Southeast COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Advising Pilot Qualitative Analysis
February 28, 2020

The Institutional Research team has been involved in a multi-faceted evaluation of the advising pilot during the 2019-2020 school year. This document provides an overview of the qualitative elements of the evaluation process: a series of focused conversations throughout the fall 2019 semester and a longer focus group held after then completion of that term.

Overview

During the first semester of the advising pilot, Vicki Domina, Administrative Director of Advising, convened monthly meetings of the pilot advisors. The purpose of these meetings was to share information with the pilot advisors and debrief them on their on-going experiences implementing the new advising model. During each of these meetings, Institutional Research (IR) conducted a focused conversation[1] with the advisors in attendance. Monthly pilot advisor meetings were held on 09/13/2019, 10/10/2019, 11/15/2019, and 12/09/2019.

On 01/08/2020, a longer focus group was held with the pilot advisors. This meeting included an extended focused conversation reflecting on the previous term, as well as a future-oriented exercise focused on designing an ideal advising model for SCC.

Detailed notes on the focused conversations and focus group exercises were compiled from audio recordings. The analysis below is an effort to identify the dominant themes that emerged from those conversations based on careful review of the notes. The full notes are appended to this analysis.

Focused conversations

During each focused conversation, the advisors were asked to reflect on which aspects of advising under the pilot model were currently they felt were going well and which were challenging (or, in the case of the final meeting, to reflect back across the entire semester for these answers). A small number of themes emerged strongly and repeatedly across the semester. Those themes were:
- The advising model facilitated relationship building with students.
- Advisors found the systematic communication strategy beneficial.
- The pilot encouraged stronger relationships between programs and college advisors.
- Advisors found the systematic documentation of advising interactions valuable.
- Professional development for advisors will be needed on an on-going basis.

The advising model facilitated relationship building with students.

The most frequently discussed theme was that students in the pilot have a clearly defined advisor with whom they know how to communicate. This shift was associated with more face-to-face contact between students and advisors and increased opportunity to build relationships. Some advisors felt these

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[1] A method for facilitating group discussions based on *The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace* (Institute of Cultural Affairs, 2000). The method is designed to allow participants to reflect on their own experiences and insights, and share diverse perspectives in a non-confrontational manner.

relationships created a deeper connection to SCC for the students. Below are related ideas that were expressed in the focused conversations:

- Students have a clearly defined college advisor.
- They are having more face-to-face contacts with their advisors.
- Relationship building; students feel like they have 'a person' who can answer questions or at least point them towards someone who can.
  - "There's a sense of ownership. Rather than just the random pop-ins I used to get, I feel connected to the students."
- Students feel a deeper sense of connection to SCC. This is especially important for those on a non-residential campus.
- Even if students are not responding to advisor emails in the short-term, they know who to contact later with a question and have access to information they might not otherwise get.
- A number of examples were given later in the semester of students who hadn't responded at the time to any of the communications, but when they had an issue they knew to contact the college advisor because of those previous communications.
- Those advisors who made first contact with their students during NSO reported having earlier and more frequent connections with advisees.
  - "I've had multiple contacts already with all of my new students that I met at NSO. I'm extremely excited about that. We haven't even started the semester yet and our relationship is already 10-fold of what the relationship was at the end of the last semester with half of my advisees. I'm excited about that—about pre-term relationship building. I think these students are going to have a much smoother journey because they know things early."

Advisors found the systematic communication strategy beneficial.

Advisors generally liked the communication strategy that was part of the advising model. They reported that it is helpful to have a pre-determined calendar of communications and models for the messages to students. Advisors repeatedly commented that it made both them and their students more pro-active in their approach to advising. Below are some related ideas that were expressed in the focused conversations:

- Intentional, deliberate communication strategy is not only good for students, but helps keep advisors organized and systematic in their approach.
  - "I just liked having a weekly plan—plug and play—here's your week one, here's your week two. And Vicki saying 'don't forget to send a reminder.'"
- Even if students don't have a question at that time, they have an email to respond to when they need something.
- Proactive contacts and check-ins from advisors have averted a number of issues – students who dropped/withdrew rather than failing; students seeking tutoring or other help before they were in full crisis.
- Students are getting information from the email campaign they would not have gotten otherwise, and are ahead of the curve in knowing crucial information.
- Advisors feel students are more likely to read emails coming from a known advisor than from an unknown individual or office on campus.

The pilot encouraged stronger relationships between programs and college advisors

The staff advisors who worked with students in cohort-based programs routinely expressed that the advising model was developing deeper and more positive relationships between advisors and program faculty. Below are related ideas that were expressed in the focused conversations:

- Better communication between programs/faculty and college advisors.
- Program faculty/chairs are also asking more questions of college advisors.
- Instructors have appreciated receiving extra help from a dedicated college advisor.
- College advisors assigned to a specific program cohort have a better ability to advise students in that program.
- Working with student cohorts within their program spaces deepened the relationship with both the students and the program faculty.
- There is a system in place and everyone has their own lane and can collaborate from their areas of knowledge.
    - "The bridge that could be built between student affairs and faculty and instruction. The closer we can work together to help students the better. I've been working with the automotive program, and it's great to know that we can partner and each do the parts that we know best. They faculty felt that is was nice that they had someone that they could send their students to and they wouldn't have to jump through a lot of hoops to get what they need."

Advisors found the systematic documentation of advising interactions valuable.

The advisors generally had positive comments about the benefits of using CRM Advise, though they also provided many suggestions for small improvements and additional components they would like to see on the platform (see full notes).

