



Academic Advising and Student Retention in Distance Learning: The Case of University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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Abstract

This research investigated the impact of academic advising on student retention in distance learning at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Explanatory sequential mixed methods design was adopted for the study. The multistage sampling technique was used to sample 727 student participants from a sampling frame of 8731. Four academic advisors and three counsellors at the College of Distance were purposively selected for the study. Further, 16 students who had dropped out from the college were sampled using the snowball sampling technique. A researcher-self constructed questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide were used to collect data. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Analyses of qualitative data were done using Merriam analytical coding process. At an alpha level of .05 academic advising made a non-significant contribution to prediction ($p = .10$) which implies that academic advising is not a significant predictor of student retention in distance learning. The study concluded by recommending that academic advisory services should be provided in a practical manner to address the specific needs of students at the College of Distance Education of the University of Cape Coast.

Keywords: Academic advising, retention, distance learning, student

1. Introduction

Student retention in distance learning has been an issue of concern in recent studies. Comparatively, student retention is of great concern to open and distance learning institutions than traditional institutions (Seidman, 2012). Kolowich (2014) affirms that for more than a decade, retention issues have been more depressing in institutions of distance learning. Simpson (2010) states that international distance education graduation rates are very low compared to conventional face-to-face higher education. According to Simpson, they are sometimes in single figure percentages. Simpson (2010) further states that the Open University in United Kingdom (UK) graduation rates stand around 22 percent compared to full time graduation rate of 82 percent.

Seidman (2012) asserts that even though colleges and universities have acted in response to student retention issues by putting into practice strategies that could enhance retention, dropout rates are still high in distance learning. Similarly, Bukholder et al. (2013) pinpoint that despite the diversity of research that has taken place for almost 50 years, students' retention rates still remain not only relatively low, but have remained relatively stable.

Retention of students in distance learning is an intricate issue, representing an interaction of institutional, personal and social factors; with likely associated unfavorable costs and repercussions for all three (Brunsdn, 2000). From an institution perspective, Tinto (2006) viewed retention as an institutional performance indicator that measures how effectively an institution delivers what students' expect, need or want. Low retention indicates an institution's lack of responsiveness to meet students' needs, failure to prepare and support students' progress and lack of potential to train valuable human capital (Nichols, 2011).

From the students' perspective, Nichols (2011) states that high dropout rates can lead to depressing of students in terms of lost tuition fees and emotional distress for non-completion. Bean (1990) believes that a student's early departure from school before graduating symbolizes a personal failure on the part of the student to achieve his or her educational objectives. Additionally, when individuals do not achieve their full potentials, this represents wasted ability not only for the individuals but also for society as a whole, which did not gain from the benefit the individual's development would have brought (Brunsdn, 2000).

However, Peterson, Kovel-Jarboe and Schwartz (1997) assert that in any institution, retention of students should not be the goal but the goal should be the social and intellectual development of students. Thus retention should be "the outcome of providing an experience so educationally beneficial and developmentally advantageous that students form favourable perceptions regarding the quality of their experience and decide to persist" (Peterson et al., 1997, p.138).

A review of the literature revealed that there is no single factor that can determine students' retention (Hupfeld, 2007). Kalsbeek and Zucker (2013) argue that retention is institutional specific and sometimes culture specific and there are multiple factors interacting with each other that lead to high retention rates across all institutional types. Enormously, most studies on college persistence and student retention identified academic advising as essential to fulfilling the teaching and learning task of higher education (ACT, 2010; Hanover Research, 2011; and Noel-Levitz, 2008). Tinto (1993) affirms that institutions who deliver effective retention programmes have come to understand that academic advising is at the very core of successful institutional efforts to educate and retain students.

White and Schulenberg (2012) state that academic advising is the human art of building relationships with students and helping them connect their strengths and interests with academic life goals. This include issues such as: how to study, time management, how to make informed choices on career and how to make the best use of the many academic and social services availed to them (O'Banion, 2012; Van, Said, Rameli, Karim, Tajuddin, & Chai, 2015). Academic advising is thus a service designed to help students reach their educational and career goals. Research evidence has shown that students' frequent interaction with an academic advisor improves retention (Hester, 2008; Thompson, Orr, Thompson, & Grover, 2007).

