

Proactive (Intrusive) Advising!

Jennifer Varney, Chair-Elect, Distance Education Advising Commission



Editor's Note: On September 12, 2012, Jennifer will be joined by current Distance Education Advising Commission Chair Tyann Cherry in a NACADA Webinar to discuss *Engaging Online Across Student Populations*. Learn more about this upcoming Online Event at <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Webinars/w46.htm>.



Five years ago, I wrote an article on *Intrusive Advising* for this publication (2007). In that article, I described the advising theory and gave some examples of how Intrusive Advising could be used, particularly with at risk students. At the time, I had no idea just how important Intrusive Advising would become in my work and how much the theory might evolve into a framework that can be successfully used with all students: traditional day, continuing education, adult learners, and even online students. Thanks to the work of some committed folks at NACADA, Intrusive Advising is now being called *Proactive Advising*, a name that does a better job indicating the nature of the model.

Proactive Advising began with the work of Robert Glennen in the mid 1970s. Glennen sought to blend advising and counseling into one discipline, and through the work of a group of voluntary faculty members, began the development of Proactive Advising (Glennen, 1975). The idea behind this new model was to provide students with information before they requested it, while also building a relationship with the student at the same time. Volunteer advisors were given training on advising and counseling, including pre-admission counseling, matriculation, and scheduling. They were also taught to scan new student files for signs of potential distress. Through the combination of focus on the interests, abilities, and goals of the students, the volunteer group was able to connect with students and raise the retention levels of the test group (Glennen, 1975).

Proactive Advising involves:

- deliberate intervention to enhance student motivation,
- using strategies to show interest and involvement with students,
- intensive advising designed to increase the probability of student success,
- working to educate students on all options, and
- approaching students before situations develop.

Earl (1988) describes Proactive Advising as a deliberate, structured student intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty in order to motivate the student to seek help. Proactive Advising uses the good qualities of prescriptive advising (experience, awareness of student needs and structured programs) and of developmental advising (relationship to a student's total needs).

As I learned more about Proactive Advising, I found that I could apply it in all areas of advising: retention, at risk student advising, critical outreach points, and student communication and difficult situations.

Proactive Advising and Retention

Di Maria (2006) observes that research has shown that the more actively engaged students are in all aspects of college life, the more likely they are to learn and stay in school. It sounds like one of the keys to retention is finding ways to engage and connect the students with the school. Proactive advising may be used to help students find these connection points, beginning with their connection to the advisor. Through the use of proactive outreach and a relationship-based approach to advising, students learn that their advisor can be their main connection to the school. Proactive advisors are able to help students determine what kind of obstacles they may be facing along the path to degree completion and help them create plans and short- and long-term goals directed toward overcoming these obstacles. Early alert systems and other methods of identifying students who are potential retention risks can be proactive ways to intervene with students before they ask for help, provide caring and thoughtful support, and give solution options for success.

Proactive Advising and At Risk Students

Molina and Abelman (2000) suggest that approximately 40 percent of students who enroll at four-year institutions fail to earn a degree and nearly 57 percent of this group leave before the start of the second term. Are there at-risk students on all campuses? Absolutely! Proactive advisors are able to work with these students through:

- early intervention at the first sign of any type of difficulty (risk factors can be identified in the admissions process);
- introduction of rules, policies and procedures, along with clear explanations and expectations of students;
- monitoring progress of students to determine how well they are using information provided; and
- customizing intervention and targeting it specifically toward student needs.

In helping students to identify potential barriers early in their academic careers, proactive advisors are able to help students build solid academic and social foundations that will help the student flourish and progress toward goal attainment.

Proactive Advising and Communication/Critical Outreach Points

An easy way to use Proactive Advising with student communication is to build a communications strategy and plan in which all communications are scheduled around school policies and events, specific supports needed at certain times in the term, and any events on campus or in the local community that might be of interest to students. Developing a communications plan involves:

1. Designing the overall communication strategy
 - a. What are the goals? Ex: one significant student outreach activity per week
 - b. Frequency and mode of communication?
 - c. Student target population per communication?
 - d. Message topics?

2. Integrating a special communications strategy for new/entering students
 - a. Include pre-term start, welcome messaging from the advisors
 - b. Send support materials, webinar recordings
 - c. Include a series of communications specifically targeted toward these students, with interactions that keep them informed and connected before the term begins
 - d. Include messaging on change management, finding balance with school and work, etc
3. Creating specific plans for other target student audiences: transfer students, etc.

Proactive Advising and Anticipating Student Challenges

Through the use of proactive advising strategies, advisors may be able to anticipate student challenges and implement plans to keep these challenges from becoming insurmountable. Academic probation, for example, is a challenge that often is pre-empted with warning signs before it becomes a significant obstacle. By monitoring student grades and attendance and keeping in close contact with faculty, proactive advisors are able to work with students to design support systems and academic safety nets, of sorts, to keep students from falling too far into an academic hole from which they cannot recover.

Could fixing academic advising fix higher education? Not completely, but advising may be a good place to start. While advising itself cannot change the curriculum and co-curriculum, it can create a vital connection between students and their education, helping them to become more reflective and strategic about the choice they are making and the learning they are involved in (Hunter & White, 2004).

Through the use of 'whole student advising', or taking all of the student actions and behaviors into consideration (academics, social behaviors, level of engagement with the school, interaction with peers, family relations, etc.), proactive advisors are able to intervene early with students and build strong and lasting relationships with them. These relationships form the foundation of a support system that will sustain the student from entry point to goal attainment.

Jennifer Varney
Assistant Dean of Business
College of Online and Continuing Education
Southern New Hampshire University
J.Varney@snhu.edu

References

- Abelman, R. & Molina, A. (2002, fall). Style over substance reconsidered: Intrusive advising and at risk students with disabilities. *NACADA Journal*, 22(2).
- DiMaria, F. (2006, October). Keeping our kids engaged, At-risk kids in college. *Education Digest*, 72(2), 52-57. Retrieved February 28, 2007 from EBSCOhost database.
- Earl, W.R. (1988). Intrusive advising of freshmen in academic difficulty. *NACADA Journal*, 8, 27-33.

Glennen, R.E. (1975). Intrusive college counseling. *College Student Journal*, 9(1).

Hunter, M.S., & White, E.R. (2004, March-April). Could fixing academic advising fix higher education? *About Campus*, 20-25.

Varney, J. (2007, September). Intrusive advising. *Academic Advising Today*, 30(3). Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/ePub/AAT30-3.htm>