# From the Editor

The comments that follow are offered by Dr. Richard Robbins, Coordinator of Academic Advising and Assistant Professor of Psychology at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas and a member of the *NACADA Journal* Editorial Board. Dr. Robbins originally offered his thoughts in the form of a manuscript submitted for publication in the *Journal*. Seldom in my tenure as editor has a manuscript elicited such consensus from the panel of reviewers. While not one reviewer liked what he had to say, all agreed that his questions are legitimate ones that need to be answered. Since consensus is so rare in this business, the unanimity of opinions alone tempted me to publish it. But when all further agreed that his questions were legitimate, I asked Dr. Robbins to rewrite his manuscript in the form of an opinion piece.

Many of the programs and services he discusses are designed and administered by academic advisors. Some are designed and administered by others. In either case, advisees are the beneficiaries—or, as Dr. Robbins asks, are they? Read on . . .

Michael Lynch

**Critically Thinking About Higher Education Services: Are We Helping or Hurting Students in the Long Run?**

The last decade has resulted in numerous programs and strategies designed to promote student success throughout all levels of postsecondary education. These services range from mentoring programs to specialized workshops to entire courses promoting academic success. They may be offered individually, as part of a university college program, as part of a student services center, or by individual academic departments. Indeed, these programs have been shown to improve student academic success and especially retention rates (Adams & Campbell, 1985; Backhus, 1989; Bedford & Durkee, 1989; Blanc, DeBuhr, & Martin, 1983; Brown, 1989; Bruno, 1990; Catalano & Eddy, 1990; Dukes & Gaither, 1984; Earl, 1988; Fuller, 1983; Garcia, 1991; Geteles, 1987; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Patrick, Furlow, & Donovan, 1988; Shanley & Witten, 1990; Van Allen, 1988). But do they help the student in the long run?

One goal of many of these programs is retention of students. Retention has become a major issue over the last 15 years. Entire books have been written about the subject, including several which are considered classics in the areas of academic advising and student development (Astin, 1975, 1985; Pascarella, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987). But for whom is this such a critical issue—the student or the institution? Smith (1986) prophetically wrote that due to declines in enrollment, retention will become a formalized institutional goal. However, Smith (1986) also cautioned that one result of this emphasis on retention would be a compromise in the integrity of the college. Is it possible that so much significance has been placed on student success, as defined by retention and graduation rates, that no consideration is being given to what happens to these students in later semesters and after graduation?

Recent surveys and projections have suggested that there will be a slowdown in employment opportunities between 1994 and 2005 compared to the previous 10 years (U.S. Department of Labor, 1996–97), with many occupations that offer higher-than-average earnings not requiring a college degree. Further, jobs requiring moderate- and short-term education, training, and experience will provide over one-half of the total job openings over that period. However, colleges and universities continue to strive to maintain enrollment figures, with most endeavoring to increase these numbers. Many of the student services alluded to above are the direct result of institutional attrition rates. They are indeed designed to promote academic success, but many are also designed to give the student a sense of "belonging" or "connectedness" to the institution, which has been shown to be the most significant factor in retention (Astin, 1993; Habley, 1981; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Starke, 1994). While we are putting a lot of effort and resources into retaining students and in helping them succeed academically, the question remains: What happens when they leave the program, the college, or the university? What is the effect of these helping services on students in the proverbial real world where they must make it on their own? Academic success in the short term is admittedly a prerequisite for success in the longer term. But are we so focused on the former that we are not attending to the latter? Are the designers and administrators of these student assistance programs and services taking the necessary steps to insure that they also foster the individual initiative and autonomy necessary for continued

success after the program, the college experience, or both have ended?

On the other hand, should we really concern ourselves with what happens to the student after graduation? If the whole point of these services is to retain students in college and move them to graduation, then is it not true that schools that increase retention and graduation rates through these programs are obtaining their desired goal?

In her article concerning student preparedness to write in the "real world," Royer (1995) proposed that what occurs in the educational setting may not be akin to what will be expected of students after graduation. For example, she suggested that the educational setting allows and even requires students to perform tasks such as brainstorming, creative writing, and requesting input from others, while real world jobs require quick writing and revision, daily preparation of memos and E-mails—often with limited opportunity for input from others. She suggests that writing courses should include writing under these conditions as well. Royer's thesis is analogous to the premise of this article: specifically that students, while in college, continually receive the benefits of special services that promote their academic success, while similar support is not likely to be offered in real world employment, certainly not on the scale provided by most colleges and universities.

One can even speculate that our best intentions and efforts to promote academic success can have negative effects for certain students. What of those students who are retained through their freshman and sophomore years with the aid of intense support programs only to become academic casualties as juniors or seniors when assistance is reduced or eliminated? Many leave without a degree but with substantial loan debt. Retention does not always equate to academic success.

All too often, program evaluations focus upon short-term goals—goals which, as noted, many of these programs achieve. Postgraduation assessments typically involve major-specific issues, such as employment rates in a specific area for graduates in a specific major, surveys of alumni regarding how well a given major program prepared them for their careers or graduate studies, or retrospective self-reports of satisfaction with their major programs of study while in college (Craig, 1991; Hale & Travis, 1992; Walkup, 1991). An extensive review of the literature of over 200 articles on the National Academic Advising Association's Clearinghouse and over 9,000 ERIC entries has shown no studies concerning the postgraduation success of students who utilized such support services while in college. While the short-term benefits of such programs is documented, there is little or no evidence on their long-term impact. It may be that these programs serve to keep the student in college, hopefully through graduation, but have no effect or even a negative effect on the person's life after graduation. In the past, when a college degree was one's ticket to a good job and better life, perhaps the question was rhetorical. However, today our graduates enter a much different world, one that is increasingly competitive and technical, a world that now and in the future will likely reward personal initiative, commitment, drive, and independence. Are we, as the designers and administrators of these services, taking the necessary steps to insure that they foster these qualities in our students?

We owe it to our students, our institutions, ourselves, and society to determine what effects these programs may have after the student leaves the shelter of college. While there may be many anecdotal accounts and opinions about the value of participation in these services while in college, there is currently no empirical evidence to show what effect, if any, these programs have after graduation. Dependent variables such as the person's ability to work independently as well as job performance criteria need to be assessed, and this assessment should include employer/supervisor evaluations and objective employment goals as well as self-assessment by the graduate. If we are sincerely concerned about our students and their futures, then we should indeed be concerned with how they perform following graduation, not just with keeping them in school to graduate.

Richard Robbins

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