

Academic Advising During Program Discontinuance

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Academic program closure is explored and student advising needs that emerged in 3 stages of program decline and discontinuation are identified. Data from interviews and advising communication of 20 graduate students enrolled in a master of education program targeted for discontinuation were qualitatively analyzed within a framework of an organizational death model. Findings indicate that program decline and discontinuation require academic advisors to understand and respond to a range of advising needs that vary with the phase of program closure: addressing students' emotional responses of grief, anger, and betrayal as well as managing student concerns over the loss of professional identity and lack of a professional network. Recommendations are offered for faculty advisors caught in the midst of program discontinuation.

KEY WORDS: advisor role, faculty advisor, graduate students, student anxiety, student educational objectives

Relative emphasis: practice, research, theory

Graduate advisors strive to facilitate their students' progress through various challenges and requirements associated with the graduate student career. Baird (1995) suggested that to understand best how advisors facilitate student progress, one may consider the tasks at which these students must be successful. Students must become socialized into their academic program, and more broadly, into their academic field, as well as obtain and maintain ongoing faculty and financial assistance. In addition, students must prepare for and successfully complete the academic requirements of their programs. In all these tasks, the graduate advisor is, as Baird described, "the most significant [person] in students' graduate education" (p. 25). Selke and Wong (1993) more specifically noted that graduate academic advisors are significant to their advisees in five essential functions: being a reliable information source, acting as a department socializer, acting as an occupational socializer, serving as a role model, and being an advisee advocate.

While graduate advisors may be adept at assisting student progress within this cycle of developmental tasks and challenges and in fulfilling essential advisor functions, they may be less knowledgeable about assisting student progress within a

volatile academic environment, one in which the student must both master challenges associated with the stages of their graduate student career and adapt to frequent changes within their academic environment. The situation is complicated for students who are enrolled in an academic program that is targeted for, and then progresses through, discontinuation. Little is known about how to facilitate students' academic progress and address their unique advising needs that emerge within the context of program decline and discontinuation.

Program discontinuance has become an increasingly large part of the current higher education landscape in part due to continued financial turbulence, calls for greater accountability, and mounting pressures to adjust academic priorities to match changing resources (Michael, 1998). Recent program closures such as those occurring at Golden Gate University, which discontinued 20 out of 50 programs (Williams, 2002), as well as other high profile closures at St. Olaf College, Auburn University, and the University of Chicago (Eckel, 2003), suggest that program discontinuance can be part of academic life for many administrators, academic advisors, and students.

However, literature on program discontinuance is sparse for reasons, as Hart (1999) noted, may not be difficult to surmise. Hart suggested that closures are like a death, a subject most people are not eager to address. A closure can "be regarded as a failure by the individuals who were members of the faculty and leaders of the organization" (p. 187). Furthermore, Hart suggested that academic units may elect to downplay information about a closure to avoid adverse community reactions and negative public relations.

Much of the literature that exists on program discontinuance is couched in positive terms and is focused at an organizational level. For example, Dougherty (1979, p. 3) described program discontinuance as a "necessary adaptive mechanism for colleges and universities . . . to maintain flexibility and respond to new demands." Similarly, Michael (1998) suggested that program discontinuance and the resulting redirection of resources is a rite of renewal in higher education, and Eckel (2000, p. 1) noted, "Eliminating select programs helps ensure a healthy organization." However, Michael also suggested, "While much thought is given to program development, often little attention

is paid to program discontinuation” (p. 379). This is unfortunate, for as Michael noted, “Program discontinuation is a complex decision with serious financial consequences and with serious implications for curriculum and personnel” (p. 383).

Although “no one has studied program discontinuance from a student perspective” (P. Eckel, personal communication, March 7, 2002), particularly as this perspective relates to resultant student advising needs, Gumport (1993) conducted one of the few studies focused on the perspective of faculty involved in program discontinuance. She found that faculty members reacted to plans for program reduction either as powerless victims or enraged defendants, commonly expressing shock, grief, and betrayal. Andrus (1995) offered a more personal, faculty perspective by discussing the practical aspects of surviving the elimination of a program and sharing the experiences of living through the phaseout of a graduate program in art therapy. She concluded that it is possible to survive the closing of an academic program without losing professional identity, but she acknowledged that the struggle to find and expand professional opportunities is not easy. Both Gumport and Andrus suggested that program discontinuance brings emotional upheaval and those involved struggle to reorient themselves; if their descriptions are representative of faculty members who have been involved in discontinued programs, then their insights are likely reflective of student experiences as well.

