

PROMISING PRACTICE

Empowering Students Through Academic Advising and Career Communities

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Higher education institutions are increasingly tasked with addressing the multifaceted needs of their students while preparing them for dynamic, ever-evolving professional landscapes. Academic advising, long considered a fundamental pillar of student success, has undergone significant transformations to meet these demands. No longer limited to course selection, advising now plays a critical role in helping students define their academic and career goals, overcome barriers, and navigate their pathways with confidence (Drake, 2011; Karp, 2013; Steele & White, 2019). Advisors who cultivate strong relationships with their students foster a sense of belonging that directly impacts retention and graduation rates (Tinto, 2012). Programs such as the Academic and Career Communities Mission exemplify this approach, blending career-focused communities with academic guidance to create a comprehensive support system (Steele & White, 2019).

For students from underrepresented communities, such as those first in their generation to attend college, academic advising plays an even greater role. These populations often face systemic barriers, including financial challenges, limited access to professional networks, and difficulties navigating institutional processes. By tailoring advising practices to meet the needs of these students, institutions can foster equitable opportunities for success (Swecker et al., 2013). For example, Swecker et al. (2013) found that first-generation students who met with academic advisors were more likely to be retained, highlighting the value of advising as a key support system. Furthermore, advising practices that support minority students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds are crucial in overcoming systemic barriers. Culturally sensitive, relationship-focused advising is essential in promoting equity and ensuring student

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success, especially at predominantly White institutions (Museus & Ravello, 2010).

In this promising practice article, we examine how integrating academic and career communities, embedding culturally responsive advising practices, and promoting credit momentum through initiatives like Think30 can drive retention, improve graduation rates, and foster equitable student success. Specifically, we address the theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and measurable outcomes of these initiatives, offering actionable insights for institutions seeking to enhance their advising models.

Career Communities

Helping students stay on track, graduate on time, and prepare for successful futures is at the heart of higher education. Like many institutions, particularly urban universities, our institution was navigating a period of uncertainty. First-year enrollment was declining compared to previous years, and our educators were faced with increasing pressure to do more with fewer resources. Staffing was lean, budgets were tight, and yet the expectations for student success and graduation outcomes continued to rise.

Research and institutional data consistently showed that retaining current students is more cost-effective than recruiting new ones. Every student who stayed enrolled and progressed toward graduation represented not just a win for our institution's mission but also contributed to the financial sustainability of the university. That awareness became a driving force behind these new initiatives.

Within this context, academic advising evolved from a transactional process to a transformational one. The team was given the space to be creative and proactive, reimagining how advising could serve as a cornerstone of student support. One of the key innovations was the development of Career Communities, a cross-campus collaboration among academic support services, experiential learning programs, STEM engagement initiatives, and faculty across disciplines. This initiative created a network of professionals and educators who formed a community deeply invested in students' academic and career success from day one.

Career Communities were structured around five broad pathways to help students explore both academic and career possibilities in meaningful ways.

- STEM and Health Sciences: For students pursuing careers in nursing, biology, computer

science, and psychology.

- International Fluency, Business, and Finance: Tailored for students in accounting, marketing, and global industries.
- Education and Social Sciences: Focused on teaching, social work, and community leadership.
- Government, Service, and Criminal Justice: Designed for students interested in law, political science, and public service.
- Liberal Arts, Humanities, and Communication: Inspiring careers in art, history, and English.

Each community offered students access to alumni networks, faculty mentorship, and industry professionals in both formal and informal settings. Workshops, networking events, and experiential learning opportunities were central to every community. Programs such as *Lunch with a Leader* connected students directly with professionals working in their fields of interest, while mock interviews and resume-writing workshops equipped them with essential, practical career-readiness skills.

Complementary initiatives like Think30 reinforced the message by encouraging students to complete 30 credits per year to stay on track for timely graduation. Together, these efforts blended academic advising, career exploration, and real-world preparation into a comprehensive support structure that helped students navigate their journeys with purpose and confidence.

The Role of Holistic Advising in Student Retention

Holistic advising extends beyond traditional academic guidance by addressing the full spectrum of a student's college experience, including academic, social, and emotional needs. This comprehensive approach helps create an environment in which students feel valued, supported, and empowered. Tinto underscored the importance of holistic advising, showing that students who engage in this type of advising are more likely to stay engaged and persist to graduation (Tinto, 2012). Elder (2020) further supported this notion, examining how academic, psychosocial, and noncognitive factors contribute to student retention at a large public university. Elder highlighted that a holistic advising model can significantly impact retention by addressing the multifaceted challenges students face.

