

Advising Can Boost Student Success

A Holistic Approach Places Advising at the Center of the Student Experience



Direction, guidance, support, connection, and learning are just a few words to describe the critical role advising plays in students' journeys toward academic, personal, and career goals. Often viewed as unsung heroes, advisors can see the forest through the trees when it comes to student issues. They hear frustrations about financial aid, study-abroad policies, or the challenges students face balancing work, school, and other priorities. Additionally, advisors meet with students who struggle with basic needs or require help navigating complex relationships with faculty and peers. It is no surprise that despite the multitude of changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and technology in recent years, advising remains an essential component of the student success toolkit.

The Importance of Quality Advising

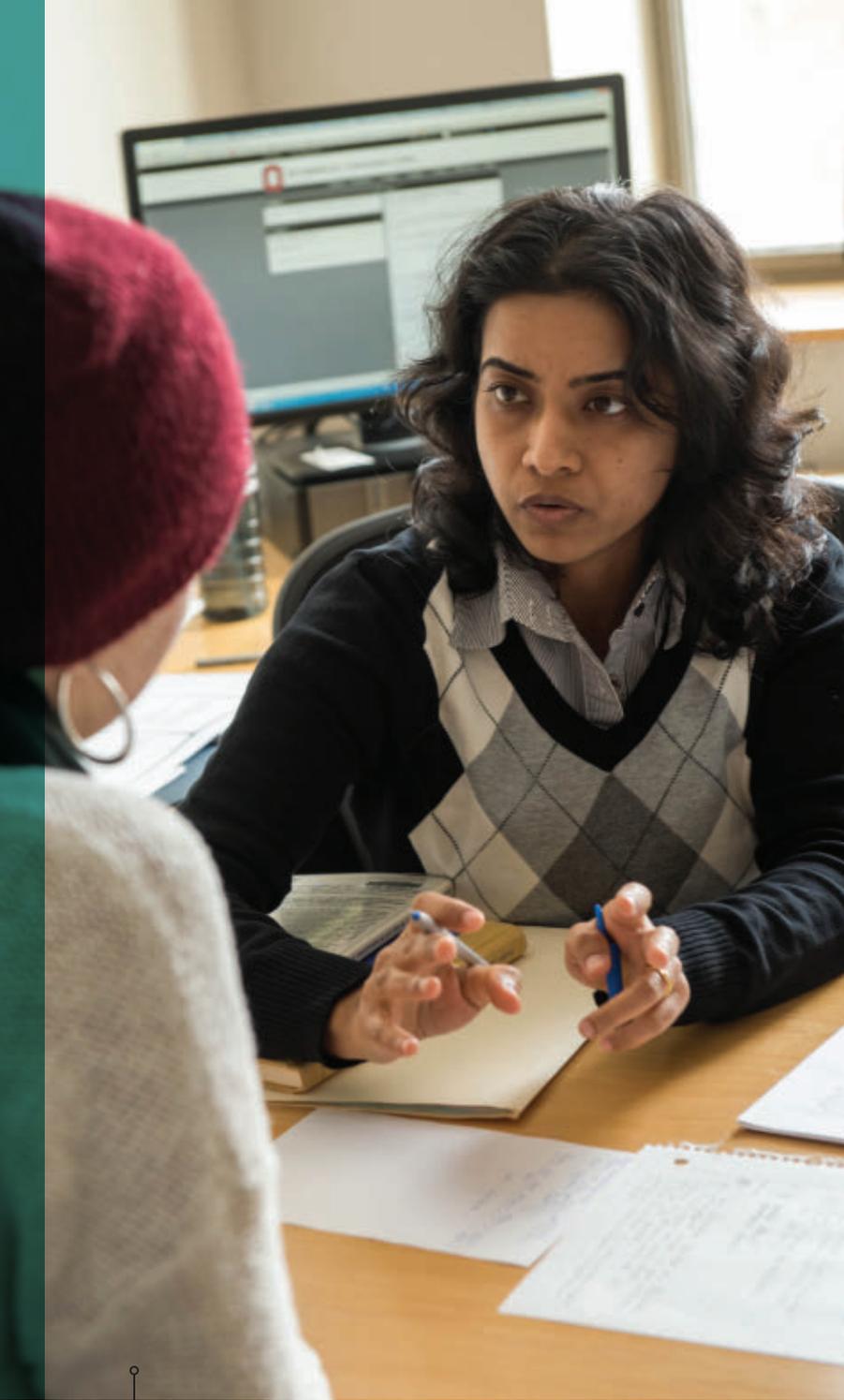
Students are faced with a number of complex challenges when entering higher education. Some may be uncertain of their course of study. Others may be figuring out how to balance work, school, and home. Many incoming students may be overwhelmed by the multitude of information they receive in such a short period of time. Campuses with strong advising programs are best positioned to help students tackle these challenges by providing holistic advising experiences coordinated with other student support services.

