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A Critical Issue: Academic Advising with Attention to Intention

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A Critical Issue: Academic Advising with Attention to Intention

Student needs in higher education institutions continue to increase each year with intersecting dynamics that are influenced by gender, age, race, external student obligations, financial needs and responsibilities, as well as their varied levels of preparedness upon enrollment (Calderon & Mathies, 2013). In an effort to meet these students' needs, higher educational institutions are faced with a critical task in determining how to best support students during their educational experiences to increase persistence and timely graduation. In systems of shrinking resources, institutions often use advising as a mode of support for students. How advising is delivered is dependent on how advising is defined structurally, characteristics used in discussions, modality of delivery, and training for all those involved in an effort to meet the purposes as defined by each higher education institution.

The structure and implementation of advising often takes a one size fits all approach which falls short of adequately meeting students' needs. Failure to create an advising system that navigates students through their higher education experience with support and clear benchmarks of measureable success will contribute to attrition, students with excess credits en route to graduation, and student financial risk which in turn leaves higher education institutions vulnerable.

This paper explores the emergence of academic advising in higher education as a critical issue including its historical development, an example of advising perceptions at Indiana University Northwest, a review of the current literature that discusses the structural approaches of academic advising from multiple points of view, and what the research supports as necessary for a successful advising approach. Finally, steps that can be taken to address the critical issue of advising at a regional campus will be provided including cost implications.

The Historical Development of Academic Advising in Higher Education

Academic advising takes roots in the early 1600's as higher education administrators served as parental extensions and took the responsibility to navigate students into the coursework thought to be most suitable (Kuhn, 2008; Rudolph, 1962; Thelin, 2011). As available curriculum increased, the need for tailored advising developed into three areas including personal issues, vocational interests, and academic advising (Cook, 2009). Following World War I, the National Association of Deans of Men was founded which would later become National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) in 1951 (Fley, 1979). This model evolved through the 1900's as the close of World War II brought a surge of enrollment from the introduction of the GI Bill of Rights (Rudolph, 1962). This era also brought a need for emphasis on freshman orientation for students who were not familiar or prepared for the academic environment (Cook, 2009). Also introduced was "advising centers" providing professional guidance from a prescriptive approach to guide large amounts of students through the enrollment process. This was a consumer based process designed to answer questions and impart knowledge from the professional to the student. The increase in access to higher education during this time period engaged professionals in discussion to determine if a philosophy of advising was needed to guide this advising evolution and the term "academic advising" was introduced (MacIntosh, 1948).

Advising predominately focused on course selection student needs until the emerging campus and cultural challenges in the 1970's brought attention to social justice, increased access to services, focus on course completion, and institutional accountability as the diversity of student entering higher education continued to expand (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 1996). The focus of advising became more about student development and the specialization of

academic advising as a significant support for students unfamiliar with higher education was recognized by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1972; Crookston, 1972; Kuh 2001; O'Banion 1972).

The evolution of advising using a holistic approach came in the 1980's as Winston, Enders, and Miller (1982) operationally defined academic advising using the following characteristics: a) a process; b) concerned with human growth; c) goal related; d) based on the establishment of a caring human relationship; e) offered by adult role models and mentors; f) the cornerstone of collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs; and g) inclusive of all campus and community resources. This student-centered approach continued to be supported as an ideal model.

The subsequent student learning model gave rise to one of empowerment that allow the student to take responsibility for the use of content focused information, developed resources, and organized support as provided by the advisor (Lowenstein, 2005). Tinto (1993) and Kuh and Hu (2001) identified the importance of faculty and student interaction as a foundation for academic success. This model continues to be supported as the pedagogy for quality academic advising.

Indiana University Northwest

Despite research that supports a collaborative model of advising, higher education institutions, particularly regional schools such as Indiana University Northwest (IU Northwest), are continuing to piecemeal advising services for students throughout their academic career using a combination of targeted programs for at-risk populations, first-year orientation initiatives, a mixture of faculty and professional advising, career services, and training. While these are each examples of best practices in an isolated view, a structural support is missing that inhibits

demonstrating measureable success through a connection of these initiatives. It is noteworthy that significant efforts are made to give prescriptive information to students during enrollment through a collection of resources, however, the span of time between first and subsequent semesters often leave students without an easily identifiable touch point for academic advising that includes not only course scheduling, but provides the engaging and supportive relationships necessary to ensure student successes. At even greater risk for failure are first-generation students who are increasing in numbers as access to higher education continues to increase (Kim & Sax, 2009). Their guidance may rely only on a limited scope of knowledge, and the inexperienced support of family peers to navigate through the higher education system, often incorrectly.

