Academic Advising: Helping Students Find Their Fit

As one of the largest community colleges in the SUNY system, Hudson Valley Community College takes pride in the variety of programs it offers that support the academic and occupational goals of our region’s citizens. However, our size can also be daunting to new students. Most students need to feel personally welcome to successfully integrate with the community they have entered when they enroll here.

A good deal of a student’s first interactions with the college involve taking care of registration tasks: completing the application, taking the placement test, scheduling classes, paying the bill. Of these, the third step—scheduling classes—is perhaps the most critical to welcoming a student to campus and initiating the process of integration. Here the new student is meeting face-to-face with an advisor to create a plan of action aimed at the realization of the goal that brought the student to the college.

If this sounds like a momentous occasion, it should. Studies on retention emphasize the importance of students finding an academic and social fit with the educational institution. This process begins with the first advising experience, when students discuss why they have enrolled, why they chose their major (or haven’t chosen a major), which classes they look forward to taking and which ones they cringe at.

The academic advisor needs to emphasize that the student made the correct decision in choosing Hudson Valley Community College to attain his or her goals and explain how the college will support the student’s academic success. The advisor puts courses in context and stresses that no course is any more or less important to the development of academic and career skills. Most importantly, the advisor establishes that she or he is and will be available to assist the student at any point.

Strong academic advising is the hallmark of colleges with good retention rates. Advising creates a personal relationship between a faculty member and the student. It validates the student’s goals and shows how those goals can be achieved. It tells the student that he or she fits at Hudson Valley Community College.
Office of Instructional Support Services and Retention Hosts Visits from Westchester Community College and Parkland (Ill.)

The Office of Instructional Support Services and Retention (ISS&R) at Hudson Valley Community College hosted groups from two colleges interested in the organization and functions of the unit.

On Sept. 19, 2005, Associate Dean Kathy Quirk welcomed Rachelle Salzberg, assistant dean of academic affairs from Westchester Community College. Ms. Salzberg was accompanied by her colleague Rita Glaser, EOP coordinator, and Robin Graff, counselor. Their visit resulted from an inquiry in March 2005 regarding the mechanics of Hudson Valley’s Student Outreach and Support Call Center. After a few e-mail communications and telephone conversations, Westchester decided to send a team to learn more.

Ms. Quirk and Kevin McNeellege, retention specialist, met with the Westchester team. Ms. Quirk described the development of the Call Center and its relationship to other functions of the ISS&R unit. Mr. McNeellege explained the types of calls made, the procedures followed to schedule calls, and the scripts used by enrollment/retention technical assistants. Both emphasized how call sessions coordinate with the activities of student services offices and inform discussions related to student persistence.

Joined for lunch by Mary-Teresa Heath, associate director for instructional support services and retention, the participants discussed the coordination of efforts to enroll and retain students. Ms. Salzberg related how Westchester Community College created an impromptu call center in August to take incoming calls from prospective students; the call center personnel, volunteers from various departments, answered questions regarding the registration process in support of a campaign to boost fall enrollment. After lunch, the Westchester group toured Hudson Valley’s campus. They were impressed by the convenience of Guenther Enrollment Services Center and layout of the recently-opened second floor of Siek Campus Center.

One week later, five instructors and administrators from Parkland College in Champlain, Ill., came to research all aspects of the ISS&R unit. This group, members of a task force established to review and re-design student support services on their campus, had read “A Comprehensive Approach to Developmental Education,” an article by Ms. Quirk published in New Directions for Community Colleges.

After being welcomed by Dr. Carolyn Curtis, vice president for academic affairs, the visitors met with Ms. Quirk and Ms. Heath, who explained ISS&R’s structure and philosophy. The remainder of the day, the Parkland team heard presentations on Hudson Valley’s tutoring services, services for learning disabled students, LRAC courses, collaborative efforts between LAC/ CLC and classroom faculty, the Call Center, the Early Warning System, placement testing, and collaboration with other offices and academic departments to support specific student populations. During lunch, provided by Dr. Curtis, the ISS&R staff and the Parkland visitors continued their discussions on linking student support and retention efforts to the activities of the entire campus community.

Planets in our Solar System: A Typological Framework for Identifying Community College Students

The University of Southern California’s Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students (TRUCCS) Research Team likes to use metaphors to explain complex data. Their most recent report uses a clever way to sort through the diverse personal characteristics and educational backgrounds and goals of community college students. The team, led by Dr. Linda Serra Hagedorn of the University of Florida, created a system of seven “planets” orbiting the community college “sun.”

The metaphor arose in part from observing the varying degrees to which students connect their lives to an educational institution, much as distance and mass determine the relationship between the sun and planets. They measured this “gravitational” factor by looking at enrollment in mathematics courses, intention to transfer, credits per semester, and total semesters of enrollment for students in the Los Angeles Community College District. The team then compared this information to demographic attributes and educational experiences. The data resolved into seven definable clusters of students—their planets. Each planet has an orbit defined by how long its inhabitants take to reach their goals.

The lives of younger, full-time students with few non-school responsibilities tend to revolve closely around campus activities. As a result, their path to completion, like Mercury’s orbit, is short. The outermost orbit is mainly populated by older, white students who take one course at a time for personal development; like Pluto, they seem to take 250 years to finish their circuit. In between, the satellites include one teeming with students looking for workplace skills and four transfer student planets differentiated by their inhabitants’ course loads and length of enrollment.

