Advising At-Risk Students in the Community College

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Advising At-Risk Students in the Community College: Part Two

Community colleges have always had to deal with the ever changing needs of their surrounding communities. As more students continue to graduate from our high schools every year and the worth of the high school diploma continues to decline, more students will be wanting to obtain a higher level degree (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). Statistics from "CU Freshman Applications" (2008), show that both the University of Colorado (CU) and Colorado State University (CSU) have received record numbers of applications from potential freshmen for this upcoming fall 2008 school year. CU has received 23,000 applications for approximately 5,600 seats, while CSU has received 13,377 applications for approximately 4,650 seats. This means that the 26,127 remaining students not accepted into the CU or CSU system will have to look elsewhere to fulfill their educational needs. A large portion of these students will more than likely funnel into Colorado’s community college system. Since CU and CSU will selectively admit the most qualified applicants, many of the remaining students forced into the community colleges will be less prepared than their university bound counterparts. These underprepared students will add additional challenges to the faculty and staff members employed at these institutions.

Underprepared students are characterized as being at-risk of academic failure in higher education. Heisserer and Parette (2002) write that other students considered to be at-risk include those who are “ethnic minorities… have disabilities, are of low socioeconomic status, and are probationary students” (p. 69). First-generation college students can also be added to this list as they have more difficulty transitioning from high school to college and are more likely to leave their institution before graduating than their peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). These students are coming to college with numerous challenges
against them, and without proper guidance many of these students will succumb to looming, yet preventable attrition.

Attrition affects both the student as well as the institution. For the student it is obvious. Less education means fewer opportunities and lower rates of pay in the job market. According to the US Census Bureau, college students who complete an Associates degree earn significantly more over a lifetime than students who only complete some college, while those who complete a Bachelor’s degree earn over 25% more than students who do not complete a degree (Day & Newburger, 2002). This means that a great deal of earning potential is riding on a student’s level of educational attainment. As for the institutions of attendance, attrition can affect patterns of funding, facilities planning, the academic curriculum, as well as the future labor market (Heisserer & Parette 2002). Recruiting is also extremely affected by attrition. The more students colleges retain, the less money they need to spend on recruiting efforts.

So why are so many of our college students unable to compete in higher education? There are many factors that play into this problem. If one examines the characteristics of the at-risk student, those who are first-generation college students, academically underprepared, students of color, of low socioeconomic status, probationary students, or have disabilities, it becomes more clear as to why so many students are not completing their degrees. Many of these students lack the social, human, or cultural capital that other, more advantaged, students bring with them. This is especially true for first-generation students who are often unprepared, of low socioeconomic status, and students of color. Pascarella et al. (2004), show that first-generation students are disadvantage in their access to cultural and human capital due to non-college educated parents. Because of this, students have less knowledge of college costs and
application processes, lower levels of family support, and low educational expectations.

“Compared to their peers with highly educated parents, first-generation students are more likely to be handicapped in accessing and understanding information and attitudes relevant to making beneficial decisions about such things as the importance of completing a college degree and what kinds of academic and social choices to make while in attendance” (p. 252).

Other issues that deter retention include the college environment itself. Students, especially students of color who often attend predominantly white institutions, often may feel as if they do not belong or feel they are not a part of the campus community (Heisserer & Parette 2002). In order to be successful, students need to feel as if they belong. They need to become incorporated into the academic and social organizations on campus to establish a membership (King, 1993). “Failure to establish membership can result in student withdrawal from the institution” (p. 24).

Poor preparation in the K-12 system also contributes to students being unprepared and at-risk. Many students erroneously believe that they are prepared for college even though they avoid substantive classes that would help prepare them for college level work (Rigoglioso, 2005). Rigoglioso (2005), writes that if students are not in the top 15 percent of their high school class, they will often not be made aware of information necessary to succeed in college. Low expectations as well as unequal distribution of funds and resources across school districts, also creates a population of underprepared students applying to community colleges (Heisserer & Parette 2002).