- Advisors felt the systematic documentation of advising interactions is improving their advising.
- CRM Advise is helping with continuity of advising as students move through their program, change programs, or change advisor.
    - "It's helpful to have our own notes in CRM Advise to go back to look at things. I always think I'm going to remember it, but it helps me to be more in the moment with the student and to be more proactive and follow up on things. It also helps me when I'm referring students to other college advisors; we can share notes and make sure we're all on the same path."

Professional development for advisors will be needed on an on-going basis

Another theme was the need for on-going training and professional development for advisors to ensure everyone is well-informed in all areas of advising.

The monthly focused conversations served as a way for the pilot advisors to process and share the specific day-to-day issues they experienced in advising, as well as to seek advice from their peers and share the strategies they had developed. Advisors commented on multiple occasions that this peer-to-peer sharing was the most valuable part of the monthly advising meetings for them. They noted that it helped them see that their issues were not unique and to collectively discuss strategies and solutions. They recommended the future advising model include time for college advisors to debrief and work collaboratively in this way.

Concerns and suggestions

Every focused conversation included an invitation to discuss what they felt was not working with the new advising model. There were no concerns expressed about the fundamental elements of the advising model. Most concerns were about having the time, knowledge, and resources to effectively implement the model. There were also many concerns expressed about the difficulty in getting the students to engage in the process (especially in getting them to read and respond to emails and texts). Below are some of the commonly expressed concerns:

- Ensuring the advisors had sufficient time to devote to all of their advisees. Faculty participating in the pilot expressed more concerns about time than staff advisors.
- Ensuring the advisors have sufficient knowledge about all the campus resources available to effectively advise and refer students.
- Thinking strategically about the college's larger communication strategy to students to ensure that they don't receive so many emails from different offices that they quit reading all of the emails.
- Advisors should have a clear number of advisees assigned to them so they can effectively manage their workload.
- More clearly distinguishing the roles between teaching and advising for those advisors who were teaching ACFS and for the faculty involved as pilot advisors.

'Dream Big': An ideal advising model for SCC

The end-of-term focus group included an exercise that asked the pilot advisors to dream big and brainstorm the elements they would include in the ideal advising model for SCC if resources were no obstacle. The advisors brainstormed individually (writing their ideas on notecards) and then gathered in small groups to discuss their ideas and put forward the best ideas for further discussion by the larger group. The larger group then: (1) grouped the ideas into common themes and (2) identified what they felt were the most important elements of a successful advising model.

Listed below are the most important elements and the common themes, followed by a list of all written comments from the brainstorming session:

Most important elements:
- Low advising ratio / appropriate workload – without the time to do the work well the rest won't matter
- Effective technology to communicate amongst each other and with students
- Training – everyone knows what they need to know to do the job
- Private meeting spaces; collaborative spaces

Common themes:
- Begin dedicated advising at NSO
- Cohort-based/program-based advising assignments (instead of random/alphabetical)
- Private meeting spaces
- Well-designed advising spaces (for non-hierarchical interaction)

- Better technology
- More training for advising
- Centralized information about advising processes
- Dedicated staff advisors with low advisee ratio
- Full access to advising notes and student data (including grades)
- More presence of 4-year schools and community services on campus
- Programming funds for (fun) events with advising cohorts
- Snacks for students
- More outreach to students' family and friends

All written brainstorming ideas:

- Required in-person orientation
- Meet students at orientation
- Required in-person NSO/reg. event with advisor present (event would be fun)
- Money to host activities and programs
- Advisors have budgets to provide occasional incentives/food at workshops; prizes for events to build sense of community
- 4-year advisors on site more frequently
- Community resource hub (community agencies have locations on campus, like 4-year schools)
- Resource fair for community resources
- Full access to notes/grades for all advisors and faculty
- Full access notes system for all to use
- Centralized contact notes system – faculty, student affairs, advisors
- CRM Advise for all
- Texting system
- Better texting capabilities
- Centralized system with information needed for quality advising
- Training for advising
- Time and money for training and professional development
- Funding to attend nationwide conferences on advising
- Ongoing training with advising trends
- Time to meet for continuing development and review
- Better website
- Technology (website, Advise, appointment scheduling)
- Website advising scheduling – students can go into system and set appointments with advisor
- App to guide students to place (like Google maps for campuses)
- Circle I-pad tables (round tables with touchscreen top for student and advisor to collaborate on registering, degree audits, etc.)
- Tablets for students to register
- Supplies students could borrow (ex. Computers)
- Dedicated staff/advisors – advising is their only job
- Low advisee to advisor ratio
- Enough staff/advisors for reasonable caseloads.
- Fully staffed college advisors to connect from admission on

- Personnel sufficient to walk students new folks (soft handoffs)
- More time to advise
- Cohort groups
- Dedicated college advisors by program
- Advisors have strong relationships with academic units
- Students have easy access to their advisor
- Every student has an advisor
- Every student knows who/where their advisor is
- Central advising location/office at each campus
- Central advising center
- Private or semi-private office space for advising
- Semi-private meeting rooms for advising/meeting
- Private meeting/advising space
- Free coffee & pastries
- On-going funding for snacks while students are chatting
- Teach blended F2F and online ACFS class with academic transfer cohort
- Reach out to designated support
- Dedicated student financial aid support (FAFSA, SAP etc.)
- Better ways to connect friends/family and/or current/former students
- Meet at orientation
- Full access notes system for all to use
- Low advisee to advisor ratio
- A specific person per program for advising
- Better texting capabilities
- College advisors are all professionals
- A specific person per program for advising
- Texting/communication options
- Spaces to meet that can be private - not where others can overhear private/emotional convos
- More training options
- Full Access to notes system
- Lower ratio of students per advisor