"Driving Toward a Degree 2020," a survey report of 2,500 administrators, advisors, counselors, and faculty from nearly 1,000 higher education institutions conducted by Tyton Partners, underscores the significance of collaboration between advising units and student supports for student success. The survey reported the most collaborative institutions have seen the largest increases in retention rates when comparing the 2012–2013 and 2017–2018 academic years. These highly collaborative institutions strive to create a seamless educational experience for students—in which students are supported in identifying and achieving their personal, professional, and academic goals, and student support staff integrate and coordinate their work with students.

The Ideal Advising Experience

To realize an impact in retention and achieve students' success aspirations, an institution should create a holistic advising experience for its students that:

- 1 incorporates academic, career, and basic needs advising.
- 2 involves advisors engaging with students throughout their tenure at the institution.
- 3 effectively integrates nonacademic supports such as student success courses.
- 4 encourages students to have mandatory check-ins with advisors.
- 5 proactively identifies students who may need additional support.
- 6 recognizes and addresses the unique needs of each student.
- 7 allows for a healthy balance of transactional and developmental activities between the advisor and their students.



Advising experiences should be designed as part of students' development and learning journeys.

This ideal notion of holistic advising requires a strong interplay between traditional advising activities and other facets of institutions, such as course selection, the student experience, and institutional culture. Additionally, an effort to redesign these services has broader implications for institutional transformation. This process can quickly become complicated and must be conducted with intentionality and purpose to achieve desired improvements in institutional and student outcomes, which cannot happen without the support of vice presidents for student affairs (VPSAs).

How VPSAs Should Approach Advising Redesign

Advising experiences should be designed as part of students' development and learning journeys. However, in many cases, students treat visiting an advisor like going to a doctor's appointment—something to handle on their to-do lists. It is often transactional, only when necessary or mandatory, and viewed as a required obligation rather than a valuable learning opportunity. VPSAs are perfectly positioned to illustrate the value of advising and to embed it into the larger ecosystem of the student experience.

"Academic advising is all about creating a pathway for student success," says Colin Stewart,

Advocating for Professional Development Opportunities

VPSAs can acknowledge how vital advising is to championing student success by embedding it in the institutional culture so advising is considered a vital teaching and learning activity rather than a secondary activity to academics. "With holistic advising redesign work, many institutions recognize the value of professional advisors with smaller caseloads who have the time to engage in more frequent, meaningful advising interactions," describes Laura Emerick, executive director of student success and engagement at Marion Technical College. She notes that several higher education institutions in the last three years have totally flipped their advising structures, hiring 20-plus staff members for larger schools or proportional numbers for smaller schools, to support those goals.

"Providing staff with ongoing professional development opportunities is critical to improving one's advising practice, maintaining motivation, and connecting with the profession, not just the job," says Emerick. At many institutions, front-line advisors are not always provided with those opportunities because they are not in leadership roles or in management positions. "This ties back to advocating for the financial resources to provide professional development for advising staff and sharing the wealth to make sure all staff members have that opportunity," notes Emerick. "When I became a director for the first time, that was one of my first commitments."

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associate dean of student involvement at Fresno State University. “I also see student success as a comprehensive, progressive, and accessible journey through the collegiate experience. A VPSA or vice president of academic affairs should ensure a curated approach to a student’s journey where the curricular and cocurricular, student engagement, and community development are intertwined in a deliberate way.” Stewart adds, “A VPSA should ensure that those milestones are met through coursework and all of the aspects of the student journey outside the classroom.”

As with most, if not all, institutional student success efforts, leadership commitment and oversight are essential when rethinking advising and student support services. Whether advising is housed within student affairs or academic affairs, VPSAs play critical roles in ensuring three things:

- ▶ A vision is provided on how the institution will support its students.
- ▶ The unique needs of the institution’s student population are identified and shared.
- ▶ Campus student affairs professionals and advisors are well-equipped to maximize the available resources to support students.