From the picture painted above, it is obvious that many students entering the community college are at-risk and in desperate need of assistance if they are to be successful. But what resources are there for these students and who will help them acclimate and succeed
in this rigorous and often unfamiliar college environment? The academic advising center is probably the most important support service on the community college campus that helps to retain at-risk students (King, 1993). “As the only structured service on campus that guarantees students some kind of interaction with a concerned representative of the institution, academic advising is critical for student retention and successful transfer” (p. 21). Advisors are often the only people students have an opportunity to meet with on a regular basis. Students see their instructors during class, but with busy schedules and limited office hours, it may be difficult for students to connect with their teachers outside of the classroom. Since advising centers are usually open for extended hours and are generally centrally located, students may find it easier to make an appointment or simply meet with an advisor during walk-in hours. This consistent availability can offer students, especially those at-risk, a convenient opportunity to build a relationship with a member of the institution instilling in the student a much needed sense of belonging.

Results from a study conducted by Metzner (1989), involving freshmen at a public institution, showed that the best strategy for improving retention was to provide students with good advising. Good advising was positively associated with the retention of freshmen students, and poor advising proved to have more positive results than no advising at all. King (1993), reports as well, that by improving advising services on campus, colleges have been able to enhanced student retention. This demonstrates the important role that academic advisors play in retaining students. So how does advising work and what constitutes as “good advising”?

There are many organizational models of advising used in different community colleges across the United States. King (2002), describes the three most popular
organizational models currently being used. These include the self-contained, faculty only, and split models. The self-contained model developed out of the guidance office concept used in many of the public school systems. With this model, all advising is done through a central unit, commonly referred to as an advising center. Advisors in these centers are professionally trained and may work with faculty to some degree, but do all of the advising themselves. This model is the second most popular form of advising used by community colleges. The faculty only model, which is the third most commonly used model, is relatively self explanatory. In this model the faculty take care of all of the students’ advising needs. The most frequently used form of advising is the split model. This model makes use of both faculty and professional advisors. There is an advising center, but the advisors here work mostly with special populations, including at-risk students. Faculty are responsible for the remaining advisees. Other organizational models of advising include, supplementary, dual, total intake, and satellite (Habley, 1993). These models however, are not as widely used by community colleges.

So which of these models works best for students at-risk? King (2002), advocates for the split model. She feels that this style of advising builds on the strengths that both faculty and professional advisors bring with them. Faculty have a more focused expertise in their area of study which many students may find helpful, while professional advisors have useful student development backgrounds. Professional advisors also are trained to work with students, especially those who have remedial needs, consider advising to be their main priority, and usually have offices that are centrally located. In this regard, it appears that the use of a professional advisor is extremely beneficial to the successful retention of at-risk students. Therefore either a split or self-contained model would be the preferred method of
advising for students at-risk. As valuable as these models appear to be though, King (2002), warns, that with dwindling budgets, many community colleges may be favoring the use of faculty only advising, as this method proves to be the least expensive.

According to Heisserer and Parette (2002), there are three traditional advising strategy models most commonly used when advising students including, prescriptive, developmental, and integrated. Prescriptive advising involves the advisor taking an authoritative role. The advisor prescribes a plan for the advisee of which they are to follow. The decision making is done by the advisor and the advisee provides very little input in this process. With developmental advising, the student takes more responsibility and develops greater independence and empowerment. In this model the advisor is considered to be more of a facilitator, helping students to make decisions themselves. Raushi (1993), believes that quality advisement is a result of developmental advising which focuses on human development and views students in the context of all parts of their life, not just the academic. In this view, developmental advising is seen as an ongoing process where the advisor establishes a caring relationship with the advisee and takes into consideration all life experiences when setting academic goals. However, Brown & Rivas (1993), warn against assuming that everyone will benefit from the same model of advising. For example, certain students from different cultural backgrounds may not be as receptive to developmental advising as others. Some cultures place more value on the authoritative role of elders and may adapt more to a prescriptive model. For this reason, Heisserer & Parette (2002), write that an integrated model that incorporates aspects of both the prescriptive and developmental models, should be implemented.
Many strategies and designs have been developed and used to advise students, but what has been shown to work best with at-risk students who come to community colleges almost bound for failure? Data shows that community colleges generally lose about half of their students by the end of their freshmen year (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2004). The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2004), results show that 36% of its respondents, more than one third, do not, or rarely use academic advising services. Almost all of them (88%), however, feel that academic advising is important. It has been shown that having a plan and setting goals is vital in a student’s decision to return to school. In fact, a student’s persistence can easily be increased simply by choosing a major (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2004). Since so many at-risk students, especially first-generation, enter the postsecondary arena unaware of their options and the inner-workings of the institution, it is important for them to be engaged as early as possible. Underprepared students seem to profit most from early and continuous advising services (Makela, 2006). One style of advising that has been used with at-risk students that involves such a strategy is know as intrusive advising.

