Effects of Increased Academic Advisor Contact on International Student Satisfaction

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INTRODUCTION

The population of international students on U.S. campuses is rapidly increasing (Kinoshita & Bowman, 1998). While this influx of foreign students is generally received positively by university administration for the increase of diversity it brings, it also brings about a new set of concerns. Among these concerns are helping students adapt to a new culture, adjust to the challenges of a new language, and acclimate themselves to a foreign educational system. Specifically, many international students may have trouble understanding services that U.S. students take for granted, such as the assistance of an academic advisor. The academic advisor in today’s colleges and universities has come to take on a large number of roles relating to students’ support and success. In addition to helping students understand degree requirements and academic policies, many academic advisors have taken on the expanded roles of assisting with career counseling and academic support services. Unfortunately, many international students tend to disregard the services available from the academic advisor, and turn to their foreign student advisor for help with myriad concerns. Although certainly the most appropriate source for information regarding immigration issues or cultural adaptation concerns, the expertise of the foreign student advisor may be limited on the specifics of curricular idiosyncrasies. The purpose of this study will be to explore how more frequent contacts with academic advisors affect the overall satisfaction of undergraduate international students at a mid-size, public, midwestern university. The researchers hypothesize that more frequent contact with an academic advisor will increase international students’ satisfaction with their academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and institutional attachment/goal commitment.
BACKGROUND

Academic advisors have filled a number of roles in the overall system of student support services, and students have come to rely on their advisors for many services outside the typical realm of academic advising. This has caused the centralized academic advising unit, and the academic advisor in general, to develop a more perceptive approach to appraising students’ needs and interests. Spicuzza (1992) proposed that advisors must come to serve students from a customer service approach, emphasizing the importance of knowing what will satisfy customers and providing it “in a way that shapes a positive attitude toward the provider” (p. 50). As student retention stems directly from overall satisfaction, a user-friendly environment is essential. Spicuzza’s implementation of the customer service approach yielded higher levels of student contact with academic advisors, and higher levels of students’ satisfaction with advising services. Building on the idea that individual student satisfaction is an instrumental aspect of advising, McAuliffe and Strand (1994) employed a cognitive developmental perspective, emphasizing the importance of moving through a reality based on external references (Interpersonalism) to self-authoring reality (Interindividual Balance), based on greater openness to experience and a “dialectical relationship with the world” (p. 27). The role of the academic advisor, then, becomes paramount in helping students find value within themselves, and relying less on the meanings of others, an important component of self-concept and, therefore, overall satisfaction. Stowe (1996) proposed a somewhat different theory explaining the role of the academic advisor in American higher education. While still emphasizing the importance of student satisfaction, Stowe suggested that advising approaches are, and have been, based on erroneous presumptions about the nature of student learning and
development. He claimed that American higher education and its advisement practices have always been based on “the modernist notions of rationality, prediction, and control” (p. 16). In order to better meet students’ needs, however, advisors might approach student development from a Postmodern perspective. Advisors must understand that there is no linear relationship between advising services, or any particular support services, and student success and satisfaction. Rather, these outcomes stem from infinite and immeasurable variables which are constantly changing. A better advising approach, then, would be to develop a system of constant assessment of individual student concerns. Furthermore, as the future is inevitably unknown, advisement should be a “creative, contextual process which can teach students the skills and attitudes necessary for the unknown future rather than imposing a seemingly rational… sense of order on a process which is inherently complex” (p.18).

Concepts such as Stowe’s application of Postmodernism to advising become critically important when considering the fact that many advisors have skewed attitudes toward certain segments of the student population, making effective advising difficult, if not impossible (Mahon & Dannells, 1998). It was found that advisors tend to view transfer students as less prepared, less motivated, less knowledgeable about requirements and procedures, and less able to adjust to an upper-division academic environment than students who matriculated at the advisor’s own institution. While the researches did not suggest that advisor attitudes necessarily cause transfer students to fail, they did uncover undeniable biases in advisors’ attitudes which may be particularly relevant for international students transferring not only from a different school, but often from a completely different educational system. The opinions of advisors, however, may not be so important as the expectations of students
themselves, according to a study by Boyer and Sedlacek (1988). Their implementation of the Noncognitive Questionnaire, designed to predict academic success for minority students, uncovered strong correlations between certain student expectations and eventual academic success and retention in international students. In particular, self-confidence and availability of a strong support person consistently predicted GPA. The authors went on to suggest that “providing student services to increase international student success requires a wide range of offerings” (p. 222).

When considering the advising of foreign students, it should not be automatically assumed that the methods and approaches the advisor uses with domestic students can be generalized to fit their international counterparts. Oliver (1999) cautioned that an advisor “with a U.S.-centric view of life will likely make inaccurate assumptions regarding international students’ thoughts or actions” (p.23). Instead, Oliver suggested that advisors can improve upon their advising style by looking at international students more holistically rather than just assisting with academic planning. This could include understanding the individual student’s social and cultural context and how that colors his or her view of the US educational system. Additionally, it must not be assumed that the advisor’s knowledge of student development can be generalized across cultures, though there is some limited basis for this assumption. Oliver referred to a 1996 study by Gibson-Cline that supported the hypothesis that there are some universals in development. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) suggested that “unfamiliarity with American customs, norms, and values may make it difficult for international students to effectively interact with Americans and meet personal and academic needs” (p. 669).