Additionally, Levinstein (2021) discussed how proactive, relationship-based advising strategies, particularly for students in their first year of college,

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can foster greater persistence and success. Banger (2024) emphasized that students' perceptions of holistic advising are crucial, finding that individualized, student-centered support contributes significantly to academic success. Moreover, Coll (2009) revealed that alignment between advising styles and students' worldviews enhances satisfaction with advising, suggesting that tailoring advising approaches to match student values plays a critical role in boosting retention. Together, these studies underscored the transformative power of holistic advising in promoting student success and retention.

The Academic and Career Communities Mission exemplifies this approach by integrating academic and career advising into a cohesive support system. For example, students in the STEM and Health Sciences career community received not only guidance on course selection but also access to networking events with professionals in their fields. These opportunities helped students contextualize their academic efforts within the broader framework of their career goals, fostering a sense of purpose and direction. Additionally, the emphasis on peer mentorship within its career communities provided an added layer of support. Peer Career Advisors (PCAs) played a crucial role in making advising accessible and relatable, offering insights into topics such as resume building and job search strategies. This peer-to-peer model aligns with findings from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2023), which highlighted the effectiveness of mentorship in promoting student success.

Theoretical Foundations for Advising and Career Communities

The success of academic advising initiatives often rests on established theories of student retention and engagement. Tinto's (1975, 2012) integration framework emphasized the dual importance of academic and social connectedness in reducing student attrition. According to Tinto (1993), students who feel a sense of belonging within their institution are more likely to persist and succeed. Programs like the Academic and Career Communities Mission operationalize this theory by fostering intentional connections between students, faculty, and industry professionals.

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement similarly underscored the critical role of student engagement in academic success. Career communities, with their focus on experiential learning and professional networking, provide opportunities for meaningful engagement that reinforces students' academic and professional identities. Research by Kraft-Terry and Kau (2019) demonstrated that outcome-driven proactive advising can significantly improve student success, particularly among populations who are academically at-risk.

Their findings highlight career-focused advising as a high-impact strategy for increasing retention and graduation rates.

Culturally Responsive Advising and Equity

Culturally responsive advising is an advising approach that intentionally recognizes and responds to students' cultural identities and lived experiences, aiming to promote equity and inclusion in educational outcomes (Museus & Ravello, 2010). This approach represents one of several current trends that are shaping the future of academic advising. Culturally responsive advising has emerged as a key strategy for addressing equity gaps in higher education. Traditional advising models often fail to adequately account for the unique challenges faced by underrepresented students, including financial barriers, systemic inequities, and limited access to professional networks. McClellan and Moser (2011) argued that advising models integrating career preparation with academic support can help bridge these gaps, fostering equitable opportunities for all students.

The Academic and Career Communities Mission highlights the importance of intentional design in promoting equity. By organizing students into communities aligned with their academic and professional interests, this program creates tailored pathways that address diverse needs and aspirations. Reflective practices, such as journaling and one-on-one advising sessions, further help students connect their academic efforts with their long-term goals, enhancing both motivation and persistence. Lee (2018) highlighted how academic advisors can utilize critical race theory to better understand and support students from marginalized communities. This approach emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive advising practices in addressing systemic inequities and fostering a sense of belonging among underrepresented students.

Emerging Trends in Advising

Culturally responsive advising represents one of several current trends that are shaping the future of academic advising by ensuring that students receive a more personalized, comprehensive, and equitable advising experience that prepares them for both academic and career success (Blasser, 2023). This approach has acknowledged the cultural backgrounds and systemic challenges faced by students from underrepresented groups and seeks to foster inclusive support strategies (Museus & Ravello, 2010). However, research has demonstrated the effectiveness of a range of approaches that include, but are not limited to, the use of technology and predictive analytics, career integration and competency-based techniques, and experiential learning methods (Fernandez et al., 2016; Gordon et al., 2008; Moore, 2024; Sweeney et al., 2016).

