

# A Partnership Between Advising and Academics: Best Practices for Student Support

**Melissa Myers and Pressley Rankin**

## **Abstract**

The Doctor of Education (EdD) in Leadership program at City University of Seattle instituted an alternative advising program separating the roles of enrollment advising and academic advising. Faculty program directors are responsible for advising students regarding academic success and concerns while enrollment advisors provide support pertaining to administrative functions. This team approach to academic advising is associated with an average increase of 11 percent in the student satisfaction scores related to the overall advising experience. This chapter presents a case

study of how pairing a dedicated enrollment advisor with a faculty academic advisor has become a best practice in the advising model.

## Overview

Mentorship, access to New Student Orientation, and creating a community are key factors related to student success of online learners (Hanover Research, 2015). Additionally, Barnes, Williams, and Archer (2010) asserted that students value a connection to faculty members that will help them socialize to the profession. At City University of Seattle (CityU), enrollment advisors consistently find that students, specifically those who have been out of school for a significant period of time, are positively affected by a close relationship with their advisors.

At CityU, once an enrollment advisor makes contact with prospective students, the advisor is responsible for building a relationship and rapport, guiding the students to the best program, and walking them through the application process. Upon admission to the program, the enrollment advisor is responsible for course registration and ensuring the student is prepared to start class. Once the student is enrolled, the academic advisor also begins working with the student. Examples of academic advising may consist of creating a long-term academic plan, dealing with student-instructor frustrations, and providing student success tips associated with prioritization and time management.

Most academic departments at CityU implement a full-cycle advisor model that takes on the roles of both an enrollment and an academic advisor. However, the doctoral program in the School of Applied Leadership (SAL) chose to create a team-approach model. By creating a team consisting of a dedicated enrollment advisor and a faculty academic advisor (e.g., a program director, a course manager, or a doctoral student support faculty), the function is split, allowing advisors to focus on their specialty. Thus, the student receives the best-possible support from the person most qualified to give that support.

Both Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) and Golde and Dore (2001) found that students need information about aspects of the academic program, about the mechanics of registration, and about the use of academic technology. Failure to provide that information causes the students stress and leads to dropouts. The combination of the enrollment

advisor working closely with an academic advisor creates an environment of strong support for students on all aspects of their university experience. This chapter will present a discussion illustrating how the combination of an enrollment advisor, focused on one program, coupled with an academic faculty advisor from that program can create a supportive student environment that increases retention and creates high levels of student satisfaction.

## Best Practices in Online Student Support

Attrition is an issue in higher education. This is especially true for online programs, which typically see an average of 10 to 20 percent higher attrition rates than face-to-face programs (Rovai, 2002). To combat attrition, students must have their expectations managed to lessen the stress and anxiety associated with understanding program requirements and registering for classes (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). To provide needed information on both enrollment and academics, enrollment advisors are often required to perform both functions. Without the specific program information available to them, they often lack detailed knowledge to provide successful academic advising. This lack of specific program knowledge has been shown to increase the likelihood of students to withdraw from a program (Golde & Dore, 2001).

Within most programs, faculty advisors are most knowledgeable about program specifics. Connecting students to faculty advisors as early as possible is important because it provides a support system to effectively manage program expectations. Additionally, there are other benefits for a student-faculty connection. Barnes, Williams, and Archer (2010) examined graduate students and found that the students valued having a connection to a primary faculty member. Further research showed that a connection to a faculty member provided needed professional socialization and was shown to prevent attrition (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Online universities that serve a primary population of graduate students must provide faculty support to follow these best practices and limit student attrition.

It is important to distinguish between a faculty academic advisor and a nonfaculty academic advisor. Ivankova and Stick (2007), in a mixed-methods study of doctoral students in a leadership program, found that

academic advisors had little statistical impact on persistence with online doctoral students. Faculty interaction, however, did significantly contribute to academic persistence with students being more likely to complete their degree (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). The model presented here represents a nonfaculty enrollment advisor paired with a faculty academic advisor.

Studies have shown many factors that support persistence: external program factors such as family support, self-motivation, prior computer skills, and self-efficacy and internal program factors such as course design and course relevance (Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009). However, one similar factor in all studies is the need for students to connect to their faculty. Park and Choi (2009) found that “adult learners are more likely to drop out of online courses when they do not receive support from their family and/or organization while taking online courses, regardless of learners’ academic preparation and aspiration” (p. 215). They go on to say that instructor support can replace missing external support from family (Park & Choi, 2009). Therefore, creating a strong enrollment and academic team can overcome other external challenges that a student may be facing.

## Practical Application of Best Practices

The following section presents a case study of CityU’s School of Applied Leadership program and its practice of having a dedicated enrollment advisor in addition to a separate faculty student support advisor for the doctoral program. The case study outlines the typical support for a doctoral student.

