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## Is there an interconnection between Academic Advising and Academic Student Performance?

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### Abstract

This paper aimed at stressing the role of academic advising in enhancing the academic performance of students in Nigerian universities. From the onset, a sensitization programme was designed to raise an awareness of the members of the University community, alongside other stakeholders on the availability of opportunities for prospective students to pursue a number of academic programmes on offer. Six months into the academic year of the first entrants to the university a robust academic advising scheme was developed to support student needs. Similar studies from other researchers support our findings that there is a positive correlation between effective academic advising and student academic performance. Absence of or poor academic advising has a detrimental effect on student performance. There was a strong rationale to project the need to adopt a predefined structure of academic advising model to operate with. This served as a guide for developing a student advising model, with student individual educational plans, in the university. Academic advising should become a mandatory role to every member of the academic faculty. A strong academic advising scheme will invariably promote student retention and graduation, especially in Nigeria universities, considering the interplay between the current social and economic pressures.

**Keywords:** Academic Advising, Student Performance, Nigerian Universities, Advisor, Retention.

### 1. Introduction

Academic advising is not a novel idea in the Nigerian university system. However, there is an emerging need to raise the performance of students in order to have a positive correlation with huge government investment in the educational sector as well as parental investments in the education of their children. Hence, the need for academic advising is given priority in the recent educational reforms worldwide.

It has been observed that a source of concern about students' frequent decision to switch from one course/programme to another may be prompted by an attempt to seeking a programme where they can achieve a better Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) at the end of their studies. Ifedili (2003) <sup>[9]</sup> observed that many students need a sense of direction in order to obtain best results in their studies. Many students fail to perform adequately because most members of the academic staff who are supposed to guide them hardly take an interest on their students. This laissez faire attitude of some university teaching staff is a major contributor to poor student academic performance. The poor may be compounded in some universities, especially when the management is weak and in addition is saddled with other pressing management issues.

On the account of the above, this paper is aimed at underscoring the role of the university Academic Advisors with a view to enhancing students' academic performance. It is intended to encourage the relationship between the academic advisor and the advisee/students. New entrants/fresh students, more especially at the point of registering their major courses and elective courses, should be guided properly. They need to be very clear on the requirements for maximum credit load for a particular semester, etc. The old students (returning students) need to be advised of the risk of being placed under probation for poor academic performance and have to be encouraged and appropriately supported in order to maintain high grade. Equally important is the non-academic members of staff, considering that they are a primary constituent of the university, some of whom play a key role in record keeping including students' data alongside other responsibilities.

It is pertinent to know that academic advising traces its beginning to the earliest American colleges including Harvard University. The history of academic advisors can be traced back to 1841 at Kenyon College (Harrison, 2004) <sup>[8]</sup>. At that time, the college required students to choose a faculty member/academic staff to be their advisors. The faculty member/academic staff would then help students determine what courses they needed to take in order to graduate, but also to be successful after graduation. This highlights that encouraging the students to have successful

live careers after graduation is a crucial outcome of academic advising. This can only be achieved if excellent academic performance had been developed and maintained by students in the university during their course of study.

## 2.0 Concept of Academic Advising

Academic advising synthesises student's educational experiences with the framework of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and time frame (NACADA, 2006). It is viewed as the process of assisting students to realise the maximum educational benefits to them, by helping them to better understand themselves and to learn to use the resources of the institution to meet their special educational needs and aspirations (Crockett, 1978). Advising simply means, passing or giving information/opinion from an experienced person (the advisor) to another person assumed to have little or less experience (the advisee). As such, the relationship could be between younger lecturers and senior members of the faculty or between the institution's professional advisors and the students. It is also important to note that Academic Advising is more than clerical record keeping. It can be understood as an art of building relationships with students and helping them connect their personal strengths and interest with their academic and live goals (Jayne, 2011) <sup>[10]</sup>. For that reason, there should be no delivery in proxy. Effort should be made in meeting with students in various places like social centres, library or anywhere deemed fit, in order to have a true picture of the students' lifestyle, for onward advising decision.