Higher education literature lacks a procedural framework to guide advisors and their students through challenges associated with program closure. However, organizational management literature offers a fair number of studies detailing the process of organizational decline and death (e.g., Carroll & Delacroix, 1982; Meyer & Zucker, 1989; Valentin, 1994). In particular, the process model of organizational death (Sutton, 1987) may be of specific significance to academic advisors because it closely attends to organizational employees’ responses to and needs during organizational closure. The model contains three distinct phases of program closure: “a sequence of events in which members first construe their organization as (1), [*sic*] permanent but threatened, (2) then as temporary, and finally (3) as defunct” (p. 547).

I believe this model may provide academic advisors with a lens through which to see and understand the process of program closure and accompanying student-advising needs. Therefore, my purpose in conducting this study is the examination of academic program closure through the perspective of

Sutton’s model. Specifically, I identified emergent student-advising needs associated with program decline and discontinuation.

The Discontinued Program: Background and Chronology

The program featured in this study matches the profile of programs in social welfare-oriented disciplines and professional schools (e.g., nursing, social work) most typically targeted in periods of reduction (Andrus, 1995; Reinardy & Halter, 1994). It was a 33-credit-hour master of education program with a concentration in adult education that was housed in the College of Education (COE) at the University of South Carolina. Throughout its more than 25-year history, the program was staffed by two to three full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty members, who offered courses at both the main campus and at satellite campuses across the state. It served between 30 and 50 fully enrolled students per academic year. Following what Habley (1997) described as the *supplementary organizational model* for academic advising, each student in the Adult Education program had been assigned to an instructional faculty member for advising, but a general COE advising office had provided additional, general, academic information and advising support.

May 2000 marked the beginning of a period of upheaval among the program faculty members. For several previous years, three long-time faculty members had staffed the program. However, in May 2000, a founding faculty member of the program retired, and as a junior faculty member, I was hired to begin teaching in January 2001. At the same time I was hired, a second faculty member unexpectedly resigned, and the last original faculty member announced intentions to retire at the end of the 2001 spring term.

It was against this contextual backdrop that college-level administrators, along with students enrolled in the program, began to pay considerable attention to the program. Throughout the early spring of 2001, the college-level administration considered whether to continue the program, and in April it verbally notified faculty members that the program was to be discontinued and that no new students were to be admitted. As the spring semester progressed, students became increasingly concerned about faculty reduction and the program’s future, continually questioning the remaining faculty and discussing the situation among themselves.

In April 2001, the chairperson of the department in which the program was housed mailed a letter to all fully enrolled students notifying them of

the discontinuation and inviting them to attend a meeting scheduled at the main campus in early May. At this meeting, administrators and faculty members reviewed program requirements and advising resources, and they distributed a schedule detailing when required courses would next be offered. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns about the scheduled discontinuance; faculty members and students then recessed for the summer.

During the academic years of 2001 and 2002, I, along with adjunct faculty members, continued to offer courses required for program completion, and I acted as academic advisor to all program students. By the fall of 2003, only a handful of students had not completed degree requirements and graduated, and as of the fall of 2005, only one student remained in the program.

Method

Participants

The program under investigation was geared toward and attracted midcareer professionals. Program students ranged in age from the middle 20s to middle 50s, attended classes part-time, and tended to be employed within the state at postsecondary institutions, corporate training and staff development departments, or various government agencies. Twenty-seven students were enrolled in the program when its discontinuation was announced, and of these, six were male. Twenty students, five of whom were male, agreed to participate in this study, representing a 74% participant response rate.

Instruments

Following the advice of Eckel (2000, p. 8), who suggested that when studying changes in organizations researchers “must seek out and listen to different stories that help create a picture of what occurred, how it occurred, and why,” I employed a semistructured interview approach to listen to stories of students as they responded and adjusted to the scheduled program discontinuation. The resultant semistructured interview protocol, presented in the Appendix, identified key student-demographic information as well as students’ responses to and advising needs associated with program discontinuance. I knew students had been regularly and informally engaged in sharing information, opinions, and rumors since the early part of the spring semester of 2001, and I used this knowledge to shape interview questions around issues I estimated to be most pressing to students during this time of transition.

