

Innovation and Transformation in Academic Advising: The Fullerton Model



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Table of Contents

I.	The Context for Innovation and Transformation	1
II.	Academic Advising at the Center of Student Success Teams: The Fullerton Model	2
III.	Institution-wide Commitment and Impact on Student Success	5
IV.	Integrating Technologies and High Impact Practices: Honoring Diverse Needs to Close the Achievement Gaps	6
V.	Broadening Our Mission: Sharing Outreach and Self-development	9

Agents of Transformation: Cross-divisional Academic Advising at

California State University, Fullerton

“Cal State Fullerton’s student success efforts stem from a simple recognition: If we as higher educational institutions are to fulfill the moral imperative of strengthening educational opportunities for the increasing numbers of traditionally underserved students in all of our communities, our country needs clear images of how, even in tough economic times, state universities can expand access and equity while improving completion rates and reducing time to graduation.” (Jose L. Cruz, Provost, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/student-690446-students-advising.html>. November 3, 2015)

I. The Context for Innovation and Transformation

In spring 2012, California State University, Fullerton's (CSUF's) six-year graduation rate was 52% and was especially low for underrepresented minority students, in particular first generation students. The achievement gap between underrepresented students and their White and Asian counterparts was 12%. Of CSUF's almost 33,000 undergraduate students, 74% are ethnic minorities, over 42% are from historically underrepresented groups (Hispanic, African American, and American Indian), and 40% are Hispanic, half of whom are first generation college students (Attachment 1A).

Against the backdrop of the larger national discourse of the changing demographics of the state and county as well as the challenge public institutions face of being expected to improve student success despite having less money, the university launched an ambitious five-year strategic plan in 2013. The plan identified the challenges to student achievement and provided a road map for increasing the university's six-year graduation rate to 60% and cutting the achievement gap in half by 2018. Data released by the university in June 2015 show an increase in graduation rate to 62%, surpassing the five-year goal, and a narrowing of the achievement gap to 8%. How did a large comprehensive public university achieve these improvements so quickly?

II. Academic Advising at the Center of Student Success Teams: The Fullerton Model

We set out to create a wholly new, homegrown, innovative student success architecture that was more flexible, early alert-focused, proactive, and outcomes-oriented than traditional university advising systems. Over the course of the 2014-2015 academic year, we examined our student success infrastructure and practices across campus and then gathered the brightest, most experienced advising minds from across the university to assemble college-based student success teams (SSTs; Attachment IIA). The SST model, which has received national attention, is an innovative, cost-effective, data-driven, distributed advising system. It was established to expand and scale up contextualized, timely, and intentional student interventions to increase graduation rates, reduce time to degree, and narrow the achievement gap between underrepresented minorities and their White and Asian counterparts. Through loosely coupled, decentralized teams, the SSTs utilize appropriate technology solutions and actionable data to foster responsive, systematic, and strategic experimentation as well as intentional student interventions.

Each college-based SST operates as an innovative “advising laboratory” within its unit’s unique context, transcending entrenched reporting lines and creating independent accelerators for the incubation and implementation of both proven and experimental advising approaches. The SSTs have a common toolbox of technology platforms that identify at-risk students; enable targeted advising; and track, document, and report success. Below is a depiction of an SST at CSUF.

The Fullerton model combines strategic hiring, infrastructure, and technology solutions to increase scale. At its core are new hires and restructured positions: graduation specialists, retention specialists, career specialists, and assistant deans strategically deployed to each college with a focus on areas of highest return on investment (ROI) to maximize the number of students we reach. To ameliorate severe understaffing in advising (1:1100 in some areas), we have leveraged technology solutions that provide dynamic and actionable data to scale the effect of the new hires and restructured positions and minimize costs. Other members of the college-based SST include the associate dean, who chairs the team, and major advisors, who are primarily faculty. Each college SST brings together professional, major, and career advisors to strategize college-level initiatives and create clusters of accountability.

We created roles and structures to promote holistic support and accountability. Graduation specialists are strategically dedicated to supporting only juniors and seniors in each college, and retention specialists support only sophomores and freshmen in each college. Both specialists are centrally trained and managed but locally embedded in each college, with supervision split 70/30 between the college (i.e., the associate dean) and the central academic administration (i.e., the director of academic advisement and the associate vice president for Academic Programs).

