ACADEMIC ADVISING IN THE WONDERLAND OF COLLEGE FOR DEVELOPMENTAL STUDENTS.

LEAH P. HOLLIS, ED.D.

School of Advanced Studies
University of Phoenix

Over the past 15 years, the Department of Education has continuously reported the increasing need for developmental and remedial education at post secondary institutions. Furthermore, only 16% of all college students are traditional aged 18-22 year old residential students, while 12 million college students are over the age of 25 (Nunley, 2007, p.B18). With changing demographics and the students’ need for remediation, academic advisors need to be cognizant of the nuances in working with this population. This article considers the methods in providing academic advising to nontraditional students who often need remediation and developmental support. Also, this discussion provides a model for professional academic advisors in delivering sound advising services to the developmental student population.

Our society has often viewed education as the great equalizer in helping people transcend class strata in search of a more stable socioeconomic life. Access to education has been at the crux of several law suits since Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, which theoretically mandated access to fair and equal opportunity in education to the underrepresented. Busing in major cities in the 1970s and No Child Left Behind Legislation of late have been attempts at educational engineering to cultivate progress for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The U.S. Department of Education reports that 96% of high school students surveyed did not have advanced math proficiency (Bozick, 2008, p. iii). Developmental students often delay entrance to post secondary education; of this population, many students do not have academic role models to help them shape their dreams or the academic aspirations to achieve such. Fifty two percent of these students are from homes where their parents have not gone to college (Horn, 2005, p.v). While developmental students might know the beaten path to success includes an education, navigation from admission to graduation is full of unexpected predicaments. For many, entering a two year or four year college is like falling down the rabbit hole; except adult students do not want to appear wide eyed and vulnerable in this daunting situation. “Post secondary students who take remedial reading are about half as likely as those who take no remedial courses to earn a degree or certificate” (Student Effort, 2004, p.1). To alleviate students’ stress and bewilderment, academic advisors can guide students through the maze of general education requirements, academic policies and deadlines.

Developmental students often emerge from a high school background which simply did not prepare them for college level math and writing. Lacking skills are due
in part to the vicious cycle of district resources, which is stitched to the community tax base. The low tax base is inextricably tied to low family income. Simply put, poorer families are in weaker school districts creating the causal link between socioeconomic status and the impending eventual need for remediation or developmental courses for those emerging from these school districts. Consequently, graduates often need remediation to achieve college level skills, and often test into courses which include basic arithmetic, reading comprehension and general writing skills. By default, students needing such intense academic intervention often have spent time distracted as they secured the basic needs in life. Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs which starts with the quest for physiological needs of food and water, and safety needs in shelter and protection from danger can present challenges for students coming from disenfranchised backgrounds (Rouse, 2004, p. 1). The quest for shelter, child care, food, elder care will eclipse the desire to practice algebra homework. Students from disenfranchised backgrounds are more likely to delay entrance to school; of this population 54% of these delayed entrants are working more than 30 hours; and 53% assume some part time status while matriculating through their academic programs (Horn, 2005, p. vi-vii). In turn, they may be older than their entering class cohort; and definitely face more outside commitments which can interfere with academic achievement.

Given their struggle with physiological and safety needs, developmental students might not have advanced through Maslow’s Hierarchy to grapple with self esteem and self actualization needs. Developmental students who enter as adult students 25 and older might have extra trauma in their backgrounds which interfere with learning. As we all become adults, we experience the range of trauma endured in adult hood. Pearce (1999) and Rosenwasser (2000) as stated in Kerka (2002) claimed, "The catalog of sources of trauma is sadly long: Physical abuse, rape, war, forced relocation, diagnosis of terminal illness, death or suicide of a loved one, divorce, robbery, natural disasters, poverty, and homelessness" (Kerka, 2002, p. 1).

Developmental students also come to two and four year colleges with different perspectives based on an amalgam of experiences which resulted in their developmental needs. “Developmental students do not have a sense of themselves as powerful people... the academic world appears to be outside of theirs, and the demands made by it frequently discount personal experiences” (Ott, 2007, p. 1). Developmental students often lack metacognition, “thinking about thinking,” reflecting on their presence and their own intellectual process in this new world. In turn, faculty have reported developmental student behavior, even from adults, to include loud and disrespectful behavior inappropriate for the classroom setting, disengagement, and a nonchalant approach to the academic tasks at hand. Nonetheless, faculty and advisors are tasked with reaching those who choose this academic walk though such developmental leaders do not always fully understanding the path before them.
Advisement model

In the last five years, state institutions of higher education have endured fiscal cuts resulting in educators continuously considering creative methods to support the increasing numbers of students needing remedial and developmental attention. Of those surveyed, 61% of students who first attended a public 2-year and 25% who first attended a 4-year institution completed at least one remedial course at the postsecondary level (Student Effort, 2004, p.1). As previously established, the weakest academic students can also harbor the more fragile self esteem. “To overcome these constraints and to help learners regain control, connection and meaning, educators might adopt a comprehensive multifaceted approach that includes...a holistic perspective, creation of a safe environment, story telling. . . and advocacy (Kerka, 2002, p. 4).

