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Intrusive Advisement: A necessary process to retain graduate students and bolster graduation rates

13th Annual International Conference on Education

Athens, Greece

May 23-26, 2011

Athens Institute for Education and Research

Graduate students across the world in higher education have self-selected themselves into their chosen degree programs, and each student tends to be assigned an advisor, or multiple advisors, to assist them through these programs. Graduate students tend to be self-directed and read most, if not all, of the literature supplied by an institution to guide what they should accomplish to succeed at the graduate level. However, some may merely glance over the volumes of this material and it is not a safe assumption of the institution that the graduate student has read all the materials, much less retain every portion of what is they did pursue.

A graduate advisor must be an integral part of the student's academic life, and partake in a somewhat "intrusive role" toward their advisees, to promote the retention and graduation rates of the institution. Intrusive Advisement (Glennen, 1985) illustrates the periodic and scheduled contact of the graduate student via all types of electronic means in order to monitor the student's progress and assure that each is aware of what is necessary to succeed. Simple things such as when to enroll, contact information updates, and other mundane portions of any higher education system, cannot be taken lightly. Enrollment monitoring by the advisor can save the student time, money, and academic hours when it comes to undertaking and completing the proper courses within their degree programs.

The graduate advisor, while using Intrusive Advisement, will find that the activities that they engage in are very time consuming and rarely acknowledged by their administrators as part of the faculty members normal work load. The true measure of success when applying Intrusive Advisement can only be measured in the retention and graduation rates of degree programs.

Who should advise-- The role of advisor at the graduate level tends to be expected, as part of most contracts, of each and every faculty member that teaches graduate level courses. This might be good in theory, but could fall short in practice. The advisor actually has to see the benefit of the time that they allot to advisement. Faculty tend to look at advisement as just another thing to do that unfortunately may

be last on their list of items to accomplish for their positions. Administration tends not to value advisement as noted in promotion and tenure guidelines that list the role as “service”, with little if any credit to the individual who is assigned to advise. Advisement should be assigned to individuals who have an excellent sense of organization, dedication, use of time, and above all, value the students who are the main reason that professors can actually teach courses. The advisor needs to view students as the sole reason for the universities’ existence.

Who should not advise-- The faculty member who is not organized, cannot follow directions, procrastinates, and cannot remember policies and rules as they apply to students, should not be assigned to advise students. The faculty member who does not know the individual degrees, and their requirements, and who cannot process the multitude of forms should be left out of any advisement assignment, or brought up to speed if it is indeed a job requirement. It cannot be emphasized enough that the incompetent faculty in this regard, should be remediated and not excused from this responsibility.

How intrusive should an advisor be? The advisor should be intrusive within reason, which means that he or she will have to find a comfortable relationship with the advisee. Phone calls to a student should take place at least once or twice a semester and hopefully the student will respond at the time of the call. If the student does not answer, then a follow up call, after a message has been left, should take place within a week’s time. The advisor will need to keep notes on each and every interaction or attempted interaction with an advisee. Phone calls should be made to remind students about registration, letting students know that they might have signed up for the incorrect course, too few courses, too many courses, to discuss current GPA issues, to just talk about how they doing in their courses and when they plan to graduate. The ultimate objective of an advisor is to prompt a student to take as many courses as possible in a semester in order to graduate as quickly as possible. Please remember that some students, due to

their family, job, and social responsibilities, may only be able to take a single course in a semester, and others might be enrolling well beyond a full-load. A simple rule to follow for all advisors---each student is different and one size does not fit all.

Assignment of Advisees-- There should be a designated person in each department who assigns all students to individual advisors. This individual should conduct a type of ‘triage’ in order to find the “best fit” of faculty, students’ program aspirations, and some connection to the student(s).

Contacting the student-- Contacting the advisee should be accomplished through phone calls, letters, emails, FAX, and texting. Do not depend on one means of being able to contact a student. Current addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses are mandatory in order to maintain many viable means of communication. Each time an advisor makes a contact there should be a request for an update of all means of current contact which will help to ensure ongoing communication. The time of day to make calls to an advisee can vary depending on the responsibilities a student has outside of school. Early evenings or even a Saturday morning contact can prove to be most fruitful. Calls during the typical 8 am to 5 pm work day are usually met with a voice recorder. Please note that with the increased popularity of texting across the world, more and more students tend to respond to a text message faster than a phone message, or even an email.

