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SOLVING THE PROBATION PUZZLE
A Student Affirmative Action Program

As part of the campus concern with retention, California State University at Long Beach developed several intervention strategies to work with students on academic probation. The Student Affirmative Action Program designed their program components based on an identification of key factors contributing to academic difficulties. Findings suggest that students who participated in this mandatory, long-term, comprehensive program made far more significant and steady progress compared with control populations who utilized other services or who did not participate in any campus program.

At California State University, Long Beach, a large urban institution attended by a highly diverse student population, in excess of 10 percent of the student body falls on academic probation during either or both semesters of a typical academic year. Generally, the number of individuals is greater during the spring, since new students enter with no academic record in September, and the majority of those disqualified at the close of the previous spring semester (some **3-4** percent of all enrolled students, undergraduate and graduate) have not returned. The incidence of academic probation and dismissal is not significantly different from that found in many urban public institutions having large student bodies.

A campus response to the probation phenomenon is determined less by its prevalence than by the institutional perspective of it. Unsatisfactory academic progress may be viewed as part of the natural attrition process by which less capable, less motivated, or underprepared students are removed from an institution that lacks or declines the special resources necessary to service such individuals. Other institutions of higher education (IHEs) may feel that because admitted students are presumed capable, given an understanding of the factors involved and the resources with which to address them, the provision of probation intervention services for some students is a moral and/or a fiscal imperative.

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Beginning in 1982-83, CSULB took note of the incidence indicated above and initiated structured programming to work with groups of students through the Academic Advising Center. Simultaneously, the Student Affirmative Action Program identified the minority students within that population and devised a more extensive probation intervention program that would also address the special needs affecting that population. Both services were developed by staff sufficiently aware of the problems experienced by their respective populations to design the initial programs accordingly and to modify them as additional information became available.

After several semesters of work with these student groups and with the data to evaluate the effectiveness of the services provided, the administrators of the Student Affirmative Action Program have been able to identify both the factors most responsible for unsatisfactory academic progress and the keys to successful interventions for affected students. The pages that follow, then, provide a demographic analysis of the campus probation population, an enumeration and brief discussion of the principal factors that cause student difficulties, and a description and evaluation of the program presented by Student Affirmative Action.

At CSULB, the population falling on scholastic probation (and into the deeper grade-point deficiency category termed "subject to disqualification") was analyzed according to school of major, class standing, ethnic identification, and residence status (distinguishing immigrants and refugees from residents). In summary, it was found that the incidence of unsatisfactory academic performance is greatest in impacted and highly technical majors, that it is found most heavily at the freshman and junior levels, that minority populations (both those admitted regularly and through special action) underrepresented in the university tend to be overrepresented in this category, and that non-native students are also overrepresented in the population, largely as candidates in the impacted or technical fields or as new students to the campus. The explanations found to account for these patterns are probably applicable to students on other campuses.

Clearly the greatest academic problems are found in the technical and most competitive majors (see Table 1), as both engineering and natural sciences show a disproportionately high probation/disqualification incidence compared to their share of majors in the university. While we were unable to identify a causal relationship between school of major and probation incidence (i.e., whether less successful, presumably less prepared students seek these fields, whether the fields themselves are so demanding as to ensure a higher failure rate among majors, or whether internal school policies keep students on probation for longer periods of time), analysis of class and ethnic patterns did provide clearer explanations.

The greatest tendency to probation, found at the freshman and junior levels (approximately 60 percent of the total probationary population is divided equally within these two classes), occurs when students are new to college or to the campus (as junior transfers); the highest level of academic disqualification also takes place in the junior year (see Table 2).

Table 1

Distribution **by** *major*

(Tables derived from 1982-83 and 1983-84 university figures, unless otherwise indicated)

	majors	prob.	subject to disq.	comb. total
Applied Arts & Sciences	16.7%	10.6%	6.0%	9.8%
Business Administration	20.4%	14.2%	22.7%	15.7%
Graduate School of Education	0.7%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
Engineering	14.5%	20.7%	29.2%	22.2%
Fine Arts	4.5%	4.4%	2.4%	4.0%
Humanities	7.8%	8.3%	7.1%	8.1%
Natural Sciences	4.3%	9.0%	7.8%	8.8%
Social & Behavioral Sciences	8.6%	8.2%	6.9%	8.0%
Special Studies	0.7%	2.4%	1.9%	2.3%
Undeclared	21.8%	22.2%	15.8%	21.1%