During the fall 2001 semester, I conducted 15

interviews, and a graduate research assistant conducted 5 interviews. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes, and based on the student’s preference, was conducted either face-to-face (16 students) or via telephone (4 students). I offered these two interviewing options to accommodate students’ schedules. Participants were encouraged to be frank and were assured anonymity in the final reporting of the data. With the student’s permission, each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed.

During the 2001 and 2002 academic year, I maintained consistent contact with each student in the program, regularly recording their academic progress and noting emergent academic-advising needs related to program closure. As part of this communication, I developed and distributed a monthly program newsletter, *Program News*, to respond en masse to advising questions, inform students of course options, and recognize students’ academic milestones (e.g., passing comprehensive exams). I used student files, notes from student-advisor communication, and editions of *Program News* to supplement student interview data to provide additional information about emergent advising needs.

Analytic Procedures

Interviews were transcribed and entered into NVivo (version 1.3), a qualitative analysis software program. To prepare the transcripts for qualitative analysis, each transcript was first coded by interview question number. A graduate research assistant and I then independently read an identical subset of the transcripts to identify broad, emergent themes in students’ responses to each question. A comparison of independently identified themes revealed a high degree of internal consistency among the themes we found.

Using these broad codes as a foundation, I reread all transcripts holistically and developed a detailed coding scheme, and I used the student-advisor communication to help me further solidify both the meaning and content of each code. My efforts resulted in 26 codes that captured significant concerns and reactions in students’ responses to program discontinuance. They also gave me insight into emergent advising needs during program closure. Examples of these codes include *affect to change* (i.e., students’ feelings about the program transitioning from an existing to a discontinued program), *degree value* (i.e., students’ reference to or understanding of the current and future value of their degree from a discontinued program), and *voice* (i.e., students’ reference to their input about the decision for program discontinuance).

Findings

I use the three phases comprising Sutton's (1987) process model of organizational death (the program as threatened, temporary, and defunct) to organize my findings associated with emergent student-advising needs during program discontinuance.

Phase I: The Threatened Program

In the first phase of Sutton's model, in which the organization is still regarded as permanent, members perceive that the survival of the organization is threatened. In response, they attempt to avert organizational demise, search for unambiguous information from supervisors, and in its absence, develop rumors to "structure uncertainty when official channels do not provide sufficient information about matters of mutual concern" (Sutton, 1987, p. 551). When the announcement of organizational death officially occurs, marking the end of this phase, common employee responses are sadness and anger. These responses suggest that employees are beginning to accept that their organization has moved from permanent to temporary status.

Events defining Sutton's (1987) first phase of organizational death resemble events occurring in the first phase of the discontinued academic program. Throughout the spring of 2001, my records of students' advising sessions indicate that students became increasingly concerned about the health of their program. They often initiated conversations with program faculty members about the importance of the program to the COE and the larger community, and one student distributed an E-mail, with the heading "[Program] Students on the Move," to all program students, faculty members, and the chairperson of the department. The E-mail suggested that program students were, as a group, very interested in promoting a positive future for the program and wanted to play a part in any decision-making process about the program's future. This type of student communication suggests that students, similar to the organizational members in Sutton's model, attempted to divert the possibility of program closure.

During program classes and advising meetings, students repeatedly raised the topics of faculty attrition and the program's future. They sought unambiguous information, which the faculty could not provide at that time. The lack of unambiguous information created an amplified level of stress in students, and they began sharing rumors about the program's demise. One student reported, "I heard about [programmatic changes] through the

grapevine. I heard that everybody needed to be done by next summer." Another student said, "Students knew that something was happening with the program. People would get tidbits of information from whatever sources. There were rumors that the program was being phased out, but no particulars."

The official notification of program closure finally reached students in April 2001 in a letter from the department chairperson. Student responses echoed those of the targeted faculty identified in Gumport's (1993) study; the majority reported feelings of shock, grief, and betrayal. Student comments included, "I was devastated because I had planned to continue with the Ed.D. portion [of the program]"; "It's not fair for the students to get into the program and then to stop it"; "They didn't maintain their promise to students."

