

# Advising Alliances: Sharing Responsibility for Student Success

*Susan H. Frost, Emory University*

Two sets of circumstances make this the right time to take a fresh look at academic advising. First, certain conditions call for change: (a) we have important clues about why some students succeed in college, (b) commitment to good teaching appears to be increasing, and (c) college graduates face changing expectations. Second, essential components of improved approaches are in place.

## Conditions Calling for Change

### *Condition One: Students Give Clues About Success*

As we who teach or otherwise guide undergraduates know, some students get more out of college than others. These students seem to discover the best in their college or university and learn sooner rather than later how to be successful within its systems. What contributes to their success? Long-held views (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) and our early findings (Simpson & Frost, 1993) suggest that involvement and commitment are two important attributes of successful students, and willingness to take responsibility for the future is a third. Involved, committed, and responsible students seem to know where they are going, spend whatever time and energy it takes to achieve their goals, and access the resources they need to help them along their way. They take a long view and plan early to achieve the goals they set for themselves. Rather than resembling popular descriptions of undergraduates—less prepared, focused, and willing to work than their counterparts a generation ago—these students enter college with purpose and direction. They are powerful models for other students and often become leaders of their peers. On campus they find not only abundant challenges but also discover most of the resources they need to manage the challenges. They have much to teach us about student success.

### *Condition Two: Commitment to Teaching Is Growing*

Similarly, some faculty have much to teach us also. Although journalists and authors profit from proclaiming the opposite, many faculty are

committed to teaching undergraduates. When asked how they balance teaching and research, 90% of faculty list teaching as their principal activity, 72% report that their interests lean toward teaching (Astin, Korn, & Dey, 1991), and 62% agree that teaching effectiveness should be the primary concern for promotion (Boyer, 1990). By example, these faculty deny the accusations of critics who charge that faculty value only research while they enjoy high pay, job security, and a system of peer review that protects them from the typical controls of the marketplace (Anderson, 1992; Kimball, 1990; Smith, 1990; Sykes, 1990a, 1990b). One new and especially disturbing parallel comes from Martin Greenberg, longtime dean of American University. Recently Greenberg (1993) likened faculty to volunteers—all their work other than teaching is optional, and sometimes the teaching is in question. Yet, year after year countless faculty "volunteer" for enlarged teaching roles by, for example, leading an orientation group, teaching a freshman seminar, or serving as an academic advisor. Accepting such responsibilities is not trivial; faculty do so because they subscribe to the teaching mission in its broadest sense.

### *Condition Three: Graduates Face Changing Expectations*

In addition to knowing about students and faculty, understanding the new demands graduates face is important. Today's undergraduates will live, work, and lead in a world that they—and we—can only imagine. New environmental, demographic, and technological realities require workers to (a) make information-based decisions; (b) work smarter, not harder; and (c) plan continually. These requirements contain demands not only for the curriculum, but for all learning in college. As gateways to the student's new world, programs that touch all student\* orientation, the freshman seminar, and academic advising, for example—an help prepare students for the future they face.

Like any other single effort, these programs cannot by themselves provide the solutions we need. However they have powerful advantages. Here we focus on advising, where we find

power in both the relationship between advisor and student and in the content of the relationship. In an environment often criticized for not providing coherent connecting points for students, advising establishes a one-on-one relationship between a student and a faculty member or other official representative of the college or university. Students come to college concerned about the future, and the future is the concern of the relationship. As we set about to make a difference for students, academic advising is a logical place to start.

### **Today's Realities: Less Than Ideal, But Improving**

Before we look at advising in new ways, it is good to get a sense of where we are, both nationally and from the perspectives of advisors and students. Although there have been perceived gains in advising effectiveness, these gains have been incremental at best. Developmental goals are not being achieved, and advising offices are in a state of crisis (Habley, 1993). Other indicators suggest, however, that interest in creating and sustaining effective programs is strong on campus. Even though most programs are underbudgeted and understaffed, attendance at National Academic Advising Association conferences increases each year, as does interest in its summer institute. My experiences with about 20 colleges and universities suggest that committed advisors, program directors, deans, provosts, and presidents continue to work for improvements. For example:

- At a voluntary advising retreat, a professor at a major public research university asked how she could make a real difference in the academic lives of her advisees. Her observation: Students seek ways to acquire the skills they need to meet the future, and when they do not learn these skills in the classroom, they do not know where to look.
- The new president of a private liberal arts college wondered how to sustain his school's strong commitment to teaching when its emerging research mission is receiving special emphasis. His question: Can quality advising help the college retain its essence as a fine teaching institution?
- Faculty heads of residential programs at an Ivy League university, having successfully involved some of the most senior, most visible faculty in advising, discussed ways to involve more junior faculty. Their comment:

Leadership among the faculty cohort is essential.

- After spending two days exploring routes to better advising, overloaded faculty at a community college of more than 30,000 students sought ways to make a difference. Their goal: To design a new approach for reaching underachieving nontraditional students.
- These examples demonstrate both interest in and energy for improved advising. The next questions begin with "How." In my view we need to join the strategies of successful students, the talents of committed advisors, and our knowledge of emerging demands. Fortunately essential components are in place.