Nevertheless, Crockett (as cited in Noel-Levitz, 2008) declares that academic advising on many campuses today is of low status, poorly organised and ineffective in meeting students' and institutional needs. Students are always dissatisfied with the service of advisors. Wycoff (as cited in Cuseo, 2007) asserts that despite students' dissatisfaction with academic advising, they still express strong desire for advisors contact. The aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which academic advising impacts student retention in distance learning at the College of Distance Education (CoDE) of the University of Cape Coast (UCC). If the investigation proved to be statistically significant there will be the need to design effective academic advising strategies to help enhance students' retention at the University.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

It is well acknowledged that distance learning institutions attract phenomenally huge number of

students but the benefits are offset by high rates of attrition. This issue of attrition has compelled many researchers and educators to conduct numerous studies to identify strategies and measures to enhance student retention (American College Testing, ACT, 2010; Anderson, 2011). Despite the numerous studies, Kalsbeek and Zucker (2013) argue that retention is institutional specific and sometimes culture specific. Simpson (as cited in Nichols, 2011) posits that various studies conducted on retention still remains a single institution research initiative and as such, institutions need to analyse their own retention characteristics and identify internal measures that can help reduce attrition if they want to improve upon students' retention. A study conducted by Akuamoah-Boateng and Boadu (2013) on "Reducing distance learners' attrition rate at the University of Cape Coast: Tutors'/students' perception" revealed that, tutors and students rated strong pre-entry counselling and monitoring counselling sessions as the highest consideration for reducing attrition. The study concluded that greater level of persistence can be achieved at the university if learners are given support that could ease their cognitive burden as beginners in distance learning. Since relatively no empirical study has been conducted to investigate the impact of academic advising on student retention at the College of Distance Education of the University of Cape Coast, this study sought to do so.

1.2 Research Question/Hypothesis

Four research questions and one research hypothesis were used to guide the study.

1.2.1 Research Question

- i. What are students' means of accessing academic advising at the College of Distance Education?
- ii. How frequent do students interact with their academic advisors at the College of Distance Education?
- iii. What are students' perceptions on academic advising provided at the College of Distance Education?
- iv. What influence does academic advising have on students' decision to drop out from school?

1.2.2 Research Hypothesis

H₀: Academic advising does not significantly predict students' retention in distance learning.

2. Review of Related Literature

Literature related to the study was reviewed based on the two main variables in this study: academic advising and student retention. Hagahmed (2014) conducted a study on "The impact of academic advising on retention of first-year students at a Gulf Arab University". The findings of the study revealed that students who were advised earned more points in their first semester Grade Point Average (GPA) than those who did not. In another study, Pietras (2010) conducted a study on "Impact of academic advising on GPA and retention at the South-Central Pennsylvania Community College in the United States". The analysis of the relationship between students' perceptions on academic advising and retention were not supported when subjective measures were used. Thus, advising service did not statistically improve students' retention.

Further, the findings of a study conducted by Brown and Kenney (2014) on "Matters of success: A deliberative polling approach to the study of student retention", revealed that, before participants' attended the deliberative event, they perceived academic advising as unhelpful to them. On the contrary, students' attitudes toward academic advising changed after they were exposed to academic advising through a freshman experience course. This result suggested the need for modifications in student advising programmes (if perceived not to be effective) to enhance students' retention.

Furthermore, Holsley-Hyman (2015) conducted a study to “examine the perceptions of social work students who graduated with a Bachelor in Social Work from a historically Black University in the south of North Carolina State in the United States”. The primary purpose of the study was to examine and identify factors that led to low retention rate, specifically among first-year students in the Department of Social Work. The findings of the results revealed that fifteen participants stated having support from their professors and academic advisors (such as engagement and communication with their professor; and focusing on building a relationship and rapport with their academic advisors, helped them to stay in school).

Besides, Brown and Kenney (2014) conducted a study on Matters of success: A deliberative polling approach to the study of student retention. The researchers polled students from a mid-sized State University in the United States. Using a polling method called deliberative polling; respondents were polled before and after a deliberate session to discuss pertinent issues based on empirical-grounded information. The purpose of the study was to identify actionable policy recommendations for improving retention and graduation rates.