After the initial shock subsided, many students lamented that they lacked a voice in the larger dialogue between faculty members and administrators over the decision to discontinue the program; such communication had been clearly requested in the "[program] on the move" E-mail. Several speculated that a more favorable outcome may have occurred with greater and earlier student representation in the decision-making process. For example, one student commented:

If there had been some kind of warning at some point, maybe there is something collectively that everybody could have done. This was almost an overnight thing. If someone had given us a "heads up" a year ago, there could have been something we could have done to prove them wrong and convince them to keep the program.

Another student expressed frustration with the "gap in the whole process of notification," saying:

It took me awhile to realize that I should have expected to have a voice in the University decision about my program. As a good state employee, I didn't even question the decision . . . please include my dismay at not being involved in the decision-making process.

Criticism of the lack of timely and ongoing communication could be found in nearly every student-interview transcript that referenced students' experience during this first phase of program closure. While this complaint was often directed at COE administrators, several students directed this complaint toward faculty advisors as well. One student commented, "Communication before that

point [May meeting] through professors would have been a good idea, instead of just dropping the bomb.” Another student commented:

Maybe if the College of Education folks would have sent a brief, one-page memo to all the [program] students just for a little more explanation maybe as to what was happening, and why it was happening, and here’s what we have, here’s what we can do to make this transition easier for you, if you need our services, maybe something along those lines. It might have been helpful, I don’t know, at least it would have made me think they cared a little bit more.

Phase II: The Temporary Program

Sutter (1987, p. 553) defined employees for the second phase of organizational death, in which the organization is seen as temporary and disbanding, as “severing the links between the organization and its members, external participants, and physical objects.” Reconnecting, defined as “creating and strengthening links between the dying organization and other social systems” (p. 553) become important employee tasks. Employees are torn between continuing daily activities and making preparations for closure. Finally, a closing ceremony, which Sutton (p. 558) defined as “gatherings at which members and former members join together to say good-bye to the dying organization and one another,” is often held during this phase. This ceremony serves as a venue at which employees can appropriately express both sadness and remembrance for the passing of the organization.

Events defining Sutton’s (1987) second phase of organizational death bear resemblance to events occurring during the second phase of the discontinued academic program from fall 2001 to spring 2003. In an organizational setting, supervisors may assist employees in disbanding from the organization and reconnecting to a new organization by identifying alternative employment either within the same business type or the same geographic location. In a routine academic setting, academic advisors also assist students in transitioning their newly developed professional identities and skills from the academic site to professional employment. Students in a discontinued program, however, have additional concerns associated with disbanding from a discontinued program and transitioning, or reconnecting, to their professional career.

As the news of the academic program’s dissolution were fully realized, my records of advising sessions indicate that students continued to display

feelings of shock, betrayal, and grief as they shared their concerns about their professional future and coping with their present academic situation. Some students expressed concern over the perceived value of their academic degree. One said, “I guess with the program being abandoned makes me feel a little like it was determined that this wasn’t an important area of study, and so I will have a master’s [degree] in something that’s not really valuable.” Another reported, “It did cause me concern that the program was closing. What does that mean for me? Does my degree not have any value now? I know that is not true, but that is how it makes me feel.”

Other students voiced concern about how those in the workplace would view their degree:

Later on down the road if someone asks, “where’d you get your degree?”; If I say [program name], they are going to say, “Oh, that is the program the university got rid of.” It’s not worth the university maintaining it, or I guess that is how I look at it.

Another student said, “I think it is going to be hard, professionally, to reference the program if it is not in place.”

Still other students wondered about the potential loss of a professional network:

I worry about the influence the degree will have in this particular area. I worry about having the professional connections that are sometimes needed to help you get into the proper arena with this degree.

While the above concerns were commonly expressed across the range of students, there was a noticeable variation in concerns related to being able to complete the program before it was completely disbanded. The discrepancies were associated with students’ degree progress. Students further from graduation expressed concern about finishing before required classes were no longer offered; students closer to graduation expressed a sense of gratitude that the bulk of their degree requirements were completed at the time the program discontinuation was announced. The latter also felt empathy for those students who still had many degree requirements left to complete. Comments from students early in their degree progress included the following:

I’ve had to overload myself to get done as quickly as possible. I doubled my load. I’ve spent more time on school in a shorter span.

[There is] the stress of knowing that there is a

bigger push to finish more quickly than I might have originally planned.