### First Contact

During the first phone call after receiving a request for information, the enrollment advisor spends twenty to thirty minutes asking questions and getting to know the student. Questions include who they are, lifelong goals, value for education, why a degree is beneficial, what is necessary in a school for student success, and what will hold the student back from completing a degree. After learning about the student, the enrollment advisor will spend the next twenty to thirty minutes discussing the program of interest, and why CityU is the student’s best option. While taking the

time to break down the degree program, which is a doctorate of education in leadership, the enrollment advisor takes advantage of initiating the idea of an online community.

Setting up the concept of the community at CityU and specifically in the doctoral program, the enrollment advisor provides details related to the wide range of student demographics in the classroom and how students have the opportunity to learn cross-industry tips and techniques to improve leadership within their own work setting. The enrollment advisor places value on discussion boards in the online learning environment as the exciting process of learning from others. For example, the enrollment advisor will let new students know:

You will be in class with leaders across a multitude of industries including corporate VPs, superintendents, principals and administrators, police chiefs, military service members, and other community leaders. This provides a unique opportunity to learn from one another. It also gives you an opportunity to help others learn by bringing and learning fresh perspectives from different industries that may be applicable to your field. It’s so exciting to be able to meet so many new people that otherwise you may never have had the chance to do so!

This begins the process of creating a community environment in which students anticipate the prospect of connecting with one another. Through the process of this initial socialization, the enrollment advisor communicates a sense of excitement that helps the student become energized to be a part of our community of leaders across the nation.

Initial conversations with students establish the primary student-advisor relationship and begin the process of building a community within the university setting. The doctoral enrollment advisor at CityU has found in her experience that some adult learners, specifically those who have not previously participated in an online learning environment, need help in learning how to connect with peers, how to manage homework efficiently, and how to get in the proper mindset for being in school. The first quarter is the most hands-on from an advising perspective and in terms of providing support.

During these initial discussions, the faculty advisor is not connected to the students unless he or she has specific program questions. The

enrollment advisor knows to refer students to the faculty advisor should the students need in-depth information about the program requirements, classroom culture, or academic expectations. Typically, however, first contact between the faculty advisor and the students happens when the students are interviewed for the doctoral program. The students and the faculty advisor have extended one-on-one conversations to evaluate the students for the program, to socialize the students to the culture at City University of Seattle, and to answer the students' questions about the program. This interview begins the students' relationship with their faculty advisor.

## Initial Enrollment

Prior to class beginning, the enrollment advisor requires students to complete a New Student Orientation, even though the orientation is not required by the university. Rarely are students unable to attend at least one of the four New Student Orientations available. However, if this occurs, the enrollment advisor and student will schedule an appointment to do a one-on-one orientation covering the basics of using Blackboard and the student portal. The New Student Orientation reviews numerous resources available, ranging from tutoring, library services, and student success tips. Hanover Research (2015) found that an introduction to the online learning environment and resources may help prevent future frustration and ultimately increase student retention.

The enrollment advisor implements strategies both before and after New Student Orientation to ensure each student is fully prepared to start courses. Prior to New Student Orientation, the advisor walks the student through the process of locating books and how to find the best deals on textbooks, how to use the bookstore, and how to prepare financial aid. After orientation, the enrollment advisor and student review any student questions and important dates for the upcoming quarter.

In addition to the orientation, the doctoral program also has an introductory class that students are required to take prior to their first academic class. This class is run by a different faculty advisor every quarter and provides students with a chance to practice their skills and learn more about the culture of their doctoral program. Students in this quarterly introduction often form bonds with fellow students that last throughout the

program. Angelino, Williams, and Natvig (2007) asserted that introductory orientations are considered a best practice for preventing online student attrition.

## First Quarter

Throughout the first quarter, the enrollment advisor provides personalized tips for student success based on the student's concerns and issues while in class. For example, the enrollment advisor recently worked with a student who was not able to complete the reading prior to answering her discussion question. The student was stressed out about how she would get through all the required and supplemental materials each week while working full-time and taking care of her family. The enrollment advisor said:

For a situation like this, I provided mentorship and support to encourage the student to try new techniques and maintain a positive demeanor toward school. We reviewed the process of prioritizing using the professor's rock analogy. First, the student must focus on getting the required reading done for her assignments (stones); we reviewed using the glossary in her textbook to find exactly what she needed to answer the discussion question. Once the assignment is out of the way, she can begin to fill in her time by reading the remaining chapters (pebbles). Then she can attack the supplemental materials (sand). Lastly, she can search for her own supplemental materials (water). By creating building blocks of importance, she is able to turn her assignments in on time, complete the necessary reading, and distinguish the difference between necessary and supplemental materials for prioritization purposes all with much less stress than she previously encountered.