### **Four Essential Components**

#### ***Component One: Developmental Academic Advising***

Developmental academic advising as defined by Crookston and O'Banion is organized around two principles: (a) higher education provides opportunities for people to plan for self-fulfilling lives, and (b) teaching includes any experience that contributes to personal growth and can be evaluated. Developmental advising, therefore, is a form of teaching and has as a goal helping students plan responsibly for the future. It is a rational process built on interaction with others and with the environment. Making decisions and solving problems are natural activities for developmentally advised students, and their skills should increase as they move through the curriculum. Seniors should need less guidance than freshmen because the attitudes and skills they develop should help them choose and attain a career as well as gain control over life situations that require investigation and planning (Frost, 1991a).

Developmental advising emphasizes process, not product, and this aspect is a cornerstone of the new system. Although developmental advising is more discussed than implemented (Habley 1993), learning can take place during the process (Frost, 1991b). When asked about their specific advising practices and attitudes, two groups of faculty identified by their students as developmental advisors revealed that attitude is more important than practice, process is more important than product. These advisors use the advising relationship to:

- involve students in their college experiences,
- explore with students the factors that lead to success, and

- show interest in students' academic progress and extracurricular achievements. (Frost, 1993)

Developmental advisors rarely make decisions for students. Rather they encourage students to ask open-ended questions, use campus resources to find answers, and plan courses of study and schedules around the outcomes of their explorations. These findings support earlier research on student preferences. Students want a personal relationship with advisors and prefer that the relationship concern academic rather than personal matters (Fielstein, 1987, 1989). Thus, developmental advisors and students seek the same outcome: a relationship based on academics that helps the student plan coherently for the future.

We focus on faculty advisors for two reasons. Most research concerns advising by faculty, and at most schools faculty do some or all of the advising (Habley, 1993). Although professional advisors form the backbone of many programs, faculty influence is undeniably strong.

### ***Component Two: The New Emphasis on Teaching***

In a recent report on the university of the 21st century, a statewide commission lists as university resources not only collections of buildings but also networks including teachers and students, and recognizes specifically the importance of good teaching and advising (Commonwealth of Virginia, undated). The commission echoes other voices that call for higher education to return teaching to its former prominence. For example, Ernest Boyer (1990), president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has suggested that scholarship be redefined to include the scholarship of teaching, through which future scholars are educated and enticed. Presidents, provosts, deans, and critics join Boyer, becoming more vocal each year. Teaching is the central mission of higher education, and reward systems need to reflect its weight. Today over 1000 institutions fund efforts to strengthen the teaching mission. This commitment reflects growing support for quality teaching.

### ***Component Three: Planning Skills Are Becoming Essential Life Skills***

Mission, goals, evaluation, improvement—this is the language of planning. At reaccreditation time we become familiar with these terms be-

cause most accrediting bodies require that institutions use planning processes, evaluate achievement, and use the results of evaluation for continuous quality improvement. Fortunately such strategies have more far-reaching implications. Institutions plan to avoid the losses associated with faulty predictions, and individuals plan to manage the complex influences that define modern life. Where in the curriculum do we teach these skills to students? Advising is a good place to start.

### ***Component Four: Society Values Teamwork***

When students begin college, they do not see or understand the administrative lines through which institutions manage themselves. Freshmen may know that colleges are organized into departments, but most do not understand that colleges with high degrees of independence form universities, that academic affairs and student affairs are separate organizations, or that in-class and out-of-class learning go forward with little or no coordination. Many seniors, still failing to understand institutional structure, have not made the most of campus resources. The coordination, or teamwork, that should exist on campus is missing or hidden. As society comes to value teamwork and many organizations require employees to be effective team members, contributing to a team effort becomes an essential skill. Productivity and creativity increase when team dynamics are strong.

### ***Advising Alliances: The Next Step for Students and Programs***

Considering the conditions we have discussed, what is the next step for advising? Challenges abound, as advisors, advising directors, deans, provosts, and presidents are quick to recognize. Advisors are overloaded. Programs are underfunded. Advisors, students, and parents are dissatisfied. The good news: Creative solutions exist within the institutions and the individuals that seek them. We tend to look outward for answers, but often the best solutions come from within. Perhaps addressing the following questions can help uncover them.

- Who are our students? What specific traits and circumstances define their needs?
- Who are our advisors? What strengths do the most valuable advisors bring to our students?
- What structures will best serve our students and advisors?

- Within these structures, how can we meet student and institutional needs and link all available resources?

When committed stakeholders thoughtfully address these questions, an exciting process begins. For example:

- Within the institutional culture, the needs of students, and not the needs of institutions emerge as the driving force.
- Diversity among students and advisors becomes a strategic advantage.
- Planning teams develop around common issues.
- As teams ask questions and seek the information they need to design solutions, they model developmental advising concepts.
- As teams take responsibility for the components they plan, alliances form, and another valuable pattern for advisors and students is in place.

