

memorandum

Date: January 15, 2012

To: California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office

From: WestEd and the RP Group

Question 2: Using Paraprofessionals and Instructional Faculty for Advising

Does research provide information on the effectiveness of using college paraprofessionals and instructional faculty to provide orientation and counseling to students? If so, are there any negative consequences to students? Does expanded access to these services (i.e., orientation and counseling provided by paraprofessionals or instructional faculty) help improve student success?

Background

In California, the 50-percent law requires community colleges to spend at least half of their budget on the direct costs of instruction. Under this law, resources that colleges commit to matriculation supports, such as counseling, orientation, and assessment, are not considered instructional costs. Therefore, the costs of hiring counselors, advisors, or other matriculation staff have to be weighed against and can never exceed the costs of classroom faculty. Such considerations are magnified by California's recent cuts in funding for matriculation services. At the same time, however, these cuts have inspired colleges to explore ways in which such matriculation support services might be consolidated and/or leveraged to better effect, as well as ways in which instructional faculty and/or paraprofessionals might be used to address student matriculation needs.

In community colleges, advising is usually centralized in a student services division. This division is staffed by highly trained counselors, whose work may be supported by professional advisors and paraprofessionals. The structure of a student services division enables the college to provide students with more comprehensive services, such as support in applying for financial aid, preparing for college-level work, developing an education plan, considering transfer requirements, career counseling, and managing any personal challenges that infringe on academic matters. These supports are particularly important for community college students, who are more likely than university students to be the first in their family to go to college, to attend school while managing family and career responsibilities, and to be low income.

The disadvantage of consolidating services is that having separate student services and academic divisions may create institutional silos that isolate student support from instruction. Counselors and advisors must be well versed in scores of academic and career technical programs, as well as in transfer

agreements with various four-year institutions.¹ To help students plan for particular careers or majors, some colleges have created dedicated transfer centers that track specific requirements and advise students on how to align their education plans with the requirements of their intended transfer institution and major. Similarly, career centers help students determine how their education can lead to employment opportunities. Both transfer and career centers are usually coordinated by counselors, who may be supported by paraprofessionals to provide tutoring, orientation, and academic advising. Faculty involvement in these centers is less common.

Scenarios for Implementation

Increasingly, community colleges throughout the country are augmenting their ability to provide student services by assigning specific advising responsibilities to non-counselors, such as students, community members, paraprofessionals, and academic faculty. Among these approaches are

- assigning first-year students to teaching faculty for advising;
- employing classified staff in specific advising roles;
- using contract/seasonal employees to provide base-level advising electronically at peak periods (e.g., prior to start of the term);
- developing peer-to-peer mentoring programs;
- recruiting teaching faculty to serve as voluntary mentors;
- using community volunteers to advise students; and
- convening an advising fair for targeted student populations.

While paraprofessional and faculty advising cannot provide comprehensive counseling, there are several ways that non-counselors are used to provide more narrowly defined student support functions. Career technical education programs often use paraprofessionals who have specific knowledge of a subject to provide both programmatic and workforce-related advising, such as in a nursing program or a culinary academy. Similarly, paraprofessionals may be used in transfer or tutoring centers to answer basic orientation or planning questions.

Faculty, alumni, and community members are sometimes tapped to provide mentoring to students. A strictly voluntary arrangement in this context, mentoring can help students address personal challenges and better understand how to achieve their goals. Similarly, colleges can tap into their student populations, training students to play paraprofessional roles, such as providing tutoring or helping fellow students stay engaged in college.²

Some colleges have dealt with budget constraints by offering specific forms of advising in group settings. In addition to being a less costly way of providing support, using groups has the added advantage of helping to build a cohort of students who enter an institution together and may provide informal peer

¹ King, M. C. (2002). *Community College Advising*. NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources. Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/clearinghouse/advisingissues/comcollege.htm>

² Koring, H., & Campbell, S. (2005). An Introduction to Peer Advising. *National Academic Advising Association Monograph Series*. Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Monographs/documents/M13-Ch-1.pdf>

support to each other as they move forward.³ Group advising also can enable faculty members to be used more efficiently in orientation efforts. Sessions may be focused on specific college goals (e.g., transfer or attainment of specific certificates), with faculty explaining how to structure an education plan or prepare for transfer in their disciplines. Similarly, mentors can bring added support to orientations that are provided for specific types of students (e.g., single parents, Latinos, or older students).

Public responses to the Task Force on Student Success recommendations help to clarify issues related to expanding the range of those who provide student services. Supports related to some of the more technical content areas, to financial aid, and to transfer planning, for example, require a deep understanding of relevant regulations and requirements. Other types of support, such as helping students manage mental health or complex personal issues, benefit from a trained counselor. If advising tasks are delegated without consideration of such issues, students may be given advice that impedes their success. Therefore, careful attention must be paid to which tasks are handed off and to whom.⁴ A related concern is how paraprofessionals or faculty should be trained to provide appropriate support.

