

Across the Divide between Health Science Academics and Advising: Considerations in Student Engagement and Retention

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Opinion

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College and University Administrators struggle to implement their institutional vision and mission, they have yet to fully realize the benefits that academic advisors can offer as partners in this effort, through their unique skills sets in bridging academic content and student development. This is particularly true in the in the health related science disciplines, where students – and retention – struggle [1].

The loss of students is costly to educational institutions. The Educational Policy Institute completed a study and published a 2013 report that calculated millions of revenue dollars lost due to attrition – let alone the costs of recruiting students in the first place [2]. But arguably much more important is the cost to a community, state, and country. Science is central to our development as humans, to problem solving, to creating technologically sound and ethical solutions for the needs of a struggling planet and its people. Creating a fabric that withstands harsh weather conditions is important both to the astronaut and the field-hand. Humanity and science need each other; we are truly co-dependent. If the answers to social and economic problems lie in the uses and ethics of science, we would be remiss as a society and world in not actively addressing the loss of students in our educational institutions.

Although retention has evolved as an area of interest, the focus began to truly emerge in the 1960s with an emphasis on student mortality (failure to graduate), and has led to numerous interventions and developments from required advising to “failure insurance” [3]. Yet, for all of the creative efforts to encourage retention, there is one area that educational institutions have not yet fully embraced: incorporating the professional advisor and advising team can still develop and

incorporate as an integral partner to the academics experience. Yes, advising exists. But it is external venture, and add-on that a student must seek out instead of a natural, seamless component of their academic career.

Three main factors in student attrition identified by Tinto still exist even now: Academic difficulties experienced by the students; the inability to meet academic and employment goals; and the inability to become part of the intellectual and social life of an institution. While faculty can (and do) assist students experiencing difficulties in these areas, they are also under pressures to deliver in the other academic requirements desired by their institutions such as research, grant-writing, publication and service to the community. In general, the barriers to completion navigated by students could be addressed in a timelier manner by other experts and in other locations.

In a standard model, advising is external to academic content-the content delivered through a course. Therefore, effectiveness of dealing with the barriers to retention is limited because the issues cannot be addressed in real time. The student is forced to seek assistance outside of the daily scope of learning.

In a learning-centered model which includes the advisor as a partner in the teaching activities, intervention is not only more immediate, but it is also embedded and organic to the student academic encounter. Academic content and faculty expertise are brought together in partnership where an advisor is in a setting that has direct relevance for the student. In classrooms, in academic building hallways, in advising offices in academic buildings, a holistic environment is created in which learning, personal growth, career

aspirations and professional guidance support retention. In the long-term, it leads to successful completion a major, graduation and new energy from graduates entering communities and professions [4].

A learning-centered approach to advising can also dramatically change the work of both faculty and advisors. It would mean a shared vision between faculty and advisor of overall course goals and content. Time would need to be allocated for the work needed to support student development goals. Compromises would be to be made, including possible impact on grading. Certainly some compromises would need to be made between faculty and advisors that could impact grading policies as well.

Advisors and advising would become much more visible to both students and the institution and advisor workloads would reflect this change. A typical work day would likely be a combination of teaching and office hours.

But the real change would occur in an institutional paradigm shift regarding advising. It would move advising from a type of added-but-external benefit accessed by a percentage of students, to advising as truly integrated into the institutional vision and mission. It has been achieved in pockets through vision or actual application. In each case, an embedded and partnered model has enormous potential.

Therefore, in this inaugural issue, I would encourage my colleagues involved in science education, to actively seek out opportunities for partnership with their advising colleagues. With every success, consider how these partnerships can be used in student development and positively impact retention.

Perhaps, through an increase in familiarity between academic and advising roles, a beneficial change will occur at the institutional level as well. I wish you every success!

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