

Serving More Than Students

A Critical Need for College Student Personnel Services

By David H. Goss



Report 7

ASHE/ERIC Higher Education Reports Series

407 H-1000

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Pioneering New Support Systems for Non-Traditional Baccalaureate Students: Interactional Advising and Peer Mentoring

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The complexion of the undergraduate college population in the United States has changed dramatically during the last 15 years. While students of traditional college age once dominated the undergraduate ranks to the near exclusion of older students, non-traditionally-aged students now constitute a significant proportion of that population. In 1978, 37.5% of the total national undergraduate college enrollment was made up of adults (25 years and older). It is projected that in 1990, 47% will be adults.¹ While some demographic studies project that the primary adult student market will be between 25 and 35 years of age, other predictions are for a spectacular increase in the 35 to 44 year-old group.² As the normative age for undergraduate enrollment changes from one that was previously quite homogeneous (primarily 18-23 years old) to one which includes the adult life-span (18 years of age and older), higher education institutions need to extend their efforts and modify their programs to effectively educate non-traditionally-aged learners.

The College of St. Catherine, a private women's college in St. Paul, Minnesota, began its Weekend College program in 1979. The program was developed as a result of the College's recognition that today's women are becoming educationally and career oriented. Weekend College offers students the opportunity to earn a college degree by attending classes every other weekend from early September through June. Weekend College is designed for women of all ages and backgrounds:

- women with the interest and energy to pursue serious academic study but whose work or family responsibilities make it impossible for them to attend weekday or evening classes;

1. William C. Hapowski, "Recruit and Retain Adult Students: The Challenge of the 80's — and Beyond!" U.S. Department of Education, National Institute of Education, Educational Resources Information Center, 1983, p. 1. ERIC

2. Harold E. Hodgkinson, "Guess Who's Coming to Colleges Your Student in 1990," National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities, Washington, D.C., January, 1983, p. 18. ERIC

- women who want the learning opportunities and certification to advance in a career which only a college education provides; and,
- women capable of self-directed study who desire an atmosphere that fosters intellectual exchange and sharing.¹

Students ranging from 18 to over 60 years of age attend Weekend College, with the median age being 31 years, and the time since their previous involvement in formal education ranging from less than one year to 41 years with the median of five years leave from school. Approximately one-fourth of the students have had no previous college experience. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of Weekend College students are employed full-time and another 12% report part-time employment. Approximately 75% of them have one or more children ranging in age from birth to over 21 years. Although students can theoretically earn a B.A. degree in four years through Weekend College, most attend on a part-time basis taking one or two courses per trimester.

For the non-traditionally-aged student, beginning or resuming work on an undergraduate degree can appear to be an overwhelming prospect. It can be especially intimidating when coursework is done on a part-time basis along with other responsibilities (job demands, family responsibilities, community involvement, etc.). Students in this situation frequently experience a great deal of uncertainty as to whether their goal of obtaining a baccalaureate degree is realistically achievable and whether they have the ability to meet the challenge. The gradual nature of their progress over an extended number of years (when compared to the traditional four-year time frame) can lead to doubts and despair.

It has been observed that when a student in the early stages of her educational process meets a student who is nearing completion, she may receive invaluable assurance and concrete indication that her goal is achievable and that the challenge can be managed with life's many demands. The student nearing completion of her degree program, or who has actually graduated, has much to offer in the way of hindsight and retrospect. She is in a prime position to offer ideas, suggestions and advice to those in the earlier stages of the same process. The student in the earlier stages can profit dramatically from the shared insights and experiences of those who have been through and successfully maneuvered the process. The *interactional advising and peer mentor programs* were therefore initiated by the Weekend College Social Work Department for social work majors in order to develop a relationship between beginning students and those nearing completion of their degree or who have graduated.

INTERACTIONAL ADVISING

Rationale

Interactional advising, an expanded and modified derivative of peer advising, is based upon a similar rationale. Peer advising systems operate on the importance of peer influence; provide low cost delivery program; and are readily accessible to students. Such programs are strongly identified with students; help to improve the organizational dynamics of an advising program; and offer positive personal benefits to the students involved.² Interactional advising expands and modifies traditional peer advising programs by adding a group

interactional component and by emphasizing personal issues (such as simultaneous balancing of family, job and/or school demands) in addition to academic/professional ones. It is not an alternative to faculty-student advising, but a supplement to the faculty-student advising relationship, providing a new dimension to academic advising and the benefits it affords students.