One important consideration for increasing faculty involvement as advisors in California community colleges is the impact on union contracts. Similarly, employing paraprofessionals to do work currently being performed by counselors would have an impact on counseling faculty's working conditions, which would also need to be resolved at the negotiating table.

Research on Paraprofessional and Faculty Involvement in Advising

Sparse research exists on the effectiveness of using paraprofessionals, faculty, and other non-counselors to provide such matriculation services as orientation, advising, and counseling, and the little research that does exist does not clarify who the best providers are for these services. None of the research we found looks at student outcomes, and few studies are empirical.

Habley (1988) outlines the strengths and weaknesses of different providers in academic advising:⁵

³ King, N. (2000). Advising Students in Groups. In V. N. Gordon, W. R. Habley, & Associates (Eds.), *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive Handbook*, p. 236. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Chancellor's Task Force on Student Success. (December 2011). *Summary of Community Comments*. Sacramento, CA: California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. Retrieved from http://www.californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/Portals/0/StudentSuccessTaskForce/Summary_of_Comments_December_5_2011.pdf

⁵ Habley, W. R. (1988). *The Status and Future of Academic Advising: Problems and Promise*. Iowa City: American College Testing Program, p. 148. Retrieved from: <http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED346903.pdf>

Advising Delivery System Matrix Strengths and Weaknesses

Delivery System	Access/ Availability to Students	Priority Placed on Advising	Knowledge Re: Academic Discipline	Knowledge of Student Development	Need for Required Training	Cost to Institution	Credibility with Faculty/Staff
Faculty	Low	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
Professional Advisor	High	High	Average	High	Average	High	Low
Counselor	Average	Average	Average	High	Average	High	Average
Peer	High	Average	Low	Low	High	Low	Average
Para-Professional	High	High	Average	Average	High	Low	Average

As the table shows, different providers or delivery systems are identified as having different strengths and weaknesses. This suggests that augmenting counselors with a mix of professional advisors, faculty, peers, and paraprofessionals could be effective for achieving student support goals.

Some studies show that peer, or student, advisors are more accessible to other students, lend credibility to the counseling services, and, as a result, increase the use of student services.⁶ However, much of this research is dated, does not look at student outcomes, and tends to narrowly focus on a single area, such as career or academic counseling.

None of the studies reviewed noted any negative consequences of using different providers for such support services as orientation, advising, and counseling, but all of the programs studied seem to focus on ensuring that non-counselors only take on assignments that are within their skill sets. Researchers who studied these programs also stressed the importance of training and evaluating the providers serving in these roles.⁷ One survey of peer counseling programs noted that if a college is planning to use peer mentors, it must be willing to give up some control of the program because peer mentors will inevitably do things differently than a counselor would. However, the researchers did not note that this has negative consequences.

The literature reveals no studies on the use of paraprofessionals to provide such student services as orientation and counseling.

⁶ Feehan, P. F., & Wade, S. L. (1998, December). The Paraprofessional Alternative. *Journal of Career Development, 25*(2), 149-157; Lamb, D., & Clark, R. J. (1974, January). Professional Versus Paraprofessional Approaches to Orientation and Subsequent Counseling Contacts. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 1*(1), 61–65; Lenz, J. G., & Panke, J. (2001). *Paraprofessionals in Career Services: Technical Report 32*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Career Center. Retrieved from <http://career.fsu.edu/documents/technical%20reports/Technical%20Report%2032/Technical%20Report%2032.htm>; Privette, G., & Delawder, J. E. (1982). Academic Peer Counseling: Advising with a Personal Touch. *International Journal of Advanced Counseling, 5*(2), 109–114.

⁷ Habley, W. R., & Crockett, D. S. (1988). The Third ACT National Survey of Academic Advising. In W. R. Habley (Ed.), *The Status and Future of Academic Advising: Problems and Promise*. Iowa City: American College Testing Program. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED346903.pdf>

Examples of Colleges Using Paraprofessionals and Faculty to Provide Advising

At **Guilford Technical College**, in North Carolina, the counseling center operates a **24-hour advising center** staffed by paraprofessionals who answer student questions that traditionally would be fielded by counselors, such as inquiries about applications, orientation, placement tests, deadlines, and financial aid forms. The counseling center also pairs counseling staff and faculty to provide a four-hour orientation session that covers key information about the college and its resources, strategies for succeeding academically, and registration. Faculty and administrators believe that this approach has freed up staff time in the counseling center — time that can, instead, be used to serve students who need more intensive support.⁸

When **Valencia College**, in Florida, realized that many career technical education students were failing to complete their programs because they couldn't figure out which courses to take, the college redirected federal funding to hire a **dedicated team of advisors who also serve as liaisons to industry**. Drawn from the same fields as the programs, these advisors help students identify which courses to take and in what order, as well as how the course content applies to real-world job skills. The advisors also help shape the content within the programs, to ensure that the curriculum aligns with current employer needs.⁹

