How to Make Effective Referrals: A Three Step Framework

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Typical advising sessions can quickly turn into crisis points when students’ conversations lead to disclosure of personal concerns and struggles (Butler, 1995). Students trying to deal with issues related to major career concerns, disabilities, pregnancy, mental health issues and thoughts of suicide are clearly overwhelmed and in need of additional assistance. When mundane advising issues are pushed aside with student crisis, advisors must know how to effectively refer those students for help (Shane, 1981; Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006).

Effective advising referrals usually involve the following three steps:
1. Try to put yourself in the students’ shoes and communicate understanding.
2. Think what resources are available to help with this issue and normalize the service.
3. Transition from the advising office to other resources.

Effective referrals start with trying to put yourself in the students’ shoes even if you have heard the issues many times before. This involves listening, understanding and then communicating your understanding back to the students. This is often referred to as empathic listening or listening for understanding (Rogers, 1961; Egan, 1998). This skill involves linking the students’ feelings to their experiences or behaviors: “I hear you saying that you feel... (the emotion expressed by the student) because... (the experiences or behavior that has given rise to the emotions).” For example, an advisor might suggest, “It sounds to me as though you feel frustrated because of your poor grades.” Or, the advisor might say, “I hear you saying that you feel overwhelmed because you still have not declared a major” or “It seems to me that you feel confused and isolated because your friends cannot help you any longer.” When advisors accurately use these types of statements, students feel understood. The key is to link students’ current emotions to the reasons behind them and communicate true understanding.

Thinking means taking the time to identify the individual resources that can assist students in working through their current struggles. This means having available the names and telephone numbers of known professionals at the Counseling Center, Career Center, Student Disabilities Center, etc. It is more effective to say to students, “I know Pat, and she has really helped a few of my students who were dealing with very similar issues; why don’t I give her a call?” than to say, “Why don’t you just call the counseling center when you get back to your room?” Thinking also involves normalizing or explaining the referral resources (O’Hanlon and...
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Proactive (Intrusive) Advising

by Jennifer Varney,
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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:

- 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?
- 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
  e. Create 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.

REFERENCES


Disability Services

The mission of the Disability Services Office (DSO) is to promote reasonable accommodations and facilitate equal access to all services and programs at Navarro College. Other essential elements of the DSO are to: increase disability awareness, advocate for students with disabilities, provide training to faculty and staff, maintain compliance in regards to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and educate students in a least restrictive environment. The DSO office works to accomplish these goals through advising, special equipment, classroom, and testing accommodations.

Below is a quick guide to reviewing the roles of the student, faculty and disability service.

A - Accessibility
Faculty members play a major role in making their classrooms accessible to all students.

C - Communication
It is imperative that students with disabilities, faculty members, and DSO communicate on a regular basis.

C - Confidentiality
All instructors and DSO must respect a student’s right to confidentiality.

E - Eligibility for Accommodations
DSO is the office designated to determine eligibility for federally mandated academic accommodations and services.

S - Student Responsibility
Students have a responsibility in ensuring they get the necessary services.

S - Support
Both faculty and DS work together to support students in their legal right to access an education.

Please also refer to a more comprehensive explanation of disability services in faculty’s frequently asked questions that will be sent to faculty email and made available on the Navarro College Disability Services website.

The DSO main office is located on the Corsicana campus in the Gooch One Stop Center, second floor, office 319. Services are available on all Navarro College campuses through coordination of personnel on each campus, i.e. Amy Dojahn, Corsicana, Erika Roland, Waxahachie, Cynthia Seskes, Midlothian, and Elizabeth Shabez, Mexia.
Weiner-Davis, 1989). Help the students understand that their struggles are often a normal part of personal development and maturity; in fact, their challenges are common enough that the university has developed resources designed to assist them. Here are two examples of possible statements: Student Disability Services can let you know the accommodations that could be available to you and that may help you be more successful in your academics. Sometimes it involves more time on tests or an environment without distractions. The whole reason they exist is to level the playing field for all students so that everyone has an equal chance at success.

The Counseling Center may be able to help you process what is going on in your life currently. It seems like everything that is going on right now is making it hard for you to feel like you are still in control. I think talking to a professional who is trained to help could assist you in getting some perspective. The Counseling Center provides a variety of services from addressing study skills and relational problems to successfully handling very personal issues like yours.

Transition is the third and final step; it moves students from the advisor to other specific resources. This referral is effectively accomplished by first summarizing what students have been sharing and then thanking them for being so open with their concerns. Once advisors have affirmed students in this manner, they can transition with a statement such as, “As an advisor I can help you with many things, but I’m not really trained to help you with what is going on in your life currently. However, I do know some others on campus who could really provide the assistance, encouragement, support, and help that you need.” Advisors can then mention the name of the referral or suggest a call right then: “Why don’t I give Sue a call and see if we can set up an appointment for you?” These effective transitional statements communicate personal understanding and concern, but are also somewhat directive. While direction is needed, advisors must remember that the goal of referral is not to pressure students, but rather to educate and inform them of their options. Here are two examples:

You know, the issues you have been sharing are really important, and it sounds like you may want some help and support in processing what you are currently going through. I have found that the Learning Center can be a great resource for students. I know Fred Smith over there, and he has assisted many of the students that I advise to work through their concerns and successfully finish college.

Sometimes there are things that your friends or parents cannot help you with, especially when you are at college. It may be helpful to get another source of support, such as meeting with a counselor or speaking with a physician about your concerns. Debbie Jones, who runs the Campus Counseling Center, is a personal friend of mine. Why don’t I just give her a call and see if we can get you in to meet with her?