Peer interaction can serve to enhance the "academic socialization" of students by encouraging the development of a personal relationship between and among students, department faculty and staff. Furthermore, collegial interaction among students can foster identification with the values, ethics and practices of the professional group the students are preparing to enter.³ Experienced peers are in the strategic position of knowing first-hand how to successfully maneuver through the system while simultaneously balancing numerous and varied responsibilities and maximizing the benefits derived. They can provide "inside tips," based on student perspective, on how to register; how to gain admission to the major; how to effectively complete course and curricular requirements; where specific information can be located; and how to utilize various campus resources. Peers can serve as an invaluable link between new students and faculty. It is not uncommon for a student to refer a colleague to a faculty member or another student as a result of a positive personal experience of a similar nature. Furthermore, peers are in the unique position of discussing frankly the impact college enrollment has had on the marital, parental, employment and social spheres of her life and how these challenges can be effectively managed. To the extent these characteristics are included, interactional advising among student colleagues has been shown to benefit its participants while enhancing the overall advising program provided to students.

Design and Implementation

Interactional advising provides a forum for small group gatherings during which early-stage students have the opportunity to hear first-hand from students who have completed, or are about to complete their degree program. Because these two groups of students are at different stages of the program, opportunities for such interaction do not ordinarily occur. The atmosphere is casual in order to promote relaxed personal interaction. Beverages and food are served.

Interactional advising was designed and implemented by the social work faculty academic advisor with direct input and assistance from a group of students and graduates. Student involvement in planning the project has been a critical ingredient. Not only did students assist in setting goals and formulating the design, but their personal investment and commitment led to interactional advising sessions which drew substantial numbers of enthusiastic participants. These sessions were deemed successful by both students and faculty.

Thus far, one round of interactional advising has been available to students each trimester. In one round, two or three sessions are held to accommodate students' varying schedules. Students usually attend once each round, but they are welcome to attend all the sessions. As a result of student demand, two rounds of interactional advising was offered each trimester starting in 1985. Faculty (one or more) are always in attendance. Students are notified of the sessions by a one-page flyer. The sessions are billed as opportunities to network with, connect with and to offer and receive support from other Weekend College social work majors.

¹ Weekend College Catalogue, College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1983, p. 3.

² Richard Layman, "The Use of Peers as College Academic Advisors: Reasons and Evidence," University of Michigan, September, 1981, pp. 6 P. ERIC

³ Daniel E. Kapran and Doris W. Coldren, "Academic Advising to Facilitate Student Retention," The Pennsylvania State University at Uniontown, 1980, pp. 11-12.

Entitled "Yes, There is Light at the End of the Tunnel!!!", the flyer encourages students to participate whether they are beginning, midway, nearing completion or have graduated from the program. Students are encouraged to come whether they're "raring to go" or "ready to hang it up" in order to reaffirm to themselves and each other that their goals, although challenging, are indeed achievable. Thus, interactional advising has components both of commonality of experience as well as diversity in relation to degree of progress towards realization of one's goal(s).

PEER MENTORING

Rationale

The term "mentor" was first used by Homer in *The Odyssey*. Mentor is the name of an and trusted friend (actually the goddess Athena in disguise) of King Ulysses who is left to care for and nurture Telemachus, Ulysses' son, while the King is away fighting the Trojan War. Mentor assists Telemachus in learning to go about his father's work, introduces him to other rulers and teaches him how to conduct himself. Hence the name came to refer to a wise and trusted counselor who advises an aspiring individual, helping him/her to grow and learn. Mentor relationships have the potential to enhance significantly the career and psychological development of both the mentor and the protege.⁶ As the protege benefits from the advanced experience of the mentor, the mentor receives recognition and respect from the protege. While a mentor may not necessarily fulfill all the lofty functions prescribed by some, such as that of teacher, sponsor, host, role model, exemplar and counselor,⁷ s/he can help to instill confidence, clarify goals, assist in problem-solving, provide feedback and share "how-to" tips.

Ten years ago, the major problem for women on campus was initial access; now, with women as the new majority of students, the major problem is one of advancement through academic programs and professions.⁸ Mentoring lends itself well as a form of adult socialization for those involved in academic and professional-level pursuits.⁹ A mentor program at Wheaton College in Massachusetts which pairs students with alumnae has demonstrated that a mentor can help a student look ahead to see the directions her career

may take, make better-informed choices about jobs or further study, and help her begin a network of career support.¹⁰

A basic tenet of psychological theories of identification is that people emulate models who are perceived to be similar to themselves. One study of the phases of mentor relationships concluded that peer relationships appear to offer a valuable alternative to the traditional mentor relationship. Not only do they offer the same career and psychological functions, they offer the opportunity for greater mutuality and sense of equality.¹¹ As such, a peer mentor is one who can offer advice, informal guidance, and share insights regarding departments, institutions or disciplines.

