

The Struggle is Real: Confessions of a First-Year Student Advisor

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Who are First-Year Students?

First-Year college students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages look to higher education to enhance their career prospects as much (or more) than to cultivate the well-roundedness expected from the undergraduate experience; many seek the fastest way to degree completion (Eagan et al., 2015).

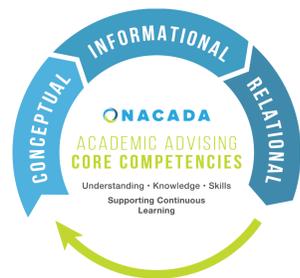
First-Year Students Increasingly...

- Come from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic groups
- Present with physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities (Raue, Lewis, & Coppersmith 2011)
- Are veterans or military-connected students using post 9/11 GI benefits (Hussar & Bailey, 2009)
- Have completed dual, Advanced Placement, or International Baccalaureate credit

First-Year Academic Advising:

In early advising encounters, students begin to develop meaningful connections to the institution and identify support systems that assist them in making a successful transition. Academic advisors assist new students in successful transitions and help them recognize and accept responsibility as active participants in their educational journeys.

NACADA Core Competencies:



CONCEPTUAL

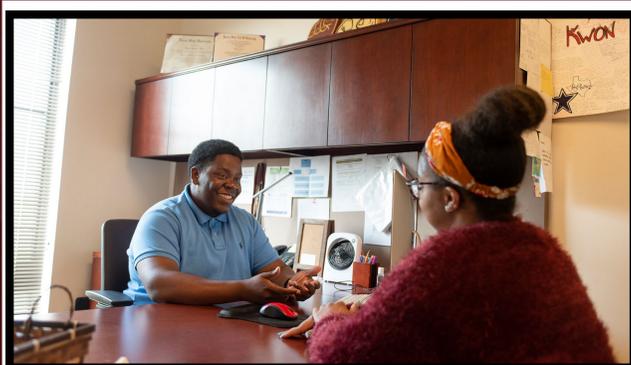
Helping students connect the components of their college experience, including academic pursuits, career planning, and degree completion (Folsom et al., 2005; Yoder & Joslin, 2015).

INFORMATIONAL

Academic advisors provide accurate and timely information that first-year students must know to navigate their new environment (Yoder & Joslin, 2015).

RELATIONAL

Effective interpersonal and communication skills that facilitate professional relationships with advisees (Nutt, 2003).



The Role of the Academic Advisor in the First-Year

Guide students in their transition (Relational)

Fundamentally, academic advising “relies on communication” (Uhlik, 2005). An academic advisor’s “ability to communicate and develop a relationship with a student provides a foundation for meaningful dialog and interactions” (Hughey, 2011).

Help students develop the cultural competencies to negotiate their complex environment (Conceptual)

Students’ abilities to expand their comfort zones are also vital to their success (Harding, 2013). Many first year students may be unaccustomed to the diversity of a college campus and may not recognize the opportunities given to them by an inclusive campus.

Generate academic plans for a timely graduation and appropriate career choices (Informational)

Academic advisors “serve as information central for students who need clarification regarding institutional policies and procedures” (Miller, 2016). While excellent institutional publications and websites delineate policies, rules, and regulations, students rely on academic advisors to explain nuances, make needed connections, and outline potential ramifications of student actions.

Construct advising partnerships across institutional units (Informational)

Higginson (2000) identified three areas to which academic advisors need to connect: “the higher education community, the local community surrounding the campus, and the broad world of work.” Anytime students have problems negotiating the bureaucracy of college, they should know they can ask their advisor for clarification and assistance” (Beres et al, 2013, p. 17).

Contribute to the students’ skill development (Relational)

“The intent is not just to help students reach a decision, but also become aware of how they make decisions...to help students develop an awareness of their own learning or thinking process” (Steele 2013). This includes facilitating reflective thinking and encouraging ownership of the problem by the student.

First-Year Advisor Perspectives:

“Some of this can feel like hand-holding.”

“Teaching them, and they’re still not getting it. At least not at speed.”

Informational: Advisors must provide attentiveness because of the extensive preparation among incoming students.

“Some conversations can feel extremely prescriptive because they are unsure about what they want to do. It takes more effort to have deeper conversations.”

Conceptual: First-year students may enter college without clearly defined goals for their education or career. Additionally, students who articulate major and career goals may not have invested sufficient considerations into their decisions.

“It’s hard to meet the needs of our first-year students sometimes. I had a student break down crying. I myself was feeling tired and I wasn’t expecting it.”

Relational: The advisor needs to be ready to assist the first-year student not only with academic concerns but also with other transitional issues.

“I try to avoid replying to my students’ emails right away. When I do, they reply quickly, and we can go back and forth as if we’re texting.”

Informational & Relational: With social media and text messaging among the most prevalent forms of communication in the United States (Newport, 2014), students assume that e-mail and calls will be returned quickly. They typically want 24/7 access to answers and advisor availability on short notice.



Beginning With the End in Mind

The first college year may prove the most crucial advising period for both advisors and students. Clearly stated learning outcomes for academic advising identify concepts students are expected to know and the time frame in which they should demonstrate this knowledge (Martin, 2007).

Cognitive Learning Outcomes: What should the student **know** as a result of advising?

- Identify graduation requirements.
- Define key college policies, procedures, and dates.
- Describe college rules and expectations (e.g., academic standing and code of conduct)

Behavioral Learning Outcomes: What should the student **do** as a result of advising?

- Use the institution’s educational technology tools.
- Examine ways educational goals align with career goals.
- Select appropriate courses to achieve educational goals.
- Use college resources to achieve goals.

Behavioral Learning Outcomes: What should the student **value** as a result of advising?

- Explain how personal and professional development opportunities (e.g., clubs, leadership roles, internships, civic engagement) help one reach intended goals.
- Value the role of academic advising in helping to achieve educational and professional goals.

Examples of advising learning outcomes. Adapted from “Assessment of Academic Advising: A Summary of the Process,” by R. Robbins and K. M. Zarges, 2011, NACADA Clearinghouse on Academic Advising Resources.

References

Fox, J. R., & Martin, H. E. (Eds.). (2017). *Academic Advising and the First College Year*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Student Experience & Students in Transition and NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising.

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