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The Puzzle of College Students Success:  
Fitting the Counseling and Advising Pieces Together

Authors

Elizabeth Krumrei, M.A. Fred B. Newton, Ph.D.  
Kansas State University

## The Puzzle of College Students Success: Fitting the Advising and Counseling Pieces Together

A common purpose of advisors and counselors in academia is to help college students achieve success. In this article we consider how advisors and counselors can complement one another in working towards this shared goal.

### *Student Success*

Success is a broad concept that may vary from student to student, but we propose that it encompasses achieving academic goals (knowledge, skills, degree, and employment) and having personal satisfaction (congruence, well-being, and confidence). The former has very tangible measurement such as grade point average and diploma. The latter has less external measurement but is nonetheless observable when students find compatibility between their personal aptitudes, interests, and aspirations.

Research has highlighted three categories of variables that are predictive of students achieving success in the academic arena, including ability, circumstance and personal factors (See Fig. 1 for comparative influences of each category: Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, in press). The ability category is often assessed by measures of aptitude and achievement. This factor has been shown to have the greatest predictive power for academic success however, similar to physical attributes with a given set-point, and there is limited flexibility for change. Circumstance involves situational factors (e.g., family of origin, socio-economic level, ethnicity and geography) over which a person also may have limited control. Finally, approximately 30 to 40% of accomplishing academic goals is attributable to personal factors, which include attitudes (e.g., motivation and work ethics), self-perceptions (e.g., confidence and self-efficacy), behaviors (e.g., organization, study habits and lifestyle), problem-solving (e.g., critical thinking and decision making), and values (e.g., personal preferences and beliefs). This category is most amenable to change and therefore the most fertile ground for advisors and counselors to focus their efforts to promote student success.

[Place Figure 1 Here]

Some make the assumption that the personal factors slice of the pie belongs solely to counselors. However, we emphasize that it is also relevant to advisors because personal variables have a significant impact on whether a student is able to persevere and succeed in academic goals. At times student contact with an advisor calls for a specific and direct response to an informational question. However, students also turn to advisors with personal issues that may be causing concern in their academic life. In this article, we highlight some of the ways that advisors can work with students in the arena of personal factors, consider the differences between advising and counseling, and discuss how advisors can facilitate referrals and transitions to counselors.

*Steps to Success in Advising Students on Personal Factors*

Working with students' needs related to personal factors will likely involve the steps of exploring, conceptualizing, planning, and taking action (see Fig. 2). This approach will have many parallels for advisors and counselors. Here we focus on implementing these steps from an Advisor's perspective.

[Place Figure 2 Here]

*Step 1: Exploration.* The first stage of any personalized contact with students involves clarifying and understanding the concern. The goal is to hear students express from their perspective what is affecting them. This can be done by taking time to listen, reflecting back the content of students' disclosures, gaining clarifications through elaborative questions, and making summary statements that connect the disclosures to a problem they are having as students. Fassaert, van Dulmen, Schellevis, and Bensing (2007) developed the Active Listening Observation Scale which is useful for considering which behaviors promote effective listening in professional relationships. This includes not being distracted, expressing understanding non-verbally, exploring questions,

and leading the conversation. While advisors and counselors benefit from similar communication strategies, the goal for advisors is to gain some understanding of what may be causing academic disruption for the student, rather than to work towards correcting emotional or personal problems. This exploration process leads to the next step of forming a hypothesis of what is causing the disruption.

*Step 2: Conceptualization.* Once students have expressed their concern, it is necessary to form a conceptualization of what is happening and what needs to be corrected. In the health field this is referred to as triage, the process of identifying, sorting, and determining the priorities for responding to the individual. Table 1 provides an overview of some of the factors we will discuss in this article that are relevant to conceptualizing student's concerns as either fitting within the framework of advising or being appropriate for counseling. A number of tools have been developed to aid in the process of defining students' concerns. For example, the Missouri Classification System (Callis, 1965) is a way to map the nature of students' problems based on the content theme (educational, personal-emotional, or vocational) and source (lack of information, personal skill level, environmental factors, conflict with self, or conflict with others). Structured assessment tools can also be employed to help define the problem and how it relates to academic behavior. For example, the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) gathers information about a student's attitudes, dispositions, and personal behavior (Weinstein, 1987). Additionally, the College Learning Effectiveness Inventory (CLEI) assesses specific personal and academic factors that are predictive of outcomes such as grade point average and satisfaction with college life (Kim et. al., in press). These tools are useful for pinpointing the source of concern and how it relates to academic functioning. For example, one college has used the CLEI to understand points of intervention for at-risk students resulting in increasing retention rate by 20% among this group over a four-year period (Sannes, 2009).

