A Case Management Approach to Academic Advising

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Earning an undergraduate degree can be a daunting journey for college students. For many students, completing college requires maneuvering through not only academic challenges but peripheral obstacles that often hinder academic success. The literature abounds with information about the needs of college students and how academic advising can be an effective way to promote student retention and facilitate favorable student outcomes. This article presents a case management approach to academic advising that can be employed to further facilitate positive student outcomes related to retention and academic achievement.

Background and Need

During the last nine years, I have served as a faculty member as well as an academic adviser in Southern University's Department of Social Work, and I have encountered students with diverse and far-reaching concerns and needs. Many of the issues have involved academics. For example, I have advised students who were on academic probation and struggling to gain and/or maintain a 2.0 grade-point average. Other advisees consulted with me about difficulties in successfully completing a departmental comprehensive exam or about repeat failures in junior- or senior-level major courses. Academic issues, however, are only one aspect of the challenges that advisees face. Within my department, for example, we have had to advise students who evacuated their homes due to natural disasters; confronted issues related to grief, death, and dying; managed the health needs of an infant child with a chronic illness; and managed their own major illnesses and surgery as well as handled issues related to domestic violence.

It became evident that for many students we advised, there were standard reasons for academic difficulties, such as test-taking anxiety and poor time-management or study skills, as well as other issues that served as barriers to their academic achievement. We came to the realization that our advising practices at the departmental level could be modified to more effectively meet our students' needs. Within our department, we are responding by initiating a case management approach to academic advising. Below are a brief discussion of case management and an overview of the model we plan to implement.

Case Management Defined

The concept of case management is diverse and spans a wide array of disciplines, professions, and settings that include health, education, child welfare, and corrections. The Case Management Society of America (2008) describes case management as a “collaborative process of assessment, planning, facilitation and advocacy for options and services to meet an individual's needs through communication and available resources to promote quality cost-effective outcomes” (¶ 1).

According to Smith (1995), there are universal functions related to case management. These are:

... identifying and attracting clients, intake and assessment, developing a coordinated service plan, advocating on behalf of the client(s) while brokering and linking different services together, implementing and monitoring service delivery, and continually evaluating and
adjusting the service delivery plan while determining outcomes clients are or are not achieving. (p. 2)

The underlying philosophy of case management is that optimal functioning for individuals can be achieved by efficiently and effectively providing an integrated delivery of services. The focus is on services that are comprehensive and that address the multitude of an individual's needs through the use of advocacy, ongoing communication, and service linkage (Case Management Society of America, 2008; Smith, 1995).

A Case Management Model

In Southern University's Department of Social Work, students are assigned a faculty adviser upon enrolling in the second sophomore-level course offered in the social work curriculum. Prior to that time, staff members in University College advise students. The department's advising coordinator is responsible for developing and maintaining an advisee database, assigning students to advisers, coordinating advising seminars, and establishing contacts with key personnel within the university's support services, such as the Counseling Center and the Center for Student Success.

Advising activities are aligned with and support the mission and goals of the program and university. For example, we serve a large number of at-risk students with various barriers that may hinder their academic success. To “turn the tide,” we realized it was essential in our role as advisers that we begin to more effectively track, monitor, and assist students. This process begins with knowing who our advisees are and establishing a relationship with each one. To promote this, we encourage students to see their assigned academic advisers. This is done to help ensure that all advisers are aware of their students' problems, concerns, or needs. Also, because we are most familiar with our advisees, this will likely facilitate more effective advising practices. The department's modified proactive, aggressive case management approach to advising will include the following key components: outreach, referral, ongoing assessment, advocacy, and evaluation.

Outreach

In relation to advising students on academic probation, Cruise (2002) stressed the need for advisers to initiate communication with students, follow-up if students fail to respond, and meet with students on a regular basis. Although specifically geared toward one type of at-risk student population, Cruise's suggestions can benefit all students. The outreach component of the model entails the following:

1. Conducting a departmental convocation once each semester with presentations by university and community representatives who provide services that may be useful to students.
2. Contacting all advisees (via e-mail and/or phone call) at least twice each semester. This includes students who are not enrolled for the current semester to provide assistance with reentry to the university.
3. Scheduling a minimum of two advising sessions with each advisee per semester.
4. Identifying any barriers to academic achievement, including issues related to social, psychological, emotional, financial, and/or academic needs; encouraging additional contact (as needed) with students.

Referral

The referral component of the model is essential to promoting positive outcomes for students. As stated by Tehan (2007), advisers are in a position to provide guidance to students relative to accessing and using university resources. Cruise (2002) further stipulated that when problems are beyond an adviser's
area of expertise, referral to university resources may be appropriate. In addition, Cruise (2002) stated:

Although taking advantage of these resources is ultimately the students' responsibility, the adviser must be persistent in making sure students follow through with referrals. This persistence may involve asking the student to bring in documentation or contacting offices for information (students must have signed a release with the adviser and the other office). (¶ 4)

Despite best efforts, no university is able to provide for all of the needs of its students; however, multiple community resources are often available to students in addition to services on campus. Therefore, this aspect of the model includes the following:

1. Providing advisers with a directory of university and community resources and support services.
2. Developing contact persons within each of these departments and agencies.
3. Developing service plans with advisees to identify needs, plans of action, and timetables for accomplishing goals.
4. Developing a systematic referral process that includes monitoring and follow-up.

Ongoing assessment

The assessment component of the model focuses on the effectiveness and efficiency of services provided. This entails reviewing and modifying (if needed) service plans as well as systematically documenting advising meetings, referrals, and services utilized. The advising coordinator will also facilitate this process by maintaining an Excel database to track and monitor overall advising activities and student data.

Advocacy

In addition to serving as catalysts for change at the individual level, advisers must also be willing to call for change at the departmental, college, and/or university levels. At the departmental level, this may include advocating for additional evening courses for nontraditional students, who must maintain full-time employment, or recommending teaching styles that are more student centered. At the college level, advisers' roles may involve opposing academic policies that are punitive or ill conceived; and at the university level, it may involve spearheading an effort to increase the availability, effectiveness, and efficiency of support services. In essence, advisers must embrace the idea that, at times, students should not have to change to fit within the system, but rather the system should change to meet the needs of students.

Evaluation

The evaluation aspect of the model addresses the need to determine the effectiveness of the advising process itself. Evaluation activities will include both peer review and student feedback. The goal is to assess the effectiveness of individual advisers as well as the case management model as a whole.

Conclusion

Students often face a multitude of challenges that serve as barriers to earning an undergraduate degree. Effective advising can serve to help reduce or eliminate those barriers. Effective advising is predicated on students knowing their goals and plans, faculty linking students to resources, and universities ensuring that resources are available (Johnson & Morgan, 2005). One goal of academic advising is to provide students with opportunities to engage in problem solving and decision making. One aspect of our role as
advisers is to assist students with these processes. Using a case management approach can facilitate these and other positive outcomes for students.

References


Additional Resource

National Association of Social Workers (www.socialworkers.org)

About the Author

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