

Academic Advising: The First Year Student Experiences at Botho University

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Abstract: *Academic advising is a crucial task that should be done at tertiary institutions as it prepares the students for the tertiary education. The study focused first year students doing Accounting degree on their experiences during academic advising for one year. A mixed methods research approach was adopted and a questionnaire and interview were used to get views from participants. Recommendations were made on how to ameliorate the academic advising at tertiary institutions.*

Keywords: *Academic advising, student experiences*

I. Introduction

Academic advising as aptly defined by Kuhn (2008) is the process by which a representative from an educational institution gives direction to a student on issues about academic, personal and social. The direction can be in the form of counseling, coaching, mentoring or even teaching. Academic advising is student centered and seeks to enable the student to realize their full potential in their studies. According to Anderson and McGuire (1997), academic advising assists students in removing the confusion that usually comes when a person is subjected to a new environment and ultimately the student will be able to elucidate their educational goals especially for first year students who will be coming out from high schools.

Academic advising is critical to the institution because it determines the retention and the pass rate for students. When students enroll for a degree at an institution, they need a mentor who can take them through their years of study at the institution, the mentor acts like a parent to the student and advises the student on the best possible options the student can take. However, the decision rests with the student who will choose what is best for them. First year students they need proper mentoring for them to be familiar with the educational institution they are enrolled with and the expected academic achievements as compared to senior students.

In a nutshell, academic advising is basically creating a link in the student's academic endeavors with the career prospects for the student. The advising part is looking at the end goal for the student and devises the best way possible to reach that goal through a mutual relationship between the academic advisor and the student. The academic advisor needs to be someone who knows the subject area well so that the student can benefit immensely from the advising process.

Getting experiences on academic advising from first year students will help to strengthen the academic advising process. The article seeks to get insights from the eyes of first year students on the missing gaps that should be addressed in order to deliver a holistic academic advising to a student and also the positive things being done by the academic advisors that should be followed suit by all academic advisors at Botho University and beyond. The study focused on students who had completed their first academic year at Botho University.

Research objectives

1. To find out how academic advising has helped first year students at Botho University
2. To check if academic advising has improved the student retention rate
3. To examine factors that should be improved by academic advisors at Botho University

Research questions

1. What is the pass rate for first year students doing Accounting degree in all the modules done in the first year
2. How academic advising helped the first year students to do their academic studies?
3. How many first year students dropped out from the Accounting degree?
4. What are the factors that should be improved by academic advisors to make the students feel free to express their problems?

II. Literature Review

Wheeler (2005) argues that academic advising is a crucial role that requires some training to the academic advisors so that they will be able to deal with students from different societal backgrounds, like how to handle students having mental issues, disability in some students and being able to listen to student's problems and suggest the way forward. In institutions of higher learning this training is not provided in most

cases and the academic advisor is supposed to handle all the issues the student will brought forward and some of the issues will be personal which needs an alert ear and a sharp mind to advise the student on what to do.

Research has shown that students need some confidentiality when they pour out their hearts to the academic advisor on the issue bothering them, according to Wheeler (2005), it is crucial to have a confidentiality policy in place so that students will be sure what they say will not be shared with other people as their privacy will be violated. If the policy is in place, students will be willing to open up to the academic advisors on issues that affect them.

It is mandatory that academic advising be done to first years enrolled at an institution of higher learning because this will be a platform to tell the students what academic advising is all about, the expectations of students from their academic advisors and what the students are expected to do (University of Arizona 2010). This will prepare the student for the higher education learning and with proper support rendered to them; the student will excel in their studies because they have a mentor who advises them on what to do.

Rendering good academic advice to students is one of the key skills that an academic advisor should possess. The advice should be tailor made to the needs of a specific student looking at their career needs, the interests of the student and their ability to finish a semester with the modules they propose to study that is their study load (Tuttle, 2000). The academic advisor plays a pivotal role is assisting the student to choose the best electives in their studies that are relatively challenging but yet achievable by the student. Students in most cases are very sensitive to comments received from the academic advisors on their academic abilities, so academic advisors should be careful in the way they pass the encouraging comments to their students.

Derby and Smith (2004) argued that academic advising ameliorates the retention rate as students dropouts will adversely affect the student, the institution concerned and even the community at large. So the role of an academic advisor is critical to avert the student dropouts at an institution. Retention rate from an institution point of view is of high importance as this will guarantee that the tuition for the student is not lost as more dropouts will have ripple effects on the management of modules in a department. One of the good things about retention rate is that it can be used as measure for university rankings (Derby and Smith, 2004).