The integration of technology and predictive analytics into academic advising is transforming how higher education institutions support their students, as documented by researchers and practitioners alike (Gordon et al., 2008; Sweeney et al., 2016). By incorporating advanced tools like learning analytics dashboards and AI-driven advising platforms, institutions can provide more personalized and proactive support. These technologies enable advisors to identify at-risk students early and offer timely interventions, which can significantly improve student retention and success. Additionally, virtual career fairs and online networking events, which saw increased usage during the COVID-19 pandemic, have expanded access to career resources, particularly for remote and non-traditional students, providing them with more equitable opportunities for career development (Sweeney et al., 2016). Technology-enhanced advising tools, such as AI-powered systems and platforms like FlightPath and DegreeWorks, have further optimized advising practices by improving efficiency and ensuring that students receive the most accurate and timely advice (Hu & Rangwala, 2019).

At Georgia State University, the use of predictive analytics and AI-powered chatbots has been instrumental in enhancing academic advising. Gao and Zheng (2019) demonstrated how these technologies have positively impacted student success, retention, and graduation rates by offering real-time, data-driven insights into student behavior and needs. Similarly, Simons and Hunsinger (2020) discussed how data-driven systems are leveraged to provide personalized course recommendations, which help students make informed decisions about their academic paths, ultimately enhancing their academic preparedness and success. These developments align with the findings of Collins and Williams (2018), who explored the *FlightPath* platform, which is an open-source tool designed to aid academic advising through functionalities such as degree audits, academic progress tracking, and scheduling. This platform not only streamlines the advising process but also supports student retention and increases graduation rates by helping students stay on track with their academic goals.

Moreover, McClure and Thomas (2021) emphasized the growing role of data-driven decision-making in academic advising. Their research highlighted how predictive analytics can forecast student outcomes and support early interventions,

ensuring that students at-risk receive the guidance and resources they need to succeed. As the integration of technology continues to evolve, the intersection of predictive analytics and academic advising will increasingly shape how institutions engage with and support their students, ultimately contributing to improved student outcomes and institutional success.

The integration of *career advising* into academic advising has proven highly effective in enhancing student engagement and retention. By helping students connect their academic progress with career aspirations early in their academic journey, students gain a clearer understanding of the relevance of their coursework to their future careers (Balfanz & Wu, 2018). This approach not only promotes active participation in academic life but

also helps students make informed decisions about their studies, including course selection, internships, and extracurricular activities that align with their long-term professional goals (Balfanz & Wu, 2018). The integration of career advising encourages students to see their education as a pathway to career success, which in turn can boost motivation and improve overall retention rates. Additionally, when students understand how their academic choices contribute to their career development, they are more likely to stay on track and persist through graduation (Balfanz & Wu, 2018).

Competency-based advising, which emphasizes the development of key skills such as critical thinking, communication, and leadership, offers another highly effective advising method (Fernandez et al., 2016). This approach shifts the focus from simply earning degrees to developing compe-

tencies that are directly applicable to the workplace. By encouraging students to cultivate these skills throughout their academic careers, advisors help prepare them for real-world challenges. Competency-based advising ensures that students understand how to apply their academic knowledge in practical situations, bridging the gap between theoretical learning and professional application (Fernandez et al., 2016). It also gives students a clearer sense of purpose and direction, as they are not just progressing through coursework but actively building the skills that will make them successful in their careers. This method also aligns with employers' increasing emphasis on skill sets rather than just academic credentials, making graduates more competitive in the job market (Fernandez et al., 2016).

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Finally, the integration of *experiential learning* into academic advising has proven to be an effective strategy in preparing students for the workforce (Moore, 2024). By guiding students toward internships, study abroad programs, and co-op experiences, advisors provide opportunities for students to apply their classroom knowledge in real-world settings. These experiences not only enhance students' employability but also help them develop practical skills that are crucial for career success, such as communication, problem-solving, and adaptability (Moore, 2024). Furthermore, experiential learning enables students to build a professional network, gain industry-specific insights, and strengthen their resumes—key factors that improve their competitiveness in the job market. As students gain hands-on experience, they also become more confident in their career choices and better equipped to navigate the complexities of their chosen professions (Moore, 2024). Ultimately, this method fosters career readiness by giving students tangible, valuable experiences that directly align with their academic goals and future career paths (Moore, 2024). While methods such as career advising integration, competency-based advising, and experiential learning are powerful and effective strategies in supporting student success, they represent just a portion of the broader landscape of impactful advising practices.