In addition to considering the nature of a student's concern, the severity of the problem is also crucial for determining whether the situation falls within the bounds of academic advising or should be referred to a counselor. This involves considering the extent to which the issue is interfering in the student's life, including his or her academic responsibilities, work roles, and personal relationships and activities. If a problem prevents a student from being able to focus in class; if it disturbs sleep; if it is putting work performance at risk; if it is causing relational conflict, these are reasons that counseling may be helpful. Kuhn, Gordon, and Webber (2006) have provided a more detailed framework for considering which observations should trigger referring students to counseling.

[Place Table 1 Here]

*Step 3: Plan.* Thus far, these steps can be thought of as: what? (exploring), so what? (conceptualizing), and now what? (planning). The planning stage makes explicit what can be done in response to a student concern. One of the most important aspects of this step is student commitment to the plan. The popular transtheoretical model (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994) is useful for considering student's readiness for change. Students can range among stages of (1) pre-contemplation, in which they have a lack of concern for the problem and may be referred for help by a professor or parent; (2) contemplation, characterized by ambivalence about taking action; (3) preparation, which may include experimenting with small changes; (4) action, being ready to address the problem directly; and (5) maintenance, keeping up with solutions to the problem over time. Tailoring the approach to a student's position in the change process can improve communication and outcomes (e.g., Cooper, 1995). Table 2 provides further information on how to assess and work with students in different stages of change.

[Place Table 2 Here]

Students in a stage of pre-contemplation or contemplation can be challenging to work with. They may make light of the concern or use "yes, but" statements. They are unlikely to benefit from concrete advice from an advisor or from further counseling. Rather than taking a directive stance, which can heighten resistance, advisors can use motivational interviewing to help students start

considering the need for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). This involves using open-ended questions that allow students to talk about the advantages of taking action and the disadvantages of inaction. Discrepancies between students' goals or values and their behavior can then gently be highlighted. By taking an empathetic stance and using reflective statements, advisors can decrease students' hostility and empower them to seek solutions that are in their best interest.

Students in a stage of preparation or action are more able to focus on problem-solving. This involves defining what resolution or improvement is desired. Advisors can facilitate this process. Ender and Newton (2000) describe useful problem solving resources that range from simple methods such as selecting from alternatives to more intricate strategies such as force field analyses, which factor in both positive alternatives and the elimination of restrictions. The most successful goals are personally relevant, desirable, clear, and reasonably attainable (Ender & Newton, 2000). An advisor can help students go from general aspirations such as "becoming a better student," to definable activities that make the goal attainable (e.g., limit drinking to 1 night per week, schedule study time). Whether in the form of a written contract or verbal agreement, getting a direct student commitment to the plan is crucial to successful completion.

*Step 4: Action - intervention and referral.* The action step consists of implementing the plan. For an advisor, this may involve directly facilitating the intervention and follow-up or it may involve referring a student to a counselor (or another academic/service office). Both intervening and referring are active processes. In this section we raise some additional factors advisors can consider about whether to engage in intervention or referral, and end with some thoughts about how to accomplish a successful referral.

It is in this step that the distinction between advising and counseling becomes most important. We acknowledge that definitive delineations between advisors and counselors are not always possible. Differences between institutions, job definitions and requirements, advisor training and skill all contribute to some ambiguity between the two roles. While there are identifiable areas of overlap in the function of advisors and counselors, each has a unique purpose and role in working with students (Butler, 1995). Kuhn, Gordon & Weber (2006) address this demarcation issue by describing five levels of interaction: information advising, explanatory advising, developmental advising, mentoring, and personal counseling. These five areas are seen not as discrete categories but as a continuum from simple to complex, from topical subject oriented to personal individual oriented.

Advisors are a key point of contact for students as they develop along their academic path. However, for advisors to become involved in the more in-depth and chronic personal factors of students can be detrimental to both the advisors and advisees. It can result in a loss of objectivity, which can hamper an advisor from carrying out advising responsibilities. For example, attending to the emotional component of a student's hardship may impede aiding him or her in the development of a meaningful educational plan. Furthermore, if advisors take on issues that require more intensive counseling, they inadvertently stand in the way of students seeking further services that they may need to achieve long-term solutions.

Besides being a disservice to students, stretching the advisor role too far makes advisors vulnerable to burn out. Advisors can use their subjective experience of stress as one barometer of students' needs. Emotional, mental, physical, and occupational exhaustion can be signs that advisors are engaged in ways that go beyond their expected role. This may call for a re-evaluation of whether students should be referred to counseling. In the meantime, advisors can engage in self-care strategies that promote resiliency on a mental, physical, and spiritual level to combat a "fatigue reaction" (Stebnicki, 2007). Norcross and Guy (2007) provide a practical discussion of how professionals can attend to their bodies, minds, and souls at and away from the office.