6. Kathy E. Kraus, "Phases of the Mentor Relationship," *Academy of Management Journal*, 26 (December, 1983), 608.

7. Daniel J. Levinson et al., *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).

8. Roberta Hall and Bernice Sandler, "Academic Mentoring for Women Students and Faculty: A New Look at an Old Way to Get Ahead," Project on the Status and Education of Women, Association of American Colleges, Washington, D.C., 1983, p. 1.

9. Kathryn Moore, "What To Do Until the Mentor Arrives," Center for the Study of Higher Education, The Pennsylvania State University at University Park, 1980, p. 12.

10. Toni Oberer, "Mentor Matchmaking," *Savvy* (May, 1982) p. 21.

11. Kraus, "Phases of the Mentor Relationship," p. 625.

Design and Implementation

The peer mentor program with the Weekend College Social Work major is designed to build upon the interaction initiated during interactional advising. Each interested early-stage student or protege is matched with a peer mentor. Students who have graduated or are nearing graduation are recruited to serve as peer mentors. Both proteges and mentors participate voluntarily. The mentor-protege relationship is described to interested students as an opportunity for sharing experience, advice, guidance, support, problem-solving, etc. with the primary objective of enhancing the protege's college and career-entry experience.

In the recruitment process, prospective proteges and mentors are asked to identify their previous work experiences and their professional interests and goals. Proteges are then matched with mentors according to commonality of professional interests and goals. Mentors are given an orientation session to prepare them to take on their role. The orientation session includes:

- mutual expectations of the protege and mentor;
- definition and philosophy of mentoring;
- responsibilities of the mentor;
- benefits likely to be derived by the protege and the mentor;
- when and where to refer proteges;
- available campus resources;
- the mechanics of initiating and nurturing the relationship, and
- tips on how to be a good mentor.

The faculty advisor coordinates the orientation and serves as an ongoing consultant to all mentor/protege units. The peer mentor program, like the interactional advising program, was designed and implemented with significant participation of students and alumnae. Their input and assistance has been invaluable in defining the program, recruiting interested participants, identifying actual mentor-protege matches and maintaining the program.

The mentor-program is periodically evaluated so that appropriate changes ensure that the program continues to meet the needs of both proteges and mentors. An evaluation questionnaire is sent to each mentor and protege. Respondents are assured that the purpose of the process is to evaluate the program and not the individual mentor or protege; that responses will be regarded as confidential; and that findings will be reported on a collective basis with no individual references. An evaluation conducted in October, 1984, revealed that the expectations of nearly all participants (mentors and proteges) are being met, and the respondents indicated a desire to continue with their mentor-protege relationships. The most frequently mentioned problem for mentors and proteges was the lack of time and the heavy demands experienced at home, school and work. In response, time management has been incorporated into the mentor orientation session.

CONCLUSION

Interactional advising and peer mentoring are valuable supplements to the traditional faculty-student advising relationship. A comprehensive advising program is essential to a student's smooth movement through an academic program. A well-rounded program serves

to provide a positive impact on the quality of the student's educational experience, their professional preparedness, and the college's retention of students. The three-pronged approach of faculty-student advising, interactional advising, and peer mentoring provides the individual student with a complete spectrum of resources they can draw upon for support, information, career and personal development and networking. Such a multifaceted approach is needed if higher education is to broaden its horizons and meet the challenge presented by a new breed of student and an ever changing society. At best, academic advising illuminates the many questions confronting students and assists them in discovering directions for growth and development. It is only through a comprehensive advising program — one which includes communication and information exchanges with faculty as well as fellow students on an individual as well as a group basis — that students can realize their maximum educational potential.

Investigating the Motivations of the Pre-Engineering Major

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ABSTRACT

Engineering programs on campuses nationwide continue to attract large numbers of students. As enrollments in these programs soar, many schools which previously had open admission policies have been forced to control enrollment, resulting in a large population of pre-engineering majors — some having limited career aspirations or unrealistic academic expectations. To aid in the understanding and advising of these majors, student profiles reflecting motivation patterns have been presented.

INTRODUCTION

Since Engineering programs nationwide have been noted for high attrition rates, it is important for university officials to encourage or re-direct students into programs in which they can be successful. Effective advising (whether it be coursework or career) cannot be accomplished unless the advisor has pertinent information not only on students' academic background, but also on their aspirations and attitudes as well. It is believed that a realistic assessment of the student's "total profile" can be a valuable tool in predicting student performance at the college level. In addition, students need to be challenged to examine their motivations for declaring engineering as a major — motivations which may be obscured by hidden influencing factors, by misconceptions about the profession and about the academic rigors of the program.

THE MODEL

The model represented in the schematic may be an effective tool in counseling and advising the pre-engineering major. It provides the theoretical basis for the development of student profiles of the pre-engineering major by including variables that either influenced or motivated the student in selecting engineering as a career.