Faculty Advising to Support Student Learning

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ABSTRACT: *This article describes the implementation of a program undergirded by the theme of faculty and staff supports that physically brings advising to the point of instruction. Research shows that establishing a strong institutional connection with students improves retention, persistence, and success. What better way to do this than take advising into the classroom and create a strong partnership between faculty and student services to provide support, information, and career direction? Sustained through an ongoing dialogue between instruction and student development professionals, classroom activities and wrap-around support services can be uniquely focused on the individual student. The college found that advising becomes a tool delivered by a faculty-student services team that holds students accountable while providing needed assistance along the student's educational pathway.*

It has been acknowledged that instruction is not an activity that occurs in isolation (Tinto, 2012). A well rounded learning environment is essential to providing and supporting academic progression especially for developmental students. Strong supports for student learning include advising programs that provide access to services, contact with individuals within the college, and strengthening of attitudes toward learning and support for the overall well-being of the student (Cross, 1976).

Sustaining holistic support for the complete student reaches far beyond the classroom. Advisors, counselors, and other professionals have an increased responsibility to help connect students to college especially for students that are undecided, first generation, or students from groups that have had difficulty transitioning to college (Starling & Miller, 2011). Effective advising is a continuous process throughout a student's educational experience and needs to adapt to the resources, and culture of that institution (Goldrick-Rab, 2007; O'Banion, 2012). Advising needs to be positive and proactive from the beginning of the educational experience, based on goals and good student development theory, and provided by individuals that understand the unique needs of the developmental education student (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).

Tinto (2012) established the necessity to have a strong connection to an institution for students to progress and succeed. There are many individuals at an institution who can contribute to that connection; however, the key appears to be a repetitive interaction by persons who have a vested interest in some aspect of that student's academic life, including advisors. Tinto references this as the principles of effective retention and emphasizes that it encompasses the totality of students, including support of their educational goals, needs, and overall experiences in higher education. One of the most important components of establishing this strong connection begins with faculty in the classroom.

Background

Traditionally, faculty advising has meant discipline-specific faculty assigned students for advising who had chosen the faculty member's particular discipline as their majors. Very often it was less about true educational advising or planning than about picking classes from a predetermined list (Boylan & Saxon, 2012). There was little discussion or information about career paths, financial aid, support systems to address life's challenges, or other career options. Faculty in popular degree areas, such as business or computer science, often had far more students than they could accommodate, whereas faculty in other areas, such as visual arts or anthropology, had few students. For San Jacinto College, it was apparent that the college wanted to move away from this form of student advising to a more intentional advising model that was referred to as "educational planning." Community college students comprise a very complex population. Many students are self-directed and know what they want to do and need minimal assistance in reaching their goals. This is a minority. Most students are first-generation college students, come from high-risk populations, and need significant (and time consuming) support and direction in order to navigate postsecondary education successfully. National data show that many do not experience success (Radford, Berkener, Wheeless, & Sheperd, 2010; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). It became a goal in instruction and student services to change that reality, and intentional faculty advising became part of San Jacinto's efforts to support students.

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Program Development and Design

In Fall 2010, the college mandated a student success course for students testing into developmental education; and in Fall 2011, the college eliminated late registration. It was predicted that these changes would cause a great deal of chaos in the registration processes during the last week before classes started and in the first week of classes. Many developmental students wait until the last minute to register, and the college did not want to lose these students by simply turning them away once registration was closed. Student services advising staff and faculty in developmental education, especially those who would be teaching the student success course, developed a triage plan (early prioritization and support) to help students transition into the college. The initiative included educational planners, developmental program department chairs, and faculty.

The triage plan was designed to provide pre-advising while students were waiting to see an educational planner. Students who registered before the semester began could speak with a member of the developmental education faculty to discuss test scores, course choices, and educational objectives. By doing this, students were often ready to register when they met with an educational planner in student services. Important questions had been answered prior to the advising appointment, and they began to establish a connection with college faculty and staff. This team effort proved to be productive for both the student and the advising office.

