Reflections in a Rearview Mirror—Revisiting the O'Banion Model

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Driving down a stretch of highway, how many times has something caught your eye in the rearview mirror? Momentary sightings are easily dismissed. Sometimes, however, mirrors need to be adjusted to sharpen the view. In some instances, one must turn completely around rather than risk missing something important. After **22** years of traveling the academic advising highway, it's worth turning around for a closer look at Terry O'Banion's academic advising model.

Reflections

Some things never change. The mystery of academic advising continues to be elusive. There are as many interpretations of advising as there are institutions and practitioners. The term itself is confusing (try to get a definition), as is the term *academic advisor* (try to find out who should do it). Depending on where you work, the delivery system in place, and the staff assigned to do it, academic advising takes on a variety of meanings. The advising process can also be confusing when defined in terms of institutional types, traditional concepts, individual philosophies, staffing patterns, or overused terminology.

O'Banion's academic advising model lists five major components:

Step 1 Exploration of life goals
Step **2** Exploration of vocational goals
Step 3 Program choice
Step 4 Course choice
Step 5 Scheduling courses

O'Banion was justifiably concerned that many institutions, especially community colleges, were assuming that the advising process began with program choice, ignoring or downplaying the importance of exploring life and vocational goals.

A New Perspective on the O'Banion Model

Most academic advising models and theories, including the O'Banion model and various developmental theories, can be defined in terms of three basic student services: counseling, advising, and scheduling. The student needs model (Figure 1) provides a practical way to bridge the gap between O'Banion's theory and advising practice. This model brings the advising process alive by pointing out the relationship between O'Banion's five essential components and three basic student services. Using a student needs model allows institutions to develop delivery systems that provide critical student services that are as important today as they were **22** years ago when the O'Banion model first appeared.

The student needs model defines the advising process by using a combination of student services. Note that counselors, academic advisors, instructional faculty, admissions representatives, and others all contribute to the process. No one

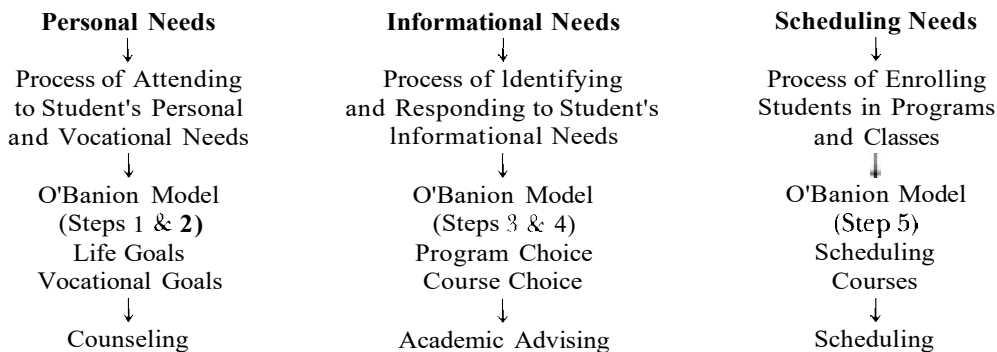| Personal Needs	Informational Needs	Scheduling Needs
↓	↓	↓
Process of Attending to Student's Personal and Vocational Needs	Process of Identifying and Responding to Student's Informational Needs	Process of Enrolling Students in Programs and Classes
↓	↓	↓
O'Banion Model (Steps 1 & **2)** Life Goals Vocational Goals	O'Banion Model (Steps 3 & 4) Program Choice Course Choice	O'Banion Model (Step 5) Scheduling Courses
↓	↓	↓
Counseling	Academic Advising	Scheduling

Figure 1. Student Needs Model

needs to be left out. As O'Banion observes, "Who does advising is probably not as important as the philosophy of the institution." While institutional philosophy and support remain essential in maintaining strong advisement services, many counselorlinstructor delivery systems that have worked well in the past may no longer be realistic or adequate in dealing with the diverse needs of today's community college students.

A New Perspective for Community Colleges

Past attempts to define the typical community college student might have been somewhat realistic. Today's typical community college students tend to be atypical and defy description. The majority are not 18 years old. They do not enroll immediately after high school, and many are not pursuing degrees in business administration and education. There are few common denominators. Each student who chooses to use the open door arrives with an individual set of goals, skills, and problems, presenting a challenge for any community college hoping to keep pace with the varied, always changing needs of students. Delivery systems (counseling, academic advising, and scheduling) need to be reviewed periodically to ensure student satisfaction with advising. If student satisfaction is a problem, community colleges should adjust their mirrors and take a closer look at the student needs model from an open-door perspective.

