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Advising Experiences among First-year International Doctoral Students

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Introduction

A faculty advisor is one of the most important individuals a graduate student interacts within the course of doctoral study (Barnes and Austin 2009). Faculty advisors can influence the quality of students' doctoral experiences and degree completion by providing academic support (Schlosser et al. 2010), transmitting discipline-specific knowledge (Noy and Ray 2012), and facilitating students' socialization in the field and in graduate school (Barnes, Williams, and Austin 2010). In this study, we focus on advising experiences among first-year international doctoral students (IDS). Because these students tend to have limited social and support networks in the U.S., which can mediate the impact of the transition to a new cultural and educational setting, first-year IDS may rely even more on their faculty advisor to help them acclimate in order to be academically and interpersonally successful (Herman and Kombe 2019; Moglen 2017). More specifically, we explore if advising experiences differ by academic disciplines (i.e., hard v. soft sciences), and whether the method of advisee-advisor pairing (i.e., student selection v. assignment) affects their experience as has been noted in other research focusing on IDS' overall satisfaction with their graduate programs (Allen and Smith 2008).

Methods

This study was conducted at a large research-intensive university located in a Southeastern state. We invited all first-year international doctoral students on campus to participate in our study by sending three separate recruitment emails through the international center. We interviewed all fifteen students who responded to the invitation email. Six additional students were recruited by word-of-mouth. Our final sample included 21 first-year international doctoral students enrolled in the university in the spring of 2018. The sample was well-balanced in terms of gender and academic disciplines, but more than a half of our students were from Asian countries, such as China, India, and South Korea. The remainder of the students were from countries in Latin America, Northern Africa, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Oceania. In the spring of 2018, we conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews and each interview took about 45 to 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. We utilized Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method (Hill et al. 1997) to analyze our data. The CQR method was selected because of its focus of allowing words to describe a phenomenon, thereby presenting an opportunity to obtain awareness of the advising experience as it emerged from the observations rather than interpreting data within the confines of a theoretical framework. In the first round, all research team members open-coded the transcripts to identify some common themes and they reported back their findings. Then, the lead author of this study reread all the transcripts to identify passages related to advisors and advising experiences, and from there, categorized the identified passages into several themes. To improve trustworthiness, another research team member repeated the process. When there was a disagreement between members about coding or emergent themes, they discussed it until they reached an agreement.

Findings

Preliminary results demonstrated that the method of advisee-advisor matching mattered significantly in shaping a student's perception of advising in the first year. Most students in the sample were temporarily assigned to the director of graduate studies (although this varied across academic disciplines). Despite this type of temporary type of placement, most students in our sample had positive experiences with their advisors describing them as nice, friendly, helpful, and intelligent. However, their interactions with advisors were largely formal and infrequent, focusing more on technical and professional aspects like coursework requirements and research interests, rather than on personal disclosure as we would find in more developed advisor-advisee relationships. However, despite temporary assignments being the norm among the first-years, we also found that the advisor-advisee interaction was more frequent among students in hard science majors than among those in soft sciences, as the former often worked in a lab with their advisors. In the soft sciences, advising experiences varied widely across individual students. Some students had very close and personal relationships with their advisors, while a few students had hostile relationships characterized by lack of support and belittlement. Students in the soft sciences reported greater confusion regarding who their advisor was and what the protocol was for securing a permanent advisor. This confusion proved to be even more detrimental for a couple of students who had negative advising experiences with their temporary advisors and who were unaware of protocols to be assigned a new advisor.

Contributions

Results from this study will contribute to the field of international higher education in the following two ways. First, our study adds to the literature focusing on international students by shedding light on nuanced advising experiences of first-year international doctoral students. Many studies in the area discuss psychological stress and adjustment issues of international students (e.g., Hirai, Frazier, and Syed 2015), but relatively little attention has been given to their relationship with advisors. Given the influence of faculty advisors in encouraging persistence with doctoral studies and their potential role in buffering the shocks associated with transitions, it is crucial to explore students' experiences with their advisors. Secondly, based on the results, our study provides recommendations for faculty advisors and directors of graduate studies. As noted, faculty advisors can have an even greater influence on international doctoral students as these students often have limited networks in the U.S. However, due to the lack of systematic training and professional development in student advising, many faculty members are left to design their own advising approach based on their own experience, teaching and advising philosophy, and perceived needs of advisees (Bloom et al. 2007). Consequently, graduate student advising practices vary by disciplines, departments, and even among individual faculty members. Based on our findings, we will provide suggestions about how to improve and provide more systematic advising practices for international doctoral students so that their talents and skills are encouraged rather than lost to attrition.

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