Table 2

Distribution ***by class level***

	total university	probation	subj. to disqualification*
freshman	16.2%	30.2%	21.6%
junior	28.9%	29.5%	31.6%
all others	54.9%	40.3%	43.8%**

*** Lower division students are disqualified at −15 grade points, juniors at −9, and seniors at −6.**

**** Class data were kept only for the groups most highly represented. We did, however, note that the figure for seniors was especially high in the disqualification category (24.2%).**

As evidenced by Table **3,** among nontraditional students, blacks (6.4 percent of the student body) and Hispanics (8.4 percent of university students) tend to be the most highly overrepresented among probation students (over 12 percent and 11 percent, respectively, of those on probation, and 14.5 percent and **9.3** percent, respectively, of those subject to disqualification). These students particularly tend to be products of inner city schools with their concomitant economic, social, and academic limitations; they are also, more frequently than their majority peers, the first generation to attend college, lacking role models, academic support, and clear educational and career goals.

TABLE 3

Distribution by ethnic group

	total university	probation	subj. to disqualification
Anglo	**61.7%**	**48.0%**	**46.7%**
Asian	**14.1%**	**16.3%**	**17.5%**
Black	**6.4%**	**12.1%**	**14.5%**
Chicano	**5.0%**	**7.4%**	**5.4%**
Other Latino	**3.4%**	**4.4%**	**3.9%**
Pacific Islander	**0.9%**	**1.3%**	**2.4%**
Filipino	**2.1%**	**3.1%**	**2.1%**

(other subpopulations statistically insignificant)

PRINCIPAL PROBATION-RELATED FACTORS

Our close examination of the university records and the project participation records of **SAA** students, of the transcripts and persistence records of a comparable (by class and ethnicity) control group, and interviews with program students served to highlight several factors characteristic of students who do not progress satisfactorily. While the majority of **SAA** students are from underrepresented populations, our inclusion of limited numbers of traditional students suggests that these factors are not unique to minority groups. Our investigation yielded an extensive list of elements of which only the most commonly repeated have been grouped into the following categories. These factors, as well as the demographic patterns identified above, become important **as** the basis for the design of an effective intervention strategy.

■ *Inappropriate course selection and poor scheduling*

The majority of records examined showed that new students tend to devise schedules which closely resemble their high school patterns: course titles or disciplines believed familiar, scheduled in immediate hourly succession, and insofar as possible minimizing the number of days or hours each day that they must be on campus, hence leaving little opportunity for refreshment or for use of support resources. Those accustomed to having courses sequenced properly for them frequently overlook or ignore the significance of stated prerequisites, especially in technical majors whose prescribed curriculum is ordered to produce timely completion of the entire program. In a large institution with high student-faculty ratios, faculty cannot effectively monitor compliance with established prerequisites.

Continuing students failed to recognize the impact of such patterns even after they had experienced academic difficulty. Individual course failure or general probation was believed to result from inadequate effort, so that students merely repeated the same course or program of courses, frequently carrying an additional studyload to offset the unit deficiency.

Poor motivation resulting from a lack of clear or realistic personal and career goal,

While many students (especially minorities, whose conscious goal might be articulatec as "going to college") enter IHEs with only a general sense of goals, those on proba tion almost universally were found either to lack direction in their studies, to be dissatisfied with majors chosen for them by others, or to be in fields for which they lacked the requisite skills or aptitude. Table 1 does not show undeclared majors to be overrepresented in academic difficulty, but all of these discouraging elements are not synonymous with undeclared status. Without clear, attainable, or satisfying goals students necessarily found it difficult to sustain the essential level of commitmen and effort to succeed academically.

Failure to recognize or to adjust to increased expectations of the universit environment

Students newly entering IHEs, even those who transfer from two-year colleges, general ly experience an adjustment period in their first semester. On our own campus we found the magnitude and duration of this period to be far greater for students from families or peer groups traditionally excluded from higher education. Three particula features of the university environment contribute to the transitional difficulties these students experience: Limited and limited-term developmental offerings (for those whose need is detected and properly identified at an early enough juncture), enrollment in baccalaureate courses where instructors assume both adequate skills and a clea understanding of study and performance expectations, and, finally, the infrequenc (compared with earlier school experiences) of evaluations and the diversity of facul ty grading criteria and procedures that can leave new students confused or falsel secure until the end of the semester. The transition period can be prolonged, then as a consequence of deficits acquired promptly upon entry.