Comments from students later in their career progress included:

At 3:30 today I'll be walking across the stage, and I guess it is not a problem for me anymore. But those still in the program are definitely concerned about being able to finish on time and not have to change their major or take additional courses.

I am fortunate that I have just about completed all of my required courses and I have just electives left to take. . . . I wasn't too stressed out about it. I realize that for those who have just started the program it will be more difficult. This is an incentive to make sure I get everything finished and completed as quickly as possible.

All students expressed a great need for information pertaining to program requirements and deadlines. As one student said,

The best thing they [faculty advisors] can do is just advise us, keep in contact with us, check and see what we are doing as far as classes are concerned, make sure that we can finish the program, address any concerns we have. . . .

In response to students' needs, I established a listserv program and wrote and distributed *Program News*. The listserv provided an ongoing forum for discussions, and both the listserv and the newsletter acted as conduits for the dissemination of course information, important dates and deadlines, practicum and professional networking opportunities, and contact names to assist in navigating university policies and procedures. Students responded positively to these communication forums. Their comments included:

If [we hadn't been] nurtured along with the newsletter, we'd all just be roaming the campus. The newsletter has been a huge help.

Continue with the program newsletter that comes to us and gives us information, and just making sure as soon as permanent changes are in place we know about them as quickly as possible.

My records of student advising sessions indicate that the continuity of the newsletter and listserv provided students with a sense of normalcy and helped

them to focus their attention on timely program completion. I noted that students were developing a sense that they needed to put their grief over the program discontinuance aside, turn their attention to remaining course work and other program requirements, and graduate as soon as possible. However, students consistently said that they felt like outcasts of the COE, and they needed college administrators to know that "this is still a very viable program for us."

Approximately 18 months after students received official notice of program termination, a majority of the students was close to graduation or had graduated. Remaining faculty members organized a gathering at a local restaurant to recognize the program's end and to offer program students and alumni the chance to come together, relive memories, and rekindle friendships. Faculty members, students, and alumni promised to remain in contact, and alumni promised to assist current students in identifying career opportunities as they completed their program.

Phase III: The Defunct Program

In the final phase, the organization moves from temporary to defunct. The only task remaining for employees is the continuance of reconnecting with other entities. Sutton (1987) found that most employees continued to display emotions of sadness and anger as they disengaged from the organization for the final time.

In this final phase, most students had graduated from the discontinued program. However, my records of student advising sessions indicate that those who still remained continued to need a strong advisor presence, perhaps stronger than before because most of their peers had left the program. These students tended to feel left behind and isolated. Most of them had full-time jobs, attended school part-time, and had only their nonrequired classes (i.e., electives) to complete. With their program completely phased out and their peers graduated, these students focused solely on degree completion. Thus, they appeared to have largely disbanded emotionally from their former program and were concentrated on fully reconnecting to their professional lives.

Discussion

Student Advising Needs in Three Phases of Discontinuance

To identify emergent student-advising needs associated with program decline and discontinuation, I examined the closure of an academic program

through the perspective of Sutton's (1987) model. Findings suggest that program decline and discontinuation require an academic advisor to understand and respond to several emergent advising needs and that these needs vary with the phase of program closure.

In the first phase (the threatened program), increased communication between faculty advisors and students emerged as students' most important advising need. Students wanted unambiguous, reliable, and constant information about the status of the program from their faculty advisors. Faculty advisors had little, if any, to share. Without this information, students developed rumors and experienced undue stress, both of which took valuable time and focus from their academic studies. When the closure decision was finally announced, students, like the faculty in Gumpert's (1993) study, were shocked and experienced feelings of grief, betrayal, and voicelessness.

In the second phase (the temporary program), students turned to their faculty advisors for assurances about the value of their degree in their own eyes and in the eyes of the professional community. Students early in their program tenure required additional advising to negotiate the changing curricular landscape. Students more advanced in their program required additional advising to clear the major hurdles of their degree program, such as comprehensive exams, in a timely and efficient manner. All students needed reassurance that the faculty and the university community at large had not forgotten about them, had not abandoned them, and were committed to seeing them finish.

In the third phase (the defunct program), students who were the last to finish needed perhaps the strongest assistance of all from their advisors. With a diminishing peer group, these students were eager to reconnect completely to their professional lives and complete the program requirements.

