

The Advisor's Toolbox

The Forum: Intrusive Group Advising for the Probationary Student

Mary Austin, Michigan State University

Elaine Cherney, Michigan State University

Jane Crowner, Michigan State University

Alice Hill, Michigan State University

"The Forum" is a group advising effort initiated to provide a more intrusive advising format for freshmen and sophomores who were on probation and reluctant to meet with their advisors. The Forum helped probationary students better understand the skills needed to maintain academic excellence. The results of the group activity suggest that it has been a significant retention tool.

Advisors have observed that students who achieve academic success have the ability to accurately assess their strengths and weaknesses. However, students who do not perform adequately in class give little thought to self-evaluation. In fact, there is probably no group of students more perplexing to academic advisors than those who report that "all is going well" and who seem genuinely surprised to learn that "all has not gone well" when they are on academic probation at the end of the semester.

In the spring of 1994, the advising staff of the Undergraduate University Division (UUD) at Michigan State University (MSU) discussed how they could have a greater impact on the academic performance of the probationary population. The UUD is the academic administrative body for freshmen and sophomores at MSU and is responsible for the enforcement of the academic policy for these students. It has a central main office, three satellite offices in different residence halls, and a Learning Resources Center. Its primary focus are those underclassmen who enter the University without major choice and are declared to be "No Preference" students—approximately 20% of entering freshmen.

Prior to The Forum and a few projects aimed at improving the academic performance of reinstated students, the UUD advisors concentrated on course scheduling and strategies to raise students' cumulative grade-point averages (GPAs) to at least 2.0. Three issues surfaced.

1. Many probationary students would not voluntarily meet with advisors.
2. advisors did not have enough time to meet

individually with all probationary students early in the semester.

3. Advisor conferences were not focusing enough on goals that help students improve learning.

The advisors agreed with O'Banion (1994) who was among the first to argue that academic advising should include discussions of life goals, vocational interests, program choices, courses, and schedules—in that order.

Advisors wanted probationary students to look at their own goals and to evaluate whether they were successfully meeting them. This supported Crookston's (1994) thesis that schooling should fit within a life plan from which educational designs can emerge. Students should be partners in the teaching and learning process. The Forum presentations included student evaluations of objectives based on personal values and short-term goals based on individualized life ambitions. The strategy was to make the students more responsible for their own decisions and actions.

Methodology

The first Forum sessions were given at the beginning of the 1994 fall semester. Letters were sent to approximately 500 students who were on probation at the end of the previous spring semester. The letters offered each student the option of attending a Forum session or meeting with an advisor. The students were told that if they did neither, an academic hold would be placed on their enrollments for the following semester.

The Forum sessions had three main parts.

1. Students received information about how to become effective learners.
2. Students received an overview of the services offered by the UUD advising staff.
3. Advisors gathered information about the students that would be useful in future contacts.

Each session followed the same format so we

could be reasonably certain that all the students had a similar Forum experience. Participants assessed their academic standings and offered explanations about their lack of academic success. Advisors explained the rationale and goals of The Forum. Then, the students were divided into smaller sections with advisor-facilitators. The students discussed their common academic problems.

Approximately 189 students attended the first Forum. In general, the participants suggested that their academic difficulties stemmed from not going to class, not studying enough, not managing their time, and not understanding written material. They also said that they often felt that their instructors did not like to teach and did not care about them. Before the sessions ended, the students were asked to set long- and short-term goals for themselves. Advisors stressed that the goals needed to be associated with the students' perceived problems and were attainable and measurable. Students were urged to follow up The Forum with meetings with their advisors.

Follow-Up

A month after the Forum presentations, a six-item questionnaire was sent to all the students who attended; 27% responded. The students indicated that they felt The Forum had been helpful. They liked attending it before classes started and they were able to handle their short-term goals. They did not feel the need for a follow-up session. The major criticism was that The Forum was too long and somewhat repetitive.

The positive results of the first attempt warranted a second Forum. However, rather than bringing the students together in one central area, a session was held in each residence hall complex. Because we thought that students would feel more comfortable with them, the residence hall advisors made the Forum presentations. The content was altered to include how to calculate a GPA and to address some university policy issues with which students might not be familiar. Facilitators continued to diagnose students' individual problems and help them establish appropriate goals. The meetings were limited to one hour.