Career Specialists reach out to all students in their respective colleges, connecting learners to the breadth of resources and career exposure opportunities provided by the Career Center in the Division of Student Affairs. An assistant dean for Student Affairs, knowledgeable in student development, intervenes when a student in the assigned college is in crisis or in need of special support due to food insecurity, mental health, family crises, or other obstacles to success. They also facilitate co-curricular, high-impact activities for students in their colleges, such as leadership development and community engagement. The work of each SST is enhanced by major advisors, primarily faculty, who provide academic advising to students within the major in each college.

We created a Student Success Steering Committee for coordination and accountability processes.

The committee is comprised of chairs of each college SST, the director of career services, the director of academic advisement, the director of Graduate Studies, the associate vice president (AVP) for Academic Programs, and the associate vice president (AVP) for Student Affairs. It meets monthly, and it is co-chaired by the provost/vice president for Academic Affairs and the vice president for Student Affairs. The AVP for Academic Programs and the AVP for Student Affairs manage the day-to-day tactical operations of the SSTs. The assistant vice president for student success/director of academic advisement manages the weekly meetings of the specialists, which focus on implementation of centralized student success initiatives that are designed to generate the highest ROI. This complex network of partnerships and shared responsibility represents the breadth and firmness of the institutional commitment to prioritizing effective advising and student success. Our unified effort has shaped our own academic ecosystem into one that promotes robust synergies, manifested in student success.

The power of the SST structure isn't just about the campaigns and actions each SST is taking this semester or next semester; the power lies in the fact that we are creating intellectual spaces in which our people can experiment, fail, recreate, implement, redesign, launch. The structure nurtures an innovation mindset, transforming each person and each unit into agents of change, rather than simply cogs in the machine.

III. Institution-wide Commitment and Impact on Student Success

From the pilot period through spring 2015, the SSTs developed and implemented the first phase of a variety of advising pilot campaigns designed to increase graduation rates, particularly through reductions in graduation deferrals. One early indicator of the success of the SSTs was the impact of the graduation specialists' work. They spent the 2014-15 academic year reviewing 6,959 graduation candidates, and they prevented more than 2,400 graduation deferrals (Attachment III.A.). Other indicators were equally positive. Our six-year graduation rate increased from 55.7% to 62.3% between 2014 and 2015 (Attachment III.C). Additionally, the achievement gap between underrepresented and non-underrepresented students narrowed by 4% in the same period: an improvement of 25% (Attachment III.B).

One beneficiary of our innovative, proactive advising effort is Titan alumna Ms. Taylor Lauren Vargas, who is influencing young children and their single mothers as an intern at 31bits in Gulu, Uganda. This organization empowers the impoverished by providing



education in basic entrepreneurship. It also develops ambitious, rising American professionals into the agents of transformation that they are destined to be. In this instance, women of Uganda are taught by interns to develop their jewelry making traditions into business skills. They learn to save and manage their money as they create accessories that the organization markets in the U.S., leading to stable lives for mothers and access to education for their children. Ms. Vargas is one of the more than 2,400 CSU Fullerton seniors whose graduation would have been deferred had she not been contacted by her graduation specialist in the College of Communications earlier that year to alert her to a missing requirement. She managed to add the missing elective just in time to remain eligible to graduate last May. Rather than sitting in a classroom this past fall, she was busily leaving footprints from which will spring inspiration and talent development for herself and others.

Ms. Vargas' story represents the potential immeasurability of the far-reaching impacts of the collaborative advising effort. In our day-to-day operations on campus, however, planning, assessment, and measuring that which is quantifiable remain integral to our progress and success. Since the implementation of this cross-divisional model for academic advising, six-year graduation rates at CSU Fullerton have soared. We have surpassed national averages (58%) for six-year degree attainment at public universities (National Center for Education Statistics, nces.ed.gov) as well as our own goal of 60% within a year of inaugurating our SSTs.

IV. Integrating Technologies and High Impact Practices: Honoring Diverse Needs to Close the Achievement Gaps

After the exciting results of our SSTs' phase-one focus on increasing overall graduation rates, the SSTs were charge in spring 2015 with cultivating small teams to tackle the achievement gap between traditional and underrepresented minority students. During summer 2015, these mini-teams designed custom gap-closing campaign pilots for their respective colleges, targeting approximately 2,100 students campus-wide.

