Intrusive Advising

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It’s an all-too-familiar situation: a student begins a college program full of excitement and nervous anticipation of the classroom experience. She wants to purchase her books weeks before they are available and arrives the first day of class with several notebooks and a fist full of newly sharpened pencils. Weeks go by and all seems fine until one day she doesn’t come to class. She attends the next day, but not the following two…before anyone realizes it, the student has stopped attending altogether and it’s too late to try and get her back. Sound familiar? This is an example of an at-risk student. All schools have at-risk students. Some are on academic probation, some are first generation college students, and some just are unsure of what they are doing. In any case, one of the best ways to reach at-risk students is through the use of Intrusive Advising (Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

Earl (1987) observed that Intrusive Advising is about getting to the heart of what is causing difficulty for a student and recommending the appropriate intervention. Earl (1987) describes the intrusive model of advising as an action-oriented approach to involving and motivating students to seek help when needed. The big question is how to get students to seek help when they need it, and before it’s too late. Intrusive Advising involves proactive interactions with students, with the intention of connecting with them before a situation occurs that cannot be fixed. Intrusive Advising is not “hand-holding” or parenting, but rather active concern for students’ academic preparation; it is a willingness to assist students in exploring services and programs to improve skills and increase academic motivation (Upcraft & Kramer, 1995).

Why Intrusive Advising?

Intrusive Advising involves intentional contact with students with the goal of developing a caring and beneficial relationship that leads to increased academic motivation and persistence. Research literature on student retention suggests that contact with a significant person within an institution of higher education is a crucial factor in a student’s decision to remain in college (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Habley (1994) tells us that academic advising is the only structured activity on the campus in which all students have the opportunity for on-going, one-to-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution (p. 10). Therefore, advisors often are the people best suited to make important student connections. When advisors make connections and show interest in students, they can become the reason a student decides to stay in school. In addition, contacting students in a preventative mode may help them anticipate problems and learn problem-solving skills and strategies (Upcraft & Kramer, 1995).

Intrusive Advising differs from the more traditional prescriptive and developmental models of advising because advisors are not only helpful and encouraging of students, but they proactively make the initial contact with students…a pre-emptive strike, of sorts. Most students know they have an advisor but may be unaware of how and when they are able to contact the advisor or what the advisor can help them accomplish. Heisserer and Parette (2002) observe that “the only variable that has a direct effect on student persistence is the quality of a relationship with a significant member of the college community” (p. 72). Thus the advisor is often the person best suited to form a significant relationship with the student. At-risk students, in particular, may benefit greatly from the intrusive approach as they may not be aware of how to move forward when unexpected situations arise.

How To Be Intrusive

Intrusive Advising sounds great, but how can an advisor become more intrusive? The most important thing is to remember the goal is to help students feel cared for by the institution.
Students who perceive that someone cares about them and that they belong to the school community are more likely to be academically successful than those who do not feel any sense of care by the institution (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). An excellent way to be intrusive with students is to begin at orientation: have a formal orientation and make it mandatory that students attend. Learn who the new students are and what their concerns may be. Take photographs of students and post the pictures on an institutional Intranet or place in student advising folders; this is an excellent way to keep students’ faces with names. The photos are a great visual aid in remembering the student when a call or email is received. Orientation should include an interactive discussion of who the advisors are, their roles in the academic experience and how advisors may be contacted (phone, email, or IM). A day planner or similar inexpensive gift with advisor contact information printed on it may encourage students to contact advisors sooner rather than later. Giving students the opportunity to include family members in the orientation process may prove beneficial as family members will know who to encourage the student to contact if questions or concerns arise.

Another way to be intrusive with students is to proactively monitor grades: both mid-semester and final. Advisors should contact students whose grades are marginal and encourage them to schedule an appointment to discuss strategies for working with faculty, improving study skills, and increasing the probability of academic success. When meeting with students, include questions about their grade expectations and how the outcome could have been different. Advisors should consider implementing an early warning system for students that includes grades, attendance, classroom behavior and any other information faculty can provide that may identify a student as being at-risk (Upcraft & Kramer, 1995). Determine the institutional definition of “at-risk student” and find ways to connect with these students.

Other ways to be intrusive include taking any and all opportunities to connect with students e.g., in hallways, on campus, or at Wal-Mart. Involvement in student activities is an excellent way to bond with students, as is having lunch or taking breaks where students typically “hang out”. Encourage students to network with each other, as well as assess their own strengths and areas of opportunity. Do not be afraid to get to know students within professional boundaries and advocate for them when necessary. In addition, advisors should:

- truly know the school and its resources.
- know the staff of school programs.
- be available to be reached by students whenever or wherever is reasonably possible.
- be trained in all relevant areas (academic and non-academic) that have a direct impact on students' well-being and success.
- monitor advisee progress with or without student presence.
- maintain clear boundaries with students: show genuine care, including a positive attitude, openness and honestly, but maintain professionalism at all times (Thomas & Minton, 2004).
- do not be afraid to contact students before they contact you e.g., email, IM, telephone, and personalized mail. College students today have many distractions from academics: compete with those distractions!

Give It A Try!

Intrusive Advising is all about making strong bonds and connections with students. The time to make these connections is when students first walk into the advising office…not when they are in trouble. Start slow…it gets easier with each student!

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References