The spirit of triaging extended into the classroom after the student was registered. The student success course included "points of contact" by student services personnel, who visited every student success class at specific times during the term to deliver services in classes. During the first point of contact session in class personnel introduced students to various services, set up email accounts, and facilitated the creation of an educational plan with the student and faculty member. The next point of contact focused on career and aptitude testing and a discussion of career and transfer paths, with information on some of the technical programs with which students might not be familiar. Student services staff and the faculty member explained the college's Level 1 certificates, which could lead to immediate improvement in wages, while allowing the student to stay in school and pursue higher-level certificates and degrees. The final point of contact focused on registration and financial aid for the subsequent semester. In some instances, students were registered in the classroom.

College data on students in the student success courses showed improvement in student retention, persistence, and successful course completion; however, better results and more achievement for our students was desired. In Fall 2009, before implementation of GUST 0305, students that met the criteria to enroll in the course had a success rate of 52.8% and at the end of the implementation year 2010/2011 the course demonstrated a success rate of 62.8%. At an earlier Achieving the Dream conference, college personnel had attended a presentation by Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia, where they discussed using the student success course instructor as that class cohort's advisor. It was interesting, but initially it did not seem a manageable option. Patrick Henry College is small, whereas San Jacinto is a large urban college of 30,000 students. But that idea remained. In Spring 2012, the college decided to try it.

San Jacinto College has provided student success courses at both the developmental and college-ready levels. The developmental course is GUST 0305 (Guided Studies), and the college-level courses are Psychology 1300 or Education

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1300 (Learning Frameworks). When the course was initiated, faculty were thoroughly trained on the goals of a student success course and worked diligently to craft learning experiences that would advance the success of students and also maintain the integrity of course content in psychology and education. A task force was created to work on the content, class activities, student learning outcomes, textbooks, and supplemental materials and to lead the training efforts for full- and part-time faculty and student services advisors. The first step in advising was to ask faculty teaching GUST 0305 to take their class cohort (the class enrollment cap is 25) as advisees. A single faculty member could do up to two classes, for a total of 50 advisees. For full-time faculty, this became part of their college service, just like committee work. For selected part-time faculty, a stipend was paid for the advising work that occurred outside of class time.

It is vitally important to note that the college did not just ask faculty to advise without training and coaching. Student services and the offices of educational planning and counseling were asked to develop a plan of advising activities and conversations that needed to take place during the term and plot those out with the schedule of the courses. The college also asked that they develop an advising handbook and advising training for the faculty who would be assuming this responsibility. The schedule of meetings and activities was specific and delineated; the detailed and thorough training was designed. The student services staff were on hand to serve as support and back-up for faculty in the program, and if serious student issues surfaced, such as a behavioral issue or life crisis, the student was referred to the office of educational planning and counseling for further and more focused support.

Educational planning and counseling provided ongoing training for faculty interested in participating in the faculty-advising program. There were more faculty trained than participated in the advising of students (see Table 1). Although not all trained faculty were advisors, this has become a rich opportunity to understand how to connect with students as well as an opportunity for faculty to increase their skills. Faculty have participated in the training because they want to use that information in their classes, whether or not they are teaching a student success course.

As with all new initiatives, problems arose in the first semesters, which were addressed as quickly as possible through changes in training, changes in schedules, and more focused support from student services. For example, we began with six points of contact in the class over a single term. This was too frequent: it over-taxed student services staff and did not prove to be necessary. This was ultimately reduced to three points of contact. Overall, however, the program went well, and when the initial performance data were reviewed, the results exceeded expectations. Clearly, this was working for students and working well. By Fall 2012 the college was ready to move the faculty advising to the college-level student success courses in psychology and education. It started slowly, but as student data were continuously reviewed, it was apparent that the college had to scale up and scale up as quickly as possible for the good of the students. The goal for Spring 2013 was to have all GUST 0305 courses at the developmental level staffed with faculty who would also do the advising and by Fall 2013 to have as many as possible in the college-level areas, with all PSYC and EDUC 1300s staffed with faculty advisors by Spring 2014.