Mott College, in Michigan, has significantly revamped its entrance and advising process to better serve students, by promoting a smoother transition into the institution and easier navigation through its offerings. A one-stop shop housed in a new physical plant offers enrollment, financial aid, placement, and advising services in one student-friendly place. Rather than relying solely on counselors, the program uses **trained faculty advisors** to provide support for education planning, with student visits tracked through a common database.¹⁰

The approach used by **Mississippi Gulf Coast College** is reminiscent of a four-year university model, with each full-time instructor providing **direct academic guidance** for an average of 25 to 30 students. Students receive this faculty support regardless of their program focus (transfer or CTE), and counselors who work with students on financial aid and other nonacademic issues indicated that they rely on faculty advisors to impart discipline-specific guidance. Recent efforts to improve this program include matching students more closely with a faculty advisor based on a student's major area of interest.¹¹

At **Mt. San Antonio College**, some departments have mapped their **courses and requirements** so that students can see a clear path to a degree or a certificate. Faculty bring printouts into their upper-level classes and lead an activity where students cross out courses that they have taken and identify the courses they need to take to achieve completion. If a student discovers that he or she has already attained a certificate, then a faculty member hands out application forms for that certificate.¹²

⁸ Northern Virginia Community College Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment. (2010, April). *Research Brief: The Development of New Student Orientation at NOVA*. Brief No. 28-10. Retrieved from <http://www.nvcc.edu/about-nova/directories--offices/administrative-offices/oir/docs/researchbrief2810NSOdev.pdf>; Venezia, A. (2011, September). Unpublished site visit report. San Francisco: WestEd.

⁹ Booth, K., & Karandjeff, K. (2011). *Aspen Prize in Community College Excellence Site Visit Report*. Berkeley, CA: RP Group.

¹⁰ Booth, K., & Karandjeff, K. (2011).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² B. McNeice-Stallard & R. Patterson (personal communication, November 14, 2011).

To address the lack of specific knowledge that counselors may have about individual majors, **Palomar College** has established a **faculty advisor** for every discipline. Students can access this advisor to get deeper guidance on questions about degrees, majors, and transfer. For example, during a general counseling session focused on developing a student's education plan, the student might indicate an interest in majoring in history. The student is then referred to the history advisor for a more detailed conversation about the major.¹³

Santa Barbara Community College has traditionally used **paraprofessionals in its transfer center** to conduct workshops, lead program orientations, and advise students. The transfer center also has a counselor who can provide support to students on more complex issues, such as addressing life challenges, evaluating transcripts, and creating education plans. The center director describes the allocation of tasks between the paraprofessional and the counselor as follows: the advisor (i.e., the paraprofessional) addresses issues that do not require specific training or knowledge, whereas the counselor is responsible for advising on topics that require specialized knowledge. Having both types of staff enables the center to use its resources efficiently. For example, its drop-in hours can be devoted to explaining the process of transfer and educating students on available resources, rather than building education plans, because students are able to make individual appointments with the counselor.¹⁴

Quincy College in Massachusetts uses paraprofessionals in its **Life Balance Coaching Office** to offer support in such areas as developing self-discipline and motivation, overcoming anxiety, improving study habits, and learning test-taking skills and strategies. In addition, the nursing program and other allied health fields use coaches to provide a greater depth of knowledge than a conventional counselor could, such as setting up practicums that are required for certification.¹⁵

Lane Community College, in Oregon, offers a **women-in-transition CTE advisor program**. Using a paraprofessional who brings career coaching skills, the program focuses on helping women identify possible high-wage and jobs that require career and technical education certificates or degrees, set up informational interviews, and tour work sites. The paraprofessional also provides tutoring.¹⁶

Foothill College has developed two peer-mentoring programs called "Brother II Brother" and "Sister II Sister" for students of color. Offering peer support, as well as support for developing leadership-, character-, and life-development skills, these programs help to create a mutual-support safety net and to foster retention, graduation, and transfer.¹⁷

Wayne Community College, in North Carolina, offers a **Minority Male Mentoring Group** that pairs high-risk students with faculty and community mentors. The program is restricted to students who are enrolled full time and who are themselves willing to mentor another student. It has resulted in a 100 percent college retention rate for its participants, compared to the 40-70 percent retention rate usually seen for this population, as well as in higher rates of employment and transfer to four-year colleges.¹⁸

¹³ K. Merino (personal communication, November 21, 2011).

¹⁴ K. Adams, A. Hollosy, & L. Castro (personal communication, December 6, 2011).

¹⁵ M. Balducci (personal communication, November 15, 2011); Quincy College Life Balance Coaching Office. Retrieved from http://www.quincycollege.edu/qc/departments/life_balance.htm

¹⁶ Lane Community College. Career Technical Education (CTE) Advising Services. Retrieved from <http://www.lanec.edu/wp/cis.htm>

¹⁷ Brother II Brother informational page. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=67946174949&v=info>

¹⁸ Peer Systems Consulting Group. (2012). *A Guide to the Mentor Program Listings*. Retrieved from <http://www.peer.ca/mentorprograms.html#FACSTUD>

Additional Resources

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