

STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

What Advisors Can Do

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Occasional Paper #11

Six Conditions that Matter to Student Success

- I. “Living” Mission and “Lived” Educational Philosophy
- II. Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning
- III. Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment
- IV. Clear Pathways to Student Success
- V. Improvement-Oriented Ethos
- VI. Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success



Students who are well prepared academically and highly motivated tend to do well in college and persist to graduation. But for various reasons — some of which are beyond their control — many students lack the requisite academic background for college-level work. As a result, most colleges and universities enroll students with a wide range of abilities. Some of these institutions are more effective than others in helping their students succeed in college. These schools recognize that in terms of learning and personal development, what students bring to college is less important than what they *do* when they get to college. Academic advisors can play an integral role in promoting student success by assisting students in ways that encourage them to engage in the right kinds of activities, inside and outside the classroom. Advisors are especially important because they are among the first people new students encounter and should see regularly during their first year.

The guiding principles offered here are based on an in-depth examination of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and demonstrated through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that they have effective policies and practices for working with students of differing abilities and aspirations. These institutions are referred to below as either educationally effective schools or high performing institutions.



National Survey
of Student Engagement

1. Adopt a talent development approach to advising

Faculty members and advisors are obligated to work with the students they have, not those they wish they had. This sentiment is a popular refrain at Fayetteville State University and serves as the philosophical underpinning of a talent development perspective on education. That is, advisors, faculty members, and others subscribe to the belief that any student can learn anything we teach here, provided the right conditions are established for their learning, and they enact this belief by meeting students where they are – academically, socially, and psychologically. These faculty and staff members share a “cool passion” for student learning. They exhibit an unwavering enthusiasm for the task at hand, with the flame of innovation burning steadily, unrelenting.

Toward this end, advisors at high performing institutions are well informed about their students. They know where their students are from, their preferred learning styles, their talents, and when and where they need help. They also establish high but attainable expectations for students, making explicit what students need to know and do to be successful. They challenge, implore, cajole, and support students to go beyond the level of effort they typically invest in their studies. When accompanied by generous amounts of timely feedback, they help student cultivate the habits of the mind that become the foundation for pursuing excellence. At the University of

Texas at El Paso, faculty members along with peer leaders gain a deeper awareness of the talents and abilities of students enrolled in their first-year seminar (UNIV 1301: Seminar in Critical Inquiry) by meeting with each student on a one-on-one basis twice during the fall semester. The individual sessions deliberately focus on the academic progress students are making during their first semester, with an eye toward getting students connected to the institution’s multiple support services, if necessary. Faculty members are expected to keep abreast of their students’ progress even after the seminar has ended.

2. Think of advising as if it was a tag team activity

Given the array of academic and social issues that students must manage during the transition from high

school to college, a cookie-cutter approach to advising students from increasingly diverse backgrounds probably will not be sufficient. Faculty and staff members at high performing colleges and universities accept their fair share of responsibility for student success by adopting a “tag team” approach to advising students, incorporating a wide spectrum of people, expertise, and multiple perspectives in the advising process. For example, first-year students at Wheaton College benefit from advising teams comprised of a mix of people across functional lines, including faculty, student preceptors, librarians, and administrative staff. This is similar to Miami University and Ursinus College, where the academic affairs and student affairs divisions work in concert to cover a variety of topics relevant to student success. Fayetteville State University, George Mason University, and Winston-Salem State University, put teams of faculty, professional advisors, student affairs staff, and mentors to form early alert systems to help identify and support students at academic risk. These team approaches

to advising makes certain that students do not fall through the cracks and get the information they need to take full advantage of the opportunities and resources for learning their school provides for their academic achievement and social needs.

3. Help students map out a path to success

The road to success in college can be full of tangles. Decades ago, a compass-like device was more or less sufficient to point students in the desired general direction. These days,

college life presents a variety of challenges, especially for first-generation and non-traditional students. As such, finding one’s way through college requires something akin to a global positioning satellite (GPS) instrument, something that is more sensitive to complex features of the terrain and offers more options and directions for what students can do to survive and thrive. Advisors, faculty, and staff at educationally effective colleges and universities know this, and they go to great lengths to make certain students know what to expect even before they matriculate, either as a first-time first-year or transfer student.

To keep students on track, advisors should regularly convey what students should be thinking and doing in order to be successful. Central to the task is working with students to plot a course of action for their educational success. For instance, advising sessions can be used to teach newcomers about campus culture—the

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traditions, rituals, and practices that communicate how and why things are done at the school. The Freshman-Sophomore Advising Center (FSAC) at the University of Kansas developed its “Graduate in Four” advising notebook to provide students with information about how to make the most of their undergraduate years and what they need to do to complete their degree program in a timely manner. Distributed at orientation, the notebook includes a section for each of the four undergraduate years along with a “checklist” that students can use to ensure that they are making appropriate choices and to monitor whether they are, in fact, making progress toward the completion of their degree.

