The Academic Advising Experiences of Adult Learners: Preliminary Findings from One Department

Noreen Powers and Russell Wartalski
Northeastern Illinois University

Abstract: Supporting the academic advising needs of adult learners is essential in postsecondary education. Research suggests that the faculty advisor's role is pivotal for ensuring a student's academic progress. The faculty advisor supports adult learners in achieving their professional goals and providing resources to ensure their academic success. However, junior faculty are not always aware of the practices that suit the needs of adult learners. To address a gap in the literature, the researchers are currently conducting a qualitative case study that explores the advising experiences of adult learners with their faculty advisors. The researchers present preliminary findings from their ongoing study to participants at the annual AAACE conference.

Keywords: adult learners, student advising, junior faculty, higher education

Ensuring the unique needs of adult learners is vital for postsecondary education. Adults have been a growing student population for the last few decades (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). As enrollment of adult learners continues to increase, faculty play a more critical role in this student population's retention and success efforts through academic advising (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Addressing adult students' advising needs and the appropriate practices necessary to ensure their success is an important consideration for junior faculty members who are embarking on new teaching roles within academia and balancing multiple work responsibilities.

The literature is clear that advising plays a vital role in the development of traditional-aged college students. Advisors are typically the first point of contact for students pursuing their studies at a new institution and become an important resource for the learner (Karr-Lilienthal, Lazarowicz, McGill, & Menke, 2013). One might believe that academic advising would then be just as beneficial for adult students. Noel-Levitz (2008), however, indicated that academic advising for adults was a source of displeasure. What does that mean then for the junior (new) faculty members tasked with advising adult learners?

The faculty advising model is used in many colleges and universities (Karr-Lilienthalet al.). Nevertheless, contemporary graduate programs preparing future faculty for teaching roles omit training that addresses student advising. The lack of training focused on student advising in graduate education can create problems for junior faculty members navigating their new teaching roles while attempting to connect with adult learners in the process. Some scholars have indicated a need for new research focused on learners' academic advising perceptions (Karr-Lilienthal, Lazarowicz, McGill, & Menke, 2013). Others have indicated a need for further studies examining adult learners' advising needs at the graduate and undergraduate levels (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). As such, the researchers of this ongoing study, both junior faculty members teaching at a regional public university, are conducting a qualitative investigation focused on adult students' advising experiences with their junior faculty advisors.

Literature Review

Student Advising

Studies that have been published on academic advising place considerable emphasis on the history of the field and the practices for advising first-time, traditional-aged students within undergraduate contexts (Cook, 2009; Larson, Johnson, Aiken-Wisniewski, & Barkemeyer, 2018). The interactions learners have with faculty and staff significantly influence retention (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Tinto, 1987). Advising has become an integral component in the retention and success of students. Additional research underscores the imperative that "solid academic advising" (Drake, 2011, p. 9) is an important support that ensures student success.

Regional Public Universities

Regional public universities (RPUs) typically recruit students from the region where they live and focus on enrolling a broad range of learners, including adults and older students, minorities and other underrepresented groups, and veterans (Zach, 2018). RPUs typically recruit adults, older students, minorities, and other underrepresented groups, and veterans (Zach, 2018). As RPUs have typically focused their efforts on student access and success, such efforts have influenced the faculty role. Notwithstanding their beginnings, RPUs focus on providing educational access for a variety of learners.

Junior Faculty

Tenure-track and tenured faculty engage in many projects and tasks related to their work, which may include creating student-centered courses, conducting scholarly (discipline-specific) research, and coaching students individually or in small groups (AAUP). At RPUs, Henderson (2007) declared that faculty "spend less time on research and more in direct contact with students than those at research universities . . . [and] have higher teaching loads and fewer research facilities" (p. 9). With junior faculty members' teaching and service requirements in mind and awareness that their doctoral education provides anything "about advising students" (Schroeder & Terras, 2015) in their terminal degree programs, junior faculty teaching at RPUs must find ways to efficiently and effectively work with their adult student advisees.

Adult Learners

The definitions and characteristics used to describe adult learners have been discussed extensively in the literature from a variety of vantage points (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Brown, 2002; Choy, 2002; Cross, 1981; Hardin, 2008; Horn, 1998; O'Donnell & Tobbel, 2007; Snyder & Dillow, 2013; Soares, 2013; Zach, 2018). While no standard definition exists, some elements that describe adult learners appear in the literature. Some commonalities include being at least 25 years of age or older (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Snyder & Dillow, 2013), working full or part-time (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Soares, 2013), sustaining themselves financially (Soares, 2013), and having other personal and professional obligations to address (Cross, 1981; Horn, 1998; Soares, 2013). Zach (2018) notes, adult learners primarily pursue their education at regional

public universities because the curriculum and support at such institutions are often "related to their job or career aspirations" (p. 13).

Methodology

This study's potential impact is a focal point for engaging in the research, especially for junior faculty who are responsible for advising adult learners. As such, the research question guiding this interpretive study follows: How do adult students perceive their advising experiences with their junior faculty advisors?

The researchers are interested in understanding students' perceptions of academic advising with junior faculty advisors. Thus, a qualitative research design is being used for this study. The researchers regularly advise students and reflect on how such interactions influence program retention and, more importantly, academic, and professional success. The researchers are employing the particularistic case study method for this research (Merriam, 2009).

Site & Sample Selection

This study is being conducted at a medium-sized university located in the Midwestern region of the US. This study utilizes purposeful sampling, and 13 research participants have participated in this study. The participants are currently enrolled in one of two academic programs--either in an Educational Leadership (Principal Preparation) graduate program or a Human Resource Development undergraduate program. Presently, the majority of research participants have self-identified as women.