To successfully lead change and to create a holistic advising experience, it is important to understand the current state of advising on campus. VPSAs can review student satisfaction and engagement surveys, conduct focus groups with students, and glean insights from faculty and student affairs staff. Most importantly, VPSAs need to talk to advising staff members. Advisors will share their day-to-day experiences working with students and help identify institutional structures, policies, and processes that may be barriers to student success.

Advisors are storytellers and keepers of knowledge, ranging from understanding a major to locating the closest food pantry to finding interview-appropriate clothes on a student budget. Advisors are often detectives, creative problem solvers, and negotiators in one 30-minute student appointment. Advisors are the most likely campus representative to deliver difficult news or congratulations—sometimes in the same day. Advisors teach students to advocate for themselves, build self-efficacy, and understand failure and success. Advisors incorporate student development and other theories into practice and often have graduate degrees from student affairs or higher education administration programs. The wide-ranging spectrum of information and insights advisors provide, along with student and staff perspectives, frame a clearer vision for improved integration of advising and student supports that can make a greater impact on student success.

University of Arizona Helps Advisors Engage Students

The University of Arizona has created a 100% Engagement Program to help address programming workloads with the advising community. Many advisors were overloaded with advising and could not find time to plan robust student engagement activities. Leadership ranked each college at the university by size and current staffing and provided needed staff for each college to conduct engagement work along with tracking, planning, and other functions. These student engagement coordinators worked under advising offices and did the heavy lifting to create events, using concepts and ideas from advising.

Manage Structure and Processes

VPSAs can have an immediate and direct impact on students’ advising experiences by ensuring that advising is perceived as an essential component of the student experience throughout the campus community. A primary focus should be putting the necessary structures and processes in place to achieve the ideal state.

A backward design approach can uncover how advising is experienced on campus. First, institutions must identify preferred advising outcomes. John Sauter, assistant dean for academic affairs at Niagara University, explains “understanding this end goal allows VPSAs and other leadership to address what they believe is critically important for advisees to know and/or accomplish, what processes need to be in place to make that happen, and who is critically important.” This will help identify the systemic equity issues, silos, workload imbalance, and disparities that leadership can address, according to Sauter. Student affairs and academic leadership can then move forward with redesign initiatives for student advising.

Create Strong Advisor–Advisee Interactions

A move to place advising at the center of the student experience illustrates that an institution sees advising as an integral part of students’ educational inquiry. In practice, VPSAs can think critically about how advising is incorporated into the fabric of a student’s introduction to an institution, most likely at new student orientation or visitation events. Typically, students interact with advising at orientation in a few ways: sessions about understanding

Incorporating Student Affairs into Advising

According to Rachel Fulton, senior academic evaluator who handles articulation agreements at the University of Cincinnati, the university holds an Advising Open House immediately before priority registration opens for students. Advisors from students' major departments, university-level advisors, campus- and school-level student affairs representatives, and Fulton attend the open house. Student affairs professionals provide conversation and resources in the "waiting room" as students prepare to meet their designated advisors. In her former position as an academic advisor in the Purdue School of Engineering and Technology at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, Fulton notes that advisors also serve as first-year seminar instructors and incorporate student affairs into their curriculum.

the curriculum, either general education or major-specific; selection of coursework for the upcoming term; and study skills or ways to be successful in college. These are often one-hour sessions, crammed between sessions on student life and financial aid. To enhance the student-advisor relationship, the orientation experience should last well into the first term. Intentional interactions, such as mandatory advising, sessions in residence halls, or first-year and transfer seminar courses, allow for the creation of meaningful relationships. Students need to see advisors as reliable sources of information and staff members they can trust. This relationship cannot be fostered by chance encounters.

Identify and Address Inequities

VPSAs have an opportunity to critically examine processes for inequities, including office hours that do not benefit working students, inaccessibility to technology on a reliable basis, and differences in quality of advising by major or department. Some of the best ways to ensure that all students have meaningful and fair advising experiences are regular conversations with and professional development opportunities for advisors. As the people who regularly translate policy and procedures to students, advisors look at each interaction with a watchful eye. Sarah Howard, an advisor at The Ohio State University, explains that a leader "who has a firm understanding that advisors serve as a critical touchpoint between students and academic programs will be sure to invite advisors into the discussion about systemic changes that will impact students, whether at a department, college, or university level." She adds, "Advisors are very good

at identifying potential barriers or inequalities for students, which can save a lot of headaches and backtracking when key decisions are being made. Allowing advisors to occupy that decision space gives credibility to advisors as part of the student success equation."

