

CENTRALIZED INTRUSIVE ADVISING AND UNDERGRADUATE RETENTION

*This study discusses the impact of the **presence** of "a centralized student advising **service** which practices intrusive advising" on the "persistence of entering students" and suggests that this strategy could be **useful** to other institutions.*

INTRODUCTION

The Student Advising Center (SAC) for advising all freshmen and undeclared students of any classification was established at Emporia State University (ESU) in 1984 prior to the fall semester. Pioneering efforts with centralized, intrusive academic advising techniques at other institutions are well documented in the literature on academic advising (Glennen, 1975 and 1985); ESU's Center possesses characteristics of those precursors.

Freshmen and undeclared students of any classification are advised in the SAC from a "developmental" perspective. Advisors are trained, released-time faculty representatives of the various undergraduate schools and colleges. At the time that advisees have attained about thirty hours of credit, identified a major with some certainty, and established a satisfactory academic record, they are transferred to academic units for continued academic advising.

One of the intended outcomes of an effective academic advising program is an enhanced student retention. The study being reported is an examination of available data for two cohorts of ESU matriculants. The study was conceived to ascertain any measurable retention influences of the presence of the Student Advising Center on the student cohort matriculating as freshmen in 1984 compared to a pre-SAC cohort which matriculated in 1979.

Literature Survey

The advising literature clearly identifies effective academic advising as one of the major strategies that might be undertaken to reduce student attrition, or, conversely, to increase retention. Beal and Noel (1980), reporting on a joint project of the American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, identified "inadequate academic advising" as the greatest impediment to student retention. From a positive perspective, a "caring attitude of faculty and staff" was the strongest positive correlate with persistence. Forrest (1982) points to the efficacy of academic advising for achieving general education objectives and increasing student persistence: "the single most important move an

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institution can make to increase student persistence to graduation is to ensure that students receive the guidance they need at the beginning of the journey through college." A theoretical framework, the Advisement-Retention Model, has been developed by Habley (1981) to delineate the crucial tie of academic advising to the retention of students. The authoritative writings of others can be added to the citations addressing advising and student persistence (Crockett, 1978 and 1985; Noel, Levitz, and Saluri, 1985; and Tinto, 1975 and 1987). Clearly, a connection exists.

The heightened interest in effective academic advising undoubtedly reflects the demographic trends which began in the late seventies, and their subsequent implications for enrollments in post-secondary institutions (Hodgkinson, 1985). The implications were ominous: institutions were faced with a decreasing number of high school graduates (WICHE, 1988). If past attrition rates prevailed with the traditional cohort of students, institutions could extrapolate fewer students, fewer student credit hours of instruction, and, consequently, smaller available operating revenues. (This, of course, assumes that new unrepresented cohorts are not recruited and enrolled; that issue is not within the scope of this study.) One strategy for coping with this undesirable scenario is to reduce attrition, or increase the historical rate of retention of the traditional student cohort.

The cynics and skeptics relative to retention strategies have undoubtedly produced criticism which presupposes that retention strategies inherently imply a reduced level of academic standards, and a subversion of integrity and all else related to "quality" education. That does not need to be the case, however. The longitudinal studies of Astin and his associates (1987a), and the other writings of Astin (1985 and 1987b) provide a persuasive argument for the efficacy of frequent and meaningful student-faculty interaction. Such interactions not only produce an increased level of satisfaction with the undergraduate experience, but also an enhanced level of academic achievement. Advising provides one significant opportunity for those one-to-one student-faculty interactions and mentoring influences. Further, retention is intended to be a secondary outcome of well-conceived and well-delivered services. It is the secondary, not the primary, objective. The primary objective is to provide sound advice and guidance to students concerning academics and other student development outcomes. When this objective is achieved, persistence with formal education appears to be another desired by-product. This premise underlies and pervades the efforts of the American College Testing Program and other credible spokespersons for higher education.