This type of tip for success illustrates the balance that must occur between enrollment advising and academic advising. While this is clearly an academic issue, the fact that it occurred during the first quarter means the student is more closely involved with the enrollment advisor and, therefore, help is more appropriate coming from that person. Issues like this represent a gray area where the student is transitioning into the program. A student should never feel that she or he is without support.

Once the student is established, questions like this are referred to the faculty advisor to provide tips related specifically to working at the doctoral level.

## Ongoing

The advising position is a fine balance between mentorship, student advocacy, and boundaries. The purpose of an enrollment advising position is to perform administrative functions for and with the student, but also to provide a single point of contact available for support throughout a student's entire academic career. This includes knowing when a student needs to be referred to a faculty advisor to get needed support.

The relationship between the enrollment advisor and the faculty advisor is reciprocal. The faculty advisor should not attempt to advise students about administrative issues. To accomplish this, the student must see the enrollment and academic advisors as a supportive team. The student should not be made to feel they are being passed around. To accomplish this, clear boundaries need to be set between what each advisor handles once the student is established so that the student is aware of which advisor to contact. Should students contact the wrong advisor that person will get the answer for the student and let them know to contact the other advisor about that topic the next time.

Ongoing student support then falls between both advisors. The faculty advisor is responsible for sending academic tips, conducting quarterly webinars on academic topics, interacting with students on social media, and fielding students' questions about current or future courses they are taking. The faculty advisor is also responsible for following up when students have stopped attending the program. The faculty advisor checks in with the student and maintains records documenting the reasons for the break to be able to notify the enrollment advisor when the student is ready to return. The faculty advisor also maintains a database, which includes information on the students' progress in the program, their grades, their program plans, and a history of contact with each student. This database is separate from the enrollment contact database maintained by the enrollment advisor.

The enrollment advisor works then to make the enrollment process run smoothly. Checking in on students and reminding them about deadlines

and other administrative issues. The enrollment advisor is also responsible for handling incoming inquiries from new students. Keeping the advisor focused on these important tasks by shifting the ongoing student support to the academic advisor helps to make sure no students are falling through the cracks with a lack of support. It also encourages university-wide growth by allowing an enrollment advisor to focus on prospecting and recruitment.

## Recommendations

The doctoral program in the School of Applied Leadership has been able to increase student satisfaction scores for advising by an average of 11 percent over the average for the rest of the university (City University of Seattle, 2015). While there may be other factors in this difference, the partnership between enrollment and academics is the main factor that differentiates the Ed.D. in Leadership program from others in the university. The enrollment advisor dedicated to the doctoral program was able to work with the faculty advisor dedicated to that student. It is recommended that graduate programs connect academic faculty with a program-specific enrollment advisor. Working together as a team increases student support and persistence beyond what one or the other department could accomplish on its own as indicated by our higher student satisfaction scores and our 80 percent persistence rate (City University of Seattle, 2015). Having an academic advisor who is a faculty member in the program allows the type of professional socialization that has been shown to increase persistence and completion of graduate programs (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010).

## Conclusion

Attrition is an ongoing concern for online higher education programs. It would seem that one possible way to avoid this would be for universities to commit to creating partnerships between faculty advisors and enrollment advisors. These partnerships must work to provide the student with support, socialization, academic guidance, and a real-world anchor that will build a strong attachment to the university and increase the students' perception of personal value by the university. By coordinating the

outreach from both the academic side and the enrollment side, students can receive all the information they need without feeling overwhelmed by a constant flood of communication. Having a program director-level faculty member as a point of contact also mitigates the enrollment advisor from being the point of contact for program issues. The direct feedback to the program director allows for quicker decision making and continuous program improvement, ultimately creating a satisfied and persistent student.

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## Author Biographies

Melissa Y. Myers is a Senior Enrollment Advisor at City University of Seattle. She has worked in higher education for four years in which she has served as a full-cycle enrollment advisor, academic advisor, team lead, and doctoral enrollment specialist. She has experience outside higher education in event coordination and logistics. She holds a BS in psychology with a Helping Skills certification from Washington State University, an MEd in adult education and training from the University of Phoenix, and is currently pursuing an MA in leadership through City University of Seattle.

Pressley Rankin IV is an Associate Professor and Academic Program Director at City University of Seattle's School of Applied Leadership. He has a PhD from the University of San Diego in leadership studies and an MS in counseling from San Diego State University. His degree in counseling helps him understand the student from a systemic perspective. Balancing multiple life roles is both rewarding and challenging, and he is committed to helping students achieve their own personal goals around balance. Dr. Rankin also has a background in organizational leadership and management including corporate, retail, and nonprofit environments.