Lack or insufficiency of support services

Campuses vary in the nature and extent of support services available to students. A CSULB, tutorials and some learning services are limited in audience because they ar categorically funded and are limited in scope because student staff competent i academic areas are not fully prepared to diagnose or address underlying needs of whic the student is also unaware.

Like most campuses, CSULB assumes that students recognize the existence an value of its extensive support resources and will seek them appropriately. Howeve most new students enter the university operating on the basis of their previous educa tional experience, which, for underrepresented students particularly, involved limite services and explicit referral to them when deemed necessary; that background doe not prepare them to self-assess, investigate, and pursue needed support resource Furthermore, we found that for the probation population prior experience has cond tioned most of them to confine their university obligation to their class time and as signed homework, to the exclusion or minimal use of libraries, labs, tutorial center or study groups, faculty office hours, career development centers, counseling center student organizations/activities, and enrichment programs.

■ *Faculty members' limited familiarity with resources available to students recognized as having difficulties*

Few would refute the allegation that faculty are potentially the most effective influences in student retention because of their daily contact with their students, affording them immediate awareness of unsatisfactory progress and of academic factors contributing to it. Generally, however, few faculty are trained to detect underlying learning difficulties or non-academic factors. In a large institution faculty are not fully nor regularly oriented to the particular functions, procedures, or status of the academic and non-instructional support services to which they may or should refer students.

External factors such as financial difficulty, family obligations, job schedules, and medical emergencies

While this category includes highly diverse factors, it pertains most often to identifiable subpopulations of students who are lower income, are employed twenty or more hours weekly, are heads of households, commute a significant distance to the campus, or come from backgrounds that place a high value on the family unit. As the median age of university students has risen and as campus affirmative action efforts have slowly increased the numbers of underrepresented students (who tend to be low income), the impact of these factors on students' academic lives has also increased.

Another very important consideration properly classified as an "external factor" is the continued expectation throughout higher education that students should be enrolled full time. Because so many determinations are based on the full-time studyload (university budgets, financial aid awards, the four-year degree assumption. auto or health insurance eligibility, etc.), students are led to believe that they can reasonably complete 12-16 units per semester irrespective of other time commitments and outside activities. CSULB's realistic discussion of this issue in orientation programs is insufficient to counteract student assumptions, and it cannot change the systemic realities that still "demand" full-time enrollment. Because of the nature and intensity of the instructional pace, when interfering factors escalate and divert attention to other priorities, students are seldom able to regain the lost time and work. For recipients of financial aid, the impact of these factors has proved cumulative and circular: academic failures produce unit deficiencies which can result in loss of awards and an increased financial burden, which interferes further with such things as academic work.

Major personal life changes that reorder priorities

Unlike the above factors, which are beyond a student's control, we also found academic difficulties resulting from elected changes like going to work full time, getting married, or starting a family. The likelihood of these occurrences is probably greatest in a public urban institution; we encountered numerous instances where students had failed to anticipate or to adjust for the impact of these decisions on established academic obligations.

■ *Lack of comprehensive and ongoing counseling and monitoring*

Based on our direct involvement in the probation intervention program discussed in the remainder of this article, we believe that the most significant single factor affecting student performance is the lack of a mandatory comprehensive advising process which identifies them upon entry and monitors them through graduation. Only a very small minority of the probationary students we serviced had ever spoken with an academic advisor, and few of those had done so more than once, despite the university's provision of an extensive Academic Advising Center for undeclared and general education students and of departmental advisors for majors. This phenomenon implies the value of mandatory ongoing advising. The complex and extensive information provided in required new student orientation cannot be fully absorbed and applied immediately, nor can it be so specific.

But mandatory advising is only part of what is needed. Many of the causes of difficulty enumerated above indicate that, in reality, personal, academic, and professional factors interplay to affect student success within the institution. Unfortunately, like most other campuses, CSULB delivers student services in specialized fragments, so that those who become aware of the specific needs of an individual do not interact by any institutional design. Students themselves seldom recognize the impact of seemingly disassociated areas on their educational lives and, as indicated earlier, are in a poor position to assess the actual causes of their difficulties. Problems in any one area, especially the academic, lead them to seek immediate assistance in that perceived need without attention to the others, which may be either causes or targets of further problems.

Students on probation often find themselves there and remain so, then, for lack of a more holistic understanding of themselves and of their predicament. The most effective solution lies in a resource which either provides comprehensive services or refers students to distinct offices and services and then helps them integrate those diverse inputs in beneficial ways. A discussion of such a model, its operation and outcomes, follows.

