

Academic Advising in the New Global Century: Supporting Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes Achievement

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In her article “Losing Sleep over Student SUCCESS?” in the spring 2006 issue of *The Presidency*, Frances A. Cordova, then chancellor of the University of California–Riverside and now president of Purdue University, stresses the importance of student success and achievement to all higher education stakeholders—parents, students, educators, as well as the public at large. She also acknowledges the challenges inherent in supporting a concept that is sometimes difficult to articulate. Cordova suggests that a renewed focus on student success could “reinvigorate the public’s appreciation” of higher education as a place of opportunity in which to grow, to dream, and to think. In this regard student success is about facilitating curiosity, wonder, and immersion in the college experience and, as Cordova says, institutions should focus their efforts on supporting those college experiences that create, foster, and cultivate student curiosity and engagement in learning—all in service of their achievement or a set of essential outcomes as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has suggested. While certainly there are many ways to support student immersion and engagement in learning, one strategy that is increasingly being acknowledged for its potential in this regard is academic advising.

ACADEMIC ADVISING AS AN ENGAGING EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

When viewed as an educational process and done well, academic advising plays a critical role in connecting students with learning opportunities to foster and support their engagement, success, and the attainment of key learning outcomes. Viewing academic advising as an educational process moves it from a paradigm of teaching that focuses on information or inputs to a paradigm of learning that focuses on outcomes for student learning. In this

way, academic advising supports key institutional conditions that have been identified with promoting student success. Such conditions include setting high expectations, providing support, offering feedback, and facilitating involvement in learning through frequent student contact with faculty and staff (Tinto 2002). As a strategy, academic advising holds the potential to address these key conditions for student success that Tinto notes, particularly when it is approached as a process grounded in teaching and learning. The case for the power of academic advising in supporting student success has been made over and over again in the literature, but perhaps not succinctly or clearly enough, particularly in relationship to supporting institutional goals for persistence toward graduation and the achievement of key learning outcomes.

In his seminal work, *Leaving College*, Tinto (1993) describes retention not as a goal but as a by-product of a successful and engaging college experience. AAC&U’s 2006 report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, also notes that retention and graduation rates are important, but the ultimate measure of progress and success is whether students have learned what they need to know to be successful both professionally and in their personal and civic lives. Thus, for institutions, the focus of attention ought to be on developing value-added educational opportunities that actively engage students in their own learning. If we do this, the by-product will be increased student satisfaction, learning, and persistence toward graduation. How does academic advising fit into this scenario? Tinto indicates that institutions have come to understand that quality academic advising is at the very core of successful student success initiatives, for it reflects an institution’s commitment to the education of its students. Indeed, in *Making the Most of College*, Richard Light (2001) found that academic advising was perhaps one of the most “underestimated characteristics of a successful college experience,” adding further evidence that



academic advising, when done well, adds value to the college student experience.

The concept of engagement in learning is not that old, but not that new, particularly in student affairs. In *Involving Colleges* (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates 1991) concluded that institutions that value and expect student initiative and responsibility encourage involvement. These researchers also suggested that campuses should “spend more effort encouraging student involvement in learning opportunities than designing new ones.” AAC&U has identified a set of these practices that research demonstrates have an impact on student success. In a forthcoming AAC&U publication, George Kuh makes the further point that these practices have an even greater positive impact on students that are still underserved by higher education. Effective academic advising practices are especially important for these often first-generation students. Encouraging students to take advantage of learning opportunities that are designed to challenge their intellectual and social development and add value to the college experience is central to good academic advising and at the heart of student engagement.

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005), talk about the dimensions of the college experience as including both student behaviors and institutional conditions. They describe engagement as the intersection between student behaviors and institutional conditions over which institutions have at last marginal control. The challenge is directing students toward those activities that are the “right” ones for student learning and success. The concept of engagement is significant when thinking about academic advising, for we would argue that *all* institutions have some control over the design and delivery of academic advising. We would also argue that, when done well, academic

advising can serve as a powerful lever in improving the college student experience and in supporting an institution’s goals with regard to persistence and time to graduation because it provides the structured opportunity to direct student behavior toward the ‘right’ activities.

