Personalized Advisement: A Brief History of Ups and Downs

Ilan Ehrlich, Ph.D., Bergen Community College

Abstract

At Bergen Community College, all tenured and tenure-track faculty are required to perform 14 hours of advising per semester. Most professors satisfy this obligation in the Academic Advisement Center, which caters to walk-ins – most of whom need assistance in planning their next semester’s schedule. Unfortunately, this system is riddled with shortcomings. To begin with, the Academic Advisement Center is overcrowded just before and after each semester begins but visited moderately, even thinly, during other times. Some professors are able to help during the early semester rush but many cannot. Professors who arrive mid-semester often find an empty room or assist a few students but spend much of their time waiting for walk-ins. A professor may spend 14 hours in the Advisement Center but far less time actually advising students. Even under the best of circumstances, the expertise of professors and needs of students often does not line up. A history professor may be able to plan a criminal justice major’s schedule (by following the college catalog) but can provide little credible career advice. Moreover, a student will likely see a different professor on each visit – leading to a shallow and disjointed advising experience. According to a vast and growing body of evidence, students would benefit far more from regular advisement from a professor who would come to know them personally and serve their individual needs best. They would also be more likely to stay in school and succeed academically. In brief, a more thorough investment in student advisement is warranted.

Introduction

Student advisement provokes anxiety in many quarters at Bergen Community College. Some professors shirk their 14 hour obligation until the last possible moment – whereupon they check into the Academic Advisement Center for long stretches. Unfortunately, their time is largely wasted as few students frequent the Center in December or May. Rather, they prefer to register in September and January just before classes start. Other faculty members, especially those with scant experience, dread the questions they will be unable to answer. For professors who maintain regular hours at the Center and know the course catalog, advisement represents an unwanted tithe on their time. The current situation is hardly ideal for students either. They will almost certainly be advised by a different person each time they visit the Center. Their advisor of the moment will know little about them. In the end, this is no different from visiting the Office of
Financial Aid or the Bursar. From an administrative standpoint, if faculty members are not in the Academic Advisement Center during the early semester rush, at least half their 14 hour quota will be wasted. Fortunately, several alternatives to the Academic Advising Center have emerged in recent years. One option matches students with professors in their field. This is available for those in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), English Basic Skills (EBS), and education, music and theater. There is also a pilot program whereby faculty members advise athletic teams. During the spring of 2014, I devised an option for Latinos, who represent one-third of the student body. These models have much in common. Each allows professors to choose students with whom they have an affinity. Students gain a mentor who can assist them on a regular basis. Lastly, advisement is conducted via appointment so little time is wasted or lost.

Addressing the Academic Advisement Center’s shortcomings is no guarantee of quality or success, however. Thus, an assessment of my own experience with Latino students is in order even though the sample size is modest. Moreover, a review of best practices from other community colleges will help determine whether further changes or even entirely new policies are justified.

**The Latino Advisement Option**

In November of 2013, I received an email message seeking faculty volunteers to advise the men’s basketball and wrestling teams at the college. This led me to consider an advising option for the students in my Latin American history surveys, who tend to be 80 percent Latino. Given my fluency in Spanish and Cuban origins (my mother is Havana born), I believed myself uniquely equipped to serve and understand them. Further, students who saw me during office hours often posed questions typically handled by an advisor. Some wanted to know about transferring to four year colleges. Others wondered whether to increase or reduce their course
loads. Several asked for help in choosing a major. A few inquired about study abroad programs. Besides discussing these and other topics, I offered to assist them with registration and many readily accepted. However, once a semester ended most students seemed no longer inclined to visit despite my exhortations to the contrary. Consequently, I felt a more permanent and formal arrangement might be preferable. My proposal to the Academic Advising Coordinator was warmly received and I was given the go-ahead to recruit students by April of 2014. The urgency of this project was emphasized by Vice-President of Student Services Naydeen González de Jesús, who indicated that fewer than half of Latino students who enrolled in fall 2012 remained after one year.

