



## **The Relationship between Academic Advising and Student Success in Canadian Colleges: A Review of the Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Increasing student retention is complex and no one single intervention can independently solve the student success problem; however, academic advising has been cited more prominently in student success literature as a central feature in a comprehensive strategy to improve student persistence, especially on college campuses. This paper explores current literature on academic advising, its relationship with student success, and the current state of the literature in Canada. Findings include that there is very little research showing the direct effect of academic advising on student success, and that only on rare occasion does this research employ rigorous analytical and design methods. It is also argued that the organization and practice of academic advising in Canada is still in its infancy. Implications for future research and practice are also presented.

### **Introduction**

It is consistently argued that student success is the most important problem for higher education administrators and policy makers (Reason, 2009). Retention and graduation rates are continuing to garner more focus in contemporary research, literature and policy, especially since they are not improving (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). In a recent submission to the Ontario government, Colleges Ontario (2014) described their goals over the next five years, which included commitments to significantly increase graduation rates. It is widely understood that increasing student retention is incredibly complex and that no one single intervention or approach can independently solve the student success problem. And yet, compared to the United States, there are only small amounts of research existing on this topic, and no author has provided a theory or framework about student success that explains this phenomenon on Canadian campuses.

Academic advising is one of the critical components of a strategy to address this complex problem. It is commonly cited in American literature as an important function that supports student persistence. Recently academic advising has been showing up more prominently in student success literature, such as in the book *Increasing Persistence* (Habley et al., 2012) and in the Center for Community College Student Engagement's recent national research report on high impact practices for student success, *A Matter of Degrees* (2014). The most recent example is a book called, *Rethinking College Student Retention* (Braxton et al., 2014), which found empirical evidence to support a theory of student success on commuter campuses. Braxton et al. also found that academic advising is one of the most important interventions for commuter students. This has particular implications for Canadian colleges, many of which are commuter campuses. Unfortunately, very little literature in Canada exists on the practice of academic advising on university or college campuses. And no published literature was found that explores the empirical relationship

between academic advising and student success in Canada.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the current state of the literature. I will argue that currently the quality of empirical evidence on academic advising and its relationship to student success is weak, and that the organization and practice of academic advising in Canada is still in its infancy. The paper is organized around three broad questions: (a) What is academic advising? (b) What is the relationship between academic advising and student success? And, (c) what do we know about academic advising and student success in Canada? While most literature related to these three questions is heavily focused on universities, literature on colleges will be a focal point. The paper will conclude with a summary of the findings and implications for future research and practice.

### **What is Academic Advising?**

To understand what academic advising is, this section will explore four components of advising literature: (a) definitions of academic advising; (b) approaches to academic advising; (c) the organisation of academic advising on campus; and (d) current debates about the current state of academic advising.

### **Definitions and Descriptions of Academic Advising**

At its most basic level, academic advising, which is also commonly referred to in the literature as *advising* is “a decision-making process during which students realize their maximum educational potential through communication and information exchanges with an advisor” (Grites, 1979, p. 1). This definition, which emphasizes the reciprocal process of communication between a student and an advisor, was also the definition that Braxton et al., (2014) cited in their recent work. The current applicability of Grites’s definition demonstrates the stability of the concept academic advising, even as different theories and approaches have been introduced in the literature.

Another practical definition is that of Kuhn (2008), which is similar but provides greater insight into explaining the various roles of advisors. Kuhn refers to academic advising as “situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach” (p. 3). The inclusion of “academic, social or personal matters” into the definition demonstrates that academic advisors do not just address academic issues; rather, advisors are available to address a comprehensive range of issues with students. This respects core tenants of the plethora of theories explaining student development in post-secondary education, which emphasize support of the whole person (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Furthermore, the reference to “inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach” represents the wide scope of approaches advisors may use with students. This breadth of understanding how advisors advise is equally important in the understanding of the scope of practice for academic advisors.

Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber (2006) sought to explain the differences between different approaches to advising on the advising-counselling

continuum. This continuum uses five levels of advising – informational, explanatory, developmental, mentoring, and counselling – to explain purpose, content, focus and the average length of time for each type of face to face advising interaction. In detail, they explain differences in the roles between advisors and counsellors, the elements that are really the scope of just advisors, the elements that either could do, and the elements that are just in the scope of practice for counsellors. In Canada, the title and practice of counselling is a regulated activity and represents a more discrete profession with a clear scope of practice focusing on mental health and therapy (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2015). This literature provides a simple way to explain this on college campuses and is a good fit for the Canadian context.