THE SAA PROBATION INTERVENTION PROJECT

Before a campus determines how it will deal with students in academic difficulty, it must first consider the range of available options. The most limited information that might be given to students is simple notification and a clear explanation (in the notice or in an existing university publication) of their probationary status, leaving them responsible for determining, and taking, appropriate action. An intermediate level of service might consist of a single probation intervention workshop where students would receive technical information about the policies and procedures that determine their academic status and where they might ask general questions. This session might or might not provide individual transcript evaluation and advisement. Here again, students would be responsible for identifying the causes of their difficulties and in-

dicated remedies. The most complete type of service would consist of on-going individual advising and counseling sessions, where students receive technical information, transcript evaluation, assistance in identifying the factors affecting their academic performance, referral to appropriate resources for their individual needs, and monitoring of their progress toward the resumption of good academic standing.

Over the past several years, different offices and programs at CSULB have undertaken all of the above approaches, including intermediate variants, as campus awareness and/or the magnitude of academic probation increased. As part of its retention component, Student Affirmative Action devised and implemented a comprehensive intervention program beginning in 1982-83. Follow-up studies now verify that, compared to other groups, active participants made more significant gains in their academic standing and were retained by the university in greater numbers.

The goals of SAA's probation intervention project are identical to the program's general objectives. In every advising component, the program seeks to help underrepresented students understand how the university functions, recognize their own abilities and weaknesses and the relationship of these factors to their career goals, and clarify personal and professional objectives. The program also provides limited direct support to them in the pursuit of those goals. For probation students, there is the added dimension of reviewing past difficulties and addressing their causes. Ultimately, the goal of all SAA programs is to make the students self-sufficient and successful in the university and beyond.

The Probation Intervention Project offered by Student Affirmative Action is unique in the university in that it is intensive, ongoing, and that it begins between semesters. The initiation of long-term contact with students during the summer or winter gives them an opportunity to modify their schedules for the following semester on the basis of the information presented.

At an initial orientation workshop, students learn how the university determines their class standing, how grade points are computed, and how serious particular grade deficiencies are. They are also given sample case studies to ensure that they understand what factors produce or contribute to probation, at what juncture disqualification occurs, and what special courses of action can accelerate their progress toward good standing. After this type of general information is presented to them as a group, they meet individually with their assigned academic advisor to review their own transcripts, to discuss the causes of their difficulty and the gravity of the situation, and to devise an overall program plan which both addresses the immediate root problems and provides long-term direction toward the resumption and maintenance of good standing. Students are obligated to sign a contract which makes them accountable for keeping regular appointments and following all program recommendations; they leave the program when they regain good standing or leave the university.

After students have completed the half-day workshop, they see their advisor at regular intervals (twice monthly or as needed) to ensure that they are progressing satisfactorily. This part of the program includes two mid-term grade checks where faculty evaluate progress and recommend areas of needed improvement; assistance in selecting appropriate future courses, time management, decision-making about current course continuation/withdrawal on the basis of progress evaluation; referrals for

assessment of skills or learning difficulties; advisor-required courses to enhance future performance; referrals for tutoring and instructional support, counseling (career or personal), financial aid, major advisement, or other needed services; and intervention on behalf of the student in special circumstances involving academic departments, administrative offices, and services.

In other words, this program is designed in such a way that it addresses all of the areas identified above as actual or potential causes of student difficulties. Rather than to replicate needed services where those already exist in the university, it serves as the repository of comprehensive information about student participants and facilitates or requires their use of indicated resources. Its holistic approach seeks to connect each student with a package of responsibilities and resources and to help him or her adjust effectively for external factors that may not be controllable.

An essential part of the program is record-keeping. Each student's file contains the contract, an updated transcript and other university documents, official copies of the current class schedule and student information record, probation status worksheet, records of advising sessions, copies of referrals made, copies of all correspondence, grade check forms, and other documents that provide necessary information unique to that student. It is updated at each advising session with a summary progress evaluation and subsequent recommendations, of which the student receives a copy signed by him/her and the advisor. It is critical that advisors thoroughly document all information reviewed and their recommendations, since this record forms the basis for follow-up at subsequent appointments. These file records also provide the data for program evaluation at the close of each semester and of each academic year.

In order to determine program effectiveness, control groups were selected during spring 1983 (the initial program semester) and academic year 1983-84 (valid for 1984-85 as well). These groups were matched to program participants with respect to class standing, ethnicity, and school of major. Most students in these groups received no direct services other than the routine notification of their probationary status (issued with their grade reports); a few may have participated in one of the other (more limited) services available to probationary students.

