

Jayne K. Drake reminds us that academic advising is more than clerical recordkeeping; it is the very human art of building relationships with students and helping them connect their personal strengths and interests with their academic and life goals.

By Jayne K. Drake

# The Role of Academic Advising in Student Retention and Persistence

**W**HEN BERNIE TRAILED BEHIND ME to my office after class looking crestfallen and slumped into the chair to study with some intensity the laces on his sneakers, I realized that a battle of epic proportion was being waged. After some moments of silence, he blurted out that he was dropping out of school, that he just didn't feel connected to the students in my class or to students in any other of his classes for that matter. He felt much more comfortable with the construction crew he worked with every summer. Maybe, after all, this was his true calling—being in the open air with scuffed work boots and dirt under his fingernails. Maybe this was where he really should be. Maybe college just wasn't for him.

It's not that Bernie wasn't a smart guy. In fact, he was. It's just that he was painfully shy and afraid that he couldn't compete with the more vocal and, in his view, more intellectual members of the class. As a result, he never offered me or his other professors so much as a glimpse into his intelligence, great wit, and sensitivity, not to mention his considerable talent as a poet. So we talked—or, rather, he mostly talked and I

mostly listened. Together we devised a strategy for him to hear his own voice in the classroom—a simple thing really. During the next class meeting, he would ask an innocuous question about an upcoming assignment that no one could possibly “judge” him on. It worked. Bernie soon found his voice and his confidence, and before long he was lavishing the students with his keen observations on life, American literature, and the world of the blue-collar laborer. In the end, Bernie decided to stick around. He agreed to work closely with one of our professional academic advisors and me to develop an academic roadmap to complete his BA in English. He graduated summa cum laude and continued his forward academic momentum through his master's degree at another area university.

The moral of this story? It points to the power of advising, communicating, and mentoring in student success and persistence to graduation. It's about building relationships with our students, locating places where they get disconnected, and helping them get reconnected. And it demonstrates the powerful effect that out-of-class interactions with a faculty member can have on student persistence. Bernie found a strong

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mentoring relationship with a faculty member—a sympathetic ear, a willing advisor, someone who cared about whether he stayed or left the institution. And in concert with his academic advisor, Bernie built the curriculum and the decision-making skills that helped him make it through.

Of course, student retention and persistence more than ever are the coin of the realm. We have long since left in the dust the notion that simply opening our doors to students is enough, that, once here, they can negotiate their own way through our often byzantine, labyrinthine curriculum, processes, and hallowed halls. With budget belt tightening an immediate and stark reality; with central administrators scouring their cost centers to slash, if not mortally wound, any perceived “nonessential” academic and support services; and with legislators looking for more institutional accountability, the drumbeat to improve retention numbers and to do more with less has intensified and quickened.

So what works in student retention? The good news is that the answers rest with four decades of research about student persistence that consistently points to three critical elements: the value of connecting students early on to the institution through learning support systems (tutoring and supplemental instruction programs, for example), first-year programming (learning communities and first-year seminars), and solid academic advising, with advising positioned squarely as the vital link in this retention equation.

Study after study over the years have tested and validated Vincent Tinto’s 1987 claim in *Leaving College*

that “Though the intentions and commitments with which individuals enter college matter, what goes on after entry matters more. It is the daily interaction of the person with other members of the college in both the formal and informal academic and social domains of the college and the person’s perception or evaluation of the character of those interactions that in large measure determine decisions as to staying or leaving” (p. 127). Conclusions drawn from Joe Cuseo’s “Academic Advisement and Student Retention” build a strong case for the value of academic advising because it “exerts a significant impact on student retention through its positive association with . . . (1) student satisfaction with the college experience, (2) effective educational and career planning and decision making, (3) student utilization of campus support services, (4) student-faculty contact outside the classroom, and (5) student mentoring” (p. 1).

