

9-1-2014

# Bridging the Gap Between Academics and Advising: Incorporating Student Development into a Large Upper Division Lecture Course

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## Publication Information

Salinas, Olga; Jensen, Jamie; Reischl, Uwe. (2014). "Bridging the Gap Between Academics and Advising". *Academic Advising Today*, 37(3).

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Leigh posted on August 07, 2014 01:05



## Bridging the Gap between Academics and Advising: Incorporating Student Development into a Large Upper Division Lecture Course

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The role of professional advisors across colleges and universities has gained recognition and is seen as “integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education” (NACADA, 2006). Yet, there remains an ambiguity about our profession and our skill sets. Faculty actively seek advisor assistance in dealing with at-risk students or student issues, but many would be hard pressed to describe the advisor role in recruitment, retention, and student development. College and university administrators wrestle with the larger issues of institutional visions and missions, but have yet to fully visualize the advisor skill sets as a partner in achieving the institutional higher purpose (Faust, 2009).



In a standard university model, advising is external to academic content. Advising offices may have a mission and an advising syllabus, but contact with students occurs within our offices. Students seek assurance from advisors regarding academic progress and related issues, as well as strategies in course planning. At times, advisors are also resource experts linking students to internal or external support services. If time permits, advisors may be able to introduce a topic for consideration in future planning. As helpful as they try to be, and as visible Advising Centers may be, this remains a passive method. Even when advisors are in the classroom, their time is limited and targeted on specific reasons, such as sharing information. In addition, they are often addressing students in a first-year setting, not the needs of students who have moved past the first stages of student development and are starting to face the results of their educational efforts and futures beyond graduation (Cox, 2007).

To change the nature of the game, we implemented an embedded model representing a proactive approach to advising and student development into a large upper-division undergraduate public health lecture class. The presentation of public health content was interwoven with student development assignments that included activities such as personality assessment, aptitude surveys, and critical thinking exercises directly related to public health career opportunities. This approach brings two key areas (academics and advising) together in alignment and partnership in one setting: the classroom. The classroom becomes an enhanced center for learning about the subject matter and about the self in relation to the subject matter. Advising and student development content is intentionally linked with advanced academic content, creating a forum for learning that has relevance on multiple levels for the students.

The reasons for embarking on this strategy included the following:

- First, it aligned with a campus-wide goal to create and sustain a vibrant, intellectual culture that fosters interaction across disciplinary lines between all members of the campus community (faculty, staff, and students) to enrich the student experience (Boise State University, 2009).
- Second, this collaborative effort capitalizes on the strengths of the key players: the subject matter and instructional expertise of the faculty member, and the student development and advising expertise of the advisors.
- Third, it was an effort to enhance the live classroom experience and reinforce the merits of a classroom setting as a learning environment. Through a variety of meetings that included brainstorming, debate, and even abstract art, an embedded approach to advising within academic content was born.

The benefits for advising in such an embedded model are substantial. A change in daily work priorities, a new time commitment and schedule, increased visibility on campus, and an even greater emphasis on interpersonal skills can transpire. While advisor availability in some office hours is important, much of the advisor time and energy can be directed towards building a network of faculty who share the vision for an embedded advising model and jointly creating the combined content curriculum. The class time leading and participating in learning experiences can also be a significant commitment, as well as the time that is allocated to providing feedback to students outside of the classroom. However, an added advantages to this approach is that advisors have the potential to reach all students in the class, not just those students who self-select into advising.

The benefits for faculty are also substantial. It takes creativity and effort to bring in a curriculum partner and restructure both the content and teaching technique. However, it also means that there is corresponding built-in support in class to address student questions.

The institution also gains from this approach. This collaborative effort expands the knowledge of both faculty and advisors through a type of cross-training. It allows faculty to witness the breadth and depth of the advising function. In turn, advisors hone their instructional skills by participating alongside not only an expert in subject matter, but also in the craft of teaching. This combined effort brings a new and enjoyable energy to the learning experience for all involved. The learning and work environment becomes a place of ideas, exploration, and growth.

Ultimately, the students benefit most of all. Faculty and advisors become the institution's representatives who are dedicated to student success in their field of study. Their alliance exhibits professional respect for varied expertise, models interpersonal skills, and demonstrates the impact of an effective work-place team. In addition, in this world of ever increasing distractions, the value of the student on-campus experience is maximized. The embedded method ensures that students are building a larger network and becoming more actively engaged in their learning experience and exploring professional opportunities in their field **before** graduation.

Granted, this is a long-term in endeavor, with the potential to truly alter the role of advising and advisors across campuses everywhere. However, our model responds to the challenge faced by colleges and universities to "create a culture of shared purpose" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007).

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Cite this article using APA style as: Salinas, O., Jensen, J., & Reischl, U. (2014, September). Bridging the gap between academics and advising: Incorporating student development into a large upper division lecture course. *Academic Advising Today*, 37(3). Retrieved from [insert url here]

Posted in: **2014 September 37:3**

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