provide. Advisors can show their investment in student success by inviting students to share interests and concerns related to issues beyond class selection. Additionally, advisors can contact students to congratulate them on accomplishments or to express concern about academic progress. These interactions allow advisors an opportunity to offer assistance and support. Consequently, students may be more willing to contact advisors at the first signs of academic difficulty if advisors have shown interest in their progress throughout the semester, not just in course selection. Supplemental contact with students also gives advisors a chance to model consistent communication by contacting students more often than is minimally required.

Perceived Support and Student Success

We next consider the role of Perceived Support in student success. According to Young-Jones et al. (2013), Perceived Support addresses a student's "intrapersonal and interpersonal adjustment to college in terms of relationships (i.e., friends and instructors) and dealing with stress (i.e., academic, personal, employment-related, or associated with a learning disability) (p.11)". The results of this study reaffirm the role of Perceived Support in student success. The findings indicate that Perceived Support is significantly and positively correlated to student GPA with a correlation coefficient of .113. These findings are consistent with the previous study done by Young-Jones et al. (2013). The relationships between students and their advisors are multifaceted. Advisors not only provide guidance for students' academic progress but also emotional support as needed. With the expectations to do well and succeed both inside and outside of schools, it can be challenging for students to stay focused on their academic learning. Students who have a hard time adjusting and managing college experiences may suffer emotionally with an extreme amount of stress. In this situation, advisors provide students' support by recommending counseling services available on campus. University counseling services work with students to ensure their mental health and social emotional well-being.

Study Skills and Student Success

Finally, we turn our attention to the Study Skills factor. As defined by Young-Jones et al. (2013), Study Skills summarizes a "set of skills related to academic success in college, including time and grade management, study skills, preparation for exams, ability to concentrate, motivation, getting adequate sleep, and contacting an advisor for assistance (p.11)". Students who do well in college tend to have better time management skills. They are organized and know how to set goals and achieve them. On the other hand, students who struggle to manage their study routines and course management can benefit from working with their advisors for early intervention. Students who experience test anxiety and struggle to maintain their GPA may need to seek help and support from their advisors. They will be referred to university study support resources, like tutoring services, to learn test taking strategies and tips. They also most likely will be guided by their advisors to seek tutoring through university student success services. Overall, struggling students are advised on how to take ownership of their study to reach their full potential.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The current study employed a sufficient amount of quantitative examination toward student advising and its impact. However, it did not inquire advisors' perceptions of their first-hand advising experiences with respect to advising empowerment, advising accountability, perceived support and study skills. Similarly, this study did not gather students' perceptions of their personal advising experiences with regard to advising empowerment, advising accountability, perceived support and study skills. The study will be more comprehensive if narrative inquiry from both academic advisors and students were explored.

This also applies to utilizing qualitative data to examine the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences that faculty advisors and students possess. Because of the complexity of academic advising and its impact on student success. Future studies need to focus on extending the exploration of quality advising by conducting a comprehensive qualitative study. The focus group interviews would include both academic advisors and students. Questions related to advising empowerment and advising accountability would be prompted to a group of advisors who are responsible for advising students as well as carrying the teach load and research loads. Similarly, questions related to perceived support and study skills would be asked to a group of students who are at different stages of their college education.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Participant demographics

Variable	N	Percentage
Sex		
Male	255	35.5
Female	461	64.1
Missing	3	0.4
First-Generation		
Yes	242	33.7
No	466	64.8
Missing	11	1.5
Classification		
Freshman	372	51.7
Sophomore	152	21.1
Junior	91	12.7
Senior	84	11.7
Missing	20	2.8
Race/ethnicity		
African American	29	4.0
White	619	86.1
Hispanic	23	3.2
Asian	9	1.3
Multiracial	9	1.3
Other	16	2.2
Missing	14	1.9
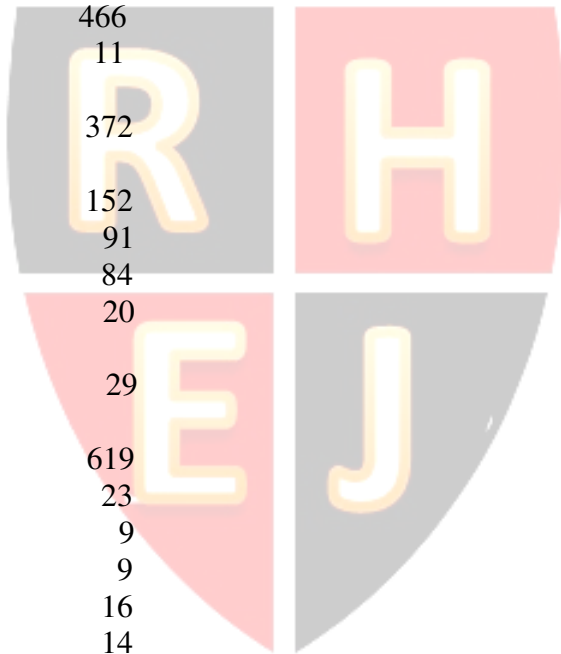
Table 2. Regression results

Factor	β	t	p
Adviser Empowerment	.250	3.52	<.001*
Student Responsibility	.063	.341	.734
Student Self-efficacy	.168	.964	.335
Study Skills	.253	4.68	<.001*
Perceived Support	.113	2.24	.025*
Adviser Accountability	.209	2.51	.012*

*p < .05