Table 1

Number of Faculty Trained as Advisors and the Number of Faculty who Advise Students

Faculty Category	Fall 2012	Spring 2013	Fall 2013
Trained faculty	67	87	114
Faculty who advise	28	33	61

Methods

Procedure

The procedures for program evaluation grew from the implementation process. Because students self-selected to either attend or not attend an advising session with their faculty member, this in essence became a two-group comparison design. In this methodology, students who did not attend any faculty advising sessions were group one, and students who attended at least one faculty advising session were group two. Using information from student records, the college compared the within-term retention rates (completing the attempted course with a grade of A to F), A-C course success rates (earning grades of A, B, or C in course attempted), and percentage of students earning a term GPA of 2.0+ between both groups. For testing statistically significant differences between percentages, a Chi-squared test on percent differences was used. The alpha-level at which we tested is alpha = 0.05. Therefore, for any reported statistically significant percentage differences throughout the results of the analyses are at the $p < 0.05$.

Participant Demographics

Concerning participant demographics, of the 620 students who attended at least one faculty-advising session in the Fall 2012 semester, the following was observed: 8.9% were African-American females, 5.2% were African-American males, 28.2% were Hispanic females, 17.6% were Hispanic males, 11% were Caucasian females, 9.4% were Caucasian males, 59% were females, and 41% were males. In contrast, the general student demographics of the 28,721 students in Fall 2012 were as follows:

6.3% were African-American females, 3.7% were African-American males, 25.5% were Hispanic females, 18.7% were Hispanic males, 17.4% were Caucasian females, 13% were Caucasian males, 57% were females, and 43% were males.

Data & Results

The faculty-advising program, a structure that supports faculty and staff to become better advisors, requires students to meet two times outside official class meetings. This is a time for the faculty member to better understand the student's situation, educational goals, and life challenges. These sessions often occur in a faculty office or a small-group setting of two or three students. This allows some students to feel more comfortable with meeting the faculty member outside of an instructional setting.

Table 2 indicates the number of faculty who advise in the GUST course, the number of students who were advised, and the number and percentage of those who took advantage of the opportunity to

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meet with the faculty advisor. Enrollment in the GUST course over the three semesters was 2,213 students in Fall 2012, 1,116 in Spring 2013, and 2,040 in Fall 2013. The college offered 96 sections of the course in Fall 2012 with 46 sections having assigned, dedicated faculty advisors. In Spring

2013, the college offered 59 sections of the course with 55 sections having assigned, dedicated faculty advisors. In Fall 2013, the college offered 89 sections of the course with 84 sections having assigned, dedicated faculty advisors. Students who took advantage of the opportunity for additional advising numbered 620 of 985 (63%) in Fall 2012 and 561 of 996 (56%) in Spring 2013, with the majority of those students meeting with their advisor two times outside of the class.

Tables 3 and 4 (p. 24) report the success that students had in all their classes during the semester they enrolled in GUST and participated in faculty advising. In the Fall 2012 semester, students who participated in at least one faculty advising session had an A-C success rate of 70% (n=1,547) compared to a 30% (n=1280) success rate for those who did not attend any faculty advising session. Students who attended two faculty advising sessions persisted from Fall 2012 to Spring 2013 at a rate of 85% which was a statistically significant 32 percentage points higher than students who did not attend the advising sessions. Additionally, the analysis indicated that 79% of students who attended two faculty advising sessions had a grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 or higher, whereas only 24% of students who attended zero faculty advising session earned a GPA of 2.0 or higher in the Fall 2012 semester.

In the Spring 2013 semester, faculty advising continued in many of the GUST 0305 courses. The analyses indicated that 76% students who attended two faculty advising sessions earned an A-C grade range success rate versus a 21.5% success rate for those who did not attend any faculty advising sessions for the same grade range. Seventy-eight percent (78.6%) of students who attended two faculty advising sessions had a GPA of 2.0 or higher, whereas only 22.5% of students who did not attend any faculty advising session had a GPA of 2.0 or higher in the Spring 2013 semester.

The most dramatic impact was seen with African-American males who attended at least one faculty advising session. African-American males who attended at least one faculty advising session earned an A-C success range on average of 49.6% in all courses taken that semester versus an 8.5% success range on average for those who did not attend any faculty advising sessions.

Although there is probably a strong element of self-selection bias built into this program, results are quite positive and serve as an impetus to scale the initiative. The goal for Spring 2014 is to have 100% of all GUST 0305 and EDUC/PSCY 1300 sections include faculty advising.

