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ASSESSING LEARNING IN ADVISING: UTILIZING INSTITUTIONAL GOALS TO MEASURE LEARNING OUTCOMES

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Assessing Learning in Advising: Utilizing Institutional Goals to Measure Learning Outcomes

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Synopsis:

This paper describes how learning outcomes were assessed following participation in a six-module advising model employing structured learning experiences for entering students at a Midwest public university. Institutional measures of academic performance and retention were examined relative to the number of modules completed. The results support incorporation of institutional goals to assess learning in advising.

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Abstract: Learning outcomes were assessed following participation in a six-module advising model employing structured learning experiences for entering traditional-aged students at a Midwest public university. Institutional measures of academic performance and retention were examined relative to the number of modules completed. Students participating in four or more modules had higher end of term GPA, higher rates of good academic standing, and higher rates of enrollment in the subsequent semester than students who completed participation in three or fewer modules. The results support utilization of institutional goals as performance measures to assess learning in advising.

Key words: Advising, assessment, academic performance, retention

Introduction

Academic advising has been a practice of higher education since its earliest beginnings. When the first universities were created in the US in the 1600's, faculty members guided students in course curriculum, study techniques, and virtually all aspects of daily student life (Frost, 2000). The foundations were secular, the curriculum was classical and fixed, and the purpose was to educate privileged young men. In the 1700 and 1800s, the US higher education landscape expanded greatly to include broader, choice-laden curricula, and education of the citizenry including women and people of color, toward state-minded goals and efficiencies. During this time, formalized programs of academic advising were established with the purpose to guide course selection within specific majors and disciplines supported by the educational philosophies of utility, liberal culture, and research (Frost, 2000). With the growth in the number and types of post-secondary institutions in the twentieth century, the practice of advising expanded to include non-teaching professionals and administrators, initially charged with assisting students in course scheduling, and later assuming responsibility for several aspects of student development including adjustments to college life, general education about the institution, its history and mission, and guidance in academic learning and strategies for successful completion of the degree program. The establishment of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in 1979 brought further definition to the role of academic advisors and advising programs (Frost, 2000).

Concurrent with these developments in professional advising, national interest in improving the first year experience brought the topic of advising into research circles and the discussion of effective advising practices. Gardner (1986) was one of the first to promote advising as perhaps the single most influential factor in student academic success. Crookston (1972/1994) and O'Banion (1972) associated learning, psychosocial, and student development theories with advising to describe advising as a form of teaching. Crookston(1972/1994) further articulated two types of advising, prescriptive and developmental, which occur in the context of the advising relationship in which both advisor and advisee share responsibility for the quality of the relationship.

NACADA, re-defining its core values in 2006, has since promoted the concept of Advising as Teaching (National Academic Advising Association/NACADA, 2006). As a teaching entity, advising is recognized to have a pedagogy, curriculum, and learning outcomes, and necessarily includes assessment. Unlike learning in the traditional classroom, advising is a co-curricular experience set in the context of the advising relationship. It was on this backdrop that the Office of Advising Services, Information, and Support (OASIS) at the University of Illinois Springfield was created.

Assessment of Advising

While the goal of advising is to support academic success and degree attainment, the teaching methods in advising are varied and to a large extent learner dependent, presenting challenges in assessment uncommon to the traditional learning classroom. Several researchers have proposed a number of approaches to assessing the value of advising. Common to all of them is the focus on measuring learning outcomes. Winston and Sandor (2002) note that assessment of advising is both formative and summative, that is, examining learning as it occurs as well as measuring the comprehensive understanding, and mastery of the content after the learning episode is concluded. Yousey (2006) supports the “practical inquiry” (p. 24) model which incorporates features common to traditional research—topic identification, development of research questions, applying methodologies to examine the questions, collecting data, analyzing results, and determining how to use the information to improve the advising process. Likewise, Suskie (2009) defines assessment in education as “action-research” (p. 13), borrowing a multitude of methodologies from traditional research to examine learning as it happens and apply insights gained. Smith and Ortloff (2010) also encourage utilization of a variety of assessment methodologies that exist along the qualitative—quantitative continuum to effectively translate research into practice (p. 71). These studies informed the research agenda that is the basis of this paper.

