



This is the 40th anniversary of Terry O'Banion's seminal article on a model of academic advising, first published by The American Association of Community Colleges *Junior College Journal* in 1972. The model has been adapted by hundreds of community colleges and universities in the last four decades. The following is an edited and updated version of the original.

UPDATING THE TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC ADVISING MODEL FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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BY TERRY O'BANION

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— instruction—will fail to ensure that students navigate the curriculum to completion.

The purpose of academic advising is to help students select a program of study to meet life and vocational goals. As such, academic advising is a central activity in the process of education. Academic advising occurs at least once each term for every student in the college; few student support functions occur as often or affect so many students. But while there is general agreement surrounding the importance of academic advising for the efficient functioning of the institution and the effective functioning of the student, there is little agreement regarding the nature of academic advising and who should perform the function. The model proposed here defines the process of academic

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advising and outlines the skills and knowledge required of academic advisors who work with students through this process. It is a flexible model that can be adapted to the needs, resources, and culture of any institution of higher education.

The Process

The process of academic advising includes the following five steps:

1. Explore life goals
2. Explore vocational goals
3. Program choice
4. Course choice
5. Scheduling courses

This is, of course, an ideal sequence. Too often, colleges fail to connect this sequence for students, giving short shrift to the first two steps because of the pressing need to address the final three. If a college wants to boost student success—from the first term through completion—it must ensure students experience each step of the academic advising process.

STEP ONE:

Explore Life Goals. A sound and substantive college education should be a life-changing experience for students. In our haste to enroll students and to move them to completion, we sometimes forget that college is a place for exploring new ideas, making new connections, and giving up worn-out views. First-generation college students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds have no better place than college for this exploration. A college education should ensure that every student has an opportunity to ask the questions: *Who am I? Where am I going? What difference does it make?*

College leaders recognize the need for students to explore life goals, and many programs and practices have been designed to foster this experience. In previous decades, colleges created classic general education programs often anchored by a personal development course. Today, programs such as the

EFFECTIVE ADVISORS: SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ATTITUDES

No model of academic advising can succeed unless supported by a team of committed, qualified advisors, who assist students in each of the five steps. The following is a tentative list of the skills required of effective advisors:

1. Explore Life Goals

- Knowledge of:
 - a. student characteristics and development
 - b. decisionmaking processes
 - c. psychology and sociology
 - d. counseling techniques
 - e. individual differences
- Belief in:
 - a. worth and dignity of all students
 - b. all students have potential

2. Explore Vocational Goals (includes all elements of #1 above, plus the following)

- Knowledge of:
 - a. vocational fields
 - b. the changing nature of work in society
- Skill in:
 - a. interpretation of tests
 - b. Acceptance of all fields of work as worthy and dignified

3. Choose a Program

- Knowledge of:
 - a. programs available at the college
 - b. program requirements, including special entrance requirements, fees, and time commitments
 - c. university requirements for transfer programs
 - d. how others have performed in the program
 - e. follow-up success of those who have completed the program

4. Choose a Course

- Knowledge of:
 - a. courses available
 - b. special information (prerequisites, offered only at certain times, transferability, graduation requirements, appropriate sequence for transfer)
 - c. rules and regulations regarding probation and suspension, and course load limit, including academic and work limitations
 - d. honors courses or remedial courses
 - e. instructors and their teaching styles
 - f. student's ability via test scores, high school record, et cetera
 - g. course content

5. Schedule Courses

- Knowledge of:
 - a. schedule
 - b. the systems of scheduling and changing the schedule
 - c. work and commuting requirements

first-year experience and the student success course represent contemporary efforts to help students explore life goals. In many of these courses, academic advising—along with assessment, orientation, career counseling, and registration—is folded into the experience to better connect life goal questions with educational plans.

STEP TWO:

Explore Vocational Goals. Vocational goals are life goals extended into the world of work. What a person is and wants to be determines in great measure how that person will earn a living and contribute to the general welfare of others. The relationship between life goals and vocational goals is intricate and complex; educators are understandably challenged to help students make decisions in these areas. But because it is a difficult and often time-consuming process in education is no reason to avoid it. Many academic advising programs flounder because they begin with “program choice.” It is assumed that students have already made choices regarding life goals and vocational goals when they enter college—a questionable assumption for college students in general and a harmful and incorrect assumption for community college students in particular.

Although this academic advising model separates the exploration of life goals from the exploration of vocational goals for the sake of illustration, the two steps cannot and should not be separated when applied to students. Clarifying life goals—as much as they can be clarified at this stage in a student’s life—is essential to clarifying vocational goals. In addition to student success courses and first-year college experiences, many colleges provide career assessment and career counseling opportunities to help students explore vocational goals. Though they occur after students have completed their first academic advising sessions, service-learning experiences can be framed as significant opportunities for students to explore vocational goals.

“A SOUND AND SUBSTANTIVE COLLEGE EDUCATION SHOULD BE A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS.”