The academic advisor for any student presumably holds the key to progress by coaching new and continuing students through general education choices, major selections, minors and possibly certificate options. Misadvisement can have a negative impact on students who enroll in unsuitably advanced courses and lose precious financial aid in an unsuccessful attempt in such courses. The stakes are higher for the developmental student who is already wrestling with guilt, self doubt, inadequacy, and possible financial trouble. An advisor’s judgment or belittling demeanor can repel a troubled student into the academic wilderness without a guide only to double the errors as they make uninformed academic choices.

Developmental Advising Model

1). Show they are safe. Provide support not punitive motivation.

2). Be detailed in analysis of students’ academic ability and coach to strengths.

3). Be prepared to kindly yet firmly support through set backs.

4). Make connections with other support systems on campus.
As previously stated, developmental students can already feel insecure about their status. They might not have the definitions and analysis at their fingertips to understand fully why they are lacking academically; but they are aware they have a steeper hill to climb. In turn, "developmental advising is a process," which relies on a strong advisor/advisee relationship. Advisors can help students feel comfortable and then encourage their growth academically and professionally (Bland, 2003, p.7).

1) Let developmental students know they are not alone. Self-efficacy can generate an image for students to know that others have succeeded though they started in the developmental classes. Point out role models from around campus of those who have emerged from developmental courses. Advisors should establish themselves as an academic life preserver who will guide students without judgment. For many, life has been a series of punishments and failures. In turn, advise from a supportive vantage point to create a safe environment for students.

2) As an advisor, be detailed in an analysis of students’ academic ability and provide realistic advisement. Developmental students are already fearful of the collegiate environment. By rushing through an appointment, or giving into students’ whims, advisors can aid students in their own demise. For example, if a student places below basic algebra, this same student probably does not have the quantitative reasoning skills to master microeconomics or physics. Though students have developmental needs, there might be bright spots on the high school transcript or in the personal statement which can give insight to students’ strengths and areas of confidence.

3) Advisors should be prepared to coach through setbacks. Academic hardships and poor grades are a natural part of any college experience. However, in some cases for developmental students, failing out of college can feel like failing out of life. He or she would return to a community who did not have faith in the college experience, or are all the more excited to have this student back and contributing financially through menial work. Provide alternative visions to students who struggle with exams, papers, and critical prerequisites. Help them to develop their own visions of a stable life once they struggle over these inevitable hurdles.

4) Advisors can fortify success by making connections across campus. Academic advisors can be part of an early alert system for developmental students. While faculty are a critical variable in getting students to tutorial services, advisors can also refer troubled students for tutorial help. Advisement appointments can also transcend into a psychological counseling appointments once advisors build trust with students. While students may feel safe and divulge critical personal information, be clear about the differences in academic advising and psychological counseling. Have solid relationships with the counseling center. If critical issues arise, the advisor is in a better position to refer or even walk students
to the resources which will help them through difficulty in college.

Lastly, advisors should engage in metacognition of their own. As professional academic advisors, they can consider their own preparedness to tackle the academic and emotional needs of developmental students. As academic advisors, this professional group often deals with students who could not decide what to wear to the prom the previous year. Traditional students who have been supported through their high school years are more equip to emerge from this academically fickle state. Developmental students do not often have the pleasure of such support. Many rush to complete degrees, despite their part time status, to reenter the workforce full time as a more potent wage earner. Disillusionment in school can threaten the developmental student’s mindset which has already considered the consequences of failure as it relates to their ability to take care of family and pay the rent. Advisors of developmental students need an insightful, understanding of the students’ confusion and fear. Then, they can approach with a combined patience and vision their advisees often forget. In turn, the advisor must be more than the Cheshire cat in this wonderland who smiles and disappears. Academic advisors of developmental students can make all the difference for students between success and returning to minimum wage.

References