Background

Originally chartered as an upper division college, Sangamon State University opened its doors in 1969 to junior level students transferring in from the local community colleges with an Associate’s degree, and baccalaureate students pursuing graduate study. Supporting a long commitment to teaching and public affairs focus, UIS became the third campus of the University of Illinois system in 1995, featuring a liberal arts curriculum, small class sizes, and a public affairs mission, with nearby proximity to the state capital. In 2001, the campus admitted a small cohort of traditional-aged freshmen into an honors program. Having sufficiently developed a lower division curriculum, in 2006 the campus expanded to become a full four year and master’s institution. The campus currently offers 23 undergraduate majors, 25 minors, 20 master’s degree programs, including 11 undergraduate and 10 graduate online programs, and one doctoral program (UIS, 2014).

Coinciding with the expansion to become a full four-year university, OASIS was created in 2006 as a new academic support unit serving primarily entering freshmen, some second year students, and students still deciding their majors. Complemented with site visits to nearby campuses, OASIS implemented many best practices noted by NACADA to serve a growing, diverse student population. Guided by the OASIS mission and vision, which was derived from the institution's teaching and learning mission, an advising syllabus was created articulating student learning objectives and outcomes, accompanied by a checklist for students to note their progress through the learning activities provided in OASIS during their first and second years. Educational units about the institution's history and learning mission as well as academic expectations and strategies for success were incorporated into freshmen and new transfer student orientation. An Early Warning System was implemented to identify and intervene with students presenting at-risk behaviors in the classroom and other learning settings on campus. A first year topical seminar emphasizing academic success skills was also implemented.

Early in the establishment of the office, the OASIS advisors began to seek ways to measure the effectiveness of these best practices from the perspective of Advising as Teaching. At the same time, it became increasingly important to document the value of OASIS' existence. An in-house advising survey was administered near the end of each term, when students were selecting courses for the next term, to gather perspectives on advising services and students' engagement in the advising process. Several patterns began to emerge, with advisors noting levels of students' engagement and academic preparedness that seemed indicative of the student's success or failure to succeed in the first year. Translating these observations into research questions, the OASIS advisors capitalized on an idea about how to assess advising's influence on academic success, and organized many of the best practices into an Intentional Advising Model.

The Intentional Advising Model

As the title suggests, the Intentional Advising Model (IAM) employs several intentional advising experiences for students in their first year. These experiences are organized into six learning modules delivered at strategic points in the students' first year. Incorporating both prescriptive as well as development components as suggested by Crookston (1972/1994), each module contains specific learning activities with articulated learning objectives and outcomes. Modules I & II are delivered the summer before students begin classes to orient the students to the institution and the demands and expectations of university learning. Module I occurs earlier in the summer; Module II is delivered the week before classes start. Module III is the Freshmen Seminar course which re-emphasizes the content delivered in Modules I & II, and includes specific learning assignments that occur within the advising office. Module IV is an advisor interview which includes an adjustment to college check-in, review of the student's expectations and projections for success in college (a retention pre-measure), and a review of the Advising Syllabus and Checklist. The advisor interview and confirmed review of the Advising Syllabus

are also assignments of the Freshmen Seminar course. Module V is a Peer Advisor workshop in which students learn how to access and read their degree audits and other important documents to develop their academic plans, and began preparing course schedules for the next semester. Module VI is a second advisor interview during which academic progress is reviewed, and the schedule for the next term is finalized immediately prior to registration. Table 1 displays the modules and delivery points of the IAM. A detailed outline of the IAM is included in the Appendix. Sensitive to the demands for data-specific support for the activities of the advising office, OASIS proposed and gained approval to conduct a research project examining the influences of the model on student success.

Table 1

<i>Intentional Advising Model</i>					
Module I	Module II	Module III	Module IV	Module V	Module VI
Summer Orientation	Fall Welcome	Freshmen Seminar	Advisor Interview / Advising Syllabus	Peer Advising	Professional Advising
June – July	August –week before classes start	Aug – Dec, 16 week semester	Weeks 4-6	Weeks 7-9	Weeks 9-12
6 components, 28 learning activities	3 components, 15 learning activities	Reviews and applies content from Modules I & II	Reviews and applies content from Modules I & II	4 learning activities	6 learning activities
Administrators, Faculty, Professional, and Peer Advisors	Administrators, Faculty, Professional, and Peer Advisors	Faculty	Professional Advisor	Peer Advisors	Professional Advisor, Faculty

The modules, components, learning activities, and objectives are outlined in the Appendix(Kemayo, 2013).