The foundation of any effective referral is the advisor’s ability to understand and to connect with the student through basic empathy skills. Once this has taken place, the advisor can think of and transition the student to the needed resources. Taking the time to develop an effective referral framework will equip you with a needed skill and empower your students to be more successful, both personally and academically.

REFERENCES

Managing the Advising Relationship: Three Common Sense Tips for Advising College Students  
by Curt Laird,  
University of Charleston

INTRODUCTION

Academic advising of college students is a task that many new faculty members struggle with to gain a level of proficiency. Advising is not an extremely difficult task; however, becoming an exceptional academic adviser takes a great deal of practice and patience. The benefits of exceptional academic advising are evident. Bourdon and Carducci (2002) found that academic advising increases academic success, graduation rates, retention, and transfer rates among college students. Yarbrough (2002) concurs with this finding by stating “the brief exchanges between adviser and advisee may have the greatest impact on the student’s sense of self-efficacy in completing his or her degree requirements” (p. 63). In fact, according to Lucas and Murry (2002), “regular faculty-student interaction, it has been shown repeatedly, increases student academic success, satisfaction, and retention” (p. 109). In an earlier study, Theophitides, Terenzini, and Loring (1984) found that students’ intellectual development was positively influenced by contact with faculty outside the normal classroom environment. Advising provides such outside-the-classroom opportunities.

Because so many benefits are associated with academic advising, it seems reasonable to believe that institutions of higher education should dedicate significant time toward academic-advising training for faculty members. Advising college students, however, is a task with which many new faculty members have no experience and minimal training. Faculty members must teach and meet research or scholarship expectations and oversee an allotted number of advisees while having little to no training specific to advising (Lucas and Murray, 2002). Some new faculty members may be unaware that their job duties include academic advising (Hunter and White, 2004).

The fact that faculty are given few instructions about working with advisees makes early success quite challenging. New faculty who must advise can consult colleagues if they truly care about improving their advising skills; however, this could be problematic if the more experienced adviser sets a poor example. In response to these training inconsistencies, the following tips are offered to give some practical guidance in creating positive advising relationships.

TIPS ON ADVISING

Establish a comfortable setting.

Student advisees respond to advising sessions in a more positive manner if they are comfortable. Individuals, student advisee or otherwise, are simply more receptive to conversing in an agreeable environment. When the student feels comfortable disclosing pertinent information, the advising session becomes easier to manage. This kind of conversation between adviser and advisee must occur in order to establish rapport.

One area over which an adviser has a great deal of control is the office where advising occurs. A desk that is positioned to separate an adviser from the student is not inviting. Instead, position the desk in a manner where the advisee can speak without feeling such a large degree of separation. A desk that faces a wall or a corner works much better. If the desk unit is large and cannot be positioned in this suggested manner, the adviser should position his or her chair next to the student. This repositioning eliminates the barrier that a desk creates between student and adviser.

Displaying pictures or art in the office is another tactic that faculty advisers can use. A faculty member with pictures of family and friends in his or her office can appear to be more “human” to students. Photographs and artwork help to create a warm office environment and can ease students’ apprehension when they visit. These items may spark a conversation and promote additional interaction between adviser and student.

Remember the Golden Rule.

Students should be treated as the faculty adviser would want to be treated. In a study of graduate students, Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill (2003) found that a number of students were unsatisfied with their advising relationships. In this study, many of the unsatisfied students believed that their advisers were too “businesslike” and “superficial.” These students felt that their advisers discussed only their classes and did not seem interested in them as people. This same study found that students were satisfied with advisers who were accessible to the students. A number of satisfied students in the study commented on their advisers’ “open door” philosophy.
Just as faculty members and much of the general public do not enjoy arranging a difficult appointment time to see a physician or a dentist, students do not enjoy making the same kind of difficult appointments with their advisers. Students want to know that advisers are available when questions and concerns arise. Indeed, McArthur (2005) found that a number of students perceived faculty advisers to be uncaring. Much of this perception was based on students’ comments that advisers were not in their offices enough, not in their offices during scheduled office hours, and not responding to student e-mails and phone calls. In any other business relationship, this would be viewed as poor customer service. Effective advisers regard their advisees as the reason for their employment and act accordingly.

**Know your advisees.**

Good advising is something that requires a time commitment from the faculty member. Much of that time can be attributed to actually conversing with and making recommendations to the student. However, a frequently overlooked principle of effective advising is the amount of time put into preparing for the advising appointment. Advisers should spend ample time reviewing each advisee’s file before a meeting. Advisers should also take academic policies into account and consider how these policies may apply to each advisee. Most colleges and universities make academic policy changes during the course of a year.

Taking notes during advising sessions is an excellent way to get to know advisees. Complimenting an advisee for making it through a difficult semester or “that horrible math class” will indicate that an adviser hears and actually cares about an advisee’s performance. By taking notes during the advising session, an adviser is more likely to remember specific details about each advisee and speak about those details at the next advising appointment.

In many circumstances, name recognition is enough for an advisee to feel comfortable with his or her adviser. Many institutions now offer online access to photographs of advisers’ current advisees. Advisers should take advantage of such technology. These photographs will allow the adviser to work at memorizing their advisees by name. Although this may seem like a trivial issue, students (like other people) want to be remembered and not treated as if they are numbers. Name recognition is an important method to use to combat students’ feelings that advisers do not care.

**CONCLUSION**

Advising college students can be a daunting task for faculty, both new and experienced. However, it does not need to be so. A common-sense strategy of determining how one would want to be treated can improve an adviser’s performance dramatically. Considering the importance that students place upon academic advising, it is surprising that faculty are not given extensive training on the subject. Because of this lack of training, these simple tips will assist inexperienced and even veteran faculty seeking to improve their advising relationships.

**REFERENCES**


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