In taking action, we encourage advisors to be aware of personal triggers of distress. Advisors are exposed to a range of students' stories of trauma, disability, mental and physical illness, grief,

and loss. When advisees present with issues that touch on advisors' personal wounds or lead towards vicarious traumatization, these are legitimate reasons to refer students to another professional for services. In sum, the decision of whether to intervene or refer is based on factors related to both the student and the advisor (e.g., role responsibilities and personal triggers).

### *The Referral Process*

The referral process is an art. Its foundation is built prior to deciding whether and where to refer a student, and consists of a network of interrelationships with student services and resources. This network will likely be in flux and continue to evolve over time. Advisors should have a good understanding of the various offices and organizations available to students within and beyond the institutional setting. These may include Student Life, Counseling Services, Women's Center, Housing, Health Center, Disability Services, University Police, Religious Organizations, Community Counseling, Psychiatric Services, Emergency Shelter, Community Crisis Center, Medical Services, Nutritionists, Alcohol and Drug Services, Community Religious Centers (Churches, Synagogues, Mosques), Veterans Affairs, Adoption Services, Children's Services, etc. Advisors will benefit from maintaining relationships with point-people for these resources when possible. This provides a network for consulting about student concerns and facilitates more accurate and confident referrals with better follow-up.

When an advisor deems it appropriate to refer to a counselor, it is important to consider how to communicate this to the student. First off, if a student has reached out to an advisor and shared personal information, he or she may be particularly vulnerable to a sense of rejection. Thus, it may be helpful to verbalize that a referral does not stem from the advisor's lack of desire to work with the student. The advisor can help to explain the nature of counseling and why it may be beneficial to the student. Table 3 provides information that can be tailored to the individual student in discussing the idea of counseling. Orienting students to counseling services helps to shape realistic expectations and allay fears or biases they may have.

We recommend taking caution to avoid conceptualizing or presenting counseling as a punishment. This may be particularly relevant when working with students with academic or behavioral problems. Any disciplinary action should be a separate consideration from a recommendation to pursue counseling. Consistent with the prior discussion of stages of change, mandated counseling is often not a fertile ground for progress.

A final and important component of the referral process is following up. It is helpful to develop a plan with the student about what the follow up will look like. Will the advisor contact counseling services directly to share information about the situation? Will the advisor and student meet again after the student's initial counseling contact? Making the plan overt helps to create a sense of accountability for future follow-up. Additionally, being transparent helps to lay the foundation for problem-solving any complications that may arise.

It is possible that advisors may experience a sense of helplessness or guilt when faced with the need to refer students elsewhere. We encourage advisors to consult with colleagues, engage in self-care, and seek additional support if necessary. Advisors are crucial to student success. Performing their unique function within the university community requires they know when and how to share responsibility with counselors. Referring students to counseling services is one key in allowing advisors to focus on what they do best.

[Place Table 3 Here]

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Table 1.

Factors relevant to the decision of whether to refer a student for counseling

1. What is the nature of the problem? <sup>a</sup>	a. educational
	b. emotional
	c. vocational
2. What is the source of the problem? <sup>a</sup>	a. lack of information
	b. personal skill level
	c. environmental factors
	d. conflict with self
	e. conflict with others
3. How severe is the problem?	a. degree of interference in personal life
	b. degree of interference in academics
	c. degree of interference in work responsibilities
	d. degree of interference in relationships
4. How ready is the student for change?	a. pre-contemplation
	b. contemplation
	c. preparation
	d. action
	e. maintenance

<sup>a</sup> Adapted from the Missouri Classification System (Callis, 1965)

Table 2. Assessing and Working with Stage of Change

<b>Readiness to Change Ruler<sup>a</sup></b>			
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">not prepared to change</div> <hr style="flex-grow: 1;"/> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">ready to change</div> </div>			
<b>Instruction to students</b>	<b>Follow up questions</b>	<b>Elicits information about</b>	
Mark where you think you fall on this line	-Why did you not mark yourself further to the left?	-Motivations for change	
	-Why did you not mark yourself further to the right?	-Perceived barriers	
<b>Motivational Interviewing Questions by Stage</b>			
<b>precontemplation</b>	<b>contemplation</b>	<b>Preparation</b>	<b>action/maintenance</b>
-What would have to happen for you to know that this is a problem? -What signals will tell you to think about making a change?	-What would be a good result of changing? -What are the reasons for not changing?	-What barriers have you overcome in the past? -What is keeping you stuck? -What strategies worked before?	-What things (people, programs, and behaviors) get you closer to your goal?