Methodology

The Intentional Advising Model was first piloted with the freshmen class entering Fall 2011. At the same time, the research proposal was submitted to the institutional IRB for approval. The Office of Institutional Research (IR) reviewed the advising survey and made specific modifications so that the instrument could be used as part of the proposed research. The updated Advising Assessment Survey was piloted during the Spring 2012 term. With minor modifications to the survey following this pilot year, data from the Fall 2012 entering class was analyzed to examine the relationship between module participation and academic performance outcomes. There were two main research questions.

RQ1: Does participation in the IAM positively correlate to academic performance and retention?

RQ2: Does participation in more modules correlate to better academic performance and higher retention rates?

Participants

Study participants included all traditional-aged freshmen matriculating into the university for the Fall 2012 semester in the traditional general education curriculum (n= 185). Fifty-seven percent of the group were female (n=105), 43% were male (n=80). All but four were age 18 or 19 at the time of matriculation; three were aged 17, and one was 25.

Data Collection

The data sources for the study included module participation records maintained by OASIS, pre-college academic performance and demographic data, and academic performance data (GPA and academic standing), and retention data (enrollment in subsequent term) maintained by the institution. IR compiled all the data into an SPSS file for analysis. The survey also contained questions for students to self-report their participation in the IAM modules and their perceptions of the influence of advising on their academic success. These responses were added to the SPSS data when available. (Note: there was a very low response rate to the survey for this term which prevented statistically meaningful analysis.)

Analyses

The SPSS analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson's *r* calculations, ANOVA, and CHI-squared. The descriptive statistics described the study population, academic performance and retention. Pearson's *r* calculations determined correlations between a) module participation and academic performance data, and b) module participation and retention. The ANOVA confirmed the statistical significance of the differences in academic performance revealed between students who participated in four or more modules and those who participated in three or fewer modules. The CHI-squared analyses confirmed statistical significance and independence in the academic standing and retention differences revealed between students who participated in four or more modules and those who participated in three or fewer. All analyses were completed as part of a dissertation research project by this author (Kemayo, 2013).

Results

Demographics

Just under 3% of the study participants were Asian-American or of Asian descent (n=5), 31% were African-American or of African descent (n= 57), 18% identified as Hispanic (n=34), 6% identified as International (n=12), 3% identified as mixed race (n= 6), 1% identify as other or unknown (n=2), and 37% identify as white/Caucasian (n=69). Per institutional definitions, 53%

of the participants ($n=97$) were categorized as coming from underrepresented groups, i. e., African-American, Hispanic, and mixed race. Additionally, 18% were identified as ESL ($n=34$) and 23% ($n=43$) were identified as first generation.

Pre-college Academic Performance

High school GPAs for the study group ranged from 2.0 to 4.97, with the mean GPA of 3.16. Fifty percent of the class had high school GPAs at or above 3.07. Composite ACT scores ranged from 16 to 32. For the purposes of this study, participants with composite scores of 19 and below ($n=64$) were categorized as underprepared (36.6%). Twenty-eight percent ($n=53$) had other college credit at the time of matriculation by means of Advanced Placement, dual credit, or transferred college coursework prior to entering the university.

Academic Performance and Retention

The end of term GPAs ranged from 0.00 to 4.00, with a median of 2.85 and a mean of 2.56. One hundred forty-two students (77%) were in good academic standing and 42 (23%) were on academic probation at the end of the term. The analysis also revealed that 169 (91%) were registered for courses at census (day 10 of the subsequent semester.) One student completely withdrew from all courses in the middle of the fall term,

IAM Participation

While participation in all modules of the IAM was considered mandatory, participation gaps had been observed during the pilot. Table 2 shows the participation rates for the study term.

Table 2

Module Participation

	Module I	Module II	Module III	Module IV	Module V	Module VI
Sum	165	143	177	120	115	175
Percent	.89	.77	.96	.65	.62	.95

RQ1: Does participation in the IAM positively correlate to academic performance and retention?

Significant positive correlations were reported between module participation and midterm GPA ($r=.254$, $p<.01$), end term GPA ($r=.360$, $p<.01$), and retention ($r=.354$, $p<.01$). Table 3 displays these correlations.

Table 3

Module Participation to Academic Performance and Retention Correlations

		Total Modules	Fall2012 Midterm GPA	Fall 2012 End Term GPA	Census Enrolled
	Pearson Correlation	1	.254**	.360**	.354**
Total Modules	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	185	184 ^a	184 ^a	185

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

^a One student totally withdrew from all courses midway through the term.

