

Advising for Retention and Graduation

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Abstract: With the increase in State and Federal legislation that now holds universities accountable for the graduation and retention of students, it is more important than ever to employ good strategies in academic advising. The culture has shifted from the onus being on the student to plan their path to graduation to today where the academic advisors, professors and the university are responsible to make sure the students stay enrolled and graduate on time. With this increasing responsibility, what must we do in an academic advisor role to retain our students and see them to a timely graduation? This paper will address the strategies that can be employed in academic advising within the fields of engineering and engineering technology. The brief will cover techniques for student retention and paths to graduation.

With the increase in State and Federal legislation, universities are now held accountable for the graduation and retention of students and those graduation and retention rates are also being used in funding formulas. In fact, only 59% of first time full time freshmen enrolling in 2006 graduated in 6 years by the year 2102.³ It is more important now than ever to employ good proactive strategies in academic advising to meet these graduation and retention goals. The culture has shifted from the onus being on the student to plan their path to graduation to today where the academic advisors, professors and the university are responsible to make sure the students stay enrolled and graduate on time. With this increasing responsibility, what do we need to do to as academic advisors in engineering and technology that will help our students stay and graduate on time?

Map a plan to graduation

When freshmen matriculate into their college journey, the end goal of graduation can seem overwhelming. How are they going to complete 120 + hours of course work in 4 years to get there? One approach to making the end goal more manageable is to create a 4 year map to graduation. This map will break down the semester by semester suggested class load for each student. This will allow the student to focus on each semester confidently knowing that they will reach that end goal without the worries of missing a recommended class or prerequisite. “Students are likely to perform at a higher level when they feel they have some kind of academic ‘destination’ in mind.”²

In the State of Indiana, it is now a law that all first time full time freshmen receive one of these general degree maps during orientation. The State of Indiana saw results from Florida State University where they saw a 12% increase in graduation rates over 10 years after the implementation of degree maps.⁴ The general degree map shows what must be taken by a student each semester to graduate in 4 years without accounting for transfer credits or remediation. Under the law, by the end of the student's first semester at the university, advisors are required to give the student a customized degree map that takes into account any transfer credits, AP placements, or remedial coursework that needs to be completed. This degree map will serve as the student's guideline for the next 4 years. In the event of necessary remediation, discussions can occur at this time on how to catch the student back up either by taking summer classes or increasing their class load in a future semester(s).

We don't want developing degree maps to become a cookie cutter process as that doesn't show a personal connection with the student and removes part of the college experience from the student. This customized map should be a collaborative effort between the student and the advisor. In having discussions with the student over their semesters, together you can make changes to this map as long as you have both discussed it and it doesn't have any impact on their graduation date unless the student decides to change their graduation date. This gives the student a vested interest in their path to graduation. What we don't want happening is a student deviating from the map without advisor consultation. This scenario can lead to missed prerequisites or missing classes that are only offered in a particular semester which in turn delays graduation and increases student frustration and possibly their education costs.

Initial meeting with freshman or transfer student

Developing a connection with incoming freshmen and transfer students is the most important part of being an advisor. This is the point where the student develops a sense of belonging to the degree program and begins to know that they have someone looking out for their success over the next 4 years. Charlie Nutt, executive director of National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) states "...academic advisors offer students the personal connection to the institution that the research indicates is vital to student retention and student success."¹ Discussing the generic degree map with the student gives the advisor and the student an opportunity to discuss the requirements to graduate in 4 years and address any issues or reservations they have about starting or returning to school. This will allow the advisor to better understand the student so good decisions can be made for their first semester. This is also the time that you can showcase to the student the successful students you have had come through the degree program. These showcases allow the student to believe that they too can graduate in 4 years and it is an achievable goal. Another topic that also engages the student in the program are the outside the classroom activities of the degree program. Whether these activities are academic or social it gives the student a chance to develop their sense of belonging which will increase their retention

in the program and university. At the close of the initial meeting with the student, it is good to set the expectation that you want to meet with them during their first semester and subsequent semesters to help them register for classes, update their custom degree map, acknowledge their progress and answer questions and issues that they may have.

Meeting advisees every semester

Like in the business world where you must keep in contact with your customers and continually understand their current and future needs, the same applies to the activity of advising. A business cannot expect to continue or grow their sales if they don't anticipate and understand what their customer needs. A lot of changes, successes and challenges occur over each advisee's semester. Understanding how your advisees are doing in their current classes, and in their work and personal lives helps you make better recommendations to them. We are the best resource on prerequisites, when courses will be offered, and available resources at the institution. We have found that when the advisee comes and talks with the advisor that they culminate with signing up for classes. Students have a tendency to procrastinate and put off the registration process which makes it too easy to not get the classes they need to graduate on time or end up sitting out a semester or permanently thus negatively impacting our graduation and retention rates. Our end goal is to keep our advisees on track to graduate by helping them prioritize their registration.

