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Student Needs Have Changed. Advising Must Change, Too.

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Body

ABSTRACT

Gone are the days of simply helping students register for classes and pick a major. New strategies and technologies are aimed at improving retention and graduation rates.

FULL TEXT

Shelbie Walker remembers the delight she felt on being accepted into the pre-nursing program at the University of Oklahoma. The university had awarded her a scholarship based on her high grades and her family's income. And the Norman campus is close enough to home - McAlester, Okla., two hours away - that she could help her mother, Stephaine, who had just been diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer.

But as her freshman year progressed, she faced other challenges, too. There was the zoology course that confounded her and a social scene that didn't include as many people of color as Walker, who is African-American, was accustomed to. Then, at the start of her second semester, her sister, Cassi, suffered a head injury. She remains in a coma.

Feeling overwhelmed, and considering whether she should stay in college, Walker sought help from the academic **advising** office. In doing so, she could turn not to a stranger but rather to an ally she had met during orientation the summer before she started college - Charles Baker, an adviser who had also been trained as an academic life coach.

During Walker's first year, Baker got her in touch with the college's study-resources center for help with coursework, encouraged her to visit nursing colleges and clinics to see if she had chosen a suitable career, and gave her solid tips on navigating college life, such as making time for herself and listing daily chores so she could complete them more efficiently.

"I was hesitant to come here - it's such a large school," Walker says. "He welcomed me the first time I met him and got to know me personally. We talked about my other goals, like my need to be more social."

Now a rising junior with a 3.6 grade-point average, she is vice president of the campus's Black Student Association and secretary of a pre-nursing-student group.

Most important, she says, Baker let her know that she belonged at the university. "I wouldn't be in the position I'm in now without my coach," says Walker. "I feel like every student should have someone like him. That one-on-one interaction means everything."

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Across the nation, colleges are looking for better ways to keep students like Walker, who come from lower-income backgrounds, and help them toward graduation. Florida State, Indiana, and the University of North Carolina have launched or will soon begin coaching programs designed to keep at-risk students from dropping out.

But the coaching program at Oklahoma may be unique. The university has certified 42 advisers - about one-third of the campus's total - as academic life coaches. The six months of training each has undertaken have helped move Oklahoma toward more-intensive **advising** models that encourage students to make their own decisions, think more deeply about what they want to get out of college, and work to shape their college experience.

Oklahoma's revitalizing of its **advising** office comes at a time when **advising** and orientation efforts are undergoing a sea change. Gone are the days when the **advising** office's mission involved little more than helping students register for next semester's classes or decide on a major. The emerging brand of adviser is still expected to take on those tasks, but also to handle a wider range of student needs - financial concerns, mental-health issues, extracurricular opportunities - and keep students on track.

"We're asking advisers to do more and more: get involved in enrollment, recruitment, retention, a growing list of issues that a student might have. It's a huge shift in the field," says Kathleen Shea Smith, associate provost for academic **advising** at Oklahoma.

A boom in software programs that can track student appointments, collate and compare notes from previous **advising** visits, and identify students at risk of failing or dropping out is helping colleges make that transition. The new platforms also give students digital ways to handle basic **advising** matters themselves, like learning the requirements for a major or next semester's course offerings. That frees up advisers' time so that they can schedule more intensive one-on-one encounters.

"It's revolutionizing how we do things," says Rick Sluder, vice provost for student success at Middle Tennessee State University. "Making sure that students have meaningful visits is paramount. I remember one **advising** office where students would squeeze a rubber duck at the front desk to let someone know they needed to see somebody. Now they can schedule an appointment using an app on their phone and go see an adviser who has more time to help them."

Changes in **advising** strategies have arisen as colleges wage an intense battle against attrition. The increasing demands of students and parents, particularly the return they want to see on their investment in education, have also increased pressure on advisers.

"A lot of schools realize that they need to train their advisers or restructure their **advising** so students have a better chance of succeeding," says Lindsay Miars, director of strategic research at EAB, a private consulting firm.

Heightened emphasis on **advising** has resulted in a field that is more professionalized. Advisers tend to have a higher level of credentials than in previous generations, sometimes even a Ph.D. Still, the pay remains low, typically starting at around \$38,000. Despite that, competition for jobs is intense, with some colleges reporting 100 or more applicants for one **advising** position.

Some colleges report a hiring boom. They are taking on more advisers who will lessen the load so that each one has more time with students. Many campuses are also looking to move away from an old model that had faculty members doubling as advisers.

There are small institutions that still rely on faculty members, but colleges over all, between 2013 and 2016, increased spending 36 percent on professional **advising** staff and 43 percent on technology for their **advising** offices, according to survey results from Nacada, a 14,000-member research-and-advocacy group for advisers. Institutions such as Middle Tennessee State have more than doubled the size of their **advising** staffs in recent years.

Despite those investments, some experts wonder whether colleges are doing enough to catch up after decades of keeping **advising** offices in the proverbial corner.

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"We've changed the demographics of college in a major way, but we haven't really done anything comparable when it comes to **advising**," says John Gardner, chief executive of the Gardner Institute, a nonprofit group that works with colleges to improve student success. "Students that don't work out will leave, incur debt, and often not pay it back. The social and institutional consequences are huge. It's immoral."