Record Keeping-- This is something that is absolutely necessary since the amount of material that is discussed with respect to any timeframe is usually too much to remember for any advisor’s mind. Simple note taking procedures need to be followed with every contact which includes the date, time, and mode of contact, what was discussed, and retention of any emails that were sent, and answered. The filing of each

of these items is necessary in order to stay up-to-date with each individual's unique situation. Prior to any contact of an advisee the advisor should refresh their memory by reviewing the student's current file. Again, all contacts with a student need to be manually noted in the student's file.

Monitoring the student's progress-- Advisor's should take a very active 'intrusive' role in monitoring the student's progress within the university's electronic system. Noting the enrollment of a student, or if a student has changed a schedule, should always prompt a contact from an advisor. GPA issues, whether they be positive or negative should also prompt a contact. Furthermore, there is no excuse to not contact a student about excellent grades achieved in any semester. Monitoring a student's enrollment during each semester is a must since some students make changes in their schedules without contacting advisors. Some of the changes are justified and correct, but in some cases the changes might lead to difficulties further along that the student had not anticipated. If a student becomes inactive for over two semesters, timely contact must be made by the advisor to find out why this lack of action has occurred. It is not the role of the advisor to "sell" a degree program to a student who does not wish to pursue their studies, but rather to counsel the student in the direction of progress that will fit the student's aspirations and goals.

Paper work—ongoing through to graduation-- All institutions require various types of paperwork to be completed by the student and the advisor. Some of this material can be completed online and, but many types of paperwork are still done via pen or pencil. Students need to be accurate and legible when filling out forms. Accuracy needs to be checked, and rechecked, by the advisor. The advisor should call each advisee to verify all information and make any corrections if necessary. All students will need to file some type of Program of Study for a degree even if the course work is prescribed. The advisor needs to make sure that the plan is in order and followed as specified. Graduation paper work is a necessary evil in all degree programs. The completion of the forms by the student and the final attention to detail by

the advisor is usually the final step before the degree is awarded. Accuracy is imperative when completing these forms since the information will be reflected in the student's diploma.

Panning for students-- This concept is relatively new to education. Panning is defined as gleaning students who were part of a degree program, left the program for some time, and then are contacted by an advisor, whose sole purpose is to convince the student to return to the program based on what that student had accomplished, and what remains unfulfilled in their degree program. Many students leave degree programs for such reasons as marriage, finances, too busy to continue, lack of interest on a short-term basis, and various other combinations of social commitment, perhaps not tied to education. The advisor needs to review the names and transcripts of all potential students who have left a degree program and make an assessment of whether the students are viable candidates to return to complete their degree. The advisor can expect to spend a lot of time phoning and talking to students to find out if they wish to return, after the advisor acknowledges what requirements remain. The advisor must really "know" the students and the student's needs, and have a co-inspired plan devised in order to potentially complete the degree. The advisor must share this plan and try to "sell it" to the student. This process might take a few phone calls and may occur over a few months of time. The benefit to the student is self-explanatory, and the benefit to the university is not only potential credit hour generation, but a student who will likely complete a degree and be very grateful for the personal contact by the advisor. Sometimes students need to be directed to what they need through the eyes and mind of an advisor.

Intrusive Advisement results over the past 10 years at a Midwestern university-- During the past ten years an advisor at regional Midwestern university has employed Intrusive Advisement techniques to all of his advisees, while all other advisors in his department employed their own techniques that mainly

assumed that since the students were adults they would know how to read, comprehend, and adhere to all policies and procedures at the graduate school level. The advisor who employed Intrusive Advisement was assigned 776 advisees during that time span which was one-third of the total number of graduate students in the department in said decade. The graduation rate for the Advisor who employed Intrusive Advisement had a 63% graduation rate (Zelazek, 2011) for his advisees, whereas the collective graduation rate for the other eighteen advisors was 54% (Zelazek, 2011). This is a substantial positive difference and can be traced to the Advisor's close contact with each of his advisees while they were enrolled in the degree program.

Conclusions-- Intrusive Advisement is very time consuming and needs to be done by advisors who are willing to take the time required to work with students. Intrusive Advisement benefits students with respect to their time, money, and effort as they are pursuing their degrees. The use of Intrusive Advisement does suggest that graduation rates can be increased when it is used on a consistent and competent basis. Higher Education institutions are in the business of educating students, and it is in their best interests to retain and graduate those students to an advanced status.

Reference List

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