The Changing Context of Advising in Higher Education
By Marianne Di Pierro

Universities and colleges are moving beyond what occurs within the disciplinary framework of a particular curriculum and keenly understand that educators must take the bold step toward incorporating advising and tutoring as part of a heuristic or pedagogical approach, employed to reinforce the kind of learning that leads to student retention and higher levels of achievement. Historically, this perspective was not always the case.

Plethora vs. dearth

The previous baby boom era with its swollen population mass may have inadvertently contributed to a cavalier attitude on the part of educational institutions which really were not wholly invested in attrition or retention to the degree we observe today. In those days, many students struggled with concerns about simply gaining admission to college and did not necessarily consider strategies for program completion, nor did universities or colleges formalize retention interventions as they currently do. University admission frequently appeared as the “be all and end all” driving force, as if admission itself were a guarantor of academic survival: if you were good enough to get in, you were good enough to stay in – and graduate.

However, not every student succeeded in this admissions goal, and burgeoning numbers of students enrolled in community colleges, the last haven for those denied admission to real universities. Of course, with seemingly endless numbers of students from which to choose, community colleges, too, could be discriminating purveyors of higher education and boast of those “not quite good enough” to be admitted, even there.

In contrast today, however, dwindling numbers of available students, among them Gen Xers and Millennials, represent a precious resource to be preserved and cultivated, rather than summarily dismissed from programs when they do not perform as expected, as were their baby boom counterparts. This is not to suggest that institutions of higher learning held no compassion for non-completers; however, it is important to consider that the seemingly endless supply of students ensured that the educational process would flourish, and institutional accountability for college student success was not necessarily a focal point. In those days, students not doing well were simply admonished to “study harder” - or “fail out.”
The competitive edge

Competition to enroll students has become a fierce enterprise of cunning gamesmanship, and those institutions which offer the most support - social, economic, financial, academic, among others, in addition to providing a cadre of sterling faculty, are the ones that successfully withstand the competitive urgency. Today, it is a combination of all these factors that makes a college or university attractive to potential students. As a result, we see the rise of institutionalized, programmatic interventions that have retention and graduation as main objectives of expansive advising and tutoring processes now in place and available to all students, not just those suffering from academic insufficiencies, but those who are already doing well and interested in raising those skills to the next level; concomitantly, the nature, purpose, and context in which advising and tutoring take place has also undergone a metamorphosis. Assistance is sought, not necessarily because one is unsuccessful and needs it, but rather because to avail oneself of assistance is to be successful - by warding off potential problems.

Academic centers for success

Both elements of advising and tutoring reflect a customer-oriented, quality approach, which increasingly has entered into the jurisdiction of higher education, and in sophisticated ways. It is not uncommon to see entire centers for academic success as part of a pantheon of support mechanisms to remediate academic challenges in mathematics and writing, and even shortcomings in examination preparation, writing notes, and time management.

First Year Experience programs are crafted along these lines and prepare incoming freshmen students for the rigor of the undergraduate experience in an effort to encourage degree completion. The tenor of higher education has been altered to account for creative ways in which students can be advised or taught out of deficiencies and meet with academic success. Years ago, these skills were relegated to developmental courses that generally were nothing more than prerequisites to gain access to entry-level freshman courses in English or math or, most unfortunately, at least at one institution where I taught, to separate students with questionable skills from access to higher education. The trend has moved from student elimination to student preservation.
Altered trends

In those days, if assistance on the undergraduate level was scarce, then assistance for Ph.D. students was not even a consideration. The idea existed then, and to some extent still does, that if students required formal assistance to get through a Ph.D. program, they probably did not need, or deserve, a Ph.D. But with an estimated 50% national doctoral attrition rate, this notion too has changed, especially as the variables that lead to doctoral success come to light and lend to insightful interventions \(^1,2,3\). In addition, the numbers of students seeking the Ph.D. are relatively small when compared with the numbers seeking the undergraduate and master's degree, and so attrition rates are even more glaring when examined in this context.

Moreover, the cost of a Ph.D., in addition to the protracted educational process, on average 6 years, \(^4\) make of it a high stakes enterprise for both student and institution, especially those institutions providing multi-year financial support or those students financing their own educations. Protecting the investment in time, monies, energy, and support has become a concern for many universities, which understand that the special advising required by doctoral students elevates these supportive measures to an entirely new level. More is required, not less. Analysis of doctoral exit surveys in the Council of Graduate Schools (2009) Ph.D. Completion Project indicates that mentoring and advising support were listed among the primary variables that students cited as contributing to degree completion\(^5\).