Hunter and White (2004) write that academic advising is “perhaps the only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult who can help them shape a meaningful learning experience for themselves.” As such, academic advising can and should play a pivotal role in directing student behavior toward those activities that will nurture and support their success toward educational, career, and life goal achievement.

When equated with course schedule development and registration, the potential of academic advising in facilitating student immersion and engagement in learning as Cordova (2006), Tinto(1993), and Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) describe is diminished and trivialized. Academic advising that facilitates student engagement and success is developmental and, in that regard, acknowledges that one lens cannot be used to view the experience and skills of all students. Effective developmental academic advising supports the social and intellectual growth that occurs during the college experience, regardless of the age at which students begin their postsecondary journeys or their level of preparedness for college-level work. It is grounded in teaching and learning, understands, embraces, and is responsive to the complex nature of effective teaching as well as to the myriad ways in which people learn. Developmental academic advising is inextricably linked to the educational mission of the institution and is considered, recognized, and rewarded as a form of teaching. This is the academic

advising of the twenty-first century, and colleges and universities nationally and internationally are acknowledging and realizing the potential of this powerful educational strategy to engage and support student learning.

In 2006, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) developed the Concept of Academic Advising in response to the growing body of literature that, however loosely or tightly, coupled academic advising to student engagement in learning. The concept intentionally and rightfully aligns academic advising with teaching and learning and more fully integrates it into the educational fabric of an institution—not merely “layered on” as a student service. The preamble of the concept makes this critical educational point:

Academic advising is integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education. Through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community. Academic advising engages students beyond their own world views, while acknowledging their individual characteristics, values, and motivations as they enter, move through, and exit the institution. Regardless of the diversity of our institutions, our students, our advisers, and our organizational structures, academic advising has three components: curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising does what it does), and student learning outcomes (the result of academic advising). (2006)

This preamble outlines several key concepts to guide academic advising on campuses today. First, the concept frames academic advising around a student’s



learning—learning that concerns much more than knowing about institutional policies and processes and includes knowledge about the broad essential outcomes of a good college education. Second, the concept outlines that the activities of academic advising are intentional and occur throughout a student's undergraduate experience and not merely in the first year, first semester, or until a program of study as been developed. Sequencing and scaffolding learning experiences as part of a comprehensive educational plan assumes a collaborative partnership between students and advisers in which the roles and responsibilities of each are clearly defined. Finally, since we recognize academic advising really is a form of teaching, we must explicitly develop and articulate the curriculum for academic advising, address the myriad pedagogies available to address students' individual learning styles, and identify the expected outcomes for student learning within the context of the academic advising experience. The challenge for academic advising is significant; facilitating the development of coherent educational plans across a student's educational career is no small task and requires those who are committed to the intellectual and social development of students both in and outside the formal classroom.

Marc Lowenstein (2005) articulated the comprehensive nature of the academic adviser's role in this way: An excellent adviser does the same for the student's entire curriculum that the excellent teacher does for one course. The similarities between the role of an academic adviser and the role of a teacher should not go unnoticed: both develop clear curricula that specify expectations for learning, both craft clear sets of student learning outcomes, both create a variety of learning experiences for students to learn what is expected, and both identify appropriate measures to determine the level of

achievement of these outcomes in relation to learning expectations. Lowenstein's portrait of the academic adviser as educator suggests that, regardless of who serves in the formal academic advising role—professional staff member, faculty member, student peer adviser, etc.—the inherent importance of the role and the responsibilities of academic advising should be valued and supported as being integral to the teaching and learning process.

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC ADVISING IN STUDENT LEARNING SUCCESS

Nationally, campuses are taking seriously the potential of academic advising in improving student success. The trends include acknowledging the contribution of effective academic advising to the quality of the college student experience by integrating improvements into campus planning; aligning statements of mission, goals, and program objectives with a campus's overall mission, designing initiatives to identify key outcomes for student learning and the delivery of academic advising, and implementing effective reward and recognition systems for academic advising. What emerges from these national (and international) trends in academic advising is the following set of guidelines that institutions can use to develop a coordinated, effective academic advising program that is linked to teaching and learning and focused on student learning success.

Collectively develop and widely share a philosophy/mission for academic advising that links it to the teaching and learning mission of the institution.