My first cohort consisted of six students. Since only one month remained in the spring 2014 semester and given my desire to cast a wide net, I offered to advise non-Latinos as well although Latinos would be given first priority. Thus, there were two non-Latino students in the group. The ground rules were simple. Students would see me on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to discuss academic, advisement or personal issues. I would also assist them with registration if applicable. One thing I noticed immediately about this first group was that it consisted of students who were either above average academically, exceptionally motivated or both. Their final grades for the semester were: A, B+, B+, B, B and C+. This is hardly the typical grade distribution for my classes where typically 80 percent receive grades of C+ or lower. On the other hand, these students required genuine help. Two had poor written English but worked relentlessly to improve. One was an English Basic Skills student taking a mainstream class for the first time. The other often stopped by my office twice a week. Aside from requiring help organizing his essays and correcting grammar, he was interested in study abroad – specifically in Germany. I thus put him in touch with the dean who coordinates this program. We also discussed
which four year colleges would suit his needs best and whether he should aim to transfer during the spring or fall. In addition, he approached me about reviving the college’s debating society so I directed him to the Office of Student Life. Thus far, I have written recommendations (for four year colleges or scholarship funds) for four out of the six. Half have now transferred to four year colleges. One received scholarship funds. Another has taken a semester off to have a baby but upon my recommendation was invited to join the college’s honors program.

When the fall 2014 semester began, I recruited students for the Latino Advisement Option on the first day of classes. Three students from my first cohort (all Latino) agreed to continue and ten others (of whom nine were Latino) showed an interest. With my encouragement, three of the new students joined the honors program. Two others have decided to present papers at the annual honors conference. I supervised the writing of these essays, which must be 10-12 pages in length and coached students for their 20 minute conference presentation. Two received recommendation letters for scholarship funds. One student had just emerged from the English Basic Skills program and was taking mainstream classes for the first time. We conducted our meetings in Spanish as she felt more comfortable speaking her native language. This student worked hard to improve her written English and showed some progress but earned a final grade of C in my colonial Latin America survey. Still, I am confident she has completed the often fraught transition from basic skills to mainstream classes. Another student, who is majoring in Chinese, often expressed interest in study abroad programs during our meetings. I introduced him to the dean who coordinates them and she encouraged him to apply for the Critical Language Scholarship Program. I also put one of my advisees, who would like to study medicine, in contact with various doctors I know via email so she could hear their opinions about the field. One student, from Argentina, did not realize there was a Latino student organization on
campus. I thus introduced her to the vice-president of the Latin American Student Association (LASA), who happens to be one of my advisees. While these results are encouraging, my second cohort also included disappointments. One student submitted plagiarized work on multiple occasions and failed the class. Two others withdrew from my colonial Latin America survey mid-semester and stopped attending their advisement sessions. Finally, one student whose written English is very poor was unable to produce college-level work and failed the class.

Currently, for the spring 2015 semester, there are eleven students in the Latino Advisement Program. Four remained in the program from the previous semester. Further, one of my advisees for the first two semesters has transferred to George Mason University. Another was accepted by Baruch College. In this case, I proofread and edited her college essay. One student has used the meetings to discuss options for studying Spanish this summer or performing volunteer work through the auspices of her church. Early in the semester, one student explained that her family was going through a difficult period and was considering withdrawing from her classes. She decided against this but many of our meetings remain devoted to discussing her family situation. I am pleased to report that she earned a B in the class. One student, who is bright and curious but never gave a full effort, failed my colonial Latin America survey, took it again and earned a C and just completed my modern Latin America survey. At my urging, she submitted a draft of her first essay of the semester before the deadline. We agreed that certain changes and improvements were called for. Her final draft received a grade of 80, a nice step forward. Nor did her progress stop there. Her next essay represented her best work yet, earning a score of 90 – which was the highest in the class. She received a final grade of B+. Another student who is very bright but had a spotty academic record confided that he had overcome a drug problem. Not only did he receive a grade of B+ but he is in the process of retaking the
classes he failed. Overall, I recommended four new students for admission to the honors program.

