



Midwifery Education in Practice

A qualitative study of freshmen's and academic advisors' perspectives on academic advising in nursing



Zenobia C.Y. Chan

School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Many universities have established academic advisor schemes so that academic advisors play a proactive role in supporting freshmen, helping them to achieve both academic goals and personal and professional aspirations. This research aimed to explore freshmen's and academic advisors' perspectives on the academic advisor scheme of a nursing school. A total of 79 participants (74 freshmen and five academic advisors) were recruited to participate in this qualitative research. The freshmen participated in a focus group interview, with 6–10 freshmen per group, and the academic advisors participated in an individual in-depth interview. Both expressed their perspectives on academic advising in four domains: (i) relationship building, (ii) academic development, (iii) personal growth, and (iv) professional goals. Most of the freshmen were satisfied and indicated that they had benefited from the academic advisor scheme, suggesting that academic advisors played a significant role in advising and supporting them. However, the results showed that relationships between freshmen and academic advisors should be further strengthened.

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1. Introduction

Many universities have established student-supporting departments to provide academic advising (Indiana University-Purdue University, 2012; New York University, 2012; Saint Louis University, 2009; Seattle University, 2011; The National Academic Advising Association, 2012; The Ohio State University, 2012; University of Arizona, 2009; University of Tennessee, 2008; University of Washington, 2012). The student–advisor relationship is positively related to the student's perceptions of what compassionate nursing is, why interpersonal relationships as well as therapeutic relationships with patients are helpful for offering quality health care. This relationship also contributes to ensuring patient safety with effective communication and mutual trust.

This research explored both freshmen's and advisors' perspectives on the academic advising scheme launched in a school of nursing. The majority of these freshmen (aged 18–21) had been directly admitted to these bachelor programmes after completing their high school education. The school emphasises the student-centred approach in academic advising. The freshmen' needs, concerns and expectations with regard to their personal and

professional development, in particular their talents, strengths and interests, are nurtured during the entire programmes. Almost all faculty are academic advisors who have worked with a group of about 25 freshmen to address the programme requirements and prepare them to be professional and competent nurses in leadership, research, and healthcare services in both local and global contexts. Since academic advisors usually take care of freshmen from the junior to final year of their entire university studies as an individual basis and sometimes as a group of several freshmen, they also assist in promoting freshmen's sense of affiliation and connection with the school, providing them with information about academic regulations and requirements, assisting them in developing their interests and abilities, and connecting them with the corresponding resources, opportunities and support. The academic advisors receive ongoing and timely support from the school, as well as from the educational development centre and the office of general university requirements of the university, in order to enhance and develop their advising skills. At the end of each academic year, the student's view of the academic advising scheme is evaluated in order to further improve the scheme.

E-mail address: zenobia.chan@polyu.edu.hk.

2. Background

2.1. Characteristics and concerns of nursing freshmen

As mentioned, our freshmen aged 18–21, who have experienced the transition to young adulthood, usually have certain characteristics and concerns regarding this adaptation, the stressful university or peer relationships, their personal development, and identification of their role in the nursing profession. Almost all these freshmen had entered university directly after graduating from high school, thus they faced various challenges arising from this new educational context. Personal connections with faculty may facilitate freshmen's transition to university life (Bell and Treleaven, 2011). In addition to the enhancement of scholastic competence and a sense of responsibility (Rhodes and Grossman, 2000), a good relationship with an advisor in university can encourage freshmen to build trust with others and improve their social skills (Rhodes et al., 1999; Thomson and Zand, 2010). This is crucial for freshmen as they transition to young adulthood and prepare for their future career in nursing.

To cope with the academic requirements of university, freshmen have to be equipped with the willingness and ability to learn independently, solve problems, and think critically. Academic advising can help under-prepared freshmen to design appropriate learning goals and strategies, thereby increasing their chances of success (Bahr, 2008).