Student-retention numbers nationwide remain flat, with around one-quarter at four-year colleges and half at two-year institutions leaving before earning a degree. The lack of viable **advising** strategies is partly responsible, Gardner says.

A handful of community colleges and Purdue University, for example, offer students intensive **advising** during several days of freshman orientation, or require advisers to have more regular discussions with students about their choice of major. Peer-leadership programs that use students to help **advise** others have shown promise, as has a new initiative at public colleges in Georgia that connects advisers with students taking introductory courses that have high failure rates.

Still, a more systematic approach is needed to improve **advising** across the board, Gardner says. The Gardner Institute and Nacada started a pilot program this spring at 12 institutions to help develop best practices.

"We're asking them to examine what they're doing and to look at what the research shows, and then craft a plan for excellence," Gardner says. "We're hearing a lot more rhetoric about being more personal in our **advising**. But the level of delivery rarely matches it."

One of the problems, administrators say, is that while standard metrics exist, finding those that can tease out the effects of **advising** remains a muddle.

While 46 percent of institutions report having some yardsticks in place, only 21 percent evaluate individual advisers, and only 8 percent say they have a central, campuswide method for sizing up **advising**, according to Nacada.

Colleges use student-satisfaction surveys - even scanning the college newspaper for letters of complaint about **advising**. Standard measures, such as the number of adviser visits per student, adviser-to-student ratio, and graduation and retention rates, can give colleges a baseline.

But those stats often don't allow the institutions to look deeply or broadly enough to see how **advising** is performing across far-flung schools on a campus, or learn which **advising** techniques are the most promising. What's more, there are too many variables - faculty advisers versus professional advisers, differences in size and culture between colleges - to comparatively measure **advising** operations. The advent of technology has resulted in dozens of fresh data points, but colleges haven't yet learned how to use them as professional assessment tools.

"This is all too new to them," says EAB's Miars.

College **advising** is "in its early adulthood - nowhere near maturity," Gardner says. "It's a structural problem, what with **advising** leaders at colleges inhabiting lower-level spots in the hierarchy."

Still, the rising profile of the field, plus the acknowledged need to use **advising** more precisely, is allowing it to grow.

The University of California system is creating administrative positions dedicated to **advising** on each of its nine campuses, with a goal of putting **advising** operations in one office that reports directly to a provost or vice provost.

Colleges are beginning to see gains from programs that centralize **advising** across campuses, as in the California system and at Virginia Tech, or ones that better coordinate efforts among career counselors, financial-aid officers, and advisers, such as at the University of Wisconsin.

Experimentation is yielding some encouraging results. Some colleges have had success "clustering" groups - such as athletes, first-generation students, and veterans - with advisers who have experience with those populations or have special training.

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At Abilene Christian University, an adviser with a STEM background speaks with students who major in biochemistry, biology, and chemistry. Meanwhile, a former coach **advises** majors in exercise kinesiology and nutrition.

Early results show that those students are more likely to stay with the same adviser throughout their college years, and that those advisers are more likely to develop a rapport with faculty members in their fields. That could result in more meaningful student interventions, says Miars, who examined clustering and other emerging **advising** practices in a report she wrote last year.

But for some colleges, the focus is less on developing new schemes or data points than on the human touch. Some embrace "holistic" life-coaching approaches, in which specially trained advisers take on tough cases.

"Data predictions are not enough," says Kathleen Shea Smith, at Oklahoma. "Campuses need to create specific and individualized interventions to address the complex reasons why students choose to leave college early."

Advisers at Oklahoma apply coaching techniques when dealing with students on the verge of failing or facing life stresses that could affect their college status.

These coaches meet every two weeks with students who need intensive support - including students like Shelbie Walker, who are academically gifted and have received state scholarships because of financial need. Studies show that those students are more likely to drop out.

Starting last year, Oklahoma began mobilizing "retention teams" to deal with students who have told an adviser they'd be leaving the school. Coaches will speak with them about any reason - academic, financial, psychological - that might keep them from completing college. "Students are here and undergoing a transformative process," says Smith. "Some are skeptical that we care about their success, and coaching can help alleviate that."

Coached students at Oklahoma show a 13-percent increase above the predicted rates for retention of at-risk students. Student-success efforts overall, including academic coaching, have helped to raise the university's retention rate from 86 percent in 2015 to 92 percent this year, Smith says.

Laura Cullen, an academic-**advising** specialist and academic life coach at Oklahoma, says that her training has taught her, above all, the value of listening.

"We totally focus on what they are telling us, and then help them set an agenda by asking very precise questions that get them moving toward a goal," says Cullen. "In the past, I may have been thinking ahead about what I needed to tell them. Now I listen very differently, and students respond with much more trust."

In the two years she has combined coaching with **advising**, she has seen a larger proportion of students raise their grades or stay in school.

"For the first time in their lives, many are making decisions without their parents," she says. "It can be scary but empowering for them. The results I'm seeing are strong."

Graphic

When Shelbie Walker (right) faced difficulties during her freshman year at the U. of Oklahoma, she turned to her adviser, Charles Baker, a trained academic life coach.

Brett Deering for The Chronicle

Student Needs Have Changed. 2

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