Another foundational description of academic advising comes from NACADA, which originated as the National Academic Advising Association in 1979 (Thurmond & Miller, 2006). NACADA is an American professional association for faculty, staff and administrators involved in academic advising. NACADA has not published a specific definition of academic advising, however, it does promote the 'Concept of Advising' which describes academic advising in a broad way and places it squarely at the heart of the teaching and learning mission of post-secondary institutions:

Regardless of the diversity of our institutions, our students, our advisors, and our organizational structures, academic advising has three components: curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising does what it does), and student learning outcomes (the result of academic advising). (NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, 2006)

It should be noted that in Canada, there is no national association like NACADA for academic advisors. However, there are a number of regional associations and there is also the Canada Interest Group which is part of the official structure of NACADA. Within its association Terms of Reference, the Ontario Academic Advising Professionals (n.d.) define that academic advising is “to be understood in its broadest sense and may include those involved in providing academic advice, career advice, counseling, liaison services, and/or learning skills opportunities in order to promote student success and retention.” While broad, this definition is consistent with American literature and the definitions of Grites (1979) and Kuhn et al. (2006). The drawback of a broad definition is that it can lead to role confusion, which is evident in Canadian literature presented later in this paper.

### **Approaches to Academic Advising**

There are a number of different approaches to academic advising used by advisors; most of which emerged within the last 40 years and are still being tested and understood. In an historical look at the eras of academic advising, Frost (2000) argued that advising only became an examined activity around 1970 when advisors started to compare their work to other advisors at other institutions. The seminal works of Crookston (1972) and O'Banion (1972) mark the first theoretical approaches to academic advising and emphasized the importance of developmental advising and the role of prescriptive advising. Crookston explained that “developmental advising is

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 evaluating skills" (p. 5) This emphasis on student development and change, according to Grites (2013) rested upon the understanding that most advisors were also faculty. As such, advising was rooted in the idea that advisors utilize their classroom teaching skills to support student growth, a foundation that is still very much present today in NACADA's Concept of Advising. Crookston also emphasized the role of the advisor-student relationship and the collaborative approach to decision making. At about the same time as Crookston published these ideas, O'Banion (1972) wrote about developmental academic advising from the college perspective.

In contrast to Crookston, O'Banion viewed counsellors, not faculty, as the group best suited to perform this task. O'Banion detailed five steps to his model of academic advising, including the knowledge and skills advisors needed during each step. The steps include: exploration of life goals, exploration of vocational goals, program choice, course choice, and scheduling courses. Most importantly, Crookston and O'Banion each argued in their own ways that prescriptive advising, which involved an advisor merely telling students what they needed to do next was still a necessary part of the developmental process. The idea was that sometimes students just needed some answers, rather than to just challenge students to think about the solutions themselves through developmental advising. Prior to Crookston's work on developmental advising, it was prescriptive advising that was the accepted approach to academic advising (Grites, 2013). These concepts are still very much a part of the literature and practice today.

There are many other contemporary approaches to academic advising, some of which include, intrusive advising (Glennen, 1975), appreciative advising (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008), and strengths-based advising (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005), to name a few. Intrusive advising, for example, is more commonly known as proactive advising today (Varney, 2013). The essence of this approach calls for more deliberate personal outreach from advisors to provide information or support to students before they need it. Through proactive intervention, this approach aims to build relationships and enhance student motivation. Appreciative advising is rooted in positive psychology and the organizational development theory of appreciative inquiry (Bloom & Martin, 2002). It includes six phases in the advising process (disarm, discover, dream, design, deliver, and don't settle) to maximize the positive and collaborative nature of student-advisor interactions. Like developmental advising, each of these approaches borrows theory from other fields to inform advising practice.

### **Organisation of Advising on Campus: Who Advises and Where**

Academic advising is organized and delivered in many different ways. The individuals facilitating advising are both faculty and professional advisors and the offices of academic advisors are situated in both academic and student affairs departments. The overall organization and delivery of advising can include any or all of these components in any number of combinations on each campus. King (2008) noted three broad approaches to the organization and delivery of advising, which includes

decentralized models, centralized models and shared models.

Decentralized models include two types. In the faculty-only model students are assigned a faculty advisor and there is no central advising office. In the satellite model, each academic unit has an advising office. In the centralized model, there is one central advising office, maximizing advisor resources and coordination. In shared models, there are combinations of central advising offices and faculty advisors or academic unit advising offices. Each of these approaches has inherent strengths and weaknesses; however, there is no one approach that has been found in the literature as most effective. According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education “advising programs must be structured purposefully and managed effectively... [and] must be compatible with the institutional structure and its students’ needs” (Dean, 2009, p. 42). Recent literature includes arguments of similar points, noting that consistent overall coordination of student success initiatives are one of the most important elements to effectively improve student outcomes (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012; Braxton et al., 2014). The models of delivery for advising, therefore, are secondary in nature to the quality of the advising practice and the consistent quality of the delivery across campus.