Freshmen usually form and consolidate their identities, roles and functions in their peer groups in various social contexts. A good relationship with advisors may facilitate family and school bonding, as well as life skills development (Spencer, 2006; Zand et al., 2009). Freshmen will soon become young adults and enter the health care labour market. They must acquire professional knowledge in the early stages to prepare themselves for pursuing professional goals (Clarke, 2004). Experienced advisors in the same or a similar industry may serve as role models and better prepare them for this career path (Allen et al., 2006; Kiefer, 2010). According to the above literature, the academic advising scheme is found to be highly beneficial to freshmen, especially in the field of nursing.

2.2. Academic advising schemes

Academic advising schemes take various forms in schools, communities, and other organisations; typically, a more experienced person forms a bond with one or more young person(s) and serves as an advisor to provide them with support and guidance (Ehrich et al., 2004; Renick, Thomson and Zand, 2010). Four of the corresponding experiences of freshmen, particularly adolescent freshmen, can be summarised as follows: (i) relationship building, (ii) academic development, (iii) personal growth, and (iv) professional goals.

2.2.1. Relationship building

When high school graduates enter university, they may face various challenges arising from this new context. Personal connections with faculty may facilitate freshmen's transition to university life (Bell and Treleaven, 2011). In addition to the enhancement of scholastic competence and a sense of responsibility (Rhodes and Grossman, 2000), a good relationship with an academic advisor in university can encourage freshmen to trust other adults and improve their social skills (Thomson and Zand, 2010; Rhodes et al., 1999). This is especially crucial as they transition to young adulthood and prepare for their future career.

2.2.2. Academic development

To cope with the academic requirements of university, freshmen

must be equipped with the willingness and ability to learn independently, solve problems, think critically, and even conduct research. Academic advising benefits them by helping them to design appropriate learning goals, thereby increasing their chances of success (Bahr, 2008). Freshmen with different talents have different concerns regarding their academic development, and academic advisors can help them to identify their needs and goals, and to pursue these goals.

2.2.3. Personal growth

Adolescent nursing freshmen are at a critical stage of personal growth. They are usually forming and consolidating their identities, roles and functions in their peer groups in various social contexts. A relationship with advisors can help to promote positive adolescent development in life skills and family and school bonding (Spencer, 2006; Zand et al., 2009).

2.2.4. Professional goals

Nursing freshmen will soon become young adults and enter the labour market. They acquire professional knowledge in the early stages to prepare them for pursuing their professional goals (Clarke, 2004). Experienced staff in the same or a similar industry may serve as role models for future staff, to better prepare them for their career path (Kiefer, 2010). Thus nursing freshmen's professional development benefits from the support of academic advisors with nursing backgrounds.

The studied school of nursing has adopted a framework of academic advising based on a review of the above four areas. This study aimed to explore the subjective experiences of both freshmen and academic advisors regarding the academic advising scheme.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this study in order to explore participants' experiences (Creswell, 1994) and reconstruct how these experiences affect their lives and personalities (Hansen, 2006). This approach enhances understanding of the inner view of participants and allows them to express their views openly and freely with rich narratives rather than by providing quantitative data. There is a lack of research into how freshmen and academics perceive academic advising; the present study therefore aims to fill this gap and offer some contextual qualitative data to enhance the understanding of both nurse educators and managers in this regard, enabling them to plan and implement academic advising with the voices of both freshmen and academic advisors in mind.

3.2. Sample and setting

The total sample size was 79 (74 freshmen and 5 academic advisors). Of the 74 freshmen, 65 Bachelor of Science in Nursing freshmen and 9 Bachelor of Science in Mental Health Nursing freshmen were recruited via research briefing seminars. The freshmen comprised 63 (85.1%) females and 11 (14.9%) males, ranging in age from 18 to 21. Five academic advisors were recruited by email to participate in an individual in-depth interview. The backgrounds of the freshmen are presented in Table 1.

3.3. Data collection

According to Griffiths (2010) and Hancock and Easen (2006), the semi-structured interview is an effective way to collect data and investigate specific areas of participants' experience. This study

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