In addition to my advisees, a number of students expressed interest receiving help with academic planning for the upcoming semester. These are students from my classes, many of whom have expressed disappointment with the Academic Advising Center but are not yet inclined to seek regular advisement. I am more than happy to assist these students for two reasons. First, I already know them (and they know me) and this will help me design a schedule that truly fits their needs. Moreover, I will take the time to speak with them about other important issues that someone from the Academic Advisement Center would not address. These include discussions about which four-year colleges might be suitable given a particular student’s interests and desired career. We would discuss costs and the differences between public options such as Rutgers or the City University of New York and private colleges. For students slated to graduate in the fall, we would discuss the feasibility of transferring in the spring (an option that many colleges do not offer) versus waiting a semester and targeting a more desirable school. We would also speak about how a student might make use of a free semester. Perhaps he or she would like to travel, perform charity work or study a language during this time, for example. Lastly, I would offer help with the application process. Second, some of these students will inevitably opt for regular advisement after realizing the many ways they might benefit. Others, of course, will accept whatever help I offer and never return. In either case, they gain valuable information.

**Preliminary Conclusions**

I have now offered the Latino Advisement Option for one-third of one semester in the spring of 2014 along with the entire fall 2015 and spring 2015 semesters. A total of 22 students
have participated. The following are my preliminary conclusions: 1) As a self-selecting group, those who have chosen the Latino Advisement Option are more academically prepared and motivated than the general student population. Of the 19 students who took my classes (one advisee recommended the program to his girlfriend), 13 received grades of B or higher. In other words, better students are more likely to recognize the value of this program. 2) Social capital is among the prime benefits. In their day-to-day lives, my students do not see or talk to people who have doctoral degrees. Much of their information, including which classes to take on occasion, comes from peers. By urging bright students to take an honors-level class and consider joining the honors program, they associate with a more knowledgeable peer group. The college’s honors director also provides them with an important advocate. Obviously, joining the honors program is not a realistic option for many or even most students. However, nearly all will require recommendation letters during their academic careers. I have already written seven for my advisees and expect this number to grow. Whenever possible, I personally introduce my advisees to deans, program directors and professors whose interests align with their own. In some cases, I know of internships specifically suited to certain students and encourage them to apply. 3) Regardless of the benefits, no more than half (and usually slightly less) remain in the program for more than one semester. 4) From my own perspective, this program is immensely more rewarding than working in the Student Advisement Center. It is very gratifying to watch a student progress academically, gain confidence, perhaps win a scholarship and transfer to a four year college. 5) Administratively, the college benefits as I spend 35-40 hours per semester on advisement rather than the 14 mandated by contract.

The Literature on Advisement
The *New York Times* reporter Richard Pérez-Peña aptly sums up the situation of community colleges, observing that, “Educators and policy makers see community colleges as a crucial answer to the need for more college-educated workers and the rising cost of education because they have lower entry requirements and much lower prices than four-year universities. And with the number of college-age Americans falling after decades of growth, four-year colleges are looking for new sources of students.” However, he adds that, “community college becomes a morass for too many students. They get little guidance and they rarely finish in two years.” (Pérez-Peña, 2013) Indeed, “about 1 in 8” community college students in the United States earns an associate’s degree within three years. (Tankersley, 2014) According to census data, Latinos are especially at risk – with a completion rate of 11 percent for men and 17 percent for women among those born in the 1980s. (Bailey and Dynarsky, 2011). Latinos are also more likely to be poor as they constitute 17.1 percent of the population but 25.5 percent of those living in poverty. (Kearney and Harris, 2014) This adds yet another hurdle, even for the gifted. Just 29 percent of low-income students who shined on eighth grade standardized tests earned college degrees. Medium and low scorers from poor families graduated at rates of 8 and 3 percent respectively. (Gould, 2012) “When you live on the margins” explains *Washington Post* reporter Jim Tankersley, “even the smallest disruption can knock you off course and out of school. Things like your car breaking down or your neighbor saying she can’t watch your child anymore, or your boss threatening to fire you if you don’t work more hours in your low-wage job.” (Tankersley, 2014)

Fortunately, a growing body of literature suggests that advisement can assist students in overcoming their often considerable obstacles. Various studies during the 1980s and 1990s found that advisement helps students clarify professional goals. Further, advisors often serve as liaisons
between students and essential services such as financial aid or career centers. One result is higher retention rates. According to Lee Noel,

> It is the people who come face-to-face with students on a regular basis who provide the positive growth experiences for students that enable them to identify their goals and talents and put them to use. The caring attitude of college personnel is viewed as the most potent retention force on a campus. (Noel and Levitz, 1985).