Some advisors have found it difficult to get advisees to commit to coming in each semester. One approach to creating this ongoing relationship is in the initial meeting with the student to set the expectation that you would like to meet with them every semester. Then sending out an email to the student requesting an appointment prior to the registration period starting. Usually after the first year, this becomes a habit and they are proactively start approaching you for their semester advisor meeting. Another approach to getting students to come in, is a stronger approach of putting holds on student registration until they meet with their advisor. While this approach is effective, students tend to resent being forced into the semester advising process. Regardless of which approach you use to get students to come in, it is important that you keep the meeting relaxed, putting the student at ease which allows you to have better discussions with them.

During the student meeting start off by asking about how the current semester is going for the student. This will give you as the advisor immediate feedback if their class load is optimal, too heavy or too light or if they are struggling with any classes. This opens the discussion about getting outside help such as tutoring, resources available on campus or even the possibility of retaking a class. Based on the discoveries from how the current semester is going, you can then segue into the degree map that has been previously developed with the advisee to determine the class selection for the next semester.

When you are meeting with a student who is struggling in their course work, time management or managing balancing work, family and school it is necessary to address these issues with them. Discussing the probation and dismissal policy before either action occurs will show the student what could happen and you can discuss strategies to avoid the action. While Registrar offices send notifications and list possible outcomes when a student is placed on probation, it is not often read by the student and discarded. When it is discussed face to face, there is more importance placed on the seriousness of the issue. I have heard students say they didn't realize that they would actually be dismissed because of their grades. Having that discussion before they are in trouble can keep the student from putting themselves in that position. Showing the student mathematically how retaking a class can improve their GPA or what GPA they need to have to achieve to maintain being in good standing sets a plan of action for the student for the coming semester. If the student is struggling with time management issues, discuss their schedule and how they can structure it to help achieve success. This may be taking advantages of breaks in their schedule to study, to take or not take online classes or using campus resources to help them learn time management skills. All of these struggles can lead to not retaining and thus not graduating our students. If we proactively address the issues, many can be avoided with some attention and direction given to the student.

Document meetings

As you have advising meetings over the semesters, it is important to take notes during your discussions. If you record what you discussed during this time, it will make it much easier to address these topics in the subsequent semesters. Being able to specifically talk about them shows the student that you are also invested in their journey by understanding and remembering who they are and what they are doing and accomplishing. Items that are good to record are internships/employment, family, concerns about classes, scholarships, on campus or outside activities/groups, future plans and or interests etc. Being able to discuss any of these items continues to build the strength of the relationship with the advisee. In the business world this is called Customer Relationship Management and our advisees are our customers. We cannot retain good students if we do not provide that relationship with our advisees.

Advocate for your advisees

Being an advocate for your advisees is very important. Responsibilities of being an advocate include writing recommendation letters for scholarships and employment, connecting advisees with employers, listening to their situations and helping them find the correct resources to help solve their problems, etc. Providing this extra "service" sets your degree program apart from others. In the business world, the little extras are what differentiate a good company from an average company. Remember that this is usually a transitional time for your advisee and they may need extra help from time to time. We have all been through these times and letting the students know they are not the only one experiencing issues can reduce anxiety. Making sure

you are approachable and willing to listen will help ensure that your advisee will seek you out for help and/or assistance instead of easily giving up or dropping out of school.

Celebrate student success

Advising is not just about figuring out which courses to take, it is also about letting students know that someone cares about their progress and successes. Departments can make efforts to celebrate and congratulate their students on their achievements. Some departments will post congratulatory messages or signs for their advisees who have won scholarships. Another approach is to list your advisees who have graduated and where they have secured a job or were accepted into graduate school. Personal touches of sending an email to congratulate them can continue to strengthen the advisee relationship. Promoting success stories encourage current students to continue to work diligently too so that they can be recognized as well in the future which can in turn help with our retention rates.

Conclusion

Meeting with each of your advisees every semester is a time consuming process, but it is also a rewarding one. Many of these strategies are in place in programs already, but not done unless the student initiates a meeting. We should take our role as advisors very seriously and understand that our efforts do in fact equate to retention and graduation rates. This should be a proactive meeting on behalf of the advisor. As in business, if a customer feels that the business is not interested in them, doesn't return their phone calls, or doesn't have any time to meet with them, they will take their business elsewhere. The same happens in our advising process. If we don't make ourselves available and approachable, we run the risk of losing our students in the degree program. If we lose our advisees, we are negatively impacting the retention and graduation rates of the degree program and/or institution which can ultimately impact the funding for the degree program and institution. Advising is no longer a duty that is done if a student happens to find us, it is a duty that we as advisors must proactively manage and engage the student. In education, there is no greater satisfaction than seeing your advisees graduate on time and gaining employment. It is then that the time spent with them over the 4 years is worth every minute.

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