All three elements of the community college model (Figure 2) should be accounted for in any system that expects to serve the complex personal, informational, and scheduling needs of today's atypical community college student.

O'Banion's concern that students were being shortchanged by delivery systems that ignored all or a portion of these services remains accurate, although the problem is now more acute. Programs have to be designed that focus on student needs, and qualified staff must be available and held accountable for delivering the assistance. Tacked-on responsibility to "get the job done" is not the answer.

Is Your Rearview Mirror Adjusted?— Problems With Community College Delivery Systems

For various reasons, including cost, past practice, and traditional concepts, many community colleges continue to define advising in terms of a counselor/faculty delivery system. O'Banion notes, "Who does advising is probably not as important as . . . the commitment and understanding with which the counselor or instructor approaches the process." Thousands of talented individuals with various titles and responsibilities remain committed to creating quality advising programs. They've made significant contributions to the advising process on their own campuses and deserve recognition for their efforts. Unfortunately, many others who have been assigned advising responsibilities regard them as burdens rather than services. The advising process is too important, too complex, and too time consuming to depend on the initiative and often-isolated efforts of a few student-oriented counselors, teaching faculty, or support staff.

In 1988 the academic advising program at St. Louis Community College at Meramec received an ACT/NACADA advising program award. Subsequently we responded to numerous in-
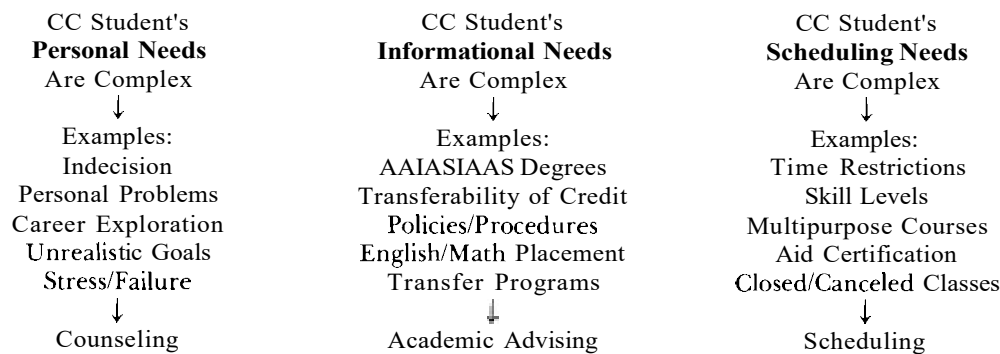
CC Student's **Personal Needs** Are Complex	CC Student's **Informational Needs** Are Complex	CC Student's **Scheduling Needs** Are Complex
↓	↓	↓
Examples:	Examples:	Examples:
Indecision	AAIASIAAS Degrees	Time Restrictions
Personal Problems	Transferability of Credit	Skill Levels
Career Exploration	Policies/Procedures	Multipurpose Courses
Unrealistic Goals	English/Math Placement	Aid Certification
Stress/Failure	Transfer Programs	Closed/Canceled Classes
↓	↓	↓
Counseling	Academic Advising	Scheduling

Figure 2. Community College Model

quiries from community colleges reviewing or upgrading their advising programs. The majority of colleges concerned about improving their delivery systems used a variation of the traditional counselor/faculty model. When asked where breakdowns occurred, colleagues clearly identified the faculty as a major concern. Three problems surfaced repeatedly as community colleges across the country reported what they saw through their rearview mirrors:

1. Community college administrators, relying on their own collegiate experiences with advising, perceived the advising process as a simplistic scheduling activity, easily performed by any of a number of individuals who had "other duties as assigned" implied or written into their job descriptions. Little attention—and even less money—was allocated to support student advising in any form. Advising responsibilities were tacked on as necessary to complete the registration process. Access to counseling and academic services was downplayed and not viewed as a campus priority. Institutional accountability for providing an effective delivery system was brushed aside with the lame, overused excuse, "It's the student's responsibility."

2. The limitations of faculty were mentioned repeatedly as a major problem. Community college directors, coordinators, and counselors indicated that although some faculty advisors were conscientious and effective, the majority of faculty assigned mandatory advising responsibilities lacked the time, training, interest, information, resources, accountability, and most importantly, the temperament and flexibility required to deal with a broad range of student personalities and problems.

3. Counseling staff put their professional training on hold and diverted most of their time to academic issues and course scheduling, leaving little or no time to counsel students needing personal or vocational assistance. Whenever faculty involvement in the advising process broke down, counselors were expected to pick up the pieces.