In *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (2005), George Kuh makes the point that just as important as the time and effort students put into their coursework is the way institutions support strategies that connect students to the campus environment and high-impact learning experiences. The way to bring all of these elements together is by embedding within them solid academic advising programs. The important correlation between student involvement on campus and student success is perhaps best summed up by Vincent Tinto in his 1975 article entitled “Dropouts from Higher Education” from the *Review of Educational Research*. Instances of social integration, he states, occur primarily “through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extra-curricular activities and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college. Successful encounters in these areas result in various degrees of social communication, friendship support, faculty support, and college affiliation” (p. 107).

Based on ten years of qualitative research with over 1,600 recent college graduates from 90 institutions across the country, Richard Light, in *Making the Most*

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of *College*, underscores the value of academic advising and its positive influence on student retention through his conclusion that “good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience” (p. 81).

Regardless of institutional type or the composition of the student body, say Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini in *How College Affects Students*, solid academic advising has an important impact on student persistence. Students who are the happiest and academically the most successful have developed a solid relationship with an academic advisor, a faculty member, or an administrator who can help them navigate the academic and social shoals of the academy. How might we then define “solid academic advising”? Joe Cuseo reminds us that any definition of advising “must be guided by a clear vision of what ‘good’ or ‘quality’ advising actually is—because if we cannot define it, we cannot recognize it when we see it, nor can we assess it or improve it” (p. 13).

Over the years, we have begun to view as quaint the notion that academic advising is *entirely* prescriptive in nature—that the advisor, in effect, takes on the role of the physician and the student becomes the patient. The doctor prescribes the best medicine, and if the patient simply takes the prescribed medication, he will get better. In their 1984 work entitled *Developmental Academic Advising*, Roger B. Winston Jr., Theodore K. Miller, Steven C. Ender, Thomas J. Grites, and Associates maintain, “Advising programs . . . that emphasize registration and record keeping, while neglecting attention to students’ educational and personal experiences in the institution, are missing an excellent opportunity to influence directly and immediately the quality of students’ education and are also highly inefficient, since they are most likely employing highly educated (expensive) personnel who are performing essentially clerical tasks” (p. 542). And while there still remains an entirely appropriate place in the academy for such a “prescriptive” advising approach, advising is now

more generally understood to be “a decision-making process during which students themselves reach their own academic potential through a communication and information exchange with an academic advisor. In a *NACADA Journal* article, “A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching,” Burns Crookston defines advising as being concerned not only with a specific personal or vocational decision, but also “with facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness and problem-solving, decision-making and evaluation skills” (p. 5).

As developed by The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising), “Academic advising, based in the teaching and learning mission of higher education, is a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students’ educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes.” It helps students to value the learning process, to apply decision-making strategies, to put the college experience into perspective, to set priorities and evaluate events, to develop thinking and learning skills, to make choices, and to value the learning process. This is what good academic advising does for students.

Good academic advising also provides perhaps the only opportunity for all students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them. What then does this caring person, the academic advisor, actually do? As defined by Joe Cuseo, the academic advisor is one who “helps students become more self-aware of their distinctive interests, talents, values, and priorities; who enables students to see the ‘connection’ between their present academic experience and their future life plans; who helps students discover their potential, purpose, and passion; who broadens students’ perspectives with

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respect to their personal life choices, and sharpens their cognitive skills for making these choices, such as effective problem-solving, critical thinking, and reflective decision-making” (p. 15). Advisors *teach* students to negotiate the higher education maze, to make effective and thoughtful decisions about their futures, to adapt their life skills to the new academic world, and to cultivate the academic skills and knowledge needed to succeed. Like the faculty member and professional advisor who worked with Bernie to see him walk across the stage to receive his degree in English, advisors help students get connected and stay engaged in their college experience and, thus, persist to reach their academic goals and their career and personal aspirations.