In essence, academic advising can be described as any conscious and enthusiastic relationship between the students and any member of the university community with the ultimate goal of achieving excellent performance while on campus and a successful career after graduation.

## 3.0 Standards for Academic Advising

White, (2006) <sup>[18]</sup>, opined that in an era where accountability is often the final word, it makes sense that professionals should monitor their own practices, set their standards, seek to achieve these standards and alter them when necessary. This suggests that professionals must monitor their own behaviours as well as constantly examine their assumptions, practices, and outcomes.

On this note, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), sets standards and guidelines for self-assessment and consequent improvement. These standards and guidelines have been developed by CAS and endorsed by NACADA. Originally these standards are set by CAS, but might be useful as a template for establishing or assessing an academic advising programme on a campus or in a particular department, with a view to implementing and addressing the necessary components to run a quality academic advising programme world over. These standards often serve as a primary mechanism to attain acceptable standards of practice or to self-assess, either for self-initiated improvement or to meet the requirements for various accreditation agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), ICAN, etc. The CAS standards and guidelines for academic advising contain the following standards: mission; programme; organization and leadership; human resources; ethics; law, policy and government; diversity, equity and access; institutional and external relations; financial resources; technology; facilities and equipment; and assessment and evaluation.

Each standard predefined the criteria that every institution of higher learning is expected and able to reach with reasonable effort and diligence. For example, one of the standards is that an institution must have clearly written statement of philosophy pertaining to academic advising, including programme goals and advisor and advisee responsibilities (NACADA, 2006). In addition, each standard includes guidelines which either further elaborate on a particular standard or provide additional suggestions for the continued improvement of a particular programme. Where these guidelines do not carry the weight of standard, those completing a self-assessment have the option of whether or not to include guidelines in their analysis.

## 4.0 National Universities Commission Guidelines on Nigerian Universities Internal Policies

The National Universities Commission (NUC), which is the education regulatory body for universities in the country, requires that every Nigerian university must have policies on admission; retention; withdrawals; expulsion and graduation of students clearly spelt out in its student's handbook. There shall be evidence that these policies are properly explained and widely publicised for the information of all students either seeking admission or already enrolled in the university. For admission into any of the degree programmes, the minimum qualification expected shall be in line with existing national policy on admission to Nigerian universities. For graduation, candidates should have fulfilled the minimum requirements for the awards of degree which includes satisfactory completion of a minimum practical, core/compulsory and elective courses stipulated (NUC, 2012) <sup>[15]</sup>. This implies relatively that some elements of academic advising are recommended for Nigerian universities. Jayne (2011) <sup>[10]</sup> states that effective academic advising is far beyond keeping and monitoring records of students' academic performance with a view to enhance student retention. In fact, the characteristics of effective advisors are the same as that of the effective teachers (Appleby, 2007) <sup>[11]</sup>.

## 5.0 Academic Advising in Nigerian University System

Nwelih, (2010) <sup>[16]</sup> proffered web-based advising system as an alternative to the current advising process in Nigerian universities, opposing the current system to be obsolete in the computer age. It is economically wise to adopt web-based/internet advising system as the stock of paper wasted can be avoided and the time wastage can be reduced. In the same vein, the repetitive process of advising could be minimised as response to the frequently asked questions can help make general clarifications via the internet. In addition, the fear of suspicious interactions during the face-to-face advising process will be avoided.

## 6.0 Academic Advising model Based on Organizational Structure

It is of paramount importance to consider how the service of academic advising is delivered in the university in order to have a clear understanding of to achieve a better and efficient delivery. It is generally accepted that there must be a model of delivery in any institution providing academic advising. An institution may opt to operate self-contained model, also named a central advising centre/unit, usually headed by a director with professional advisors to provide all advising service to students. However, there are critical challenges involved in using this method, such as the high cost related to establishing and managing such unit. Habley (1988) noted that

schools that operate with this type of advising system are mostly two-year schools; mostly diploma awarding institutions in the case of Nigeria.