The study revealed that before participants’ attended the deliberative event, they perceived advising system as unhelpful. Conversely, students’ attitudes toward academic advising changed after the freshman experience course. This result suggested the need to make changes in the student advising programmes to improve retention. Brown et al. (2014) study was an action research aimed at improving student retention. This study filled the gap by utilizing a deterministic approach to investigate variables that can enhance students’ retention.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The analysis of this study was largely informed by Moore (1983, 2013) Transactional Distance Theory. The Transactional Distance Theory assumes that there is ‘a psychological and communication gap between the student and the instructor that can lead to misunderstandings and feelings of isolation (Moore, 2013). It is this distance in the relationship of the two partners that Moore referred to as transactional distance. According to Moore (2013) there are three factors and three variables that determine transactional distance. The factors include: the instructor, student and method of communication. According to Moore, with one factor missing, there can be no educational transaction.

The variables identified by Moore (1983) include: dialogue, structure and autonomy. Moore describes dialogue as the extent to which in any educational programme, learners and educators are able to respond to each other. This is determined by the “content or subject matter which is studied; by environmental factors and by the personalities of the educator and learner” (Moore, 1983, p.157). The most important being the medium of communication. Moore (2013) sees the success of distance learning to be based on the content of dialogue between the teacher and the learner and also on the effectiveness of the communication system in the educational process.

Structure measures an educational programme responsiveness to assess an individual learner’s needs. It also expresses the extent to which educational objectives, teaching strategies are flexible to the learner’s needs. Autonomy is “the extent to which learners decides on certain factors such as what to learn, how to learn and when to learn” (Moore, 2013, p. 68). According to Moore, high autonomy incorporates structure. Autonomy to some extent is associated with student-instructor dialogue and satisfaction. Thus effective manipulation of dialogue and structure are paramount to minimizing transactional distance.

Notwithstanding its usefulness, Gorsky and Caspi (2005) critique the theory for not linking its main variables to an outcome variable and also for measuring dialogue using only one variable (the amount of teacher-learner dialogue). Gorsky and Caspi (2005) further append that different types of dialogue can lead to different types of transactional distance that were not accounted for in Moore’s theory. This study however filled this gap by linking its predictor variable to an outcome variable (students’ retention) and measured dialogue using advisor-learner dialogue

2.2 Conceptual Framework

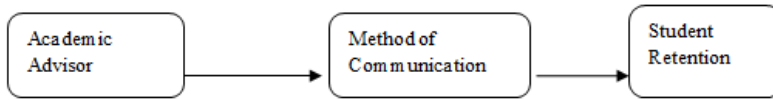


Figure 1: Transactional Distance Model.

The conceptual framework for the study (Figure 1) was modeled based on the literature reviewed for the study. The study assumed that students who are exposed to high-quality academic advising (effective communication) are likely to be retained. Notwithstanding, there are some potential students who will persist or drop out no matter the condition.

3. Methodology

The explanatory sequential mixed methods design was adopted for the study. According to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (as cited in De Lisle, 2014) mixed method is the type of research methodology in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. The explanatory sequential mixed methods strategy is characterised by an initial collection of quantitative data and analysis and then followed by a second phase of qualitative data collection and analysis. In this approach, priority is usually given to quantitative data (Creswell, 2014).

The sampling frame for the study was made up of 8731 second year students pursuing diploma programmes in Education and Business at the College of Distance Education of the University of Cape Coast in four selected regions (Ashanti, Greater Accra, Northern and Central) of Ghana. The purposive sampling technique was used to select these four regions based on their specific locations. Seven hundred and twenty seven participants were sampled from the sampling frame based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table using a 95 percent Confidence Interval with a margin error of plus or minus 3.5 percent.