Development of the gap-closing campaigns was a strategic process, taking into consideration our mission and commitment to diversity. For example, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences chose to focus its gap-closing campaign pilot on Criminal Justice, a department that includes high percentages of underrepresented minority students and first-generation college students. In summer 2015, using the Educational Advisory Board software platform, the SST identified 205 at-risk criminal justice majors with 20-89 units earned (i.e., of sophomore or junior standing) and a cumulative GPA between 2.0 and 3.0 on a 4.00-point scale.

For Mr. Luiz Diaz, the timing was perfect. The summer of planning for the Criminal Justice Success Academy came just as he was in the process of making the transition from Fullerton College to his junior year as a transfer student at California State University, Fullerton. Upon completion of the program, he submitted a letter to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences:

“As a new student to this school I



can say that it was a rewarding experience to be part of the Criminal Justice Success Academy . . .

In the program we were able to visit the Community Court of Santa Ana. During the visit we were able to meet with Judge Perez, and we were also allowed to sit in during a Drug Court Session . . .

One of my main goals is to work for the FBI or provide my services and experience in the Juvenile System as a psychologist/counselor for juveniles.”

It is this kind of inspiration that motivates the academic advising communities across the campus and divisions to learn and grow alongside the students. The team members have a common toolbox of technology platforms, each of which can be leveraged with precision to identify at-risk students, target students for advising, or track success (Attachments IV.A and B.).

In 2013, we implemented two comprehensive data software elements: Dashboard and Titan Advising Notes. Dashboard makes it possible for team members to identify in real time which students to target for particular campaigns and initiatives. Tied directly into the campus’ internal student information system, Dashboard facilitates e-mail and other forms of outreach to students rapidly. Titan Advising Notes provides a space, viewable by colleagues campus-wide, where every student interaction can be documented. The table below demonstrates our progress as faculty and all advisors embrace these technologies.

Semester	Number of faculty (major) advisors and retention/graduation specialists posting Titan Advising Notes	Total number of notes posted	Increase in users since campus-wide implementation (post-pilot)
Spring 2014	147	9,067	
Fall 2014	157	20,388	10 (7%)
Spring 2015	289	20,802	132 (84%)
Fall 2015	349	26,894	60 (17%)
Totals	942	77,151	202 (137%)

By means of online advising notes, we avoid duplicated efforts and present a seamless and united front to our students. As they move from resource to resource, we increase efficiency by sharing various elements of professional input on each student’s progress, activities, and goals. In order to sustain these efforts, supporting all of the SSTs is a full-time professional trainer, housed in a unit within the Office of Academic Programs.

V. Broadening our Mission: Sharing Outreach and Self-development

As we commit to talent development, we underscore that we, the advisor-educators of Cal State Fullerton, are lifelong learners; we must continue to develop ourselves and pursue our students’ benefit. Our SSTs were formed in an era influenced by active conversations nationwide revolving around student agency and the power of a deliberately developed growth mindset (Dweck. C. S. 2006. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Random House). We, too, have adopted that view of our own self-development. Over recent years, our administrators have been invited by professional organizations and peer institutions across the United States to

share our story and methods. We have developed a structure and strategy adaptable to almost any higher education context in which there are learners not fulfilling their potential. Our advisors and strategic partners on campus regularly present proposals and informative sessions at professional assessment and advising conferences across the country, and we host an annual academic advising professional conference on our campus each spring. Additionally, we have cultivated a unique spirit of community that prioritizes our shared roles in student success outside of the classroom. We are agents of transformation. As our university mission states:

“Learning is preeminent at California State University, Fullerton. We aspire to combine the best qualities of teaching and research universities where actively engaged students, faculty and staff work in close collaboration to expand knowledge . . . Through experiences in and out of the classroom, students develop the habit of intellectual inquiry, prepare for challenging professions, strengthen relationships to their communities and contribute productively to society.”

It is our duty, as the largest campus within the largest public university system in the country, to model student-centered practices for our peers across the region and the globe. We share in NACADA’s philosophy. The concept of “advising as teaching” lays the foundation upon which we build our commitment to advising through ongoing learning, collaborating and innovation.