4. Focus on meaningful interactions with students

Another feature that stands out at strong performing colleges is the frequency and quality of interactions students have with their advisors, teachers, and other students. At Miami University, the majority of academic advisors for first-year students live in the same residence facility as their advisees, creating numerous opportunities for serendipitous, informal advising talks as well as easier-to-schedule formal meetings. Macalester College encourages quality student-faculty interaction outside the classroom by making funds available for faculty members to host dinners for students in their homes. Professional advisers at Fayetteville State University create opportunities for informal contact with students by visiting with small groups of students in their residence hall suites, a practice referred to as Suite Talks. The breadth and scope of student-faculty interactions is particularly distinctive at Longwood College, where it is not unusual for faculty members to advise students from the first through the senior year of college.

Another way advisors can encourage meaningful interactions is to help develop, support, and participate in mentoring programs. Mentee-mentor relationships help create close connections with one or more key persons, relationships that are especially important for students in underrepresented groups on campus. For instance, Sewanee’s Faculty Minority Mentor Program links faculty with minority students. The relationships students form with their mentors helps them adjust to college life. Students also gain from the relationships they build with faculty members who advise department clubs or organizations. Finally, getting involved *early* with students is essential to establishing meaningful interactions with them. Advisors along with faculty members, department chairs, student affairs staff, and other staff at high performing colleges and universities do this principally through first-year orientation programs and experiences.

5. Connect students to co-curricular learning opportunities, as what happens outside the classroom influences learning inside the classroom

Another way advisors can promote student success is by encouraging students to participate in complementary learning opportunities outside the classroom. Among the high quality co-curricular experiences that have powerful positive effects on students and their success are service learning, study abroad, civic engagement, internships, and experiential learning activities. Strong performing institutions are intentional about connecting academic courses to real life issues, thereby enhancing student learning in ways that many academic courses alone may not be able to accomplish. The breadth and scope of these co-curricular experiences put them within reach of students that may not have the resources or necessary time to benefit from what they offer. For example, at Longwood College, a group of students can begin to make important connections with their peers before school starts through the New Student Leadership Program. California State University Monterey Bay requires two semesters of service learning, experiences that are tied to the communities from which many students come. Similarly, Winston-Salem State University requires many of its first-year students to be involved in the local community. Advisors at these and other high performing institutions often reported that many of their students began the co-curricular experiences skeptically but eventually described the experiences as “life changing” and “transforming.”

6. Encourage students to seek out and learn from experiences with different forms of diversity

There is considerable evidence that experiencing diversity is associated with many desirable benefits, such as enhancing leadership skills, developing the ability to work with people from different backgrounds, viewing the learning environment positively, and interacting more frequently with peers and with faculty members. The opportunities to learn about self and others create powerful enriching educational experiences, such as for those students who participate in the University of Texas at El Paso’s Bi-National Leadership Development Program, a collaborative leadership experience between UTEP and the Autonomous University of Juarez in Mexico. Salient learning opportunities, which may not occur in the classroom setting, derive from critical dialogue students from both institutions engage in on race, culture, and ethnicity. Alverno and George Mason craft shorter study abroad experiences to involve more

first-generation and non-traditional college students who otherwise might not consider a semester or full-year of study abroad. Advisors can champion the development of such opportunities and make certain their advisees are aware of them.

Questions to Ponder:

Academic advisors play an essential role in promoting student success. Many of the high performing institutions became successful in promoting student success through an improvement-oriented ethos—a perpetual learning mode focusing on where they are, what they are doing, and where they want to go. In this light, a number of questions to ponder are offered to help academic advisors improve in their important work.

1. What does your institution write or say about itself regarding the development of students’ talents?
2. Are resources and learning conditions arranged to maximize students’ potential?
3. How are programs and resources organized to help students succeed academically and socially, and is it effective?
4. To what extent are students academically challenged to go beyond what they are expected to do in college?
5. In what ways do academic advisors interact with students? Does the interaction appear meaningful?
6. What is the extent to which advisors are involved in programs and experiences that socialize first-year students to academic expectations of the institution?
7. To what extent do co-curricular and diversity experiences enhance the quality of students’ learning?

Answers to these questions from different types of strong performing institutions around the country are offered in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. The book features what 20 diverse, educationally

effective college and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project was supported with generous grants from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Altogether, the 24-member research team talked with more than 2,700 people during its 40 multiple-day site visits to the DEEP schools. Six properties and conditions shared by these colleges and universities are discussed along with a wide array of effective educational policies and practices that if adapted appropriately can help a campus create and sustain a culture that supports student success. The book can be used in faculty and staff development, strategic planning, institutional mission clarification, leadership development, and collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs. A companion volume, *Assessing Conditions for Student Success: An Inventory to Enhance Educational Effectiveness*, will be available in September 2005 and provides a template for institutions to use to identify areas of institutional functioning that can be improved to promote student success.

Sources:

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Project DEEP Colleges and Universities

Alverno College (WI)
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 The Evergreen State College (WA)
 Fayetteville State University (NC)
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