Retention Study Methodology

The 1987-88 academic year was the fourth year for the existence of the Student Advising Center at Emporia State University. Consequently, the moment seemed propitious for an analysis of any retention influences of the SAC.

With the assistance of the director of the ESU Management Information Systems, a strategy was developed for accessing what was considered to be a reliable set of comparative data. Initially all fall 1984 (845 semester) ESU matriculants were identified. A session-by-session enrollment history for these matriculants was accessed. All non-freshmen were removed from the data. The enrollment of each 845 freshman matriculant — the first group of SAC advisees — was then analyzed. The number of continuing (or stop-out and returning) matriculants on a semester-by-semester basis was then determined and summed. (Summer session enrollments were included, but are not reported in the findings of this study.)

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 presents the findings for the 845 (fall 1985) freshmen matriculants. Germane to this study are the following points from Table 1:

- (1) Of the 764 matriculants, 489 or 64.0 percent returned the following fall semester (855); and
- (2) Of the 764 matriculants, 301 or 39.4 percent persisted through eight semesters or four years.

Table 1

Longitudinal Retention for 845 Freshman Matriculants at ESU

Semester (1)	Number Students (2)	Number Departed (3)	Percent Persisting (4)
845	764		
851	636	128	83.2
855	489	147	64.0
861	443	46	59.8
865	363	80	47.5
871	340	23	44.5
875	325	15	42.5
881	301	24	39.4

- (1) **The** coding system for semesters is based on the following:
 - (a) the first two digits refer to the calendar year, and
 - (b) the third digit codes the fall semester with a "5" and a spring semester with a "1." Hence, "851" refers to the spring semester of 1985.
- (2) Number of students enrolled in 845 classified as freshmen and continuing (with or without break) in subsequent semesters. Students enrolled in semesters after 845 are subsets of the 845 students.
- (3) "Number Departed" is the difference between "Number Students" in subsequent semesters.
- (4) "Percent Persisting" is based on a semester's enrollment relative to the 764 students matriculating in the 845 semester.

The data for 845 freshmen assume additional significance when compared to a pre-SAC cohort. The fall 1979 (795 semester) freshmen matriculants were identified, arbitrarily, for a similar analysis and comparison to the 845 cohort. Those data are presented in Table 2.

Salient points from Table 2 are the following:

- (1) Of the 881 matriculants, 523 or 59.4 percent **returned** the following fall semester (805); and
- (2) Of the 881 matriculants, 277 or 31.4 percent persisted through eight semesters or four years.

Table 2
Longitudinal Retention for 795 Freshman Matriculants at ESU

Semester (1)	Number Students (2)	Number Departed (3)	Percent Persisting (4)
795	881		
801	725	156	82.3
805	523	202	59.4
811	474	49	53.8
815	369	105	41.9
821	356	13	40.4
825	309	47	35.1
831	277	32	31.4

- (1) See note (1) in Table 1.
- (2) Number of students enrolled in 795 classified as freshmen and continuing (with or without break) in subsequent semesters. Students enrolled in semesters after 795 are subsets of the 795 students.
- (3) "Number Departed" is the difference between "Number Students" in subsequent semesters.
- (4) "Percent Persisting" is based on a semester's enrollment relative to the 881 students matriculating in the 795 semester.

Thus, even though more students matriculated for the 795 semester (881 students) than the 845 semester (764 students), the number persisting from the 845 cohort for four years (301) **exceeded** the number of retained students (277) from the larger 795 cohort. Also, the **four**-year survival rate for the fall 1984 cohort exceeded the fall 1979 rate by eight percentage points.

The data and findings from the analysis of the ESU samples parallel the exhortations of those writing in the literature surveyed. A modest assertion is that the Student Advising Center is at least partially responsible for this outcome. In fact, there is no other outstanding variable which can be identified to account for this reduced rate of attribution, or the increased retention rate, for the latter fall 1984 matriculants.