These collectively developed statements of philosophy, in turn, guide the development of mission and goals statements at other organizational levels, such as school/college/department or program. For institutions with highly decentralized academic advising programs, these

statements provide a framework within which to guide and foster consistency in academic advising across a campus.

Identify clear outcomes for student learning and the delivery of academic advising that are derived from the philosophy/mission and that guide the development of learning opportunities.

It perhaps goes without saying that in order to link an academic advising program to an institution's teaching and learning mission, the program must be outcomes-based and student-learning focused.

Increasingly, campuses are developing assessment plans for academic advising that identify what students are expected to learn as a result of participating in academic advising. Framing the intentions of academic advising in this way changes the conversation about what academic advising is and, in turn, how it is delivered. Treating academic advising as curriculum development opens avenues through which the intentions of academic advising can be communicated to students. Increasingly, campuses are adopting a syllabus format to communicate the intentions of and expectations for academic advising. The advising syllabus articulates the particular, and perhaps unique, goals and outcomes for academic advising, acknowledges the variety of ways in which academic advising might be organized (e.g., individual school/college-based, centralized advising center) and delivered (e.g., faculty, professional academic advisers, peer advisers), and identifies expectations for students and advisers in the academic advising relationship. More recently, some academic advising programs have elected to submit these syllabi to school/college curriculum review committees for official review and validation as valued institutional experiences.

Design systemic and systematic processes of assessment to inform and support changes in philosophy and practice. An outcomes-based approach



to academic advising demands the development of an assessment plan through which learning opportunities are developed, benchmarks for success are identified, and multiple measures are used to gather evidence to inform improvement and demonstrate program success. Essential to this process is the identification of measures that go beyond mere measures of satisfaction and facilitate understanding of what and how students are learning what we expect them to learn. Multiple measures can be both quantitative and qualitative. The latter should include conversations with students about knowledge they have gained, skills they have developed, as well as their values regarding higher education and their futures. Clearly, these conversations extend beyond those about institutional policies and course requirements that are most often equated with academic advising.

Implement comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs that are informed by the identified outcomes for student learning and for the delivery of academic advising. These professional development programs are built around the mission and philosophy of academic advising, the expected outcomes for student learning, and the desired outcomes for the delivery of academic advising. These comprehensive programs recognize the myriad ways in which professional development programs can be delivered and utilized both campuswide and in more localized formats, as well as in combination with low- and high-tech pedagogies. Campuses that are effective in designing and delivering professional development programs for academic advising ensure that they are organizationally sustainable. On some campuses these programs are coordinated by someone responsible for academic advising

professional development, while on others these programs are aligned with the centers for teaching and learning. Regardless of where it is housed, any professional development program for academic advising must consider advising as a form of teaching in order to be effective and successful in supporting student learning.

Develop campus programs and structures that recognize the value of academic advising and reward advisers for quality academic advising and for their contributions to the field. Increasingly, campuses are demonstrating, in key ways, the value of academic advising to the success of their students by rewarding the work of professional and faculty advisers. There is significant work being done on many campuses to develop career ladders or paths for professional advisers that reward such things as advanced graduate work in the field as well as research and publication in the field of advising. These career ladders or paths demonstrate, in very concrete ways, the institution's commitment to quality academic advising. For faculty members, more and more institutions are beginning to revisit policies concerning how academic advising is regarded in promotion and tenure processes. Research and scholarship in advising are becoming more universally accepted and supported as a field of applied research and publication.

The trends in academic advising indicate that institutional recognition of academic advising is a campuswide responsibility in which all constituencies—administrators, students, faculty, and staff—work together to promote student success. As higher education continues to find itself increasingly under the microscope of internal and external scrutiny, it must identify strategic ways to demonstrate

student satisfaction and learning. If considered integral to the teaching and learning mission of an institution, academic advising then offers the potential for this visible demonstration of student satisfaction and learning through the experiences of students who are well served and connected to the campus. As Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) write in *Student Success in College* “Advising is viewed as a way to connect students to the campus and help them feel that someone is looking out for them.” Indeed, these connections are essential to student engagement and the role of academic advising in facilitating them should not be underestimated. ■

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