Yet, the main objective for international students is the successful achievement of
academic goals which can be advanced through enjoyable contacts with the students’ host community, according to Heikinheimo and Schute (1986). If the environment is an open and receptive one, students can move along the adaptation process which includes academic, social, financial, cultural, and language-related elements. The impact of these factors have recently come to the forefront of college administrators’ minds due to the potential impact of adjustment problems on student attrition (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). An advisor can help in this process by understanding that international students come to the United States with different needs and preferences for seeking help, and by aiding these students in their acclimation process (Kinoshita & Bowman, 1998). Certainly, the advisor must be capable of recognizing the typical areas of concern for international students, and help to ease their transition in the same ways that teachers of international students address these concerns. The most common problem areas for international students are listening ability (understanding the instructor), cultural background differences, oral communication skills, vocabulary, and writing skills (Lee, 1997). An effective academic advisor, however, must be prepared to address concerns that may not surface in the classroom or other support areas. Some foreign students, for example, may not feel comfortable talking to an international students advisor about emotional or interpersonal problems. Instead, they will reaffirm their academic focus, and seek the assistance of an academic advisor. During the course of an advising session, the advisor who is aware of cultural differences and modes of adaptation may be able to move beyond the realm of typical academia, and address the emotional and interpersonal concerns of students, as well. Kinoshita and Bowman noted that these duties should not fall solely on the international student office, which may be limited in staff or resources. Rather, the inclusion of the academic
advisor draws on an excellent resource for information about a variety of university services and resources of relevance to international students.

Luzzo, Henao, and Wilson’s (1996) assessment of the academic and social needs of international students affirmed the interconnectedness of positive experiences. Academic satisfaction was related to active campus involvement and substantial friendships. The authors suggested asking international students to complete a questionnaire about academic and social needs as a means of assessing satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study will examine the effects of increased contact with academic advisors on the overall satisfaction of international students at a public Midwestern university. Participants will include all undergraduate degree-seeking international students at the university. Degree-seeking international students are defined as those who matriculate at the university with the intent of attaining a four-year degree. Short-term exchange students will be excluded from the study because they face adjustment issues on a much different timeline than degree-seeking students. The overall international population at the university approaches five hundred students, the majority of whom are graduate students and, therefore, excluded from the study. Of the 125 undergraduate international students, approximately one half are degree-seeking candidates. Due to the relatively small size of the population in question, data will be gathered of all relevant students (N=62). While the results, therefore, will be particularly relevant for the specific university in this study, results can be generalized to other universities and factions
of international students only with great caution.

**Instrumentation**

Students will complete the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) instrument, which consists of 67 statements addressing students’ perceptions of their own academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and institutional attachment/goal commitment, within the setting of higher education. Personal-emotional adjustment refers to the physical and psychological well-being of the student, and institutional attachment/goal commitment refers to the overall connectedness between the students’ goals and the university as a venue for attaining them. Students are asked to respond to each statement on a 9-point Likert-type scale measuring how closely the statement relates to them. For example, students will be asked to rate how closely they agree with statement such as, “I expect to make at least a B average,” and “I participate in volunteer/community service work.” Because this instrument analyzes students’ perceptions of their own adjustment in the previously stated dimensions, rather than externally determined measures, we will essentially be assessing the students’ satisfaction with their own progress (Baker & Schultz, 1992).

Measures on internal consistency for the SACQ meet acceptable standards. SACQ coefficient alphas range from .77 to .88 for the Academic Adjustment subscale, from .84 to .92 for the Social Adjustment subscale, from .73 to .81 for the Personal-Emotional Adjustment subscale, from .79 to .88 for the Attachment subscale, and from .90 to .94 for the full scale (Baker & Schultz, 1992).
**Procedures**

The constituents of the population will be identified from a list generated by the Center for International Programs. Participants will be randomly assigned to two groups of equal size. In cooperation with the Center for International Programs, and the relevant academic units, Group A will be required to meet with their academic advisor at least four times over the course of the semester. Group B will be instructed to follow the general university policy on academic advising, which requires no minimum number of visits. At the end of the semester, advising records will be consulted to determine which students in Group A elected to participate in the study, by meeting the minimum number of advising contacts. Compliance Group A members and all Group B members will be mailed a cover letter and asked to complete the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), also included in the mailing. In order to encourage a higher rate of return, participants who have not responded within two weeks will receive an additional mailing containing a reminder and another copy of the SACQ.

**Data Analysis**

Upon receiving the questionnaires, students’ responses will be described by calculating the mean and standard deviation for each question and each category, as well as overall, for Group A and Group B. Comparisons will then be conducted using an independent samples t-test analysis ($\alpha=.05$) to determine significant differences and satisfaction level overall, and in each specific subscale between the groups.
REFERENCES


