Academic Advising in a 100 Percent Online Environment

Building Relationships Through a Variety of Advising Methods

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Who is Columbia Southern University?

• Primarily online; hybrid program in Vietnam
• 34,806 active students (enrolled in a course in 12 months; 28,998 – 6 month reporting
• Online enrollment options:
  ✓ Term
  ✓ LifePace Learning
  ✓ Veteran’s Advantage

Who Our Students Are

• 45% military related (using military funding – VA, TA, military spouse, active duty, etc.)
• 20,352 student between 31-45 (58.38%)
• Largest age group 31-35 (7,425); smallest age group 18-20 (218)
• Working adults
• Seeking degree for promotion/job retention
CSU Academic Advising Services

- 48 employees
- 36 active advisors (4 open positions)
- Average of 1,100 students per advisor
- Initial and ongoing advisor-specific training
- Proactive outreach to students at various points in program
- A variety of advising delivery methods:
  - Phone
  - Email
  - SMS Messaging
  - Adobe Connect Webinars

Distance Education Research

- “Adults...need someone within the institution who cares.” (Bland, 2003, p.1)
- “Every individual is unique, and the advisor’s recognition of that student’s personal attributes and life situations can strengthen the relationship.” (Bland, 2003, p.8)
- Alternative strategies and tools...to help students feel connected..., promote persistence..., and increase graduation rates. (Luna & Medina, 2007)

More Distance Education Research

- Distance advisors will need to build and solidify relationship with students via different strategies.
- One is to develop and utilize some type of early warning system to identify students at risk. Be proactive as possible with student questions and concerns; anticipate student questions. (Varney, 2009)
- Keep track of students and reach out to them at various checkpoints. (Varney, 2009)
- The institutional philosophy...must be to strive to respond to learner needs rather than the learner adjusting to an institution's established organizational structure. (NACADA, 1999)
Proactive Advising Research

- Yarbrough’s Engagement model:
  - Identify student assumptions
  - Encourage student to recognize unclear assumptions
  - Identify future goals of student
  - Direct student through meeting requirements
  (Yarbrough, 2002)
- Adult learners: advisors need to make the first move with the student regarding advising and have contact with the student on a regular basis. (Glennen and Basley, 1985)

And More Proactive Advising Research

- Advisors need to be knowledgeable about the institution and resources available. (Yarbrough, 2002)
- By understanding the non-academic factors that will have an impact on the ability for the student to complete coursework, the advisor can work to provide a balanced approach and not overwhelm the student. (Giroir, B. & Shcwehm, J., 2014)

Methods of Advising

- Dependent on the needs of the student.
- Many in higher education continue to consider developmental advising (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009; O’Banion, 1972/1994/2009); the most effective form of advising, but in some circumstances prescriptive advising may be more appropriate.
- Many adults who are seeking workforce training or degree completion have embraced distance learning as a means of achieving their educational goals (Steele, G. 2005).
Comprehensive Training

- Mentoring
- Training for all (most) policies/practices that academic advisor will encounter on a daily basis
- Classroom training integrated with on-the-floor training with active advisors
- More advisors = less rushed in training
- Cross training with other departments
- Ongoing refresher training

Proactive Contact Points: When do we contact our students?

- MyStudents
  - Initial Advising Session
  - Student Struggling in a Course
  - Unsuccessful Course Completion
- Possible SAP Status change
- Enrollment Approval (variety of reasons)
- Academic Probation
- Reenrollment with Low GPA
- 12 Hours from Graduation

Initial Advising Session

- Between submission of first enrollment and seven days into beginning of course
- Small number of appointments set by admissions; otherwise, advisor establishes first contact and sets appt.
- Initial Advising Session is not required
Initial Advising Session (cont’d)

- Initial Advising Session includes the following topics:
  - Contact preference
  - Advising relationship expectation
  - Review of program requirements
  - Long-term/short-term goals and relation to degree
  - Motivation for degree completion
  - Previous educational experience
  - Enrollment plan and degree completion goal
  - Available resources
  - myCSU student portal
- Now also being delivered in Adobe Connect Sessions to multiple students at a time
How does the IAS build relationships?

- Establishes an early connection between student and advisor
- Establishes advisor as the student’s main point of contact
- Conversation varies dependent on student needs/questions/response
- Sets student up for success from the start

Students Struggling in a Course

- Course GPA is .5 below overall GPA with 20% of course work submitted
- Grade in course must be C or below
- No progress in course (submission) in 21 days for LifePace Learning students or 14 days for Term students
- No log in to course in 48 hours from course start
How does the Student Struggling in a Course build relationships?

- Offers resources and options to the student
- Proactively addresses situations which may be extenuating
- Advisor connects with the student before an F or W in the course
- Lets the student know that the advisor is looking out for him/her
- Can bring situations to the student that he/she doesn’t realize are occurring

Unsuccessful Course Completion

- Student has failed last enrollment
- Student received a WF in last enrollment
- Student was likely contacted during previous enrollment (Students Struggling or for Possible SAP/Probation Enrollment)
How does Unsuccessful Course Completion build relationships?

• Assists with best option for student moving forward
• Advises student on how the unsuccessful course completion may affect/has affected academic standing or SAP status
• Establishes an ongoing relationship of concern/mentoring
• Proactively offers student alternatives; may discover extenuating circumstances

Probation Enrollment/Possible SAP Status Change Enrollment

• All financial aid enrollments scanned for possible SAP status change (based on current progress in courses)
• System looks at current GPA and current completion ratio and calculates possibility of remaining assignments as “0” and as “100”
• If lowest possible GPA or completion ratio falls below SAP requirements, enrollment is reviewed by academic advisor
• All enrollments by students on academic probation reviewed

Enrollment Approvals (Other Reasons)

• Three system definitions for enrollment: in-degree, advised, prerequisite met
• Enrollment must meet prerequisite and either in degree or advised. If not, must be reviewed by advisor.
• Advisor contacts student regarding missing prerequisite, course not applying to degree, elective option, etc.
How does the Enrollment Approval contact build relationships?

• Advisor is proactively offering alternatives for next term
• Contacts student regarding the possibility of SAP status change or where in probation status student falls – explains the ramifications of current progress
• Student sees that advisor is in the business of student’s success
• Preempts a conversation in the future concerning courses not applying to degree or how to appeal/come off Failing SAP
Reenrollment on Probation

- AAs reach out to all students coming back from inactive status who have a GPA below the required standard.
- AA explains in email which courses student will need to retake, ramifications of changing program, use of financial aid/financial aid status, etc.
- Without student acknowledgement, reenrollment is not processed

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How does Reenrollment contact build relationships?

- Establishes an early connection between student and new advisor
- Student is not surprised later in program that he/she needs to retake specific courses that will not apply to new/revised program
- Student is not surprised about lack of financial aid eligibility
- Puts student on a path of success

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12 Hours From Graduation

- System reports all students who are 12 hours from completion of required degree hours
- Advisor mails handwritten postcard to student with personal message, graduation checklist
- Promote excitement of graduation to those who will not attend commencement ceremony

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How does the Approaching Graduation contact build relationships?

- Closes the loop on the advisor/advisee relationship
- An extremely positive and personal contact
- Who doesn’t like to receive hand-written, snail mail?
- Creates excitement over the graduation process for distance students who may not participate in graduation ceremony
Coffee Talk (with no coffee)

- Pros/cons of these initiatives at CSU
- Do you have similar initiatives at your institutions?
- If not, how can your advising teams implement similar initiatives?
- What would be the pros and cons of these types of initiatives?

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