Most experienced educators know that a large number of community college students are not prepared to make decisions pertaining to their vocational goals when they first enter college. Once these students are clearly identified, they should be required to enroll in a prescribed program for undecided students. If the college has a classic core of general education courses, this becomes the prescribed program. As an alternative, a learning community that includes a student success course, an introduction to psychology, and a developmental or college-level writing course—or some appropriate cluster of courses—becomes the prescribed program. If the undecided student is enrolling in only one course, that course should be a student success course or an experience in which the exploration of life and vocational goals forms much of the content.

STEP THREE:

Choose a Program. Once the college has provided an opportunity for students to consider life and vocational goals, whether through summer advising groups, occupational seminars, orientation programs, self-development classes, programmed guides, technology aides, or experiential sessions, the

student must choose a program. At a community college with a diverse student body, the process of choosing a program staggers the imagination.

If students are absolutely sure of their program choice, the academic advising process should move them smoothly and efficiently to the next steps. These students might be channeled to specific programs or departments, such as nursing or criminal justice, where trained advisors and faculty will confirm their choices and help orient them to careers in select fields.

Undecided students, meanwhile, are prescribed a limited program. Students who have an inclination toward a particular area of study must be given an opportunity to test their interests and make changes without losing credit. This is tricky business for the student and the advisor; only the most effective advisors should work with undecided students.

STEP FOUR:

Choose Courses. Once a program is selected, students must choose courses for the immediate term and perhaps even for subsequent terms. Most colleges provide program guides, which list required courses, often noting the courses required by different transfer institutions. It is important to note prerequisites in selecting courses and to make sure students possess the competencies required for their courses of choice. Advisors must be particularly sensitive when helping underprepared students understand the need for developmental courses and when selecting a sequence to ensure their success.

There are many challenges inherent in selecting specific courses for a term. Such challenges require knowledge and training on the part of personnel who assist in this process. Students who reg-

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ister late will not have as many choices as those who register early. Low-income and poorly prepared students tend to register later than other students and are more likely to become frustrated and disappointed when required or recommended courses are closed or not available at the right times.

Colleges committed to the completion agenda and the student success pathway should require students to create personal development plans or road maps intended to frame their choices and track their progress as they navigate the college experience. These plans should include the courses required and elected for the program of choice. Advisors typically must sign off on these plans.

STEP FIVE:

Schedule Courses. Deciding when to take courses is no simple task, either. Many community college students are unfamiliar with concepts such as semester-hour credit, transfer, grade-point average, and developmental studies. They are often on their own to develop a schedule of classes, most of which they cram into a three-day week, as opposed to the five-day weeks they became accustomed to in high school. All of this, of course, is in addition to the fact that many community college students also work full- and part-time jobs. Students also often have to meet family obligations, arrange for child care, and commit to other responsibilities outside of school and work, which make schedules more difficult still.

Any well-conceived program of academic advising will encompass each of these five dimensions. It is possible for each to be explored in a single day. But most colleges are likely to view the process of academic advising as ongoing, beginning before the student attends his or her first class and continuing throughout the entire college experience.

A Team Approach

While historically systems of academic advising have been designed as "faculty

“ACADEMIC ADVISING OCCURS EVERY TERM FOR EVERY STUDENT AND SHOULD BE MANDATORY; IT IS THE PRELUDE TO THE CENTRAL ACTIVITY OF THE COLLEGE—INSTRUCTION.”

advising” systems or “counselor-based” systems, this model strongly supports academic advising as a systemwide team approach. Academic advising is too important to assign it to one group. Personnel should be assigned based on the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for each of the five steps. Students, counselors, instructors, and special personnel, including student assistants, community volunteers, and advising specialists, contribute to the process.

The student is the primary decision-maker throughout the advising process. Students must be engaged in academic advising as full partners from the beginning. While a student’s role depends largely on his or her experience, ability, and clarity of goals, all students should be required to review prepared materials about vocational goals and program choices and/or to participate in special summer or pre-enrollment sessions designed to help them make important decisions about programs and courses. Academic advising should be mandatory for every student every term, and the student should be prepared to meet his or her obligations.

Counselors have a responsibility to help students explore life and vocational goals. Ideally, such exploration should occur in the form of small personal interactions during the summer for new students and in student success courses taught by counselors. A programmed guide designed to help students explore life and vocational goals can be used if face-to-face groups are not possible.

In addition to direct involvement with students, counselors should prepare special information for faculty advisors and students to clarify their respective roles in the process. Counselors should also provide staff development for faculty and other advisors to improve and expand competencies in academic advising.

Faculty members participate in academic advising as experts in their disciplines and are expected to share their understanding of the career options related to those disciplines. They can help students explore programs of study and careers and can help students navigate course sequences leading to completion and transfer. They should have a sensible load (no more than 15 advisees without a reduced teaching assignment), and they should be required to participate in staff development that targets the advising process.

Academic advising occurs every term for every student and should be mandatory; it is the prelude to the central activity of the college—instruction. Certainly the college should organize its resources to ensure that every student has the greatest possible opportunity to navigate the student success pathway to completion.

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