The multistage sampling technique was used in selecting participants for the study. First, the cumulative frequency was used to determine the percentage of students in the four regions sampled for the study. The sample grid is shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Level 200 students per region, study centres at CoDE

Region	Study Centres		Number of Students			
	Education	Business	Education		Business	Total
			DBE	DPF		
Ashanti	8	1	2230	1350	180	3760
Central	7	1	1425	926	300	2651
Greater Accra	4	2	790	645	515	1950
Northern	2	1	270	50	50	370
Total	21	5	4715	2971	1045	8731

Key: DBE = Diploma in Basic Education, DPF = Diploma in Psychology and Foundations of Education

Table 2: Student Participants Selected from the Four Regions

Region	Population	Relative Frequency (<i>rf</i>) (%)	<i>rf</i> x727 (Sample)
Ashanti	3760	43	313
Central	2651	31	225
Greater Accra	1950	22	160
Northern	370	4	29
Total	8731	100	727

Subsequently, the simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used to select 12 Study Centres from the four regions for the study. Then after, stratified random sampling technique was used to select participants from the subgroups (Education and Business). After the stratification, simple random sampling method was used to select participants from each stratum for the study. Details are shown in Table 3 and Table 4

Table 3: Student Participants Selected from the Twelve Study Centres

Region	Study Centre	Programmes		Business	Total
		Education DBE	DPF		
Ashanti	A1			38	38
	A2	88			88
	A3	87	44		131
	A4		56		56
Central	C1	66	42	27	135
	C2	30	15		45
	C3	30	15		45
Greater Accra	G1	50			50
	G2	40	21	19	80
	G3		30		30
Northern	N1			04	04
	N2	16	09		25
Total	12	407	232	88	727

Table 4: Student Participants Selected per Programme in the Four Regions

Region	Sample Size	Programme		Business (%) (12)
		Education (%) DBE (56)	DPF(32)	
Ashanti	313	175	100	38
Central	225	126	72	27
Greater Accra	160	90	51	19
Northern	29	16	09	04
Total	727	407	232	88

Further, interviews were conducted for academic advisors/counsellors and some students who had dropped out from their programmes of study for in-depth understanding of the quantitative analysis. This was done to support the findings of the quantitative data. According to Flick (2014) interview provides an in-depth, rich and detailed form of gathering information rather than providing answer categories to specified questions. The overall sample grid of participants is illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Overall Sample Grid of Participants Selected for the Study

Participants	Total
Students	727
Academic Advisors	04
Counsellors	03
Dropped outs	16
Total	750

The main instrument for data collection was a researcher-made questionnaire. This questionnaire was used to collect data from student participants. The questionnaire was structured under three main sections. Section 'A' was used to elicit responses on students' means of accessing academic advising and the frequency of interaction with the academic advisors/counsellors. Section 'B' was used to elicit responses on students' perception of academic advising offered at College of

Distance Education. These two sub-scales of the questionnaire consisted of both open and close-ended questions. The scores were constructed by taking the mean of the observed variables (items) that made up the likert sub-scales. These were measured using the sub-scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagreed*) to 5 (*strongly agreed*). For student perceptions, a respondent who obtained ($M \leq 3$) were classified as having negative perceptions and student respondents with ($M \geq 3.1$ and above) were classified as having positive perception.

Section 'C' of the questionnaire consisted of close-ended binary likert question items of 0 (*true of me*) and 1 (*not true of me*). The binary likert scale items were used to measure students' intention to remain in school (see Appendix A). All statements were worded in negative and an agreement to a statement was coded '0' and a disagreement to the statement was coded '1'. The highest score a respondent could obtain was $1 \times 10 = 10$ (meaning the respondent has a high probability of remaining on the programme until graduation) and the lowest score was $0 \times 10 = 0$ (meaning the respondent has a high probability of dropping out from the programme).

The main instrument for data collection was purposively subjected to pilot testing in the Eastern region of Ghana. Two study centres in the regional capital (Koforidua) were purposively selected for the pilot test. A test-retest reliability testing for internal consistency of the likert items was performed through a calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The values of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the internal consistency per each sub-scale were above 0.70. This means the instrument was appropriate (Streiner, 2003) hence deemed reliable for the data collection. To check for validity of the interview instruments, the first interview provided the opportunity to refine, rephrase and clarify some questions in the guide.

4. Results

Out of the 727 students' surveyed 625 valid participants' responses (representing 86% response rate) were deemed valid and used for the analyses. First a question was asked to find out from participants if they were assigned academic advisors. The responses to the question revealed that majority of the respondents (87.5 %) had not been assigned academic advisors. Sixty seven of the respondents representing (10.7 %) were not sure of being assigned an academic advisor while 1.8 percent agreed to the statement that they had been assigned an academic advisor. Second, frequency of students' interaction with academic advisors was sought. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Frequency of Interaction with Academic Advisors in a Semester

Interaction	Frequency	Percent (%)
None	436	69.8
1-2 times	109	17.4
3-4 times	50	8.0
5 times or more	30	4.8
Total	625	100.0

The results in Table 6 show that almost 70 percent of the respondents had no interaction with an advisor in the institution. The highest interaction stated by respondents (17.4 percent) was 1-2 times.