Another model is the shared model. In this approach, the advising service is carried out by the central advising centre and the departmental or faculty advisors. In this system, there are about four different ways through which academic advising can be implemented:

- i. **Supplementary Approach;** In this approach each student is assigned a departmental advisor and there exists a central advising office that provides some administrative advising support.
- ii. **Split Approach;** The academic advising service is split between the departmental advisor and a professional advisor at the central advising centre.
- iii. **Dual Approach;** In this approach, students who have not declared their majors are assigned central advisors. However, after declaring their majors, they are then assigned to a particular departmental advisor.
- iv. **Total Intake Approach:** This is when the entire advising role is handled by the central advising centre until the students might have met certain criteria. After which, they are then moved to a departmental advisor for onward advising service.

Lastly, is the decentralized model, which also categorises the advising service in to two:

- i. **The faculty only model.** In this, the advising service is handled by the Faculties. For example, Faculty of Agriculture would take care of the advising service for the departments under its faculty. That means, the advising service caters for students under the faculty of Agriculture; students who have registered for their majors in the faculty.
- ii. **The satellite model.** In this case, each department runs an independent advising service in their own style within the university.

However, the general challenge to using all the identified models is that they pose a transition problem from the central/faculty advising to the departmental advising and overlapping or duplication of responsibility among the advisors. In a survey conducted by Turgeon (Barbara, 2006), about 38 out of 50 schools surveyed were using some type of shared advising structure with the split model been the most common specific delivery system.

### 7.0 Varying factors influencing academic advising

Like any other commitment, academic advising is influenced by some number of factors. Some factors have a direct connection with the system of delivery, while others are related to the advisors or the advisee.

- i. **System based factors.** These are problems associated with the model of advising which an institution chooses to operate with. For example, if an institution is operating with central advising centre, students may not have time to go there for advising because of the distance and the advisor may not have the opportunity to check the students' social behaviour on campus which may be useful in forming opinion about the students. Also, it was observed that the current system of academic advising in our Universities is lacking the provision for rewarding advisors who demonstrate excellent commitment. The system does not have method of checking the relationship between the students and their advisors, except, if foul play is reported or identified. Non-availability of accommodation facilities which make many students to

live outside the campus, can also limit the advisors' capacity to monitor students life style while not on campus. Sometimes the advisors live outside the campus and while the student lives on the campus. Many colleges and universities have been reported to have failed to capitalise on the benefit of quality advising, particularly, in helping students live on college campus (Habley, 2004) <sup>[7]</sup>.

- ii. **Advisors related factors.** The tight schedules of responsibility especially by the most senior academics who at times are on national assignments, external supervision among other responsibility as resource persons, have prompted the inadequate time allocation to student academic advising. Even the junior lecturers are tied down by other commitments, within the academic work, apart from their primary duties. Also, where central advising is in operation, the advisors may find it difficult to frequently come to the department in order to monitor the progress of their clients. It is worthwhile to emphasise that some of the key characteristics of effective advising are; availability, good knowledge of the subject matter and helpfulness (Creamer and Scott, 2000) <sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, if the advisor is the type that do not have time for students or lack the stock of knowledge to help solve student problems, they may intentionally create a gap between them and their students.
- iii. **Students related factors.** This can be attributed to some factors like non-conformity of the student to the rules of the game, such as dress code, drug abuse, etc. This will invariably make the student shy away from the advisor. Very often, some students meet their advisors with different issues rather than seeking academic advice. Sometimes, the female students can take advantage of their sex appeal in meeting with the advisors in anticipation of luring the advisor to award them higher test/examination marks or leak the examination questions. In contrast, the advisors may take advantage of their office by trying to seduce students and such can scare some students away from the academic advising. It is highly believed that positive relationship between academic advising and student development aid student's satisfaction with college (Parget, 2011). In some situations, it is envisaged that some the male students may feel downgraded to seek academic advice.