In this vein, an “intrusive advising” policy at Zane State, a community college in Zanesville, Ohio, improved retention by five percent between 2006 and 2009. (Abdul-Alim, 2012) This program targeted at-risk students and compelled them to meet with advisers. Additional benefits also included higher completion rates in developmental English and math courses. (Abdul-Alim, 2012) At Skagit Valley College, a survey conducted by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCSE) indicated that student support services were “fairly average.” Thus, the college devised a counseling program for developmental education students that improved passing rates by seven percent. (Abdul-Alim, 2012)

Charlie Nutt argues that advisement works best as a one stop shop where students address multiple concerns, ideally including course selection, financial aid and professional development. (Nutt, 2003) He notes that Rowan College combines academic planning with career services, allowing students to “see the connection” between their present and future. City University of New York offers perhaps the most comprehensive take on this model through its ASAP program. ASAP provides low-income community college students with a mix of intensive guidance, tutoring and monetary pick-me-ups. The program, which was launched in 2007, boasts a three year completion rate of over 50 percent or nearly three times the national average. (Hulbert, 2013) ASAP begins with the premise that students at top colleges study full-time and receive ample academic support. Conversely, their counterparts at two-year schools are often
part-timers left to their own devices. Sometimes, student advisor ratios reach a scandalous rate of 1500:1. (Hulbert, 2013) Anne Hulbert of *The Atlantic* observes that the status quo could “hardly be more perverse.” After all:

Students at the bottom, whose life histories and social disadvantages make them the most likely to need clear guidance and structure receive astonishingly little of either. Meanwhile, students at the super-selective top prodded toward high ambitions and disciplined habits by attentive parents and teachers ever since preschool, encounter solicitous oversight every step of the way. (Hulbert, 2013)

ASAP seeks to redress this situation by emulating the successful elite model. Hence, students in the program must register for a full course load and attend bi-weekly advisement sessions. The latter is especially key since, “students, especially the least prepared ones, don’t just need to learn math or science; they need to learn how to navigate academic and institutional challenges more broadly, and how to plot a course – daily, weekly, monthly – toward long-term success.” (Hulbert, 2013) Just as importantly, ASAP removes financial hurdles. The program pays tuition not covered by federal or state aid and supplies books on loan. ASAP also foots the bill for summer and winter courses. At a cost of $3900 annually per student, ASAP requires a major investment. However, the program’s high graduation rates yield overall savings.

Last but surely not least, the actual advisors themselves merit consideration. Margaret King argues that students are best served by a mix of professional and faculty advisors. The former “have student development backgrounds, they are trained to advise across all program areas, advising is their priority, they are typically housed in a central location with easy accessibility, they are trained to advise across all program areas, and they are trained to work with students who are exploratory or developmental.” (King, 2002) Faculty, on the other hand, are uniquely equipped to offer guidance in their fields. They are also familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of present and former students. Further, professors can recommend advisees
who were their onetime students for scholarships and admission to four-year colleges. King believes that, “Given the complexity of our programs and the increasing diversity of our students, it is unrealistic to expect one group to be able to do it all.” (King, 2002) At the same time, she cautions that colleges primarily relying on faculty advisors must have “faculty buy-in.” Otherwise, “students will not be well served.” (King, 2002)

**Conclusions:**

The current system of advisement at Bergen Community College, whereby most students receive guidance in the Academic Advisement Center or none at all is ripe for reform. According to the literature, advisement is one element that can help improve retention and completion rates. For the best results, advisement should be compulsory. As Kay McClenney, Director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement notes, “students don’t do optional.” (Hulbert, 2013) On the faculty side, there has been no effort to establish “buy-in.” Faculty members lack incentives to provide high quality advisement. The college should emphasize the importance of advisement and offer either financial compensation or release time as inducements. This would represent a small price to pay for the almost certain improvement in student performance.

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