Other approaches, such as *interdisciplinary advising*, *wellness-focused advising*, and *peer advising programs*, also play vital roles in meeting the diverse needs of today's college students. Interdisciplinary advising offers tailored support for students pursuing complex academic pathways by drawing on the expertise of multiple departments (Kelly & Kyriacou, n.d.). Wellness-focused advising acknowledges the crucial connection between mental health and academic performance, providing students with holistic support that fosters resilience and well-being (Kelly & Kyriacou, n.d.). Meanwhile, peer advising programs create accessible and relatable sources of guidance, helping students feel more connected and empowered (Blanc, et al., 1983). Together, these diverse strategies demonstrate that effective academic and career advising must be flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the evolving challenges faced by college students today.

Think30: A Path to Timely Graduation

Amid declining first-year enrollment and limited staffing, our institution launched a proactive credit momentum campaign to encourage students to complete 30 credits per year and stay on track for timely graduation. Inspired by national models but adapted to our campus context, the effort was intentionally hands-on and collaborative. Advisors manually reviewed individual academic evaluations,

flagged students who were falling behind, and sent personalized outreach emails with guidance on how to get back on track. The team discussed the initiative openly at orientation, speaking directly to students and families about the long-term cost of extending a degree beyond four years and the earnings students forgo by delaying entry into the workforce. A dedicated website was created and expanded course offerings during January and summer terms to give students flexible pathways to catch up. Participation was never mandatory, but always encouraged, and most importantly, the initiative required full institutional buy-in to prioritize credit accumulation as a core part of our student success strategy. Early results were promising: the percentage of students completing 30 credits rose by 18% in the first year, jumping from 44% to 62% in the fall 2018 cohort. This high-touch, data-informed approach helped shift campus culture toward one of timely completion and proactive support.

Over the course of 4 years, our credit momentum initiative evolved to better meet students' needs and improve outcomes. In its first year, the concept was introduced during orientation and followed up with personalized emails to students immediately after, encouraging them to commit to completing 30 credits annually. While initial interest was high, student follow-through with events was limited. In our second year, the initiative was expanded to include sophomores, aiming to improve retention.

Large events were also scaled back in favor of more personalized touchpoints, such as one-on-one advising sessions and academic planning check-ins. Advisors worked closely with students to develop customized academic plans that considered real-life demands—like jobs or family responsibilities—and built in opportunities to catch up through summer or winter sessions. Faculty collaboration also deepened, allowing for earlier identification of students at risk for academic failure and timely interventions, including tutoring, financial guidance, and academic support. The core message stayed consistent: completing 30 credits each year shortens time to graduation and helps students enter the workforce earlier. This approach is aligned with national research from Complete College America (2023), which confirmed that consistent credit accumulation is a strong predictor of on-time degree completion.

Results

The impact of the Think30 initiative extended well beyond academic metrics. For the fall 2016 cohort, the 4-year graduation rate reached 50.3%, a historic high for the university and a significant milestone compared to the national average of 45.3% for all 4-year institutions and just below the 54.1%

average for private nonprofit universities (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). This improvement underscores the effectiveness of targeted programs like Think30 and the Academic and Career Communities Mission.

Benefits Beyond Graduation

But the benefits did not stop at graduation. Students involved in the initiative reported increased confidence in their academic standing, greater clarity around career goals, and a stronger overall sense of direction. Timely graduation also helped students avoid extra tuition costs, enter the workforce sooner, and reduce long-term debt, leading to enhanced financial stability and improved lifetime earning potential. The initiative created ripple effects across campus, supporting institutional retention goals, strengthening data reporting systems, and even boosting alumni engagement, as graduates felt more connected to a university that helped them finish strong and on time.

Retention rates also increased due to proactive advising and tailored interventions. Advisors monitored student progress through analytics dashboards, identifying at-risk individuals and addressing their challenges early. This data-driven approach ensured that students received the support they needed to persist, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Diversity in STEM and Career Readiness

The schools focus on equity and inclusion is evident in the success of its STEM programs. In 2021, Black men accounted for 17.95% of graduates in the Computer Science program, while Hispanic men represented 41.03%. These figures significantly exceed national averages, where Black men earned 6.2% and Hispanic men earned 12.5% of bachelor's degrees in computer science (National Science Foundation, 2023).

The integration of career readiness into advising further amplified the program's impact. Activities like mock interviews, resume workshops, and networking events equipped students with the skills and confidence needed to transition from college to the workforce. For the Class of 2019, the school reported a 95% success rate in the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) First-Destination Survey, surpassing the national average of 86% (NACE, 2023).

