

point of view

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Academic Advising on Steroids

Advising Program Must Be In Place for Every Student at Every College



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There is a growing assertiveness in the language used to address the challenges we are facing in community colleges, particularly the challenges we face in trying to meet the goals of the Completion Agenda: “mandatory” placement, “disruptive” innovations, “accelerated” instruction, early “alert,” data “driven,” “deeper” engagement, scalable “interventions,” “high impact” practices, etc. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) asserts that we are caught in a “leadership crisis” because of a “tsunami of transitions.” The old passivity associated with change is giving way to something more robust and energetic; colleges are picking up momentum because the charge is clear and the timeline short. Never in our history have so many stakeholders galvanized behind a common goal as they have around the

Completion Agenda. Never in our history have so many foundations provided so many funds to support our efforts to reach the goals of completion and student success. Never in our history have we had so much access to sound research to guide and support our efforts. It is our 15-minutes-of-fame on the national stage, and failure is not an option.

This growing assertiveness in the language — and one assumes in the action suggested by the language — is reflected most clearly in the work of academic advising. It used to be “faculty advising” or just “academic advising” as the passive monikers for this important function. In the past, academic advisors talked about “developmental advising” versus “prescriptive advising,” the latter a bit assertive but generally rejected by practitioners as an inappropriate model.

But academic advising is no longer the passive service it once was. Today, almost every college has adopted a more assertive stance to gear up to the challenges of the Completion Agenda. College leaders, especially the student service leaders, proudly announce they are engaged in “robust”

advising, “intrusive” advising, “proactive” advising, “attentive” advising, “mandatory” advising, “gap” advising or “intentional” advising. Academic advising is now on steroids.

Why This Language Change?

Advising has always been seen as an important part of the intake (now “onboarding”) process for students, but college leaders are beginning to see it as much more important — even recognizing it as the key to student success. George Kuh, founder of the National Survey of Student Engagement, has said, “It is hard to imagine any academic support function that is more important to student success and institutional productivity than advising.” Vincent Tinto has noted, “Good advising is one of the key conditions that promotes retention for it reflects an institution’s commitment to the education of students.”

Every year for the last decade, students responding to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement have reported that, among an array of student support services, the most important is academic planning and advising. Yet many students also indicated they did not know about or use the service.

One of the reasons advising has become so important is related to the “cafeteria model” of the curriculum identified by Tom Bailey and his colleagues at the Community College Research Center as a major barrier to student success. Today, the curriculum is a “food court,” a “cafeteria” of courses, a “smorgasbord” of disconnected pieces of

knowledge, a “buffet” of tantalizing items to tickle the intellectual palate. The vivid metaphors describe a current community college curriculum that is, if not fractured, is, at least, unfocused and not integrated. The disintegration of the common curriculum idea may be a result of increasing specialization, of student demand for more vocational courses, or of the proliferation of courses to reflect the self-interests of faculty members. The result is a distributed curriculum made up of unrelated courses that has become a jungle that students must hack their way through.

Community college faculty no longer talk about an “integrated curriculum” or about “curriculum integrity” and with good reason. At Lorain County Community College in Ohio, students may choose from among 46 different courses in the arts and humanities to meet a three-course general education requirement, from among 36 courses in the social sciences to meet a three-course requirement, and from among 48 in math and science to meet a three-course requirement.

At Orange Coast College in California, students have even more choices. For students who want an associate in arts general education degree, the college catalog offers three general education degree options. In Option One, students must earn 25 units distributed among five different areas. In Area C, arts and humanities, students choose a “minimum of three semester units to include one course from Group 1 and one course from Group 2.” In Group 1 there are 64 courses listed, but students may also select any literature course from A141 through A285 and

any course numbered A160 through A285H. In Group 2 there are 97 courses from which students are required to select one.

This proliferation of courses to meet curricular requirements may stem from the best of intentions in that faculty want to provide more choices for students regarding their careers and their future educational plans. But recent research reported by Judith Scott-Clayton from the CCRC points out that too many choices confuse students and lead to poor decisions and poor planning. And too many choices present a challenge for academic advisors who have to help students make meaning of all the choices and create a plan to navigate the many options of multiple programs and multiple courses. The academic advisor is a guide through the jungle, but the jungle has become so dense even advisors sometimes lose their way.

A Model Advising Program

The purpose of academic advising is to help students select a program of study to meet their life and vocational goals. Academic advising is the second-most important function in the community college. If it is not conducted with the utmost efficiency and effectiveness, the most important function in the college — instruction — will fail to achieve its purpose of ensuring that students succeed in navigating the curriculum to completion. Ideally, academic advising occurs every term for every student ensuring that students will stay on a guided pathway to success.

Unfortunately, few community colleges brag about their academic advising programs

because they have not created sound models that work. In the fall of 2011, I worked with the American Association of Community Colleges to identify the most exemplary or outstanding academic advising programs in the nation's community colleges. AACC included invitations in two editions of its newsletter inviting 13,000 leaders, including the president of every community college in the nation, to nominate an academic advising program considered exemplary or outstanding. Sadly, only 27 nominations were received, and when profiles of these programs were reviewed by a panel from the National Council of Instructional Administrators and the National Council on Student Development only five were deemed exemplary or outstanding. These five programs were featured in *Academic Advising: The Key to Student Success*, the last book to be published by the Community College Press in 2013. Copies are available from AACC.

This book also featured a model of academic advising selected in 1994 by the National Academic Advising Association as one of two "classics in the literature of academic advising and one of the most cited in the literature." The model outlines five steps as a framework for academic advising:

- * Exploration of life goals
- * Exploration of vocational goals
- * Program choice
- * Course choice
- * Course scheduling

The model describes what occurs in each of these steps and lists the knowledge and skills

required for the staff who provide assistance for each of the steps. It is a team approach involving counselors, instructors, and special personnel such as student assistants, community volunteers and advising specialists with the student playing a primary role throughout the process.

If community colleges are to be successful in increasing the number of students who are retained each term and who complete a certificate, associate degree, or who transfer to a university a model academic advising program must be in place and supported for every student in the college. One model is briefly outlined above; there are other good models. It will not be enough to adopt energetic adjectives such as “robust” advising, “intrusive” advising, “intentional” advising, etc.

When the steroids wear off there is still the very hard work of creating and implementing a

pragmatic model of academic advising that will ensure that every student, every term benefits by an effective and efficient advising system that really works.

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