

Academic Advising in British Columbia

Executive Summary

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“Advising” consists of those activities and tasks that result in providing information to students. BC’s post-secondary education has evolved over the past number of years and student advising has changed along with it. Post-secondary institutions are currently challenged to increase student engagement, improve workplace readiness of their graduates, internationalize, increase retention rates of Aboriginal and non-traditional students, and prepare students for sustained participation in a learning economy. This paper examines academic advising in BC, references it to the literature on the topic, offers examples of successful practices, and identifies areas for future research. The research consisted of a literature search, an online survey of advisors currently working in BC Transfer System institutions, a website review, and student focus groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advising as an activity has been evolving since the early 1900s when it was not a separate department, but embedded in the student’s relationship with faculty and focused on students’ academic development. Today there are a variety of personnel within an institution that may have advising duties, including faculty advisors, professional/academic advisors, or generalist advisors. The need for an academic-career integrated advising approach continues to be expressed as students and families are growing more concerned about job placement outcomes, time-to-degree, and debt load when looking at prospective programs and campuses. Advising, as a profession, continues to become more formalized and separated from counselling and in some cases faculty work. The need for trained advisors, whether faculty members or professional advisors, can be very important in ensuring advising services are keeping pace with the changing needs of students and an institution’s educational goals. There appears to be no clear recommendation as to the best advising model.

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The use of data, technology, and online resources is becoming an expected standard in most areas of PSE. Technology was recommended for all prescriptive information and to free advisors’ time so that they can focus on the learner’s development and not strictly provide course/program information. Today’s student population is dramatically different from previous generations in terms of race, ethnicity, proficiency in English, financial status, family experience with post-secondary education, and in terms of their understanding and use of technology. For example, it is important to ensure Aboriginal learners feel welcome and supported. Another group consists of the ‘smartphone generation’—much more comfortable using technology to access information than previous generations of students.

There is confusion around the use of the term ‘advising’ in relationship to academic, professional, or faculty advising. In some cases advising refers to the providing of admissions, course, and program planning information to students. In others, advising can be associated with a wider range of information provided to students including health and wellness, career and personal planning, and financial and other sources of institutional support. However, good advising takes a talent development approach and helps students discover a connection between their academic experiences, work/life experiences, their abilities, and future plans. Effective advising systems gradually shift the responsibility of planning, goal setting, problem solving, and career development from the advisor to the advisee. Advising has been described as being the hub of the institution connecting students with faculty and support services.

ACADEMIC ADVISING IN THE BC TRANSFER SYSTEM

Website Review: All 38 institutions had an online presence although there were a variety of approaches to presenting advising information. Each institution had separate advising web pages and resources for Aboriginal students, although the information for Aboriginal students was not usually associated with the institution’s general advising. All 38 institutions had information on how to transfer and a resource link to the BC Transfer Guide (BCTG).

Survey Results: Respondents returned 166 out of 273 distributed surveys with at least one response received from each of the 38 BC Transfer System institutions. The survey was exploratory, and the responses may not be representative of all those who provide advising services within an institution. About 90% of all respondents indicated that the demand for advising services had increased over the previous five to eight years. Respondents perceived technological challenges connected with the changing demands of students as well as the increased demand for services. The respondents reported on their education (80% were required to have a bachelor’s degree), their working schedule (95% worked full-time during the day Monday to Friday), type of advising that they do (30% doing advising for special categories of students), and the length of a face-to-face appointment with students (typically 21-30 minutes). About 70% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that academic advisors at their institution were doing an excellent job of meeting the needs of students. However, the survey indicates that advisors’ views on ease of access and overall effectiveness may be different from students’ perceptions.

Focus Groups: Students would appreciate more flexibility of access to advisors and reported that online and group advising, were extremely helpful. They appreciated drop-in advising and being able to communicate using email. They suggested more advice that connects education to workplace skills and occupations was needed, especially through electronic resources related to career planning. Students from all types of institutions reported that they often went to Education Planner before they met with an advisor- especially at the start of their program- and that they used it and the BCTG to verify information after advising appointments.

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Future Directions and Research:

Definition and Roles: Institutions may wish to review definitions of advising, goals, structures, and approaches, with the aim of ensuring institutional consistency and clarity.

Professional Development: Institutions may wish to offer advisors specific training in working effectively with specific groups of students, including Aboriginal, international, or other non-traditional student groups.

Evidence-Based Decision Making: Better information sharing could inform advising, for example the CAS Standards. Institutions may wish to consider developing, articulating, and measuring learning outcomes related to advising.

Technology Usage: Institutions may wish to review the currency of their online interaction with and support for students on a regular and short-cycle basis.

Research: Institutions also may wish to conduct more complete and comprehensive reviews of student opinions in their own institutional contexts.