Additional potential barriers to student success worthy of consideration include registration holds, accessibility issues, and required courses only offered during a particular window of time. Additionally, through interactions with student staff, such as residence hall directors and orientation leaders, VPSAs can gain an understanding of advising from the student perspective and better assess policies and procedures to reduce inequities, omit unnecessary steps, and remove barriers.

Leverage Technology

VPSAs must think critically about how to leverage technology to deliver optimal advising experiences. The leading technology-related decisions are often less focused on the procurement of new systems, as many institutions have invested in one or more platforms. The more urgent decisions are typically connected to integrating functionality across various technology applications. For example, some VPSAs may seek options that lead to streamlined approaches for managing the flow of information. Tools such as universal applications, chat bots, online appointment systems, and centralized redesigned websites can give students simpler and more efficient options for accessing general information.

Build Relationships

VPSAs must continue to build relationships with advising professionals to share and learn information about the student experience. It may be helpful to meet with advisors across the institution regularly to discuss student trends and concerns. In addition, a strong relationship between student affairs and academic affairs is a necessity. "As a former academic advisor and director of advising, I saw firsthand the impact that quality advising can have on student success," says Ana Hernandez Blackstad, dean of students and senior student affairs officer at Anglo-American University in Prague, Czech Republic. "I now work closely with academic affairs to make sure that students are receiving timely and informed advising to keep them on track academically and engaged in university life."

VPSAs are able to advocate for advising in leadership spaces that are not readily available to advising directors. This advocacy can be achieved by explaining to leadership and other stakeholders what advising is and does and how advisors can partner to provide holistic care for students.

Incorporating the knowledge that VPSAs gain through overseeing the cocurricular activities along the student journey ensures that critical lived experiences are incorporated in the development of a successful redesign strategy.

Integrate Advising into Engagement Activities

Even if a VPSA does not directly oversee advising, VPSAs still have critical roles to play in advocating for advising collaborations, deepening the relationship between academic affairs and student affairs, and finding ways to integrate advising into existing programs and student engagement activities. Latricia Brand, chief diversity officer at Portland Community College, explains, “If advising is a role that falls outside of student affairs, it’s essential that the VPSA bring it in. Advising should be a foundational part of new student orientation and other student engagement events, and residential life and learning communities can create partnerships with advising.” Brand encourages VPSAs to “demonstrate to students, your student affairs team, and academic affairs that intentional and integrated advising relationships can be transformational to the student experience.”

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Bring Online Students On Board

Tara Mahoney, former associate director for online student advising and support at the University of Bridgeport, built a partnership between her department, UB Online, and the university’s student affairs office. “I had regular meetings with the dean of students to see how we could connect our students with on-campus programs and services,” says Mahoney. Her office provided quarterly webinars for online students from different functional areas such as career services and the library. “We also sent welcome gifts to online students, with costs shared between UB Online and student affairs,” says Mahoney. “We sent padfolios one year and laptop messenger bags the following.” An online student resource center, which featured a letter from the dean of students and student affairs staff, gave students an introduction to the full staff even though they primarily interacted with UB Online.



The Future of Advising

Advising has and will continue to be an essential component of student success. Throughout the years, institutions have done a great job at expanding advising offerings to ensure students have the resources for meaningful experiences and degree attainment. It is now time for institutional leaders to bring advising and other relevant student supports together to create a more student-centered, holistic approach to giving students the support they need.

Understanding institutional context, culture, and community is essential to transform advising on any campus. VPSAs hold a special role that touches on all of those components. Ann Marie Klotz, interim vice president of student success at The New School, speaks of the unique opportunity ahead. “In some ways, this is the defining moment for higher education,” says Klotz. “Many of our mission statements talk about innovative practices. It is now time for us to shine in what might be the largest challenge to higher education in a century.” While there is no cookie-cutter model for higher education institutions to follow, institutional values—particularly the safety of students, faculty, and staff—must remain at the forefront. Klotz asserts, “The world is watching. It is time to show that we operate by the very ideals we espouse daily.”

Through a commitment to advising transformation, institutions have an opportunity to truly provide students with a holistic advising experience. Rather than parcel out services, institutions must embrace a collaborative approach for the success of the entire campus community. **LE**

Student advising is a critical part of a student-centered, holistic approach to student success.

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