Intrusive advising is an advising style in which the advisor proactively engages a student deemed to be at risk. It includes intervention strategies that facilitate informed decision making, increased motivation, and enhanced academic success (Heisserer and Parette, 2002). According to Holmes (2003), intrusive advising is guided by a principle in which academic and social integration are essential to persistence in college, and that through intrusive advising students can be taught these orientation skills. She states that, “intrusive advising has been effective in increasing the retention and overall academic performance of a variety of high-risk students” (p. 1).
The intrusive advising of at-risk students at the community college begins with assessment (Garing, 1993). Advisors need to be aware of assessment scores so they can properly place students into the appropriate classes. When speaking with students about placement scores, advisors need to be sure that the students clearly understand the results and their implications (Makela, 2006). This is especially true for students in need of remediation. They may be confused about the necessity of the remedial class work and may not understand the implications of their course planning decisions. Clear lines of communication are important in intrusive advising.

The most important feature of intrusive advising revolves around the proactive nature of the advisor. It is important for advisors to seek out their at-risk advisees since these students often will not take the initiative in finding help (Holmes, 2003). Although the word “intrusive” often has a negative connotation attached to it, intrusion by an advisor is a display of concern showing the student that someone at the institution cares about them. A great chance for advisors to make their initial intrusion is at orientation (Garing 1993). Advisors can arrange to meet students at orientation in small groups, or one-on-one. This initial contact is extremely important, and sets the stage for the student-advisor relationship.

After the initial contact, advisors must continue to be in touch with their advisees. Garing (1993), recommends four critical times during the first semester in which advisors should be contacting their students. These include after three weeks, midterm, pre-registration, and between semesters. Of these times, the midterm is one of the most important, as progress reports are often sent out and students still have time catch up in failing classes. There also may be a discussion about dropping classes if necessary. The main idea though, is that advisors need to seek out their at-risk advisees through either mail, email, or telephone.
This intrusion not only shows the student that someone concerned about them, but also helps in motivation which is a major benefit of intrusive advising. “Students who know that an academic advisor will contact them are more motivated to keep up with their work” (Holmes, 2003).

Another necessity in intrusive advising is for advisors to be knowledgeable about the services available at their institutions. Advisors need to make these services available to students at-risk and encourage them to take advantage of these opportunities. Encouraging students to get help through on campus resources is extremely important in the success of these students and is another way the advisor shows the student that they are concerned with their education and truly care (Holmes, 2003). Services commonly available include learning centers, tutorial services, labs, and career centers.

Other intrusive advising strategies that have been used successfully include, the use of open-ended questioning, identification of student strengths and weaknesses, matching student learning styles with instructor teaching styles, goal setting and action plan development, and the explanation of the importance of deadlines and attendance (Miller & Murray, 2005). Hicks (2002), also stresses the importance of including the parents in the advising process. Parents should be encouraged to attend orientation and other activities that could promote the support of their children’s academic aspirations. This could prove to be especially important for first-generation students whose families are not as familiar with the college environment.

Academic advising is an important part of the community college. Academic advisors are often the first and only representatives of an institution that students will meet. It is imperative for advisors to use their skills and talents in the most suitable ways to help their students, especially those at-risk succeed. In their case study of a student retention program
for at-risk students, Walleri, Stoker & Stoering (1997), showed that students earned more cumulative credit hours and had higher one-year retention rates when they were involved in intensive academic advising. These statistics stress the importance of quality academic advising programs. With the diverse populations that community colleges enroll there will always be underprepared students at-risk and in need of extra assistance. Therefore it is necessary for these institutions to have highly qualified advisors with sound advising techniques able to assist their students in achieving academic success.
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