Implications

For a very large institution with 30,000 students, such as San Jacinto College, regular high-touch advising is not attainable through student services

Table 2

GUST Faculty Advising Components

Components	Fall 2012		Spring 2013		Fall 2013	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Total GUST courses	96	100	59	100	89	100
Total GUST with faculty advising	46	48	55	93	84	94
Total enrollment in GUST	2,213	100	1,116	100	2,040	100
Students enrolled in GUST with Faculty Advisor	985	45	996	89	1940	95
Total students receiving faculty advising	620	63	561	56		
1 Meeting with advisor	268	43	239	43		
2 Meetings with advisor	352	57	322	57		

alone. Through the success courses it is possible to support students more effectively and to provide scheduled interventions at points where data show students are at highest risk of failing or dropping out of college because trained faculty are involved in the advising process. Having these trained faculty advisors in the success courses allows issues to be managed where and when they occur.

Choosing classes and creating a schedule are not the only problems for high-risk students; life's challenges are the greatest burden (McSwain & Davis, 2007). Creating this awareness in faculty is the initial step to helping students to manage those challenges. Including faculty in the advising process has created a partnership between faculty and student services and eliminated the silos which led to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Because faculty have been trained, even if they do not plan to teach the student success course, a greater understanding of how to support students

has spread throughout the faculty ranks. It is more effective when teaching faculty and advisors to work together collaboratively, rather than pulling against each other in a tug of war.

In addition, having faculty who are trained in advising provides assistance to student services during peak times. Faculty can provide expertise

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in course content that advisors generally do not have and this allows the advisor and the faculty member to discuss the many aspects of how to best place a student. Ultimately, this collaboration allows faculty to contribute their unique knowledge of discipline content and instruction and advisors to contribute their depth of knowledge in transfer

requirements, assessment procedures, and educational pathways to the advising process.

Conclusions

These efforts have not been without difficulty, of course. However, with an approach grounded solidly in student success, all those involved in the planning and implementation believe the effort is worthwhile, and college staff and faculty are committed to making this work and work well. The college continues to improve the faculty advisor training and to refine the activities related to the student services points of contact in the student success courses. In addition, discussions are being held about those students who have not attended advising sessions and how that might be addressed. An ongoing issue deals with students who "disappear" from class within the first 2 weeks and what strategies can be used that might address this issue. Traditionally, faculty members have taught and advisors have advised. Forward-thinking leadership will be needed to bring together two functions of the institution around common goals and that leadership must be based on a student-centered approach, grounded in data that show the remarkable platform this provides for student retention and success. There is more work ahead, but the results from the faculty advising initiative show that the college has found answers to how to help students stay in college and show significant success in all of their classes.

Table 3

Fall 2012 Success Grades A-C (All Courses Attempted)

Ethnicity	Faculty Advising Not Received			Faculty Advising Received			Total in Faculty Advising Program		
	# of Classes	Success (A-C)	Success %	# of Classes	Success (A-C)	Success %	# of Classes	Success (A-C)	Success %
African American	283	54	19.1	304	185	60.9	587	239	40.7
Hispanic	575	197	34.3	980	673	68.7	4,555	870	55.9
Caucasian	263	77	29.3	462	641	73.8	725	418	57.7
Other	159	61	38.4	451	348	77.2	610	409	67.0
Total	1,280	389	30.4	2,197	1,547	70.4	3,477	1,936	55.7

Table 4

Spring 2013 Success A-C (All Courses Attempted)

Ethnicity	Faculty Advising Not Received			Faculty Advising Received			Total in Faculty Advising Program		
	# of Classes	Success (A-C)	Success %	# of Classes	Success (A-C)	Success %	# of Classes	Success (A-C)	Success %
African American	310	43	13.9	310	157	50.6	620	200	32.3
Hispanic	691	170	24.6	846	520	61.5	1,537	690	44.9
Caucasian	264	50	18.9	360	271	75.3	624	321	51.4
Other	157	43	27.4	286	218	76.2	443	361	58.9
Total	1,422	306	21.5	1,802	1,166	64.7	3,224	1,472	45.7

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