The results of this study have implications for academic advisors and their students who are caught in the midst of a program decline and closure. Prior to the announcement of program closure, being a reliable information source, one of the five advising functions outlined by Selke and Wong (1993), should be a priority.

Faculty advisors should be prepared for the onslaught of student questions and concerns about the program status; however, they may not have unambiguous information to share with their students. As Eckel (2000) noted, program closure is a political decision in which full disclosure of unambiguous information is uncommon, and Reinardy

and Halter (1994) found that once an elimination proposal emerges, the responding academic unit typically has very little time to react in its defense. Thus, events associated with program closure can happen quickly with little reliable information made available for advising faculty.

Results from this study suggest that even in the absence of unambiguous information from their advisors, students wanted their advisors readily available. I found that students could accept hearing, "I don't know what will happen to the program, but I'll be here to help you as best I can." They resented advisors who did not admit that they had no information about the program status or who were not readily available.

During the first phase of program closure, students needed to have a voice in the closure decision. In the case described here, if students had been provided with this opportunity, the outcome probably would have been unchanged. However, treating students as important program stakeholders with an opinion to share in a constructive and open format might have allayed at least some of their later feelings of betrayal and anger.

At the time of the announcement of program closure and as the implications of this announcement became clear (the closure enters the second phase), advisors would be wise to anticipate and be ready to respond to students' feelings of shock and grief as well as their concerns about professional identity and the value of their degree. Students felt comfortable displaying these emotions at the announcement of the closure; as time passed, students still grieved but felt that they should cope with it. Faculty advisors might recognize that their students are experiencing disenfranchised grief, defined by Doka (1989, p. 4) as "grief that people experience from a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported."

In exploring disenfranchised grief and the workplace, Lattanzi-Licht (2002, p. 167) wrote, "Because workplace norms typically ask us to separate our personal and professional selves, it is easy for grieving employees to feel unacknowledged." In the same way, norms found on the college campus, particularly at the graduate school level, may make students who grieve the loss of a discontinued program feel unacknowledged and embarrassed to admit to their grief. In this study, I found that in the same interview students would sometimes initially say that the discontinuation of their program had affected them only slightly, but then later they would lament the loss of their program in personal

and emotional terms. During program decline and discontinuation, faculty advisors should be prepared to work with students who grieve but either cannot or will not openly share that grief.

Advising faculty should also be prepared for student concerns about their professional identity and the value of the degree from a defunct program. Students in the beginning stages of their professional career are likely to be most concerned. In the situation in the COE, an occupational socializer is instrumental (Selke & Wong, 1993). I found that placing students in contact with successful program alumni who then acted as mentors eased some concerns. In addition, by encouraging students to become involved with national professional organizations representing academicians and practitioners in their field, faculty members gave students assurance that their discipline had larger importance and recognition beyond that perceived in the local context.

As the bulk of students move toward program completion in a reshaped educational environment, advisors and students can both benefit from a strong network of shared information. I found that establishing a listserv and a monthly programmatic newsletter served several purposes: I was able to keep students constantly updated on course offerings, graduation deadlines, and program requirements. I was also able to recognize and celebrate student accomplishments, such as accepting new positions, passing comprehensive exams, or reaching graduation, thus keeping students informed of each other's progress and emotionally supporting students who remained in the program. Finally, I was able to use newsletters to keep administrators informed of student progress and accomplishments, serving the implicit purpose of reminding administrators that these students continued to be a part of the campus community as they worked toward degree completion and thus advocating, as Selke and Wong (1993) had suggested, on their behalf.

As students finish the program, support of the handful of students who remain is important because efforts to complete their degrees are made more difficult by the absence of both the program and their peers. For these students, faculty advisors are called upon to continue several essential advising functions, including that of a reliable information source, occupational socializer, advocate, and role model.

Study Limitations

Limitations to this study should be noted as the reader interprets the significance of these results. Although the students participating in this study rep-

resented a majority of those enrolled in the degree program under investigation, their number was small, as was the program from which they were drawn. A larger number of participants may have led to the discovery of additional or different advising needs during program discontinuance, and the nature, number, or timing of emerging student-advising needs may be different in larger programs. However, programs that enroll a large student body are at less risk for discontinuation. As Eckel (2000) found, colleges often target for closure weak, small programs not central to the core college mission, an apt description of the program under investigation.