Erroll Davis, former chancellor of the University System of Georgia and an enthusiastic advocate of quality academic advising, recently commented to me that advisors play a powerful role in higher education today because they stand at the nexus between the students who often arrive at the academy uninformed and undefined and those who leave with identities and life direction shaped by a convergence of influences— influences marked by positive interactions with faculty members and professional advisors. It is the particular responsibility of advisors, Davis noted, to guide students to make academic and life plans consistent with their interests and abilities. Very little is more connected to the academic, career, and personal success of students than academic advising. The end goal of higher education must be the retention, persistence, and graduation of students; as such, academic advising is the key to engagement in their educational careers. Under Chancellor Davis’s leadership, the enhancement of academic advising was positioned as Goal #1 in the University System of Georgia’s Strategic Goals; the University System is holding all of its institutions and college and university presidents accountable for a high level of achievement in the quality and consistency of academic advising.

This past year, presidents from community colleges to the nation’s largest universities have publicly endorsed strong advising programs as being crucial to the central mission of their institutions. At a NACADA

conference last year in Colorado Springs, for example, Tony Kinkel, president of Pikes Peak Community College, spoke of the importance of academic advising to student success and the key role academic advisors play in the instructional mission of the college. He strongly encouraged advisors to continue to collaborate with their faculty counterparts to provide the highest-quality educational experiences for students. Dana Mohler-Faria, president of Bridgewater State College, in his keynote address at another NACADA conference stated that academic advising matters because it changes lives by taking people to places of their potential. He pointed to academic advisors as teachers who help students effectively engage in their educations and with their institutions. Student success must be at the core of all institutional work and decision making; therefore, he concludes, academic advising is critical to the success of higher education. At the What Works: Student Success and Retention conference in Leeds, England, Baroness Estelle Morris, former Secretary of Education in the United Kingdom and now chair of the Strategy Board for the Institute of Effective Education at the University of York, articulated the importance of student success initiatives in colleges and universities and the value academic advising/personal tutoring plays in the success of students in the United Kingdom. Mark Rosenberg, president of Florida International University, and Anthony Tricoli, president of Georgia Perimeter College, have also expressed their support for the development of quality academic advising programs on their campuses and have placed a strong emphasis on the importance of connecting academic advising and advisors to the teaching and learning missions of their institutions. Ann Weaver Hart, president of Temple University, a strong and outspoken advocate for the central role that advising plays in student success, recently infused Temple with significant funding to install an Advising Career Ladder and hire ten new advisors.

In this period of tightening budgets and shifting demographics, these leaders have determined to invest often scant resources in what will make the most difference to their institutions and their students.

# Student success must be at the core of all institutional work and decision making; therefore, academic advising is critical to the success of higher education.

One final word about Bernie: He has been working in the pharmaceutical industry for the past seven years managing IT implementation for Regulatory Affairs and working on projects that literally extend across all regions of the world. In his own words, Bernie credits his degree in English as the foundation for his success: “I use the critical thinking and communication skills I learned studying literature at Temple every day. The ability to read, assess, and communicate those assessments has been key to my success in the industry. The study of literature fed my analytical side, and forced me to articulate my analysis, opinions, and decisions. I was once told by a vice president after working there for four years that she wasn’t sure hiring an English major was going to work until she met me.” Bernie has found his place.

Not long ago I received a note from him (accompanied by pictures of his two young boys) that reinforced for me the powerful influence that faculty and advisors have on students. He recalled the times he would perch himself in my office to talk about school, his relationships, his friends, and family—life. What he remembered most was not the substance of those conversations, but that, no matter how busy I appeared to be, I would always put everything aside to focus on him, and for that time, he mused, “the rest of the world went away.” It was this residue of memory that stayed with Bernie long after he left the institution and that later influenced his own approach to life.

In the end, strong academic advising programs signal an institution’s commitment to the success of its stu-

dents and should never be left to the vagaries of chance or sitting precariously on the chopping block. All the Bernies on our campuses deserve far better than that.

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## NOTES

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