### **Current Debates about Academic Advising**

Scholars have debated a number of fundamental questions about academic advising in recent years, largely related to the questions: is academic advising a field of inquiry or a profession? Creamer (2000) argued that there were no theories of advising. In a response to this statement, Hagen and Jordan (2008) concede that there is no single unified theory of advising, but that a unified theory is non-existent in other professions too. They argue that multiple theories can exist and should exist at the same time within a profession. Lowenstein (2005, 2011, 2014) has contributed the most to these debates, including his proposed Integrative Theory of Advising, which holds that advising is “fundamentally a learning activity in which students intentionally and reflectively integrate their academic learning into an education that is a coherent whole” (Lowenstein, 2014, para. 1). As the editors of the NACADA Journal, Kuhn and Padak (2008) address the question about academic advising as a discipline. They concluded that “based on published discipline-oriented research findings in adjudicated journals and acceptance as a degree granting area... academic advising must establish more credentials before it can be considered an academic discipline” (p. 3). A year later, and after a comprehensive analysis of scholarly activity related to academic advising, Habley (2009) made a similar conclusion. Kuhn (2008) concludes that “the future history of academic advising will lie in its ability to create and use theory, apply findings in practice, and assess effectiveness through research” (p.14). There is still very much a need for a widely accepted and empirically tested theory of advising to legitimize it, and Lowenstein’s (2014) proposed theory may serve to be the catalyst for new scholarly work to rise to this challenge.

**In reviewing the basic elements of academic advising, I have demonstrated that there are some definitions and approaches that are generally accepted among advisors, but that there is no single definition or theory of academic advising that is widely embraced. A**

similar scenario exists related the organization and delivery of advising on campus. Academic advising is a broad and complex function in higher education, which in many ways, likely fosters confusion and hinders its ability to foster greater student success. Despite this relative lack of maturity that academic advising seems to have as a field of inquiry or a profession, there is a fair amount of evidence about the relationship between advising and student success, and recent literature is placing it more centrally among a set of strategies aimed at improving student success.

#### **What is the relationship between academic advising and student success?**

This section of the paper will show that there is growing consensus that advising should play a central role in retention initiatives; however, strong empirical evidence to support this idea is still lacking. To explore this relationship, I will review recent American research findings on this topic, including an emphasis on why advising appears to have an even more central role on college campuses.

Proponents of academic advising as a critical service for student success ground their arguments in some simple and easy to grasp concepts that, in and of themselves, are supported by the literature. For example, meeting with an advisor improves learning and student persistence for student at-risk of dropping out. In a longitudinal, single institution study, Abelman and Molina (2000, 2001, 2002) confirmed that the long-term impact of one-time intrusive advising interventions has a significant positive relationship to student grades and persistence outcomes, especially for those students most at-risk. Academic advising can and likely will support all students on campus. Habley (1994) argues that academic advising is the only structured activity, outside of the classroom, that every student has the chance to participate in. And O'Banion (2013), in an update to his 1972 seminal article on developmental advising in colleges, argues that "academic advising is the second most important function in the college" (p.3), outside of classroom teaching. Conceptually, these arguments make perfect sense, but the literature still needs to be advanced with evidence from more rigorous research.

In reviewing thirty years of empirical evidence on academic advising, including randomized control trials and statistical analysis controlling for confounding variables, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also found a consistent and positive relationship between advising and student success. However, this conclusion was qualified by saying, "[whether] the effects... are direct or indirect is unclear... [but] whatever the causal connections, low-quality advising may be better than no advising at all, and sooner is probably better than later" (pp. 404-405). Building on the work of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Tinto (2006), Reason (2009) reviewed the current state of retention research and evidence. Reason found that most studies fail to account for the wide array of factors that influence student persistence and focus on single interventions or solutions. Reason argued that a more comprehensive approach is needed, specifically more multisite, multivariate and complex analytical designs and methods are necessary to understand student persistence. Such a finding seems at odds with this papers singular focus on academic advising; however, given the growing interest in academic advising as a central fixture in student success

strategies, and the limited evidence available about the efficacy of advising itself, Reason's argument actually serves as an important reminder to ground proponents of academic advising. It also serves as a lens with which to evaluate academic advising research, an approach that will be utilized in the following sections of this paper.