The analyses further sought from respondents' who had interacted with academic advisors their means of accessing the advisors. The responses from the 189 respondents are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Means of Accessing Academic Advising

Means of accessibility	SD		D		U		A		SA	
	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)
1. Academic advisors/counsellors are accessible to me through telephone.	56 (29.6)	23 (12.2)	29 (15.3)	62 (32.8)	19 (10.1)					
2. Academic advisors/counsellors are accessible to me through e-mails	101 (53.4)	36 (19.1)	32 (16.9)	9 (4.8)	11 (5.8)					
3. Academic advisors are available through personal contacts	71 (37.6)	22 (11.6)	2 (1.1)	38 (20.1)	56 (30)					

Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, U = Undecided, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

The results in Table 7 show that, 81 representing (42.9%) of the respondent who were able to access advising services did so through the telephone. Only 20 representing (10.6%) of the respondents were able to access advising services through e-mails.

The fourth task was to seek the perceptions of student participants on academic advising provided at the college. The result is presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Respondents' Perceptions of Academic Advising

Perceptions	SD	D	U	A	SA	M	SD
	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)		
1. Academic advisors are always willing to find out about my needs.	279 (44.6)	195 (31.2)	63 (10.1)	79 (12.6)	9 (1.4)	1.95	1.09
2. I get assistance on what to do to succeed on the programme from academic advisors.	227 (36.3)	199 (31.8)	50 (8.0)	131 (21.0)	18 (2.9)	2.22	1.22
3. The academic advisors are aware of my personal situation and sensitive to how it affects my academic achievement.	220 (35.2)	173 (27.7)	67 (10.7)	141 (22.6)	24 (3.8)	2.32	1.27
4. Academic advisors provide information on career development.	255 (40.8)	185 (29.6)	55 (8.8)	108 (17.3)	22 (3.5)	2.13	1.22
5. My study behaviour was improved because of my interaction with academic advisors	253 (40.5)	175 (28.0)	60 (9.6)	103 (16.5)	34 (5.4)	2.18	1.27
6. Academic advisors help me to set goals and work toward achieving them.	278 (44.5)	194 (31)	64 (10.2)	78 (12.5)	11 (1.8)	1.96	1.10
7. Academic advisors understand what it is like to be a student on a distance learning programme.	254 (40.7)	184 (29.4)	57 (9.1)	110 (17.6)	20 (3.2)	2.15	1.22

Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, U = Undecided, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree, M = Mean and SD = Standard Deviation.

The results in Table 8 show that all items measuring students' perception on academic advising were negatively scored. Items 1 (advisors are always willing to find out about my needs) recorded the lowest score of $M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.09$. This was followed by item 6 (academic advisors help me to set goals and work toward achieving them) with a score of $M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.10$. This shows that students' perception on the interaction between academic advisors and students at the college was very minimal.

The result for overall students' perception for academic advising was calculated by adding the recoded values for all the seven items that make up the Likert scale. The most positive perception was 7 and most negative perception was 1. The result for overall students' perception on academic advising yielded a score of $M = 1.07$, $SD = 1.61$. This shows that respondents had negative perception towards academic advising as a support service provided at CoDE of the university.

Subsequently, each of the variables on respondents perception of academic advising Likert scale was subjected to recoding of their original scores to categorical variables as 0 = negative and 1 = positive. A respondent who has a mean score of less than three ($M \leq 3$) was classified as having negative perception and was coded 0. A respondent who has a mean score ($M > 3.1$ and above) was classified as having positive perception and was coded 1. The recoding of the ordinal variables into nominal variables was used to establish the relationship between the two variables (academic advising and student retention) using tetrachoric correlation coefficient.