A specific example of the need to address advising as a critical issue can be found at IU Northwest following consultation with Dr. Susan Campbell serving as a representative of National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in February 2013. She stated in her findings, “There does not appear to be a consistent understanding of what academic advising is or its potential in supporting student success” (Campbell, 2013, p. 4). Her findings indicated a need to move beyond prescriptive advising and include the need to link student to additional campus resources that supports students from a holistic approach.

Support for her recommendations were provided through internal data collected using a Student Satisfaction Survey that included academic advising as well as an Advisor’s Survey, both distributed in Spring 2013, offered to those who provide advising services at IU Northwest. The Student Satisfaction Survey qualitative analysis revealed that students were in search of building relationships with their advisors, were concerned about consistent access to advising services, they wanted a plan for graduation that maximized their time and financial investments,

and desired to be linked to the correct resources on campus when in need of additional support (Indiana University Northwest [IU Northwest], 2013a).

The Advisor's Survey identified also indicated a lack of clarity in what is defined as advising services (Indiana University Northwest [IU Northwest], 2013b). Many who responded indicated struggling to find adequate time to devote to advising services that allowed for the establishment of personal relationships given additional job responsibilities. Responses varied in how they chose to deliver services currently including on-line, group advising, or face-to-face appointments. Faculty indicated being comfortable with providing academic guidance but less able to guide students through financial or personal issues. Professional advisors indicated the need for additional training and were in favor of providing services beyond curriculum planning.

Academic Advising Structures and Points of View

The design and implementation of academic advising in higher education institutions can take many forms. Given the resource differences in institutions based on type, size, funding sources, and purpose, debate stems from how to structure advising, what advising characteristics are most valuable, how to deliver advising services, and how to measure accountability. The combination of these factors are weighed against institutional resources and the campus culture of how advising has been historically approached to seek a formula for advising student success.

By Structure

Habley (1983) uses organizational structure to define who is providing advising services:

Faculty only. Students are assigned to a specific full-time faculty member in a specific discipline generally linked to the student's chosen field of study.

Shared supplementary. Students are assigned to a full-time faculty member for advising linked to the student's chosen field of study. An advising center provides training and support for the faculty advisor and general information, including referrals, for students.

Shared split. Students are assigned to a full-time faculty member for advising linked to the student's chosen field of study. Students who are undecided or targeted as at-risk are assigned to an advising office with professional staff trained to support particular subpopulations.

Total intake. All incoming students are advised in a center during completion of general education requirements. Once general education requirements are completed, students are assigned to a faculty member based on their selected course of study who takes over advising through graduation.

Satellite. Advising is done online or at remote locations off main campus.

Self-contained. All advising is done by designated professional staff centralized in a particular location.

Given the increase of technology, online classes and the shifting generational needs of students, most campuses use a combination of some of these approaches to best meet student needs. Advising responsibilities become divided based on who is engaged in the formal or informally recognized advising process (Carlstrom, 2013). Shared advising models are most recently evidenced as the most common approach engaging students upon entry with one advisor, then shifting to a particular departmental advisor upon committing to a course of study. Habley & McClanahan (2004) identify that the most dominate title for one to oversee this process is a Coordinator or Director of Advising who responds to the Vice Chancellor or Director of Student Services.

By Characteristics

A second system of classification is through the evaluation of advising characteristics which identifies the method of engagement between those providing services, the student, and the content covered. Attention is given to the time spent and the content of advising sessions.

Proactive. Previously referred to as intrusive advising, the characteristics of this approach include engaging students in an ongoing and consistent manner to provide multiple dimensions of support in their higher education experiences (Miller & Murray, 2005).

Prescriptive. This model is one of giving by the advisor and receiving by the student. It suggests that the advisor solely imparts knowledge of the advisor to the advisee in an effort to teach what is needed for a successful academic journey (Crookson, 1972). The roots of this approach are based in early student development theory and are largely dependent on advisor knowledge (Dillon & Fisher, 2000),

Professional. Advisors using this model generally devote the bulk of their time to work in partnership with subgroups of students in partnership with other campus professionals to guide students through their academic needs and complete referrals to other supportive services (Self, 2008).

Mentoring. Successful mentoring programs utilize advisors who provide encouraging and supportive services through their educational processes as well as coping with experiences and challenges outside the classroom setting (Mayo, Murguia, and Padilla, 1995; Tinto, 1993)

Wiseman and Messit (2010) describe how the interaction between advisor and advisee have evolved to be one that is reflective of an interactive relationship that stresses the importance

of both student persistence rates and their perceptions of the advising process. Fowler and Bolan (2010) note that advising receiving the recognition for measured success includes clear student guidelines, integration of first year coursework, intrusive advising to disseminate general information, as well as traditional developmental education coursework and tutoring to support academic needs.

