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LIFE PLANNING

Enabling Comprehensive Advising at Small Institutions

The authors state that "the thesis of this paper is that a life-planning approach is the epitome of comprehensive advising and results in education which is both liberating and holistic." Following is a description of how one school attempted to achieve this comprehensive approach to advising.

In academia today we are faced with stinging indictments that we are preparing students to make a living but failing to prepare them to live. Calls for reform in higher education range from recommendations from national blue-ribbon panels to Allan Bloom's great books panacea. These and other sources agree that true education must be Liberating and holistic. This demands that both the affective and cognitive domains of learning be addressed. Life planning, which is a process by which students make decisions relative to life's values and goals, must necessarily include both these domains. While life planning is an implicit outcome of education, it is too important to merely assume that it will happen. It must be given deliberate attention. Comprehensive advising is a logical place to begin the process of life planning. The thesis of this paper is that a life-planning approach is the epitome of comprehensive advising and results in education which is both liberating and holistic.

Structurally higher education is frequently divided into two major domains: 1) academic and 2) student development. The academic domain typically focuses on the cognitive dimensions of the student's education, while the student development domain focuses on the affective dimensions. The apartheid (separate but equal) approach does not work any better in academia than it does in politics.

The goal is not for academics and student development to be seen as equal partners, but rather to indeed become members of a team. Being a small institution can be an asset in facilitating this collaboration. One of the advantages is that teamwork is more likely to occur because there is less bureaucracy, and because there is a greater likelihood that the faculty and student development personnel will be able to develop a working relationship. Life planning as an integral part of comprehensive advising not only necessitates this partnership, but also provides the conceptual glue for an integrative approach.

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The necessary integration for such advising is the result of several critical elements listed below which might be more easily nurtured in a small institution:

Advising needs to be viewed as a process.

Advising is a process, not an event. It needs to help students work through their questions, concerns, and decisions. The process required for advising, life planning, and other decision-making contexts includes assessment of self and the world around one's self, exploration of the available options, and goal setting based on the outcomes of the assessment and exploration.

Student development personnel must have academic credentials.

So much that is life-influencing occurs outside the classroom; thus, it is sometimes referred to as the hidden curriculum. Since this is the primary responsibility of student development, it is important that the student development personnel have appropriate academic credentials and academically credible programs. Academic credentials are the common denominator that makes teamwork possible.

Faculty should see advising as a **vital** part of what they do.

Teaching, in a sense, encompasses all that faculty do. Some of the most powerful teaching occurs in the one-on-one contact outside of classes. Comprehensive advising requires consideration of what happens within, as well as outside, the classroom. Thus, all faculty members need to be involved in comprehensive advising.

Students need to become active participants.

Active student involvement is more likely to occur if students realize that rather than education "giving them the answers," it is helping them to construct a world view and to develop a set of skills enabling them to begin the search for answers to their questions.

Appropriate tools and processes are developed.

While the preceding variables are necessary for comprehensive advising, they are not sufficient to operationalize it. Student development personnel, faculty, and students each have different skills, and approach advising from different perspectives. Therefore, some means must be developed to provide a common focus which will integrate these skills and perspectives.

Messiah College is an example of a small institution where comprehensive advising evolved into life planning. Ten years ago, we reflected a typical **academic/student** development schism. In fact, the student development pronouncement to the faculty was, "you take care of them in the classroom and we'll take care of the rest." This fit into an atmosphere where the majority of the faculty defined their territory as the classroom. Even advising was not regarded as part of their role and, thus, was left to department chairs.

In 1979 the new academic dean changed the approach to academic advising by defining it as part of teaching and, therefore, something that all faculty needed to be involved in. At the same time, student development upgraded their placement efforts by adding a career development professional to initiate a comprehensive program. These administrative innovations laid the groundwork for the significant changes made the following year.

Thus, it was in 1980 that the first small steps were taken toward what eventually evolved into the integrative model described here. On the academic side, all full-time faculty became advisors, aided by a newly developed *Advising Handbook*. Personnel changes in the student development area resulted in a professional student development staff whose credibility was recognized by the faculty.

Within a year the academic dean and the dean of Student Development recognized the importance of the cooperation of their respective areas and began meeting regularly. During that same year the position of assistant academic dean was created. The person who assumed that position and the director of Career Development followed that same pattern of cooperation. This interaction resulted in a synergistic approach to a number of institutional programs beginning with a comprehensive advising system including the development of an *Advisee Guidebook*.

The *Guidebook* reflects both the continuing evolution of the advising system and the integration of the student development and academic domains. The current effort to integrate the mentoring program into the advising system represents another step in that evolution. After a decade of teamwork we have come to the conclusion that a life-planning approach is the key to integration because effective life planning requires academic and student development synergy. Whereas advising is one arena in which this teamwork is beneficial, it is critical for a life-planning perspective.

Education, which is truly holistic, must address life planning. The advising system needs to reflect a holistic approach; however, it must go beyond that. Life planning enables students to apply their learning to life by developing a process that they can use *throughout* life.