A test of correlation between the two variable revealed $r(623) = 04$, $p = .48$). The level of significance obtained from the tetrachoric correlation coefficient between the two variables was more than the level of significance, .05 at which the test was performed. This implies that academic advising and retention of students are not significantly correlated.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to predict retention of students in distance learning using academic advising as the predictor. The following null hypothesis was formulated.

H_0 : Academic advising does not significantly predict students' retention in distance learning.

A test of the full model against a constant only model was not statistically significant, indicating that the predictor did not reliably distinguish between students' retention and their non-retention $\chi^2 (df = 1, N = 625) = 3.00$, $p = .08$. Prediction overall success rate was 81.4 percent. Nagelkerke's R^2 of 0.01 indicates a weak relationship between prediction and the grouping. The probability of obtaining

the chi-square statistic given that the null hypothesis is true was (3.00). The p -value which was compared to a critical value to determine if the overall model was statistically significant was greater than .05. In that case, the model was not statistically significant. Table 9 presents the logistic regression coefficient, Wald test and odds ratio for the predictor (academic advising).

Table 9: Logistic Regression Predicting Respondents' Intention to stay on the distance programme from Academic Advising

Predictor	B	Wald χ^2	p	Odds Ratio
Academic Advising	.47	2.78	.10	1.61
Constant	1.39	154.10	.00	4.03

At an alpha level of .05 academic advising made a non-significant contribution to prediction ($p = .10$) which implies that academic advising is not a significant predictor of students' retention in distance learning. Therefore, the results supported the null hypothesis and it was concluded that academic advising does not significantly predict students' retention in distance learning.

Further, the odds for academic advising shows that a student who has positive perception of academic advising is 6.47 times more likely to stay in the distance learning programme than a student who has a negative perception. For a student who has a negative perception, the odds are 4.0 times more likely to stay on the programme. The odds ratio for academic advising as predicted by the model is $6.47 / 4.0 = 1.61$. The probability that a student who has a positive perception of academic advising will stay on the programme is .87.

To support the findings of the quantitative analyses on why student respondents rated academic advising negatively, interviews were conducted with academic advisors and counsellors for in-depth understanding on this phenomenon. All interviewees shared a common theme. They believed that student respondents have negative perception for academic advising provided at CoDE because the service is not available for students to access. One counsellor shared this:

...we also have tight schedules, our time-table is chunked with periods for face-to-face tutoring and there is nothing like counselling or academic advising on the time table. Study centre coordinators who are supposed to provide academic advising at their various study centres are also busy with their tutoring activities and as such students are unable to access the service.

Another counsellor shared this:

At the weekends when we are to provide counselling or academic advising services to students' we go out for other assignments and also to teach. Even if we have to provide this service, there is no time for counselling or academic advising on the students' time-table. Students who are able to access the service do so at the detriment of forgoing their classes or break time. Sometimes too we provide this service at the expense of a tutor's face-to-face period, since we have to talk to students' during tutorial sessions.

The researcher probed further to find out the extent to which student participants' access the service provided. The most identified theme was: sometimes they have three to four clients at the weekends and sometimes none. However, some students with issues report at the Counselling Unit during the week days for assistance. On issues or problems that students/clients present for assistance; the most identified themes were: Students come for help on issues with incomplete results with majority of them being those who were not able to make the pass Cumulative grade point average of one.

Other issues were on how interviewees intend to increase students' access to academic advising/counselling and mechanism they have put in place to identify students who are at risk of dropping out. All the interviewees shared a common theme on how to increase students' access to academic advising or counselling services. They were of the view that: there should be a time slot on students' time-table for the service. On the issue of how students who are at risk of dropping out are identified, both academic advisors and counsellors have no knowledge of such students. They all believed that there was no mechanism in place to identify such students.

One of the academic advisors' shared this:

It is true, it does happen, especially the DBE students, we have to identify them from the beginning and help them. They normally fail all their papers. Some students came to me that they cannot continue the programme because they have made eight Es in the first year (failed all the eight papers).

The common theme: was the need for a mechanism to be put in place to identify at-risk students. Discussions with focus group participants on the issue also emphasized the importance of closer relationships within the context of smaller learning environments (study centres) to identify at risk-students as a way of working towards preventing students from withdrawing.