The student learning model as one of empowerment that allows the student to take responsibility for the use of content focused information, developed resources, and organized support as provided by the advisor (Lowenstein, 2009). This model continues to be in use currently and supported as the pedagogy for quality academic advising. The use of this model allow institutions to best maximize scarce resources using multiple models that best fit particular student population needs. These components allow for students to receive the information that is common to their academic and professional experiences while compartmentalizing their unique personal needs for focused intention.

Delivery Method by Location

A third classification method is by the delivery of advising services defined geographically as centralized or decentralized (Pardee, 2004). Centralized advising houses all advisors with primary advising responsibilities in one location with the intention of cross-training and recognition as a valued unit. Decentralized advising allows for advisors to be located throughout the higher education community and online.

The use of technology has provided the opportunity to advise off campus and is an evolving trend in programs using a decentralized model. Clear communication is most likely to occur when both students and advisors understand how to efficiently and effectively use the technology to ensure that both timeliness and quality advising objectives are met. Types of

technology training might include degree audits, degree mapping, scheduling availability, the navigation of the registration process, advising documentation, internal coursework delivery systems, and how to link to other departments the students might need to support their academic experiences.

Support for automated academic advising is varied. Santoso (2010) credits online advising as a more consistent guide for course selection that is not prone to human errors. He also notes that it allows students to explore academic plan scenarios easily when using a programming approach that combines Case-Based Reasoning and Group Technology. Important to note is the need for thorough training for all who will use an online supportive tools in the advising process (Leonard, 2004). Leonard also recognizes that technology can serve as a valuable component in the advising process however human interaction remains valuable to meet students' needs beyond course selection.

Advisor Training

Regardless of the model, characteristics, and demographics of students enrolled, a centralized approach to training of advisors is a critical component to accurately determine advising effectiveness and efficiency (Higginson, 2000; King, 2000). Smith, Szelest, and Downey, (2004) identify that information gathered through the use of evaluative tools (such as the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory, focus groups, and exit surveys) can be a roadmap to determine outcomes. Outcomes measured that yield useful information for training might include the students' ability to develop organizational skills, negotiate academic procedures, the development of self-efficacy, the use of university resources and goals setting student responsibility (Smith et al.).

King (2000) identifies the three primary components of training: 1) conceptual, 2) informational, and 3) relational. The development of commonly shared skill sets of faculty and staff when working with new students among all faculty and staff members is critical given their unique experiences and backgrounds. Conceptual component includes training that allows for role clarity, common understanding of advising, and care to develop an emergent shared culture (Nutt, 2003).

Informational training includes the development of a common understanding of the laws, policies, procedures, and resources related to the internal and external environment, an awareness of student needs, and the advisors' knowledge of him/herself (Higgeson, 2000). Relational training includes skill development in area including problem solving, rapport building, advising versus counseling, listening, and interviewing, and building a common language set when engaging in the institution's advising process (Habley, 1986).

Academic Leadership Plan of Action: Using a Combined Approach

An academic advising approach must be tailored to meet institutional and student needs in a partnership with the resources available including how advising is defined (Robbins, 2013). A successfully combined approach engages in the use of an agreed upon model and definition of the function of advising within the institution. Higher education institutions can use a combination of types and models in search of a combination that will provide evidence of efficiency and efficacy. The Council for the Advancement of Standards of Higher Education's (2009) standards and guidelines offer general and qualitative guidelines that allow each institution the flexibility to adapt its resources accordingly. Carlstrom (2013) notes academic advising often uses a multi-layered organizational model that includes faculty members, graduate students, staff, and administrators that serve multiple roles. Each works to ensure that all corners

of each student's needs are met. DeSousa (2005) concurs finding that high performing institutions to have a shared approach to navigating and supporting students through the higher education process.

Proposed Structure

Montag, Campo, Weissman, Walmsley, and Snell (2012) suggest the use of a split-model advising system that is grounded in generational theory to best meet students' academic, personal, and professional growth needs. This allows students to have access to professional advisors for general needs and links to resources while allowing the faculty advisors to serve as experts in particular fields of study. Longitudinal studies have begun to show support for a split-model that uses proactive techniques such as email and text messages as well as persistent communication follow up in the efficacy of student retention, persistence and graduation (Schwebel, Walburn, Klyce, & Jerrolds, 2012; Ryan, 2013). The encouragement and multi-modal method of meeting students where they are developmentally while appealing to their emotional needs for inclusion are equipped to provide the engagement and the attention to meet their academic goals within a split-model.

Cueso (2005) found that this evolution of quality in a split-model of academic advising was associated with an increase in student retention. This opened the wave for accountable academic advising that combines the previous movements into a strengths based, collaborative approach between the university, the administration, the faculty and staff, and the students. Michael, Dickson, Ryan, and Koefer (2010) extend support this approach as they found it provides concentrated efforts to target at-risk students who are otherwise unfamiliar with the college experience.