The sessions were held at the beginning of the 1995 spring semester. As before, the students were told that academic holds would be placed on future enrollments if they did not attend a Forum session or see their advisors. There were nine programs given and 492 students attended, which constituted approximately one third of the probationary population.

In addition to the advisors, the Forum presenters included successful students—some of whom had previously been on probation. They functioned as academic liaisons in the residence halls and were good role models, as they shared their experiences with the probationary students.

All the students who attended The Forum filled out information cards that included their phone numbers, and postal and E-mail addresses so that the advisors could readily follow up on each student's semester progress. Once again, goals were emphasized and students were made aware of the various units on campus that offer academic support.

Following the 1995 spring semester Forums, advisors concluded that further modifications were required. Enrollment changes were recommended in instances where students had poor grades in prerequisite courses, had enrolled for heavy credit loads, or were planning to change majors. Advisors also decided to better define "short-term goal" and encourage students to consult with advisors after attending a Forum.

The grade reports of the attendees of the second Forum were examined at the end of the semester. The review compared the grades of those students who attended The Forum, those who saw an academic advisor, those who both attended a Forum and had a meeting with an academic advisor, and those who did neither. Students who attended a Forum and had a conference with their advisors increased their GPAs from 1.316 to 1.894, an improvement of 0.578. (Ninety-nine students who attended The Forum also conferred with their advisors.) The 393 students who attended The Forum but did not see their advisors moved their GPAs from 1.449 to 1.914, an increase of 0.47. The 450 students who had individual probation conferences with advisors before the fifth week of the semester, but who did not attend a Forum, had a 0.495 GPA improvement, from 1.436 to 1.931. The probationary students who neither attended a Forum or saw advisors prior to the fifth week of classes bettered their GPAs by 0.34 points—from 1.433 to 1.771. Enrollment holds were placed on non-complying students just before they were eligible to enroll for subsequent semesters. Although all probationary students who wished to continue at MSU eventually met with advisors in order to have the holds removed, those who had early contact with professional staff experienced the most GPA improvement.

Efforts such as The Forum are only successful if students persist in college. At the end of the fall

semester 1995, the grade reports of the attendees were again reviewed to see which students were still in school. Those probationary students who attended The Forum had the best short-term retention rate, 69.7%. Fewer of the probationary students who both attended a Forum and saw their advisors (68.75%) were retained; this group had the lowest initial GPA. Of the probationary students who did neither, 60.4% continued their education at MSU.

In the fall of 1995, The Forum was offered but without the threat of academic holds. Only 23 probationary students out of 1,200 attended the sessions. We therefore concluded that the imposition of holds on future enrollments had to be an integral part of the program. We continue to present these sessions at the beginning of every semester. The Forum now consists of a visual program with commentary by a team of advisors and successful students.

Conclusion

The results from this structured, intrusive advising strategy suggest that such labor-intensive effort is worthwhile. Although placing holds on the enrollments of those students who did not attend a Forum or see their advisors may seem harsh, there seems to be remarkably little resentment of this intrusion on the students' academic privileges. Indeed, the presenters have been told

by the students that they were relieved and grateful that they were forced to confront the causes of their academic problems and make changes before it was too late.

References

- Crookston, B. B. (1994). A developmental view of academic advising as teaching. *NACADA Journal*, 14(2), 5-9. [Reprinted from *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 13, 12-17.]
- O'Banion, T. (1994). An academic advising model. *NACADA Journal*, 14(2), 10-16. [Reprinted from *Junior College Journal*, 42, 62, 64, 66-69.]
- Office of the Assistant Provost for Academic Students Services. (1995). *Retention Plan for Michigan State University*. East Lansing, MI: Author.

Authors' Notes

Elaine Cherney is an emeritus professor at MSU and is currently consulting and teaching developmental reading courses. After several years as an undergraduate advisor, Alice Hill is currently a mathematics specialist in the Learning Resources Center at MSU. Mary Austin and Jane Crowner are advisors and coordinators of campus offices in the Undergraduate University Division at MSU. Interested readers may contact Mary Austin at 109 Brody Hall, MSU, E. Lansing, MI 48824 or by E-mail at austinm@pilot.msu.edu or Alice Hill at 209 Bessey Hall, MSU, E. Lansing, MI 48824 or at hilla@pilot.msu.edu.