The relationship between module participation and academic performance was also examined specifically for groups thought to be potentially at-risk. Table 4 shows the correlations between IAM participation and academic performance. There was a positive correlation for all groups between participation and end of term GPA; there was also a positive correlation between mid-term GPAs and IAM participation for the first generation group.

Table 4

Module Participation to Academic Performance Correlations by Group

	Midterm GPA	End Term GPA
ESL (n=34)	.330	.344*
First Gen (n=57)	.476**	.514**
Minority (n=97)	.109	.233*
Underprepared (n=64)	.075	.366**

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

RQ2: Does participation in more modules correlate to better academic performance and higher retention rates?

RQ2 sought to compare the performance and retention of students participating in all or most of the IAM modules to that of students who participated in fewer modules. Of the study group, 156 students participated in four or more modules, while 29 participated in three or fewer. The analyses revealed that students who participated in four or more modules averaged higher end of term GPAs (2.67) compared to those who participated in three or fewer modules (1.96). ANOVA analysis confirmed that this was a statistically significant difference and the likelihood

that this difference occurred by chance is less than one in one thousand (1 and 183 *df* is 12.709, $p < .000$). A larger percentage of those participating four or more modules were in good academic standing at the end of the term (81%) compared to only 56% of the students participating in three or fewer modules. CHI-squared analysis confirmed that this difference is statistically significant and the likelihood that this difference occurred by chance is less than six in one thousand ($\chi^2(1, n=184) = 7.522, p < .006$). Also, 96% of those who participated in four or more modules were enrolled in the subsequent semester at census, compared to 69 % who only participated in three or fewer modules. The CHI-squared analysis confirmed that these differences were statistically significant and the likelihood that these difference occurred by chance is less than one in a thousand ($\chi^2(1, n=185) = 21.184, p < .000$).

Discussion

This study sought to examine correlations between IAM participation, academic performance and retention and determine the potential influence of advising on academic performance. As with other types of academic learning, the levels of participation and engagement with the coursework and learning activities are often good predictors of success in the course (Upcraft, 1995). From this reasoning, it was assumed that participation and engagement in the IAM would influence the institutionally defined learning outcomes, i.e. end of term GPA, academic standing, and retention. In an attempt to draw data from multiple sources, the study also attempted to gather feedback from the participants about their advising experiences in the IAM and their perceptions of the value of advising in general.

The results of this research suggest that advising as delivered through the Intentional Advising Model does influence academic success at this institution. With so many factors influencing a student's potential for success, it is challenging to parse out what difference any particular learning activity, support mechanism, or intervention may have. However, being able to examine the performance outcomes of a large group of students who participated in the same learning activities designed specifically to support academic success begins to distinguish those activities from other potential influences. The analyses also provided a limited opportunity to examine the academic performance of sub-groups with characteristics that have historically been indicators of risk for academic success (Dreasher, 2011). The fact that these groups also showed positive correlations between module participation and academic performance lends further support to the IAM as an effective teaching model for academic success.

Despite this general support for the IAM as an influential experience promoting student success, much more examination is needed to confidently identify particular advising practices as meaningful and valuable. To fully incorporate Cuseo (2004) and Winston and Sandor's (2002) call to employ multiple methods of assessment throughout and at the conclusion of learning, OASIS will need to include more direct assessments of specific learning activities throughout the model. As Reynolds (2010) suggests, students need feedback early and often to engage and remain engaged in the learning process. Interspersing feedback opportunities often

within each module will not only boost engagement but also provide more meaningful assessment opportunities.

Summary and Conclusions

Academic advising is a co-curricular learning experience. Aligning the learning objectives of the advising learning activities to the institutional goals is a deductive process that begins with aligning the advising program goals and objectives with those of the institution. Learning objectives for specific learning activities in advising are derived from the programmatic goals. Academic advisors teach students the institutional culture and academic performance expectations in higher education settings. Students learn to become resourceful, effective decision-makers and self-directed agents of their education. Learning occurs through structured interactions with advisors and other academic support entities. Specific learning objectives determine the nature, timing, and content of these interactions. Learning outcomes in academic advising are measured through assessment of performance of developmental tasks. Popular methods of assessment include advisor observation and documentation of performance on designated tasks, and self-directed knowledge acquisition and application with immediate feedback. Checklists, success plans, surveys, pre- & posttests are other useful tools.