Proposed Delivery

Academic advising can be delivered using multiple modalities with attention to the function of each to meet the students' needs. First, development of institutional specific technology that allows student to independently conduct degree audits, map out their academic plan, and register for courses allows for self-sufficiency at the core of the advising process.

Group advising can serve as a vehicle to share as information that is general in nature for large groups (King, 2008). The formation of smaller groups based on interests and commonalities such as demographic identifiers such as gender, race, first-generation students, in a small group setting may serve to allow student to build institutionally based support systems and share common challenges and coping strategies. Other small groups might be formed within academic disciplines to provide students with career planning and peer-mentoring strategies. Individual advising is best suited to serve students to discuss particular career strategies, address specific academic needs based on outstanding performance or less than adequate progress, and to build meaningful relationships that anchor students to the institutional experience (Wiseman & Messitt, 2010).

Proposed Characteristics

Successful advising can begin using a combination of proactive and prescriptive strategies including email, text message reminders, Twitter, and other social media. Engaging students consistently will allow the prescriptive information needed to stay in the forefront of students' priorities (Miller & Murray, 2005). The additional use of professional advising and mentoring in an open and supportive environment will allow students to have a consistent avenue to link to referrals and other support services needed to meet students' unique needs (Johannessen, Unterreiner, Sitienei, & Zajda, 2012). This multimodal engagement with students

in meaningful relationships will allow students to engage in a process that moves beyond solely course selection.

Proposed Training

To engage in academic advising successfully and continue to move through the advising process for the duration of a student's academic career, both the student and the advisor need to have access to and active participation in conceptual as well as informational training. The relationship between the advisor and the student can serve as a key bridge for academic success (Blitz, 2010). Given the changes in academic structure, course requirements, and enrollment trends, advisors will need to update their advising skill sets on a yearly basis. Students' training must include an understanding of the purpose advising serves in their academic career as well as how to prepare and engage in the advising structure successfully. Relational training becomes an important link to ensure that positive behaviors are utilized by both the advisor and the student to consistently engage in the in the advising process as it is defined by the institution.

Potential Costs

Bringing attention to advising structure is the first step to create a cost effective approach. Using a split-model structural design will allow all students to access information to guide course selection and support services availability while also engaging students from identified sub-populations to determine how best to meet their own needs. The primary costs will be invested in the human capital to provide targeted services.

Another cost will be the time and financial resources needed to train advisors to effectively deliver services. However, the benefit of a well-informed advising team is the opportunity to move students through their necessary coursework with timeliness. Trained advisors will increase students' awareness of general coursework expectations and may better

prepare them to move into their selected majors and intended fields of study without the burden of excess credits and delayed graduation.

A cost effective group advising approach can be used within departmental majors to maximize individual programs' resources. Flexible group advising sessions with the opportunity to address individualized challenges still engages students in a community of support, provides additional direction in career development, and meets students' developmental needs in a learning context. The use of group advising will also allow students to engage with each other as peer support.

The use of highly individualized advising might demand a higher student to advisor ratio however, it is this very type of relationship that allows students to create a meaningful partnership with the higher education community (Goralnik, Millenbah, Nelson, & Thorp, 2012). The need for each program to identify one person to serve as the bridge for all advising needs can be a cost effective approach using a non-tenure track faculty member who is also responsible for other responsibilities such as advanced student individual advising, small teaching loads, or program admissions. An additional small professional advising team to meet the needs of students who have not yet declared a program of study also serves as a source of support that does not leave anyone to be left behind. While the cost of these positions may initially appear as an expense to the university, the opportunity to move students seamlessly through their academic careers in a timely and efficient manner while tending to their needs from a customer service perspective will provide long term economic benefits to the institution.

Programming within the structural outline may bring costs in supplies and space however the impact has the potential to far exceed the investment. Advisors who are equipped and supported with the time and skill sets to engage in advising with students will bring confidence

in their delivery and innovation in their methodology. The provision of quality advising services that are aligned with the institution's goals and other supportive resources will benefit students, faculty, and the institution in the academic process.

Conclusion

Using a structural approach to shape and deliver academic advising services provides the greatest opportunity for measurable success. Academic advising has the ability to serve as a bridge to link academic affairs and student affairs creating a dual benefit for both sides of the higher education institution. The creation and use of a structure that is aware and focused on who it is targeting, flexible institutional and advising activities that are designed for maximum impact, as well as short and long term measurable outcomes will best align student academic plans and successes with higher education goals of persistence and timely graduation. Only by giving attention to the intentions of advising can an institution design an approach that utilizes its resources responsibly while it invests in the success of its students.

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