

Research Summary

Destination Integration: A Two-Part Series

Strategies to Improve Academic Advising (December 2018)

Perspectives of Students and Advisors about Improving Academic Advising (May 2019)

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Many CSU campuses, to support a more holistic and coherent advising process for students, are focusing on integrating services better across colleges, divisions, and departments. Some are also seeking better alignment with tutoring, career, and financial aid services. These reforms are mostly in the early stages, and they mirror national trends.

Based on an exploratory study of five CSU campus, including interviews with 36 administrators, researchers found the following primary improvement strategies underway:

- Advising councils, committees, and task forces to better integrate advising services while retaining decentralized structures and staff reporting lines;
- Advising tools to support workflow and analytical functions to better target advising resources and provide a more proactive approach;
- Professional development to create community, disseminate effective practices, share information, and increase consistency in advising;
- Shared positions and cross-functional advising teams to encourage cross-unit collaboration; and
- A senior administrator to coordinate campuswide advising.

Administrators said that the changes have the potential to improve relationships between academic and student services functions generally, and between faculty and professional advising staff specifically. Common challenges that the campuses are facing in addressing these reforms include: change management within large, traditionally siloed bureaucracies; the faculty's role and engagement in advising; initiative fatigue; and alignment with other reforms.

"I think the decentralized advising model has a lot of advantages and it makes sense, but it's a big, clunky model. Without any kind of direct reporting line to any one person, it makes it hard to make sure people are doing things consistently."

—CSU Campus Administrator

Students, faculty advisors, and professional staff advisors at the campuses largely agreed with administrators, saying that advising: (1) is fragmented with a focus primarily on course selection and academic planning, and (2) should be a more holistic and cohesive experience for students, including alignment with other student services.

Students described challenges in accessing advising services and said they struggle with the effects of fragmentation, including not knowing where to go for which kind of information, feeling bounced from one advisor to the next, and receiving contradictory information. Many also described advising experiences as impersonal and rushed, including being given "cookie-cutter" answers that did not fit their individual circumstances or needs.

Advisors and students were in general agreement with administrators about the value of the primary improvement strategies underway on the campuses, but they voiced some differences as well. Regarding eAdvising tools, for example, faculty and staff advisors who were familiar with these tools were generally hopeful about their potential. Faculty, however, were considerably less familiar with the tools than staff advisors. Students said they value eAdvising tools as a complement to face-to-face advising, but said the tools are not yet meeting their expectations.

Advisors and students value the importance of building long-term relationships, and students in particular would like advising to be more personalized. While students do not necessarily expect to be assigned a single advisor, they would like the university to integrate multiple advising touchpoints into a seamless experience, including through eAdvising tools and online and virtual formats.

“They threw me at so many different advisors ... and they just pin-balled me around until they finally shoved me on the one person who actually was in charge of what I needed done... They finally pin-balled me into the right lane.”

—CSU Campus Administrator

Recommendations

As campuses consider ways to improve the cohesiveness of advising, services, the authors suggest the following, based on their findings from administrators, faculty advisors, staff advisors, and students:

- Offer advising at more flexible times and formats to facilitate better access, especially for nontraditional students.
- Create more meaningful mandatory advising touchpoints that ensure all students receive advising services at critical junctures.
- Disseminate knowledge and information through consistent training of advisors to support a seamless, integrated advising experience.
- Support a more personalized approach through professional development for advisors and better use of technology that can personalize students’ advising experiences.
- Improve the effectiveness and integration of eAdvising tools, as well as the training provided to both students and advisors, with particular focus on online degree-planning tools.
- Provide more professional development customized to faculty and strengthen faculty-staff advisor partnerships.
- Assess the effectiveness of advising improvement strategies, including their impact on equity goals, and explore how data and evidence about equity can be used to support professional development efforts that increase awareness among advisors of the unique challenges and needs of nontraditional and underserved student populations—student groups that together make up the majority of CSU students.
- Continue to create oversight structures that allow for integration and efficiency.

This summary is based on the Destination Integration two-part series including Strategies to Improve Academic Advising and Perspectives of Students and Advisors about Improving Academic Advising. A discussion guide is available to support campus conversations about the implications for CSU campuses. Findings from Part I are based on interviews with 36 administrators involved in improving advising at five CSU campuses. Findings from Part II are based on a survey of 180 faculty advisors and 164 professional staff advisors and on 14 focus groups with a total of 88 students, all at the same five campuses studied in Part I. The research was conducted by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) for the CSU Student Success Network.

The CSU Network creates spaces for CSU faculty, staff, and administrators to share ideas and take the lead in supporting equitable opportunities and outcomes for students. The Network is facilitated by EdInsights at Sacramento State, a research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.



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