Allies for Education
ENCOURAGING CONVERSATIONS ACROSS OUR ROLES IN P12 SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Volume 2, Issue 2
2019

# Academic Advising and the Evaluation of Student Petitions: A Vehicle for Student Equity and Justice

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The question of whether evaluation of policies and practices promotes growth, equity, and justice is one that I consider every day in my work as the Director of Academic Advising at California State University, Channel Islands. As an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), one of my goals is to ensure that we are truly Hispanic *Serving*, and not just Hispanic *Enrolling.* One way to do this is to critically examine our policies and procedures through the lens of equity and justice while applying what we know from the field of higher education retention and student success. Another way is to see how we can structure policies and procedures with a built-in understanding of the student population. In academic advising, one area in which we wrestle with the question of evaluation and how we apply it to students is in regards to how we evaluate student petitions. At some universities, academic advisors manage the evaluation of petitions, while at others it is the responsibility of the registrar's office, also known as the records and registration office on other campuses. Those who evaluate and decide whether to approve or deny student petitions have to balance institutional requirements and individual student circumstances. The work and expertise of academic advisors lies at the intersection of these two areas. Advisors must be experts on institutional requirements and are representatives of the university (and its rules and regulations) in their interactions with students. However, they also serve as advocates for students and their individual experiences. Based on the literature and my own professional experience, I argue that academic advisors are the individuals best qualified to evaluate petitions and that this contributes to institutional equity because of advisors' expertise in university policy and individual student experiences.

To understand this topic, we must first define the term student petition. These are requests initiated by students for some sort of exception to a stated rule or policy. Some examples are adding or withdrawing from a course after the published deadline, exceeding the number of enrolled units allowed in a term, allowing exceptions to University degree requirements, or allowing exceptions to university policies on repetition of courses. In these cases, students are often given a chance to submit a written explanation/justification for their request as well as any supporting documentation. In just these few examples, one can see that the decisions a university makes on these types of petitions can have long-

reaching implications for a student's time to degree, GPA, and even degree completion. As a result, those who evaluate these petitions, and the processes they use to make these evaluations, play a central role in student success and retention. Yet there is surprisingly little written on how universities determine who should evaluate petitions and whether the process for this evaluation is equitable and properly considers its student population.

In making the case that academic advisors are best suited to evaluate these cases, we must first understand what academic advising is and its role in student success. Terry Kuhn defines academic advising as, "situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter" (Kuhn, 2008, p. 3). In order be successful at giving insight or direction, advisors must have a deep understanding of the institution, its curriculum, policies, and procedures, and of the students they serve. This understanding of the student is firmly grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of student development theory, which is a critical component of any academic advisor graduate program (Brown, 2008). Student development can be defined as "the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capacities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education" (Rodgers, 1990, p. 27). Particularly with students of color, it is imperative that advisors have a strong grasp of the needs, demographics, and unique experiences that different populations bring with them (Torres, 2006; Clark & Kalionzes, 2008; Museus, 2014). In this sense, advisors take on the role of cultural navigators who help students negotiate higher education successfully (Strayhorn, 2015; Glaessgen et al., 2018). To make the case that academic advisors are the most qualified group of professionals on campus to evaluate petitions, it is important to contrast the dual expertise I describe above with the expertise and duties of individuals in a registrar's office, which is the other entity that typically evaluates student petitions.

Traditionally, a university registrar is the custodian and manager of records (Lanier, 2006). Writing in the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers' (AACRAO) scholarly journal, *College and University*, Lanier goes on to underscore the role of business practices as central to the mission of the registrar. He states, "The registrar has become a leader in campus technology planning, implementation, and operation," and that "the position of the registrar plays a central role in coordinating these real-time operations" (p.17). Lanier's overarching argument is that the responsibilities of the registrar center on business and technological practices and that "Highly trained, knowledgeable people with a variety of skills are required to administer, maintain, and improve these systems" (p.19). At no point does he mention registrars needing an understanding of student success research, student development theory, or the student experience in general.

In this same AACRAO journal, Pace (2011) interviewed selected registrar and enrollment managers at medium and large public and private institutions, asking them about what an ideal registrar's office would look like. In regards to staff qualifications, of the eight elements identified by the interviewees as necessary for the ideal registrar's office, only one mentioned students, stating that staff, "would interact well with students and faculty" (p.4). The other elements centered on managing data, reporting systems, and technology. In terms of professional preparation, they only identified having a bachelor's degree and having, "strong interpersonal, communications, and technical skills" (p.4). The most recent AACRAO Registrar Career Profile Report (2018) supports this last point of not needing background in a specific discipline. In their survey of university registrars, the position typically requires a master's

degree (67%), followed by bachelor's degree (30%), though it does not specify a specific discipline for those degrees. Additionally, the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education states that registrar program personnel be trained on areas such as institutional policies pertaining to the functions or activities they support, privacy and confidentiality policies, and laws regarding access to student records (2015).