<sup>a</sup> Adapted from Rollnick, Butler, & Stott, 1997

Table 3.  
Sample scripts for orienting students to counseling

Open a discussion about counseling	College can be a really stressful time. It seems like the problems you are facing right now might not go away on their own. Your usual ways of handing problems may not be working anymore. Experiencing [anxiety/stress; low-self confidence; relationship difficulties; self-defeating behaviors; academic problems; sexual identity questions; decision- making dilemmas; depressed feelings; difficulty adjusting to college; lack of emotional support, alcohol or drug use; eating issues; sexual problems; abuse] is a concern for a lot of students. The folks over at counseling services are trained to help students with these types of issues.	
Explain what counseling is	Counseling is a chance to talk about your concerns with a trained professional. Students work together with their counselor to identify the problems they want to address and work towards solutions. A counselor can help you learn skills and consider different ways of looking at situations so that you will be more capable of solving problems on your own.	
Highlight the benefits of counseling for the specific student	<p>Counseling can help you to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...work towards a resolution of personal issues ...understand your behaviors/feelings/relationships</li> <li>...gain more control over your thoughts/feelings</li> <li>...learn how to cope better with your stressors</li> <li>...manage your anxiety</li> <li>...adjust to loss (death, relationships, job)</li> <li>...increase your self-understanding</li> <li>...clarify choices and make decisions</li> <li>...learn to be more assertive</li> <li>...learn relaxation techniques</li> <li>...deal with eating concerns</li> <li>...deal with drug/alcohol issues</li> <li>...increase your self-esteem</li> <li>...work on academic concerns (text anxiety, study skills)</li> <li>...improve your performance at school</li> <li>...improve communication (with parents, faculty, friends, roommates)</li> <li>...improve your interpersonal skills</li> <li>...develop healthier relationships</li> <li>...grapple with gender issues</li> <li>...cope with trauma (sexual assault, violence)</li> <li>...have accountability for making changes</li> <li>...identify your personal strengths</li> <li>...experience personal growth</li> <li>...get more satisfaction out of life</li> </ul>	
Demystify counseling and dispel misconceptions	<p>Counseling is not...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...a quick fix or easy solution. It takes time and effort. To make real change may require some commitment to counseling.</li> <li>...a place where someone will tell you what to do or make decisions for you</li> <li>...a punishment</li> </ul>	
Respond to students' questions and concerns	Question/concern	Possible response
	I don't know if	-Counseling involves the concerns and

	<p>counseling is for me</p>	<p>problems of normal students.          -Lots of students use Counseling Services. [You can share the percentage of students who seek counseling at your university].          -It is your choice whether to go to counseling and you are free to end it when you like.          -There is no set length of time for counseling. Sometimes a one-time consultation or a couple of sessions can be helpful. Other times longer counseling is really beneficial.          -If you feel uncertain about whether counseling is for you, you can make an appointment and discuss your reservations with a counselor.</p>
	<p>I'm concerned about what others will think</p>	<p>-Counselors listen without criticism or judgment          -Counseling happens in a safe and private setting          -You don't have to tell [your parent, significant other, friends] that you are seeing a counselor          -All counseling is confidential. Your counselor won't talk to [your parent, professor, and advisor] unless you give them written permission.</p>
	<p>I'm nervous about going to counseling</p>	<p>-Counselors try to make you comfortable -- they know that students are often nervous about coming in.          -Would you like me to walk you over to counseling services to show you where it's located and what it's like inside?</p>



Figure 1.

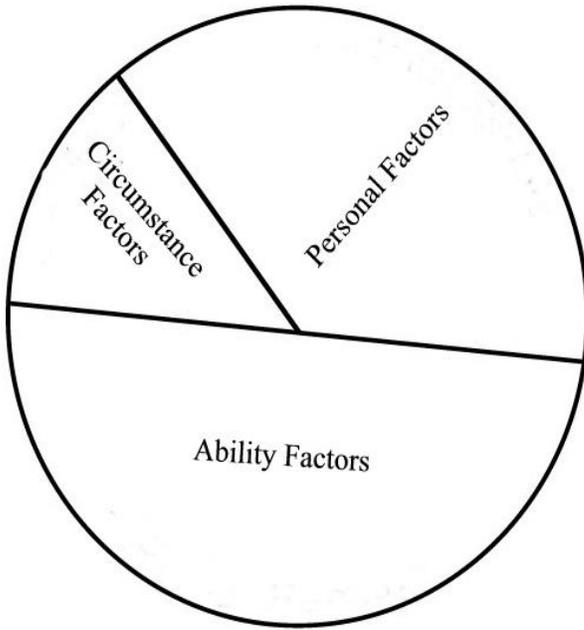


Figure 2.