Data & Data Analysis

The researchers are collecting several types of data for this qualitative case study. The first type of data being collected comes in the form of individual interviews. The researchers are conducting individual interviews that are approximately 60-90 minutes in length. Miles et al. (2014) suggest that researchers engage in the data analysis process "concurrent with data collection" (p. 70). Utilizing Glaser & Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method, the researchers have already begun analyzing the data. The researchers have organized current data into preliminary, relevant, yet these may change with additional data collection.

Findings

In this ongoing study, the researchers continue to elicit the perceptions of advising practices of adult learners with their junior faculty advisors. While this paper addresses the preliminary findings of 13 research participants, the researchers have already begun to identify their unique vantage points and historical perspectives concerning their advising experiences. So far, the three emerging themes that have surfaced include (a) cultivate trust, (b) comprehensive communication, and (c) clear program documents.

Cultivating trust and maintaining is the first preliminary finding. Specifically, trust allows adults to grow as both learners and practitioners within their respective fields. Trust is the main

element, so far, that is established in relationships. Creating trust is typically demonstrated by junior faculty advisors through robust interpersonal abilities. It appears that regular meetings (in-person and virtually) help cultivate this important ingredient in successful advising relationships. Advisors need to understand their students' challenges and responsibilities. Research participants are also indicating that they want some level of autonomy in the advising process. In essence, they want to have space to voice their concerns and guide their path to success.

Comprehensive communication is the second preliminary theme for this study. Junior faculty advisors who communicate competently and effectively with advisees appear to sustain relationships more quickly than those who do not. In the relationship-building process, research participants indicate a need for space to understand critical information that impacts learners' academic and professional success. In particular, comprehensive communication helps students navigate academic programs, understand specific roles in the workplace, and clarify potential career trajectories. Students noted specific content, various mediums of communication, and the frequency in which junior faculty advisors communicated with advisees was critical to success.

Clear program documents are essential to successful student/faculty advising relationships, highlighting the third preliminary theme for this study. In particular, participants are noting good relationships are predicated on the program plan, which provides information on individual courses, the sequence in which courses are to be taken, and other pertinent information about college and university requirements. The program plan is typically the first document provided to students at the beginning of their respective programs. The research participants discuss the importance of referring to program documents throughout their time in their programs.

Conclusion

This ongoing research study focuses on adult learners' advising experiences with their junior faculty advisors at one regional public university. The study emphasizes students' advising experiences at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Although three themes have already begun to emerge, the researchers will continue to collect data there are repeating themes (Creswell, 2007). The final results will be published in a peer-reviewed manuscript.

References

Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research, 55*(4), 485-540.

Brown, B. L. (2002). Strategies that contribute to non-traditional/adult student development and persistence. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning, 11*(1), 67-76.

Choy, S. P. (2002). *The condition of education 2002: Special analysis: Nontraditional undergraduates*. Institute of Education Sciences. http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2002012

Cook, S. (2009). Important events in the development of academic advising in the United States. *NACADA Journal, 29*(2), 60-70.

Cross, P. K. (1981). *Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitation learning.* Jossey-Bass.

Drake, J. (2011). The role of academic advising in student retention and persistence. *About Campus 16*(3), 8-12.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Aldine Press.

Hardin, C. J. (2008). Adult students in higher education: A portrait of transitions. In B. O. Barefoot (Ed.), *The first year and beyond: Rethinking the challenge of collegiate transition* (New Directions for Higher Education, No. 144, pp. 49-57). Jossey-Bass.

Henderson, B. (2007). *Teaching at the people's university: An introduction to the state comprehensive university*. Anker Publishing Company.

Horn, L. (1998). *Stopouts or stayouts?: Undergraduates who leave college in their first year*. Washington, DC: USDOE, NCES.

Hussar, W. J., & Bailey, T. M. (2013). *Projections of Education Statistics to 2022* (NCES 2014-051). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Government Printing Office.

Karr-Lilienthal, L. K., Lazarowicz, T., McGill, C. G., & Menke, D. (2013). Faculty advisors' attitudes towards undergraduate advising in a college of agriculture and natural sciences: A non-experimental study. *NACTA Journal, 57*(2), 35-44.

Larson, J., Johnson, A., Aiken-Wisniewski, S. A., & Barkemeyer, J. (2018). What is academic advising? An application of analytic induction. *NACADA Journal, 38*(2), 81-93.

Merriam, S. B. (2009) *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Noel-Levitz. (2008). *National adult student priorities report*. Ruffalo Noel Levitz. https://www.ruffalonl.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/ASPSReport08.pdf

O'Donnell, V. L., & Tobbell, J. (2007). The transition of adult students to higher education: Legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice? *Adult Education Quarterly, 57*(4), 312-328.

Pike, G., & Kuh, G. D. (2005). First- and second-generation college students: A comparison of their engagement and intellectual development. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76*(3), 276-300.

Ruffalo, N. L. & Lumina. (2019). *2019 National adult student satisfaction and priorities report*. Ruffalo Noel Levitz. https://learn.ruffalonl.com/rs/395-EOG-977/images/2019_National_Student_Satisfaction_Report_RNL-005.pdf

Schroeder, S. M., & Terras, K. L. (2015). Advising experiences and needs of online, cohort, and classroom adult graduate learners. *NACADA, 35*(1), 42-55.

Snyder, T. D., and Dillow, S. A. (2013). *Digest of education statistics 2012* (NCES 2014-015). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2014015

Soares, L. (2013). *Post-traditional learners and the transformation of postsecondary education: A manifesto for college leaders*. American Council on Education. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Post-traditional-Learners.pdf

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. University of Chicago Press.