III. Methodology

The study was done in the Faculty of Accounting at Botho University focusing on students doing their first year degree programme. A mixed methodsresearch approach was in the study. The quantitative used a questionnaire instrument to get to get responses from participants. A random sampling approach was used to select participants for the research. The qualitative method employed an interview with the Dean in the Faculty of Accounting to establish the retention rate for the first year students doing Accounting degree. The questionnaire was pilot tested to check validity of the content and the interview guide was also pilot tested for content validity also. Both instruments questionnaire and the interview guide were given to experts to check the content validity and the recommendations from the experts were incorporated into the instruments. SPSS was used for data analysis from the questionnaire. A total of 70 questionnaires were distributed to students and a total of 55 questionnaires were filled and returned back.

IV. Data analysis

The standard deviation and the mean were used to check if academic advising has helped the first year students doing Accounting degree and also to check factors that should be improved by academic advisors atBotho University. The retention rate for students doing first year in accounting the data was obtained through the interview done with the Dean. The questionnaire used a Likert scale that asked participants to rate if academic advising has helped the students to excel in their studies. The participants were supposed to choose one response from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree. The responses were assigned weights from 1,2,3,4 and 5. To choose the range of accepted responses, the sum of all the weights was divided by 5 to get a criteria mean of 3. The responses less that 3 were rejected while those from 3 to 5 were accepted which shows that academic advising has helped the students to excel in their studies. The same was done also to establish factors that factors that should be improved by academic advisors at Botho University.

Table 1: How academic advising has helped first year students

	Mean	Standard deviation
Did academic advising helped you to excel in your studies	4.45	0.9

From the above table it can be seen that the academic advising has helped the students to excel in their studies as can be seen with a high mean score of 4.45 and the standard deviation of 0.9 showing that the responses were all singing from the same hymn book that they strongly agree that academic advising helped them to excel in their studies.

Table 2: Factors that should be improved by academic advisors

	Mean	Standard deviation
Confidentiality of information shared with the academic advisors	4.66	0.8
Giving good academic advice	4.22	1.2
Willing to listen to student problems	3.67	0.9
Advisors need to be knowledgeable with career paths in Accounting	2.88	1.2
Academic advisors need to be friendly	3.33	1.3
Improve privacy during the meeting with the advisor	4.23	0.8
Advisors ability to address problems given by the student	2.89	0.8
Were the academic advisors properly trained to handle your problems	4.04	1

The above table shows the factors that need to be improved by academic advisors. Confidentiality of information shared should not be disclosed to third parties as can be seen with a high mean score of 4.6 and the standard deviation of 0.8 meaning to say most of the responses strongly agreed that confidentiality of information should be maintained. The academic advisors need to give good academic advice to students as can be seen by a high mean of 4.22 and a standard deviation of 1.2. The factor that academic advisors need to be knowledgeable with career paths in Accounting was rejected as it is less than our criteria mean of 3. Academic advisors need to be friendly to students as can be seen with a high mean of 3.33 and a high standard deviation of 1.3.

The other factor that needs improvement is privacy during the meetings as can be seen with a high mean score of 4.23 and a low standard deviation of 0.8. The academic advisors need to be able to address problems given by the student was rejected as it fell below the criteria mean of 3. Qualitative results indicated that the retention rate for first year students doing Accounting is very high as no dropout has been recorded so far and the pass rate for the students is very good which is above 70%.

V. Conclusion

Academic advising should be carried out at institutions of higher learning to curb students dropping out of courses owing to lack of academic guidance from mentors which can be prevented if academic advising is in place. The above results have shown that students have benefited immensely from the academic advising at Botho University which has resulted in them excelling in their studies. For academic advising to work properly, the academic advisors need some training on how to handle students from different backgrounds and with different physical disabilities.

The results also pointed out that there are some factors that need improvement when doing the academic advising to students namely, confidentiality of information shared should be maintained. There should be some form of privacy during academic advising meetings so that the students will feel free to pour their hearts out to the advisors. One of the things that will make students open their problems from the results is for the advisors to be friendly to the students.

VI. Recommendations

The results from the study have shown that academic advising should be done at institutions of higher learning to reduce cases of student dropouts and to maintain a good pass rate but it has to be done properly. The academic advisors should be trained on how they should deal with student's problems. There problems shared by a student to an academic advisor should be kept secret and the place for conducting the academic advisory should have some privacy so that students can open up to air their problems.

Academic advisors should be able to give good academic advice to students so that they can progress well with their studies and reach their career goals if they are properly guided by an academic advisor. Academic advising should be a continuous process when students enroll for their first year until they complete their studies. According to King and Kerr (2005), students will feel being part and parcel of an institution if given academic advising and this will challenge the student to work hard to achieve their career goals.

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