This is in contrast to the evidence I presented above describing how academic advising graduate programs emphasize understanding of the student experience. Also in contrast to the required qualifications for registrar's office staff, academic advisors typically require graduate study in fields related to higher education. In an article published by the National Academic Advising Association, McMahon found that most academic advising positions require master's degrees in higher education or college student personnel (2008) because these programs convey a comprehensive understanding of models of student personal, social, and intellectual development as well as the foundations of higher education, faculty governance, and student affairs. The CAS Professional Standards for Academic Advising echo this by recommending that advising staff be trained in theories of student development and comprehensive knowledge of the institution's programs, policies, and procedures (2015). In summary, registrar office staff tend to focus on processes, data management, and record systems maintenance and are not expected to have a background in the student experience or higher education. Academic advisors work directly with students, helping them navigate the university as a whole. They are also expected to have completed graduate studies in higher education. This dual expertise in both the institution and the student are what make academic advisors the most qualified professionals on campus to evaluate petitions holistically.

## Holistic Evaluation of Petitions

As a result of the expertise in both the institution and the student, I argue that when academic advisors evaluate petitions it should be labeled a *holistic* evaluation of petitions. I am defining holistic evaluation of petitions as taking into consideration the totality of the student's academic record and interactions with the university as well as their personal experience and current life circumstances outside of the classroom and university. This is very similar to how Ferguson defined one component of holistic, person-centered academic advising, as looking "at all aspects of the student's experience, including reviewing notes from previous meetings with the student and looking at his or her overall academic performance, major choice and work path, course enrollment and life outside the classroom" (2010, p.12).

Those not in the field of academic advising may not understand the complexity involved in evaluating petitions holistically in a way that ensures equity, the institution's needs, and an understanding of the student population. At my previous institution (UCLA), academic advisors were solely responsible for evaluating all late add, withdrawal, additional unit, and GE substitution petitions. As an advisor and trainer for new advisors in the College of Letters and Science there, it was my job to both evaluate petitions like these and prepare new advisors to do the same. To better understand all of the factors that went into the review of a petition, I will describe the process we used at UCLA, using the example of a student petitioning to withdraw from a course after the published deadline.

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Most universities allow some flexibility in accommodating extenuating circumstances when students file such a petition (Ramachandran & Wyandotte, 2016). At UCLA, petitions to add or withdraw from a course after the deadline required consultation with the instructor. In these cases, instructors had to sign off on the petition before my office could even consider it. In practice, unless the instructor had a strong objection to approving the petition, the vast majority of faculty deferred to advisors' judgement on whether an exception was warranted or not.

Once in our office, the petition was entered into the student's record and was forwarded to a standing committee in our office that consisted solely of advisors. According to my former supervisor, the rationale for use of a committee rather than one individual advisor is that it results in greater consistency, accountability, and equitable treatment of students (C. Hollis, personal communication, June 11, 2018). Our commitment to students was that they would receive a response to their petition in no more than ten working days. In most cases they received a response in less than five. In addition to evaluating the extenuating circumstances precipitating the need for an exception to the stated deadline, the committee would also consider how the withdrawal would impact the student's degree progress. Factors here included:

- When will the course be offered again and does the student need it to graduate?
- Is the course a prerequisite for other more advanced courses?
    - If so, when can the student take the course again and will they stay on track to graduate?
- Has the student used up repeated courses for grade forgiveness?
- Will an "F" put the student on probation or academically disqualify them?
- How close are they to graduating?
- Can they exercise another option like taking the course on a credit/no credit basis?

In regards to taking into account the student's background and looking at the entire situation from a more holistic perspective, the advisor would consider questions such as:

- Has this student been advised about the petition process before or are they a first year student who is unfamiliar with university rules and regulations?
    - Is the student also first-generation and therefore even less likely to be familiar with university rules, regulations, and the long-term repercussions of a withdrawal?
- Does the student want to withdraw because they are failing the course or merely because they *perceive* they are failing?
- Has the student taken advantage of tutoring, mentoring, and other study skill resources on campus?
- Is the student working?

  - How many hours?
  - Could they benefit from enrolling as a part-time student?
  - Are there other financial barriers at play that could be addressed by university resources?

- Has the student been misadvised by another office on campus regarding the withdrawal deadlines? Is there a record of this?