Ideally, advisors and students adopt the patterns of the teams and also form alliances. Advisors who question, investigate, and plan with

students can teach or guide them into acquiring life skills.

Perhaps the soundest advice to those who need change: Resist seeking a fast answer. Instead design strategic solutions that fit your populations, and draw stakeholders from all constituencies into the process. The eventual rewards will be richer and more far-reaching than first imagined.

### First Steps That Work

- Define mission early. According to Habley (1993) 60% of advising programs have a written policy statement; therefore, 60% have a starting point. Perhaps the first move is as simple as reordering existing priorities. See Table 1 for an example of this strategy.
- Convince faculty leaders to join the effort. This is essential, even if professional advisors form the core staff.
- Involve students in planning. They are important stakeholders in all aspects of the program.

**TABLE 1**  
**A Reordering of Developmental Advising Priorities**

---

One college that was interested in establishing a developmental advising program began with this priority list:

- Establish a caring working relationship.
- Discuss the relevance of higher education and the liberal arts.
- Provide a rationale for distribution requirements.
- Stimulate life and career planning.
- Clarify goals.
- Relate interests and abilities to educational and career plans.
- Assist in choosing a major.
- Help with course selection and scheduling.
- Monitor academic progress.
- Encourage exploration of options and alternatives.
- **Encourage extracurricular involvement.**
- Function as a referral agent.

By revising and reordering priorities, the college achieved a strong developmental advising model.

The new continuum:

- Establish a caring working relationship.
  - Help students clarify goals.
  - Discuss the relevance of higher education and liberal studies.
  - Encourage thinking about life and career planning.
  - Relate interest and abilities to plans.
  - Assist in exploring and selecting majors.
  - Provide a rationale for requirements.
  - Help select and schedule courses.
  - Monitor academic progress.
  - Encourage students to explore options, become involved, and use campus resources throughout their time in college.
-

- Blend group and individual advising. As advising becomes a teaching process, group advising allows an expanded mission to be achieved.
- Unleash the power of peer advisors. Peer advisors provide valuable bridges, especially in group situations. Build in essential elements: training, ongoing supervision, and feedback about performance.
- Nurture the bridges that form across campus. Strong working relationships lead to strong alliances, and these gains can influence other efforts.
- Evaluate as you go. Use nonthreatening, formative approaches, perhaps including self-evaluation by advisors.
- Keep desired outcomes in mind. An effective program can increase student responsibility and help students build skills for the future.

### What Can Leadership Do?

Leadership can help best by supporting advising on all levels. Of course, budget comes to mind, but this is only the beginning. Support for planning, mission development, and ongoing campuswide collaboration is essential. Strategies that include altering the reward system to acknowledge advisors' commitment require support from the top, and there are compelling arguments for such support. Resources committed to advising reach students. When compared to the dollars other programs require, investing in traditional advising makes sense. Investing in advising alliances makes even more sense because returns include learning for students, professional development for faculty, and eventually satisfied alumni. Learning is our goal. Advising alliances can contribute to learning and do so in the larger ways today's students need.

### References

- Anderson, M. (1992). *Impostors in the temple*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college?: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Astin, A. W., Korn, W. S., & Dey, E. L. (1991). *The American college teacher: National norms for the 1989-90 HERI faculty survey*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute. University of California, Los Angeles.
- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Commonwealth of Virginia Commission on the University of the Twenty-First Century. (undated). *The case for change*.
- Fielstein, L. L. (1987). Student preferences for personal contact in a student-faculty advising relationship. *NACADA Journal*, 7(2), 34-40.
- Fielstein, L. L. (1989). Student priorities for academic advising: Do they want a personal relationship? *NACADA Journal*, 9(1), 33-38.
- Frost, S. H. (1991a). *Academic advising for student success: A system of shared responsibility* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 3). Washington, DC: George Washington University School of Education and Human Development.
- Frost, S. H. (1991b). Fostering the critical thinking of college women through academic advising and faculty contact. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32, 356-359.
- Frost, S. H. (1993). Developmental advising: Practices and attitudes of faculty advisors. *NACADA Journal*, 13(2), 15-20.
- Greenberg, M. (1993, October 20). Accounting for faculty members' time. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A68.
- Habley, W. R. (1993). Fulfilling the promise?: Final report of the ACT fourth national survey of academic advising. Iowa City: American College Testing.
- Kimball, R. (1990). *Tenured radicals: How politics has corrupted our higher education*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Simpson, R., & Frost, S. (1993). *Inside college*. New York: Plenum.
- Smith, P. (1990). *Killing the spirit: Higher education in America*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Sykes, C. J. (1990a). *The hollow men: Politics and corruption in higher education*. Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway.
- Sykes, C. J. (1990b). *Profscam: Professors and the demise of higher education*. Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway.

Swan H. Frost is director of institutional planning and research. Address correspondence concerning this article to her at 114 Administration Building, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322.