Doctoral student advising, once the sole purview of doctoral advising committees, is now integrated within a complex of programs sponsored out of the Graduate Center at my university. When I began my tenure as director ten years ago, I asked a question that continues to figure critically in my work: "What do doctoral students need in order to successfully complete their programs and graduate?" This question has opened onto intensive programmatic support mechanisms, logically configured to bring about a stable return on investment: timely graduation and reduced attrition rates. Moreover, the rationale for creating such a center dismantles the natural assumptions regarding doctoral students in their trajectories to the Ph.D. One of these concerns the idea that they are sophisticated consumers of education who “know the ropes” when, in fact, graduate education represents a singular experience for which they may not
always have a solid foundation.

Yet another assumption is that they are prepared for the research experience and can write or edit the dissertation independently and without great intervention⁸ or that they are cognizant of the rules of responsible conduct of research or understand how to manage and report data. Degrees of fluency in statistics, as well as the ability to analyze and synthesize results are sometimes questionable. Research indicates that many students are not comfortable in configuring a dissertation committee or in selecting a major advisor⁷, and levels of feeling secure in interacting with/communicating with dissertation advisors and committee members are not necessarily as high as one might surmise. The fact is that doctoral students often suffer from great hesitancy in speaking with these individuals and negotiating strategies for successful, and timely, completion of the degree, as my work with them indicates.

Falling prey to varied assumptions that doctoral students can independently do it all ensures a problematic, if not impossible, doctoral process and undermines the potential for success. In many instances, doctoral students require consistent hands on guidance, oversight, and vigilance. While it is true that their training prepares them to be independent scholars, they are nevertheless, still students, whose identities as emerging scholars are under construction.

Moreover, they have never written a dissertation and have little experience in crafting a document that can easily run several hundred pages in length. The opportunity to work with a dissertation coach who can help the student to shape, hone, and narrow the focus is a boon; the coach does not assume the role of dissertation advisor, but rather, provides the student with an opportunity to tease out the concept and to shape it into a form that meets with the advisor’s vision for the monograph. In my interactions with students, I counsel them, up front, that the advisor always has the final decision in all dissertation matters, and there is close communication between and among the student, advisor, and me, in my role as coach. In addition, the implementation of a quality circle review or a doctoral peer-editing group aids both the writer as well as the students conducting the review⁹. Holistic programmatic approaches empower students and convert them into active participants who maintain negotiating rights and who learn how to prevail over an intensive educational process with self confidence.

The Graduate Center provides a consistent hands-on approach to doctoral students in the attainment of their success and does not restrict visits or resources. The objective in

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creating the Center was to construct a one-stop, umbrella-like complex of programs, all at no
cost, through which students would be retained and graduated. Students are even provided with
unlimited access to a statistician who oversees the entire review process by reading Chapters I
and III of each student’s dissertation proposal, reviewing collected data, and responding to the
student’s questions and concerns regarding the analysis and interpretation of research data.
These skills often extend, quite logically, into the preparation for the defense. Advisors work with
the statistician throughout this process and are kept informed via written reports that follow each
consultation with the statistician.

The close alignment of the dissertation advisor, the advisee, and the statistician creates
an integrated collaborative approach in the advising process that unifies and solidifies the
dissertation initiative and makes of it a less solitary or isolating experience. The same result
holds for the conceptualization of the dissertation, just mentioned, yet another place in the
process that often results in students’ sense of hesitancy and insecurity if they are left to their
own devices. Our foray into the world of statistics advising has revealed that students require
assistance in preparing and cleaning data for analysis, in running software programs, and in
learning how to anticipate defense questions, and we have sequenced programmatic support in
these areas, as well.

Conclusion

Advising serves as a conduit in helping educators achieve quality student learning
outcomes in education. The dissertation proper represents this outcome, the product of a long
and demanding educational process. Advising extends from what happens within the
disciplinary framework of the curriculum to embrace other advising forms that are inextricably
connected to the production of the monograph. These account for students’ emotional and
psychological wellbeing, their sense of writing confidence, their ability to synthesize and analyze
data, and their ability to embrace the rigors of research with aplomb.

The question, “What do doctoral students need in order to successfully complete their
programs and graduate?” is a question that always opens up to multiple layers of responses
and therefore to continuous process improvement. The use of quality tools and collaborative
interventions, closer alignment of graduate faculty, their advisees, and graduate centers for
success ensure that all the key players and their available resources are directed toward the
same objective. Previous doctoral advising models are passé. The time has come for educators and professional staff to pool their skills, talents, and initiatives and propel students, collaboratively, toward success.

References
7. Ibid.

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