This is just a sampling of the questions I would consider when reviewing a student's petition, but it illustrates the thought process well. I would look at how the potential withdrawal would impact the student's degree progress through a review of their degree audit and transcript. Additionally, I would examine the student's background through their written explanation, additional questions sent to the student, advising notes, and grades earned thus far in the course (at UCLA, advisors had access to any grades posted by instructors through the learning management system). Finally, I would view all of this through the lens of my knowledge of student development theory by considering, for example, is this a first-generation college student with limited knowledge of bureaucratic procedures in higher education? I would use all of these elements to arrive at a decision that was equitable to the student and took into account the broad range of their experiences but that also considered the institution's needs and requirements. In other words, it takes deep knowledge of both the curriculum and the student's unique circumstances in order to evaluate a petition holistically.

As important as the holistic review of petitions is to equity and student success, an equally important effect of housing this function in an academic advising office is that it contributes to a reduction in administrative barriers for students, such as having fewer offices to visit to take care of administrative matters.

## Administrative Barriers as Barriers to Equity

Administrative barriers are part of the university experience. In fact, probably the most widely cited researcher on university retention and departure, Vincent Tinto, has argued that one of the keys to retention is the degree to which students integrate socially and academically into the university culture, which includes its bureaucratic structures (1993). This is no small feat, particularly for first-generation college students who face an organizational structure that is often highly fragmented, compartmentalized, and resistant to coordination (Schroeder, 2013). Students' lack of this college cultural knowledge and the institutional assumption that they will somehow figure it out can lead to a lack of trust in the institution (Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013). The greater the difference between students' expectations for fairness in institutional interactions and the reality of those interactions, the more likely they are to become disillusioned and leave the institution (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Housing the evaluation of petitions in an academic advising office can address this particular administrative barrier.

Academic advising is often the first university resource students reach out to when they are experiencing difficulties that may require withdrawing from courses or the term. By being able to advise them on the petition process while simultaneously reviewing their record, the advisor can determine if a

petition is the best option and, if so, how to submit the petition. This greatly reduces the administrative barrier of having to navigate the complex environment that is characteristic of most universities today (Kalsbeek, 2013; Schroeder, 2013). Torres (2006) cites eliminating these bureaucratic hurdles as an area in need of improvement, especially as it relates to first-generation Latina/o students.

## Advisors as the Campus Student Success Experts: Perspectives from the Field

If we agree that universities should promote equity and justice in how it serves its students, then it stands to reason that the policies and procedures related to students should be equitable and just. Similarly then, the ways in which a student interacts with the institution should reflect this same equity and justice. Student petitions are fundamental vehicle through which students interact with the "administration" of a university. If we hope to instill equity into these interactions, I argue that the university representatives who engage in and oversee these interactions should be those with the greatest knowledge of both the institution (curriculum and policies), and the literature on student development, success, and retention. On the vast majority of campuses, these are academic advisors.

Very few offices on a university campus have the same concentration of professionals specifically trained in higher education administration and student development, success, and retention. Here at CSUCI for example, every advisor on my staff has at least one master's degree in higher education administration and/or university advising. Such education uniquely prepares each advisor to understand and uphold the integrity of the university while also being able to appreciate the hurdles faced by our mostly first-generation student population. This level of academic preparation was the same at my previous institution

Academic advising offices that are responsible for evaluating petitions provide similar justifications. For example, L. Madolora, an academic advisor at San José State University, stated:

Our office is in charge of the petition process since we are somewhat seen as the office full of experts on University Policy as well as being fair to students in their specific situations. We also have knowledge of student resources that we can refer students to. (personal communication, April 2, 2018)

When asked why UCLA feels that academic advisors are best suited to evaluate petitions, my former supervisor said:

Since academic advisors work directly with students, they are better able to judge petitions holistically. For example, they can determine when it is appropriate to give a "one time only" approval because of a particular situation, such as allowing a student to add a class late, because that will graduate the student rather than requiring him to stay for an additional term, or because a required course will not be offered again in a timely manner. (C. Hollis, personal communication, June 11, 2018)

## Conclusion

Student petitions like the ones I described are generally reviewed by either registrar or academic advising offices. I argue that because of their different training and expertise, academic advisors are better suited to review petitions in a way that ensures the integrity of the record but also considers the

totality of the student experience. While registrars serve a vital function on campus as record and data managers, their focus is on data processing and using business practices to improve data management systems. In short, they record and maintain official university records. Academic advisors, on the other hand, while having an understanding of these inner workings of the university, also must understand the student, their entire academic record, and how to bridge these two worlds. As a result, having advisors review petitions can serve a vehicle for greater student equity and justice.

In summary, colleges and universities, because they exist to create and promote knowledge, are naturally inclined to promote equity and justice. However, being inclined to do something is not the same as being destined to do something. We as educators must work to ensure that the structures and processes we create in our universities promote that more noble inclination. Having academic advisors, with their specific training and expertise, oversee petition evaluation and management is one way to accomplish this.

## About the Author

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