Compared with the control group's progress during the same period, SAA program students have shown consistently improved performance, as indicated by Table 4.

Data clearly indicate that students who were active participants in the Student Affirmative Action Probation Intervention Program made noticeably greater gain toward good standing than the control population who did not participate in an ongoing intervention program. That pattern holds consistently for both the shorter term pilot intervention (spring 1983), when beginning status actually favored the control group (a greater percentage of SAA students were already subject to disqualification), and for the full-year projects, where both groups were more evenly matched. The extent and significance of these differences are discussed at length below.

Control group members, like all other probationary students in the university, were notified of their status and were advised to avail themselves of an academic advising program on campus. Because SAA is a predominately minority program, the population from which the control group was randomly selected necessarily included a significant number who were members of other "student affirmative action" programs on campus.

TABLE 4

SAA outcomes in the Probation Intervention Program

	Spring *1983*	
	SAA	Control
Beginning status:		
probation	67.5%	79.6%
disqualification	32.5%	20.4%
Ending status:		
good	36.3%	23.7%
probation	38.2%	29.0%
disqualification	25.6%	47.3%
Net change in deficiency	+3.33 grade points	–1.59 grade points
Advisor contacts/semester	2.58	0.00
Number of students	289	295

	1983-84 and *1984-85*		
	SAA, 1983-84	SAA, 1984-85	Control
Beginning status:			
good*	3.0%	3.2%	0.0%
probation	64.2%	72.8%	65.3%
disqualification	32.8%	24.0%	34.6%
Ending status:			
good	47.5%	52.8%	25.5%
probation	34.8%	33.6%	45.1%
disqualification	17.7%	13.6%	29.4%
Net change in deficiency	+4.23	+7.69	–1.42
Advisor contacts/annually	4.50	6.82	0.00
Number of students	161	140	155

* A few students were able to move into good standing by filing required administrative forms or by completing additional coursework during summer or winter sessions. Having been identified and recruited immediately upon their designation as probationary students, they were kept in the program for one instructional term to secure their continuation in good standing.

The response of control group members involved any of three options: independent efforts to resolve their difficulties, attendance at single probation information workshops, or utilization of services offered by the academic support programs to which they belonged. The outcomes experienced by the control group suggest that the resources they pursued were insufficient, or that they themselves were inconsistent in following through on the recommendations made or the services offered. It follows that without required comprehensive, ongoing intervention services, students are likely to make minimal gain or to move further into probation or disqualification.

Data show that, initially, all members of both the SAA and control populations were designated by the university as being on probation; at the end of the year, however, an approximate average of 75 percent of the control group were still on probation, compared with about 50 percent of the SAA students. Conversely, about twice as many SAA students regained good standing (47.5 percent in 1983-84 and 52.8 percent in 1984-85 vs. 25.5 percent of the control group) and only about half as many SAA students were disqualified (17.7 percent and 13.6 percent, vs. 29.4 percent). With regard to the number of grade points below 2.00 (good standing) which students were deficient, SAA students reduced their deficiencies by an average of 4.23 in 1983-84 and 7.69 in 1984-85, while the control population as a group increased its deficiency by 1.42 and slipped further into probation. It can be assumed that after the year under review, SAA students still on probation (who were encouraged to continue involvement in SAA retention services) would progress further toward good standing, while the control group was unlikely to reverse its direction and would eventually become subject to disqualification.

These data also suggest that there is a correlation between the number and frequency of advisor contacts and the gains in grade points. SAA students gained 4.23 grade points in 1983-84 with an average of 4.5 contacts, and 7.69 grade points in 1984-85 with an average of 6.8 contacts. Not surprisingly, the more regularly and closely an advisor is able to review student progress, the more specific attention and needed assistance can be directed to problems that might arise, and the more accountable a student feels for his obligations in each course and to the advisor. This sense of accountability and regularity is not, however, a natural consequence of a student's initial involvement in a program, but is the result of his/her building trust in the expertise and concern of the advisor and experiencing progress through consistently active participation in the program.

As institutions examine their students' performance, determine the extent of academic probation on the campus, and explore alternative strategies for addressing the problem, they will undoubtedly need to consider unique institutional factors in designing any intervention program. The research discussed above, however, clearly suggests some constants. The keys to effective intervention lie in programs being mandatory, evaluative, and comprehensive, systematically linked to campus support services, and professionally staffed to provide accurate personal and academic direction.