Recent publications from Habley et al. (2012), the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014), and Braxton et al. (2014) have continued to advance our understanding of how academic advising could and should play a central role in supporting student success, yet only Braxton et al. (2014) was multi-institutional and employed a rigorous analytical approach that seemingly would be supported by Reason (2009).

Habley et al. (2012) offered an account of strategies that support student success in their summary of three decades of ACT's *What Works in Student Retention* national surveys. They argue the importance of academic advising as one of four foundational student success interventions, including: assessment and course placement, developmental education initiatives, and first-year transition programs. Unfortunately, the "research based" evidence they utilized was surveys of administrator perceptions of what works, and not actual evidence of what works. In other words, they could not fill the void in the literature of the direct, causal relationships that Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found.

The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) researches the actions, interventions and practices that will help the most students succeed. A recent CCCSE national report (2014) details the relationships between student outcomes and fourteen established high impact educational practices in colleges. All fourteen practices are related to improved student outcomes, two of which are elements of academic advising: goal setting with an advisor; and alert and intervention. Students who reported that an advisor helped them set goals and create a plan for achieving them were about 1.3 times more likely to complete developmental courses compared to students who did not receive advising in their first term. Similarly, they found that students who reported that someone at the college contacted them if they were struggling academically were about 1.7 times more likely to complete a developmental course. Strengths in the design of this study include that it took place on twelve college campuses and that survey results were linked to individual student data from each institution. However, a weakness of this study is that the core element of data collection was via a self-reporting mechanism: student surveys.

Perhaps the most recent and persuasive evidence about the relationship between academic advising a college student success comes from Braxton et al. (2014), who empirically tested a pair of theories of student retention originally proposed by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004). These theories, they explain, constitute a substantial revision to Tinto's Interactionist Theory of Student Departure (1993), which they argue has contributed the most to our understanding of student retention. The result are two revised theories of student retention; one focused on residential institutions and the other on commuter campuses. The theory for commuter institutions may be the most relevant to Canadian colleges, especially those in Ontario, which are primarily commuter institutions. This

theory recognizes the role of: student entry characteristics, initial institutional commitment, external environment, internal environment and organizational characteristics, academic and intellectual development, and subsequent institutional commitment. Each of these elements has influence over the outcomes of student persistence. Using an approach called analytical cascading, they empirically tested a wide array of interventions and found that academic advising was one of the most important “levers of action” on commuter campuses for its positive effect on “students’ perceptions of their academic and intellectual development as well as their institution’s commitment to the welfare of its students” (p. 57). Additional recommendations include: an integrated design approach; nine imperatives for institutional commitment; enacting a strategic retention initiative; and recognizing the role of faculty. It should be noted that while this theory and set of recommendations focused on four-year institutions, the authors suggest its applicability to two-year institutions. Repeating this study and testing it within the two-year college setting would be a welcome addition to the literature, especially if tested in the Canadian context. The strengths of this study include that it relied on data from five institutions, was built upon and tested a comprehensive theory, and used an advanced method called analytical cascading.

In summary, the relationship between academic advising and student success is well documented in the United States; however, studies involving multiple institutions and a rigorous research design, such as randomized experiments or statistical analysis that controls for confounding variables, are rare and still very much needed to clarify and substantiate the effect academic advising has on student outcomes.

### **What do we know about academic advising and student success in Canada?**

We know very little about academic advising and student success in Canada. Finnie and Qiu (2008) provide the most current account of persistence patterns in universities and colleges across Canada, finding that if students who switch programs or institutions are included in graduation rates, that student outcomes are much better than initially observed, but still leave room for improvement. And through comprehensive statistical analysis, Finnie and Qiu also demonstrated that the reasons why students leave are complex and difficult to predict and plan for, making the challenge for college administrators a significant one. This challenge is further evidenced in a review of approximately 140 studies funded and published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario by Wiggers and Arnold (2011). They concluded that despite the best efforts of college and university staff, student awareness and utilization of support services is low, making it difficult for researchers to assess student success outcomes reliably. Wiggers and Arnold also found that there was room for improvement in the overall quality and rigour of the research design of many projects.

While our knowledge still primarily relies on American literature, there have been a number of valuable scholarly works published in recent years specifically within the colleges. Our knowledge of academic advising and student success, both as independent concepts and also the relationship between them still needs to be teased out in the literature. With a couple exceptions, each of the following publications will further demonstrate this



point.