Assessment of learning in academic advising is an important component of the advising experience. It is valuable to the learner and to the teacher (advisor). Effective assessment informs and improves the advising process and the learning that occurs in advising (Schuh, 2008). Aligning learning objectives in advising with institutional goals is an important first step in developing a culture of assessment at the institutional level (Suskie, 2009). The data collected in this study provides numerous opportunities for additional research specific to the model and to advising in general. Consciously attaching a research agenda (White & Leonard, 2010) to improvement strategies will spark additional ideas about ways to examine advisor and programmatic effectiveness, and quickly implement methods that meet the everyday challenges and continuous changes in academic advising.

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Appendix: IAM Modules, Components, Activities, & Learning Objectives†

Modules	Components	Activity	Learning Objective*
I. Summer Orientation			
	Academic Overview		
		Institution History	G
		Liberal Arts Education/ Disciplines & Majors	G
		General Education	F, G
		Engaged Citizenship	F, G
	Faculty Expectations		
		Responsibility	A & E
		Respect	A & E
		Communication	A, D, E
		Academic Integrity	A & E
	Advising is Teaching/ Co-curricular Learning		
		Advising is Teaching	A, E, F
		Advising Syllabus	C, D, E, F
		Experiential Learning	
	Peer Advising (Group)		
		Student Life	A, D, E, F, G
		Disciplines & Majors	A, B, C, E, F
		Academic Success Planning	A, B, C, D, E, F, G
		Campus Resources	A, D, E, F
	Faculty & Professional Advising		
		Curriculum Development	A, B, E, F,
		Academic Success Planning	A, B, C, D, E, F, G
		Disciplines & Majors	A, B, C, E, F
		1 st yr Advising Guides	B, C, D, E, F
		Course Selection	A, B, D, E
		Registration	A, C, D, E

(continued)

IAM Modules, Components, and Learning Objectives (continued)

Modules	Components	Learning Activity	Learning Objective*
I. Summer Orientation	Learning Technologies & Academic Support Resources	BlackBoard	A, C, D, E,
		Starfish	A, C, D, F
		Outlook	A, D
		Library	A, B, E, F, G
		Center for Teaching & Learning	A, B, D, E, F
		Career Development Center	A, B, F, G
		Experiential & Service Learning	A, E, F, G,
II. Fall Welcome	Academic Expectations	Freshmen Seminar	A, C, D, E
		Responsibility	A & E
		Respect	A & E
		Communication	A, D, E
		Academic Integrity	A & E
	Learning Technologies & Academic Support Resources	BlackBoard	A, C, D, E,
		Starfish	A, C, D, F
		Outlook	A, D
		Library	A, B, E, F, G
		Center for Teaching & Learning	A, B, C, E
		Career Development Center	B, E, F, G
		Experiential & Service Learning	A, B, F, G
	Freshmen Seminar Intro	Attendance expectations	D, E

(continued)

IAM Modules, Components, Activities, and Learning Objectives (continued)

Modules	Components	Learning Activity	Learning Objective*
II. Fall Welcome			
	Freshmen Seminar Intro		
		Participation expectations	C, D, E
		Performance expectations	D, E, F
III. Freshmen Seminar			
	Classroom instruction		A, B, C, D, E, F, G
IV. Advisor Interview/ Advising Syllabus			
	Advisor Interview		
		Curriculum Development	A, B, C, D, E
		Academic Success Planning	A, D, F, G
		Academic Portfolio	C, E, F, G
		Advising Syllabus	C, D, E, F
V. Peer Advising			
	Group Advising		
		Disciplines & Majors	A, B, C, E, F
		Advising Guides	B, C, D, E, F
		Degree Audits	B, C, E
		Schedule Creation	A, B, C, E, F
VI. Professional Advising			
	Individual Advising		
		Curriculum Development	A, B, C, D, E, F
		Academic Success Planning	A, C, D, E, F, G
		Disciplines & Majors	A, B, C, E, F, G

(continued)

IAM Modules, Components, Activities, and Learning Objectives (continued)

Modules	Components	Learning Activity	Learning Objective*
VI. Professional Advising			
	Individual Advising		
		4 yr Advising Guides	B, C, D, E, F
		Schedule Approval	A, B, D, E
		Priority Registration	A, C, D, E

**IAM Learning Objectives Key*

Key Code	Objective
A	Self-Awareness & Self Agency
B	Effective Research & Investigative Skills
C	Effective Organization Skills
D	Effective & Responsible Communication
E	Ownership of Academic Preparation & Performance
F	Ownership of Academic Success & Career Strategy
G	Life Long Learning

† *Used with Permission*