An additional basis for analysis is the pattern of retention at other similar institutions. How do the ESU retention patterns compare to other institutions? The pursuit of this question frequently presents considerable difficulty if one wishes to do credible comparative analyses: 1) definitions for retention differ, and 2) there has been a dearth of national normative data. Metzner (1987) and Tinto (1987) admonish concerning the first caveat. Fortunately, Beal and Noel (1980) and more recently Astin and associates (1987a and b) have provided data for comparative purposes through the longitudinal studies of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP).

Astin (1987b, p. 38) presents national normative data for the retention of students through the undergraduate years at different types of institutions. The following is a descending order for retention rates (using three different definitions of retention) by type of institution:

- Private universities (best performance)
- Catholic four-year colleges
- Public universities
- Non-sectarian four-year colleges
- Protestant four-year colleges
- Public four-year colleges (poorest performance)

Apparent from Tables 2 and 3 is that the four-year retention rate for the ESU 795 matriculating cohort (31.4 percent) is consistent with the normative data for public four-year colleges (32+ percent); the four-year persistence rate for the 845 ESU matriculants (39.4 percent) exceeds the normative figure for four-year public colleges. Thus, the ESU retention performance seems particularly noteworthy since the time that students have had available the services of the Student Advising Center. Regarding the absence of ESU data in all cells of Table 3, an analysis was not undertaken to determine those ESU students who completed the undergraduate degree in four years. Also, at the time of the study it was not possible to determine those ESU 845 matriculants who persisted with an enrollment into the fifth year.

Another reference point for analysis is provided from ACT-compiled data. ACT institutional data (ACT, 1987, p. 11) for national dropout rates (from freshman year to sophomore year, by admissions selectivity) reveal the following:

NATIONAL DROPOUT RATES

Selectivity Level	ACT COMP	Mean Percent
Highly Selective	≥ 26	11.4
Selective	22-25.9	20.1
Traditional	18-21.9	31.0
Liberal	15-17.9	40.8
Open	≤ 15	44.1

TABLE 3
Retention Rates by Type Institution (Astin Definitions)

Astin Definition of Retention	Percent Retained (1)			
	Public University	ESU		Public 4-year Colleges
Completed undergraduate degree after four years	27	Not analyzed		20
Completed undergraduate degree or enrolled through four years	47	Matriculation 845 795 39.4 31.4		32 +
Completed undergraduate degree or enrolled four years or enrolled beginning of fifth year	60	See (2)	See (2)	40 +

- (1) Data, except ESU, are from Astin, 1987b. ESU matriculation data appear in Tables 1 and 2.
- (2) These data were not analyzed for the two cohorts.

The ESU freshmen cohorts analyzed have an ACT composite average at the upper end of the "liberal" selectivity level (even though ESU is technically an "open-admission" institution). From Tables 1 and 2 we obtain an ESU freshman to sophomore "dropout rate" of 36.0 percent (for 845 matriculants) and 40.6 percent (for 795 freshmen matriculants). The ESU data for 795 freshmen matriculants (40.6 percent) parallel the 40.8 percent national average for "Liberal" admission and are below that (44.1 percent) for "open-admission" institutions. The 36.0 percent attrition rate for the 845 ESU freshmen matriculants is lower than the normative national benchmarks reported by the ACT. Thus, one can conservatively conclude that this, too, corroborates a positive influence of the SAC relative to an increased retention of matriculation freshmen since the time of its establishment.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of available data from a pre-SAC ESU student cohort and a SAC-influenced cohort suggests that the four-year retention rate has been increased by 8.0 percentage points. Because no discernible treatment variable exists other than the presence of a centralized student advising service which practices intrusive advising, one may conclude that the services of the Student Advising Center have measurably affected the persistence of entering students at Emporia State University. The salient finding of this analysis corroborates the retention literature, and suggests one strategy which institutions might pursue to increase the retention of matriculants.

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