A total of four theses exist within Library and Archives Canada with the words “academic advising” in the title. All four are university focused and are basic in the design of the research. Three of the four (Bens, 1995; Starks, 2008; Stembera, 2007) are single institution studies and due to a variety of other limitations, the findings are not generalizable. Armstrong's (2011) thesis provides a slightly broader view of advising in Ontario via a survey of advisors across the province on a wide range of topics. Results showed that organizational models were equally split between decentralized and shared models with very few offering centralized advising offices. This proportion of decentralized models is noted as much higher than in the United States. Caseloads were also significantly higher than ideal levels suggested in the literature. These findings suggest that academic advising is less organized in Canada and still in its infancy; however, it also demonstrates the opportunity for vast improvements.

There are a number of interesting trends and themes that emerged from literature on academic advising in Ontario colleges. The first trend is the growing number of advising roles within the colleges. In a study that focused on describing the current state of counselling in Ontario, Lees and Dietsche (2012) found that the student population is getting more complex, which has resulted in counsellors doing less academic and career counselling and more personal counselling. However, this narrowing of the counsellor role has occurred at the same time as many new advising roles have emerged on college campuses. In a report by Deloitte (2012) for Colleges Ontario, a second similar trend was observed. It was found that more operational dollars are being spent on student support and success initiatives each year by Ontario colleges. The report also claims, albeit with vague anecdotal evidence, that the wide array of support services they reviewed, which included academic advising, produces a 35 percentage point increase in graduation rates for students at risk. While the evidence may be weak, the trend of increasing attention on student success and academic advising is clear within the college setting.

College research projects in Ontario focused on student success have also emerged recently that included findings related directly to academic advising. Each has, in its own way, placed academic advising as a foundational component of student success strategies. The Foundations for Success project (R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2009) looked directly at the relationship between case management advising and student success, but also the role of financial incentives and three different levels of support. This study used a rigorous, randomized experimental design on three Ontario college campuses. The findings included increasing retention rates with increasing levels of services used by students. Findings also included that both “participation matters” and “money matters” such that increasing levels of participation and financial assistance improved outcomes. However, given the low participation rates in the study, the per-student costs were too great to scale up the program and operationalize it on these campuses. Another conclusion was that if institutions knew students needed remediation or advising, that it should be made mandatory.

Participation in student support services was also the focus of a study by Dietsche (2012), which looked at the patterns of self-reported use of

student support services on college campuses. This study spanned the Ontario college system and included over 60,000 survey responses. Dietsche found that students who report that they need assistance do not use student support services and that institutions needed to employ a new delivery model for student outreach and support. While the study looked at a broad collection of support services, Dietsche argued that institutions need to take a more proactive and web-based approach to reaching out to students. This conclusion was based on the literature and evidence of intrusive academic advising, which again places academic advising at the centre of a strategy to improve student success.

A recent dissertation by Poirier (2015) is also worthy of noting because its conclusions placed emphasis on the role of advising in supporting student success. While this study focused on orientation and transition programs at three Ontario colleges, Poirier concluded that “a focus on advising to ensure substantial career clarity is likely the single greatest enhancement that Ontario could implement” (p. 81). The idea that students have a greater need for career guidance is rooted in results of two sets of findings. First is the Pan-Canadian Study on First year College Students (Dietsche, 2007) where findings suggest students desired more career information and support than what is available on campus, and second is Finnie and Qiu’s (2008) report on patterns of persistence in college, which shows decisions to switch or leave college were related to the college or program being a poor match for the student. Similar to Dietsche (2012), Poirier argues that rather than leaving the onus on the student to reach out to services, a more proactive, targeted and personalized approach is needed to enhance student success.

The trends in Ontario are clear: advising roles are growing, more money is being spent on support services, students rarely access the services they need, and thus institutions need more intentional, proactive and personal support services and policies. These needs fit neatly within the purpose and scope of academic advising. The Ontario experience seems to also mirror the literature reviewed in this paper, which places academic advising at the centre of highly coordinated student success initiatives on college campuses.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I explored the relationship between academic advising and student success. This literature review recognized that while there is no single intervention that can independently improve student success, there is a distinct trend to placing academic advising at the centre of a comprehensive student success strategy, especially on college campuses. Evidence of this trend was also found in Canadian research, specifically in Ontario. Even with increasing attention, academic advising was shown to still be a relatively young function that requires greater definition of its core approaches and stronger coordination and delivery across campus. This appears to be the key to unlocking the potential of academic advising programs. For administrators, this paper should serve as a catalyst for greater attention on advising, including more proactive and campus wide strategies, perhaps even with an emphasis on career guidance. For researchers, the need for more rigorous analytical and design methods is a critical gap in the literature that college administrators need to more effectively focus their student support programs.

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