Regular communication between Academic Affairs, Career Services, and Student Support Services fostered a unified approach to student success.

Challenges

Implementing large-scale student success initiatives like Think30 and the Academic and Career Communities Mission brought meaningful progress but also revealed important challenges. Resource limitations, resistance to change, and persistent equity gaps highlighted areas that required strategic problem-solving and adaptability. Reflecting on these challenges provides critical insight into the lessons learned and opportunities for continuous improvement.

Implementing initiatives like Think30 and the Academic and Career Communities Mission required significant investments in technology, staff, and infrastructure. Limited advisor-to-student ratios at times created bottlenecks, reducing the effectiveness of personalized interventions.

Faculty and staff initially resisted the additional workload associated with career-focused advising. Convincing stakeholders of the long-term benefits required strategic communication and consistent professional development.

Despite the program's success, certain populations—such as part-time and non-traditional students—did not fully benefit from the initiatives. Addressing these gaps required innovative approaches, such as virtual advising and flexible scheduling.

Lessons Learned

The experience of launching and scaling these initiatives reinforced the importance of several core practices. Strong collaboration, data-informed strategies, and a continued focus on the human side of advising all played a critical role in supporting student success and sustaining momentum.

The success of these initiatives depended on cross-departmental collaboration. Regular communication between Academic Affairs, Career Services, and Student Support Services fostered a unified approach to student success. Leveraging analytics was crucial for identifying trends and implementing timely interventions. Advisors relied on dashboards to monitor student progress, enabling them to provide targeted support. While technology enhanced efficiency, students consistently valued the personalized guidance offered by advisors and mentors. Building trust and fostering genuine connections remained central to the program's success.

Recommendations for Higher Education

Building on the successes and lessons of these initiatives, several key recommendations can help institutions strengthen their student success efforts. By adopting holistic advising models, leveraging technology thoughtfully, addressing equity gaps, expanding experiential learning opportunities, and investing in faculty and staff development, institutions can create more inclusive and effective pathways for student achievement.

Institutions should move beyond traditional advising to embrace holistic approaches that integrate academic, career, and personal development. Programs like this demonstrate that when students receive comprehensive support, they are more likely to thrive academically and professionally.

AI-driven platforms and learning analytics dashboards can help institutions scale their advising efforts while maintaining personalization. However, technology should complement and not replace the relational aspects of advising.

Institutions must prioritize equity by implementing culturally responsive advising practices. Advisors should receive training to better understand and address the unique challenges faced by underrepresented students.

Partnering with local businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies to create internships, co-ops, and service-learning opportunities is essential. Experiential learning not only enhances career readiness but also strengthens students' confidence and professional networks.

Providing faculty and staff with ongoing professional development ensures they are equipped to support students effectively. Incentivizing faculty participation in career communities can further enhance program engagement.

Conclusion

The initiatives implemented, particularly the Academic and Career Communities Mission and Think30, highlight the transformative potential of holistic, student-centered advising. By integrating academic guidance with career readiness and fostering a sense of belonging, our university demonstrated that even modest institutions can achieve significant outcomes when programs are designed with intentionality and equity at their core.

The measurable success of these initiatives, including record-breaking 4-year graduation rates and increased diversity in STEM degree attainment, underscores the power of proactive advising to address some of higher education's most pressing challenges. Think30's focus on timely credit accumulation not only improved graduation rates but also alleviated financial burdens for students, while the Academic and

Career Communities Mission created a framework for connecting students with the people, resources, and opportunities they needed to thrive.

The lessons learned from these efforts—such as the importance of collaboration, the value of data-driven decision-making, and the enduring necessity of personal connections—offer a blueprint for other institutions seeking to improve student outcomes. Additionally, the challenges faced during implementation, including resource constraints and equity gaps, underscore the need for continuous innovation and commitment to addressing the diverse needs of today's students.

Looking forward, the future of advising lies in striking a balance between leveraging technology for scalability and maintaining the human element that students so deeply value. As institutions continue to navigate the evolving landscape of higher education, integrating academic and career advising, fostering experiential learning opportunities, and prioritizing equity will be critical to ensuring that all students graduate not only with degrees but with the confidence and readiness to pursue meaningful careers.

Ultimately, the initiatives demonstrate that when advising is treated as a holistic, transformative process, it empowers students to achieve outcomes that once seemed out of reach. These efforts reaffirm the vital role of higher education in shaping not only academic success but also the personal and professional futures of its students.

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