Academic Advising at Merarnec

Five years before the O'Banion model appeared in the *Junior College Journal* and *12* years before NACADA became an official organization, St. Louis Community College at Meramec adopted an innovative approach to academic advising that focused on the needs of the community college student. In 1967, based on student satisfaction survey data that identified academic advising as a major problem, the administration decided to develop a program that would provide students with easy access to experienced advisors, accurate and detailed educational information, and individualized advising assistance. Many of the concerns identified by O'Banion were shared by Meramec staff who designed solutions and introduced accountability into an innovative delivery system. Although the Meramec program has grown significantly, the institution has never compromised its commitment to a professional, student-oriented advising program. Six aspects of the program help explain its growth, longevity, and high degree of student satisfaction:

1. Counseling, academic advising, and scheduling assistance are available to all students on a walk-in or an appointment basis in a centralized academic advising/counseling center.

2. Professional counselors and a counseling department chair are available in the center to assist students with personal problems or career exploration (O'Banion—steps 1 & 2). Counselors are also involved in academic advising and scheduling during peak advising periods (O'Banion—steps 3, 4, & 5); however, the majority of their time is spent using their training and skills as counselors.

3. A staff of academic advisors and a coordinator of academic advising are available in the center to assist students needing detailed educational information or guidance with course selection or the scheduling process (O'Banion—steps 3, 4, & 5). Academic advisors provide students with the detailed educational information needed to make realistic, informed decisions. Academic advising is their primary responsibility.

4. Advisors work a flexible schedule, which allows the coordinator to budget time throughout the calendar year and increase the availability of trained staff during peak advising periods. This cost-saving feature for the college provides day and evening access to trained staff throughout the academic year as well as throughout the summer.

5. Academic advisors prepare, publish, and distribute most of the information used in the advising process. They maintain ongoing working relationships with instructional departments on campus and articulation representatives at transfer institutions. Advising manuals, transfer documents, scheduling guides, and graduation checklists are maintained by advisors in an on-

going effort to provide students uniform and accurate information.

6. Instructional faculty assist in advising by providing valuable information to students and staff; however, they are not expected to interpret academic policies or deal with complex transfer issues.

The Meramec delivery system works because student needs are clearly defined and trained staff are accessible and accountable for services described in the community college model. Delivery systems are more effective when counselors, academic advisors, and faculty can use their strengths and professional training to assist students. Forming pick-up teams and assigning advising responsibilities to staff as needed to accommodate the registration process do not lend themselves to a quality program or to a great deal of student satisfaction.

Community college students are not going to disappear; neither are their goals and aspirations. Changing or modifying a delivery system takes time. Progress can be enhanced or delayed depending on institutional commitment, funding, past practice, and staffing. Until the advising process is seen as a priority, with community colleges making an effort to design delivery systems that respond to student needs, student satisfaction will be left to chance. Successful delivery systems will be determined by individuals with a sense of responsibility, not by the effectiveness of a coordinated academic advising program. O'Banion had legitimate concerns about assigning advising responsibilities to faculty back in 1972. Dozens of community colleges repeatedly identified faculty advising as a weak link in the advising process in 1988, and nothing suggests that this situation has changed. Faculty make excellent resource persons for students and staff. They can get the job done if necessary; however, many continue to lack the time, interest, and specialized knowledge needed to be effective.

Conclusion: Check Your Rearview Mirror

A question most travelers ask at least once a trip is "How far have we come?" As you take a second look at the O'Banion model and review developmental advising theory, how does your program measure up? As you look at the student needs and community college models, how does your delivery system stand up? How far have you come?

Revisiting the O'Banion model is like revisiting an old friend. Many of O'Banion's concerns from 1972 remain. We haven't come that far. Although professional counselors are critical in theory to the advising process, too many are expected to spend substantial amounts of time dealing with academics. Although instructional faculty struggle to keep pace with teaching loads, too many are expected to provide advising and scheduling assistance with little training, recognition, or reward. Although administrators laud innovation and excellence, too many are reluctant to confront the problems associated with traditional delivery systems.

How far you have come is difficult to know without a map. There is plenty to learn from the theories and delivery systems encountered along the academic advising highway. O'Banion gave us a starting point and a destination. Every community college should be able to determine how far it has come by revisiting the O'Banion model or by taking a closer look at the student needs community college models. If you find your advising program bogged down or stuck in the mud, it may be time to invest in a new car, adjust your mirrors, and hit the road. Be sure, however, to take along a good map.

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