The researcher tried to find out from interviewees and focus group participants if it will be necessary to train student-mentors to assist in providing academic assistance to their peers. Although, it was a laudable idea, all interviewees shared the same theme. They questioned when it could be carried out since the student-mentors too will have to attend tutorials during the weekends and may have other busy schedules during the week days. Finally, the researcher tried to find out from interviewees how they are accessible to students. The common means were through personal contacts or telephone calls.

In sum, both academic advisors/counsellors and focus group participants believed that effective implementation of academic advising at the college will help in improving students' study behaviours and also deal with students' career aspiration issues. All interviewees believed that there should be a slot on the students' face-to-face time-table for effective implementation of academic advising and counselling services at the college.

The researcher further interviewed 16 students who had withdrawn from the college to find out reasons for withdrawer and how they were assisted by an advisor at the college. Content analyses from the interviews revealed that, out of the 16 students the researcher was able to locate, it was only nine who had actually withdrawn from the college. The remaining seven had deferred their programmes for various reasons such as child birth and work related pressure. Three out of the seven who had deferred their programmes gave notices while the rest did not. The interaction with the nine who had stopped the programme revealed that five had issues with poor grades, two had family related issues and two had work related issues.

All these persons did not seek assistance from any academic advisor or counsellor before leaving the institution. Although some spoke with other staff members, the interactions were not fruitful. Common themes identified for not seeking support when they were faced with challenges, were that they did not know whom to approach.

One dropout had these to share:

I presumed I wanted to complete the programme and I tried. All my study mates got good grades, I was the only person who failed all my papers among them, but we study together and share ideas. I began to lose interest and as much as I know withdrawing was the right thing to do. I still cannot help but feel like a failure and I think of it all the time.

Another drop out shared this:

I gave birth and there was no one to look after the child for me. My husband insisted I stop the programme so I had no choice.

One of those who discussed their intentions with some staff members shared this:

I spoke a little about my intention to but to be honest, what could they have done... I felt it was really my problem because I had made bad grades.

These statements highlight the need for proactive academic advising services at the college. Effective implementation of this service will help in solving most of students' academic, personal/social and career issues which will also help promote the psychological wellbeing of the learners.

5. Discussion

Findings from the results revealed that majority of respondents rated academic advising negatively because they were unable to access the service. Although the service is available, its accessibility is a problem to students and as such the college needs to make conscious efforts to make the service very accessible to students. Consequently, there was no variability in students' responses to allow for statistically significant in the prediction of the Logistic regression model because the test did not show any good basis to determine the relationship between academic advising and retention of students.

However, the results of the findings from this study are in agreement with findings from Pietras (2010) study which hypothesized that academic advising does not support students' retention. The findings are inconsistent with studies by Brown et al. (2014), Hagahmed (2014) and Holsey-Hayman (2015) who found academic advising to be significantly related to students' retention. Holsey-Hayman (2015) participants indicated that the support they got from professors and academic advisors helped them to stay in school.

Furthermore, findings from interviews with students who had dropped out revealed common reasons for drop out: work related issues, family issues and poor grades which were in line with findings from Hagahmed (2014) who identified reasons such as: difficulty in maintaining good grades, conflict with job responsibilities and studying as well as conflict with family responsibilities and studying. Notwithstanding, such students if given support may have remained in school.

Finally, it could be seen that respondents' negative perception for academic advising is in line with findings from key informants (academic advisors and counsellors) who were of the view that the service is not available for students to access. This lack of effective communication can increase transactional distance in the environment. Utilizing Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, it became visible that dialogue between academic advisors/counsellors and learners at the college was very minimal. Based on the results of the study, it can be argued that even at the second year of students' enrolment, transactional distance exists in the environment. There is therefore the need for academic advisors/counsellors to employ different skills to reduce transactional distance in the environment.

6. Conclusion

Academic advising needs to be effectively implemented to help enhance students' retention at the College of Distance Education. Student advising staff needs to market their services through variety of communication methods (brochures, advising awareness day, video presentations, class visitations, telephone contacts and personal emails) to create awareness to students. Given a flexible structure, student-advisor dialogue will become very important in the development of learner autonomy at CoDE.

7. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study, the study recommends that, academic advising should be given a slot on students' face-to-face time table. This will help advisors interact with students during every face-to-face and help solve some of students' problems if not all, in relation to academic, social/personal and career issues.

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