The study participants were limited to graduate students, and graduate students have different advising needs than their undergraduate counterparts (Kramer, 2000). Therefore, one can reasonably assume that undergraduate and graduate students may also differ in their advising needs during program closure. Some of these differences may be due to age differences between undergraduate and graduate students. Graduate students are likely to be older, and their experience with program closure may be better understood through the lens of adult learning and development literature. Adult learning literature (e.g., Knowles, 1990; Merriam & Brockett, 1997) suggests that adults are self-directing, have a task-centered orientation to learning, and use their previous experiences as a foundation for their educational pursuits. Consistent with these sources, adults in the program under investigation experienced a self-directing need for a voice in the decision of program closure, were task centered in their educational orientation, possessed a strong desire to know how program closure would immediately affect or interrupt their task of degree completion, and most were able to rely on a strong record of previous work experience to help them disband from the program and reconnect fully to professional careers. How undergraduates would react to this same situation and how their advising needs during program closure would differ are issues worthy of consideration and future research.

Of the graduate students who participated in this study, all were enrolled in a master's degree program, most attended school part-time, and most were female. Thus, advising needs during program closure revealed in this study may not generalize to students at the doctoral level, full-time students, or to a graduate student group in which most members are male. However, O'Brien (1992) wrote that 80% of graduate students are enrolled in master's degree programs, approximately two thirds of master's students are enrolled part-time, and approximately

three fifths of graduate students are women. Thus, while study results may not generalize to the graduate student population as a whole, its participants can be considered representative of a large segment of graduate students.

Finally, in this study I served as both advisor and author, and the potential for bias on my part should be noted. I was an active participant in the discontinued program as the situation unfolded, and I likely influenced the results of this study through my participation. For example, by creating and distributing the newsletter, I directly affected students' perceptions of their own needs. My dual role and unique circumstances doubtlessly affected the other findings as well.

Conclusion

Throughout the changing educational landscape associated with program decline and discontinuation, and more broadly, within reorganizations and upheavals common to academic organizations, the faculty advisor is, perhaps more than ever, "the most significant [person] in students' graduate education" (Baird, 1995, p. 25). As Gumpert (1993) noted, program reduction "entails intraorganizational turmoil" (p. 283), and my findings suggest students experienced a notable level of turmoil as they strove to complete their degree requirements in a discontinued program. These students were in need of faculty advisors who could fulfill the final and perhaps most important function noted by Selke and Wong (1993) as essential to the graduate advisor role: that of a role model who effectively anticipates and responds to the unique advising needs associated with program decline and discontinuation.

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Appendix Student interview protocol

Student Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking part in this study; we appreciate your participation. We want to assure you that we will make every effort to ensure your confidentiality; the information you give us will never be linked to your name, and your participation is strictly voluntary.

We are conducting this study to help us understand how you and your fellow students have been affected by the recent changes in [name of program]. As a [name of program] student, you have many unique insights to share. Please answer honestly, and feel free to add anything you think we may have overlooked. If you are uncomfortable with any of these questions, you are free to choose not to answer them. Again, thank you for your participation.

- a) Age: 21–30 31–40 41–50 51–60 61 and above
- b) Ethnicity: African American Caucasian Other
- c) Gender: Female Male
- d) Residence: Local Not Local
- e) Expected graduation date: _____

Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to pursue a graduate degree?
2. Why did you choose to attend the [name of program]?
3. What changes have occurred in the program in the past year?
4. How did you hear that the program was changing?
5. How do you feel about how you learned about the changes?
6. How did you react when you heard the program was changing? Why?
7. Did you attend the May [name of program] meeting between faculty and students? If YES, what happened at this meeting? If NO, why did you choose not to attend?
8. With regard to pursuing your degree, have you done anything differently since you've heard that the program was changing?
9. How have the changes in the program affected you professionally?
10. How have the changes in the program affected you personally?
11. What have faculty done to help you adjust to the changes in your program? What else might faculty do to help you adjust to the changes in your program?
12. What has the college-level administration (for example, the department chairperson, Dean's Office) done to help you adjust to changes in your program?
13. What else might the administration do to help you adjust to the changes in your program?
14. In your opinion, why is the program changing?
15. What have I missed? What haven't I asked you that you think is important for me to know about how the changes in the program have affected you?