### 8.0 Academic Advising and Retention

McArthur (2005) stated that academic advising improves student retention in the universities through improved academic performance. The following benefits accrue as a result of effective academic advising:

- Responding to students;
- Referring students to the appropriate personal in special cases;
- Providing information and guidance on academic and curriculum matters like study habit, time management;
- Availing the students with information that would help them explore the available facilities and resources on campus;
- Watching the academic performance of students with a view to serve as basis for enhancement and retention.

On the same vein, Kitchen (1995) is of the opinion that effective academic advising can also help students in clarifying and understanding societal values and their personal goals, as well information about academic policies, procedures and requirements.

### 9.0 Strategies to Enhance Quality Academic Advising

The goal of advising and its curriculum is to enable the students complete the graduation requirements and earn degree (Appleby, 2001).

Cuseo (2003) maintains that good advising is systematic and ongoing, involving a close student-advisor relationship and frequent interactions between the student and the advisor. Effective advising involves assisting students in setting and achieving their academic goals. On this note, advisors should understand that it is not keeping track of student's performance as regards test and examinations that matters, but rather maintaining a mother-child relationship.

Some strategies which could be employed for enhancing the quality of academic advising are summarised below:

- i. There is need for reorientation of the advisors on their role and developmental programme be organise to help enhance their performance;
- ii. Maintain advisee-to-advisors ratios which should be manageable in order to enhance effective delivery;
- iii. Assess and evaluate the quality of academic advising model that is operative;
- iv. Provide strong incentives and reward in order to motivate the committed advisors;
- v. Devise an encouraging measures for students to meet regularly with their advisors;
- vi. Identify highly committed advisors and position them in such a place they can be to welcome first-year/fresh students or academically at risk students; and
- vii. Include advising as one of the effective measures for recruiting and selecting new faculty members.

Cuseo (2003) advises that it is important to take cautionary measures on student with special cases. These cases include:

- Transfer students; students on transfer from other universities within or outside the country.
- International students; non-Nigerians coming to study in Nigeria.
- Students changing programme; change of course of study within a department or to another department.
- Student on academic probation; students that do not earn the minimum grade point to move to another level.
- Non-traditional students. This group of students consist of the aged, the distance learning programme students; the in-service staff on training, etc.

### 10.0 Conclusion

Academic advising is every member of staff responsibility in the university community. In recognition of this fact, all Deans and Head of departments, as well as all other academic member of staff should serve as general overseers in their constituencies in ensuring effective implementations of the university's academic advising scheme. This calls for a serious commitment on the side of all staff members and the need for proper attention on the existing system of advisor-advisee relationship for better delivery and improvement. Members of the academic staff should be more focused on ensuring adherence to their roles as teachers and mentors at the same time. Academic advising is inevitable in students' lives throughout their stay in the university irrespective of their year of study.

### 11.0 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- I. There is need for a clearly defined model of academic advising for universities; the shared model has been found to

be very effective as this approach enables university management to check non-adherence to the system.

- II. Stringent standards should be put in place in the universities to help check the relationship between the advisor and the advisee. For example, it will be worthwhile to for the Head of Student Academic Advising to stipulate the minimum contact period and how often the advisor and the advisee would meet per semester or in an academic year.
- III. There should be regular evaluative measures which reflect on the effectiveness of the scheme.
- IV. Academic advising effort should be intensified at the time of time of registration when students are making decision on courses and career options. And also special care should be given to students with special cases like the international students, students on probation and the like.
- V. Students should be encouraged to take an active part in the advising responsibility. This can be achieved by old students mentoring new students.
- VI. Resources should be allocated for Information Technology. Universities could establish a web portal to be used by advisors to post and retrieve advising information. This can be useful to prospective students as well.
- VII. Highly committed and effective advisors should be identified and motivated accordingly.
- VIII. Further research is necessary in this area especially in assessing the status of academic advising services operational in our universities.

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