ERRATUM

In the article, "The Development of Academic Advising Programs: Formulating a Valid Model," by Celeste P. Frank, which appeared in the Spring 1988 issue of the *NACADA Journal* (pp. 11-28), the captions for the two figures illustrating the Four Stage Model were reversed. The theoretical and revised versions of the Model are correctly labeled as follows:

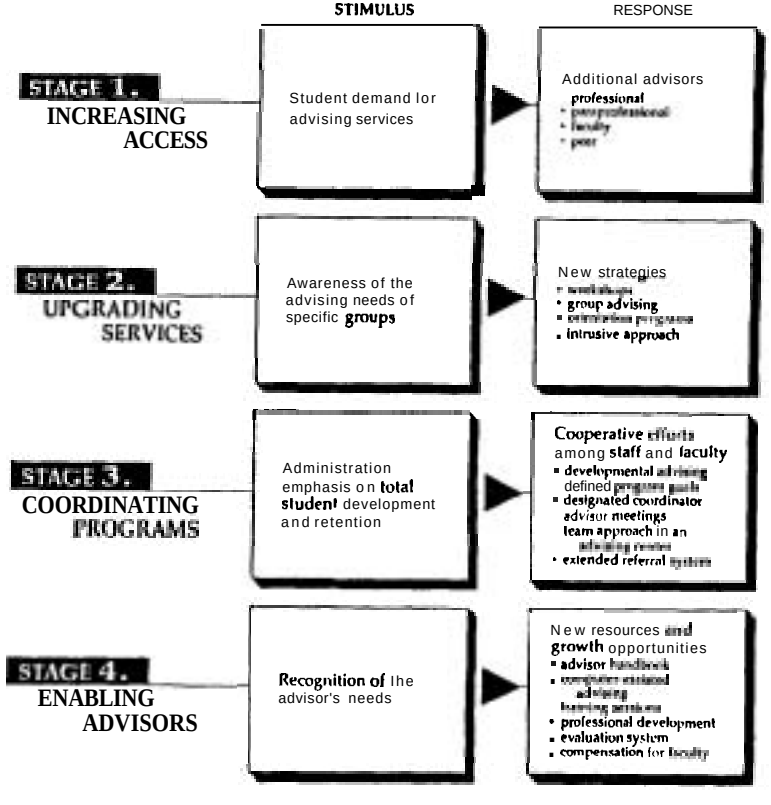

Figure 1. Four Stage Model of **Academic** Advising Program Development **(Theoretical).**

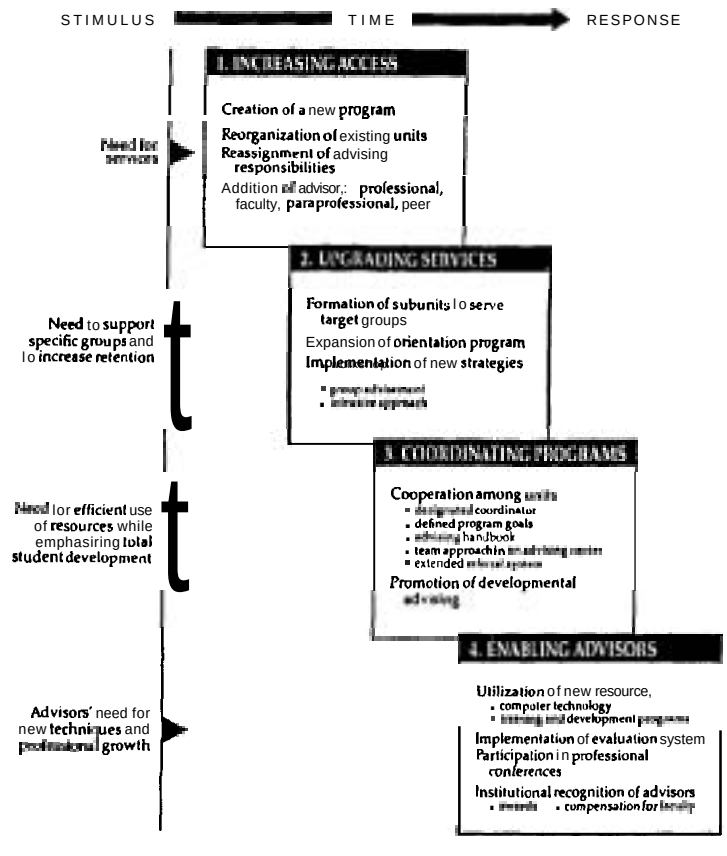

Figure 2. Four Stage Model of Academic Advising Program Development (Revised).