This typology brings together perspectives on at-risk populations and the role of student integration in retention, creating an easily grasped framework for designing retention strategies.
A record 187 faculty members (32.7 percent) participated in the Early Alert process earlier this fall. These faculty members identified students who were exhibiting behaviors in the first weeks of class that are indicative of poor academic performance. As a result, 1,518 students were sent an early warning letter in September and early October, encouraging them to meet with their instructors to talk about the steps necessary to achieve academic success.

Some faculty members have mentioned that they received the request to identify students for an Early Alert letter before enough work has been completed to gauge their students’ performance in class. The forms are sent to instructors the third week of classes. However, the deadline to return the forms to have letters sent is the end of the fifth week of classes. This fall, 63 percent of the letters that were generated resulted from information provided by instructors in the fifth week of classes. Research indicates that faculty are aware of their students’ poor academic habits and behaviors, even without graded assignments and tests, by this point in the semester. Moreover, the timing gives students a chance to begin corrective action before midterms.

A few faculty members have asked to have their e-mail addresses listed on the letter in addition to, or in lieu of, their office location. The Office of Instructional Support Services and Retention is considering this idea. E-mail has become a preferred communication tool for many people. On the other hand, a critical element in student persistence and retention is promoting face-to-face interaction.

The Early Alert letters are the second of three sets of letters sent to students each semester. Beginning the week of Aug. 22, 2005, letters from Dr. Carolyn Curtis, vice president for academic affairs, were mailed to all students enrolling at Hudson Valley Community College. The letters welcomed students to campus and reminded students of the academic support services available to them. Gail Dailey (Planning and Research), Maryanne Remarchuk (Word Processing), and Joe Bode (Central Receiving) processed 12,368 letters in five batches. An insert listing the functions and hours of Hudson Valley’s Academic Support Centers was guided through printing by Tanya Stimson (Graphics). In addition, 2,789 new students received a welcome call from the enrollment/retention technical assistants from the Student Outreach and Support Call Center.

In late October, the same team prepared and mailed 6,079 letters to students with GPAs of 2.00 and higher, as well as 1,310 letters to non-matriculated and new, matriculated students with GPAs below 2.00. The latter letter included an invitation to take the Midterm Check Survey, which is accessible from the online LAC, and to sign up for the Midterm Tune-Up workshop conducted by Don Frament (LAC).

If you have questions or suggestions regarding Hudson Valley’s Early Warning System, which includes Welcome, Early Alert, and Midterm Check letters, please contact Kevin McNeellege by phone at 629-7638 or by e-mail at mcneellege@hvcc.edu
Two studies recently reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and a study from ACT, the testing organization, provide evidence regarding the benefits of promoting study groups and providing developmental education courses to support retention efforts. These studies draw on data from large student populations at four-year and two-year institutions.

The first study, presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, compared the reasons why students dropped out of four-year institutions and community colleges. Professor Regina Deil-Amen of Pennsylvania State University analyzed the data from the Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study, a federal research project that tracked students who first enrolled in college in 1995. Ms. Deil-Amen confirmed Vincent Tinto’s attrition model—that students drop out due to low levels of academic and social integration. More important, she found that Tinto’s model is equally applicable to community college students as to the four-year population it was originally based on. In fact, the model was accurate even when attributes typical of community college students, such as part-time study, employment, and child care, are considered.

Ms. Deil-Amen notes several activities that promote academic and social integration and are “significantly negatively associated with dropout.” They include participation in student activities, study groups, and frequent contact with faculty and advisors outside class. She singles out study groups as a particularly important tool for retention at community colleges; participation in study groups reduced a community college student’s chances of dropping out by 28 percent. In interviews with students, Ms. Deil-Amen found that study groups provide emotional as well as academic support for non-traditional students.

Another study investigated the efficacy of developmental courses. The research team of Eric P. Bettinger of Case Western Reserve University and Bridget Terry Long of Harvard University analyzed data from Ohio’s public higher education system. Each institution in the system sets its own standards for mandating developmental courses based on test scores and high school grades. As a result, students with comparable entering academic profiles might or might not be required to take remedial math or English. Given the size of the Ohio public college and university system, Bettinger and Long had a large pool of students (approximately 15,000) who were required to enroll in developmental courses at some colleges but not others.

The researchers found support for the utility of developmental education as part of retention efforts. Students in remedial mathematics courses were 9.6 percent less likely to drop out than their peers who did not take such courses. Students who took developmental English were 17.3 percent more likely to graduate with a bachelor’s degree within four years compared to students with similar academic backgrounds who did not. However, the authors cautioned that their study did not look at students whose test scores and grades were so low they would have been mandated to take remedial courses at every institution, a population poorly prepared for college work.

ACT also recently released a study that looked at the effects of developmental education courses on student success and retention. Multi-year data were collected from two universities to measure outcomes in higher level classes, comparing students who completed developmental math or English courses and students who had not. The developmental courses were not mandatory; as a result, the cohorts’ placement test scores overlapped. The results showed that students who received a B or higher in a developmental course were more likely to complete the next higher course in that subject than all other students. Moreover, they were also more likely to persist to their second year than other students.

These studies highlight activities we pursue and cultivate to improve retention. Study groups and contact with faculty outside class assist students in identifying with the educational community on campus. These tools foster the academic and social integration students seek when deciding to persist or not. Developmental courses, when not simply a repeat of lessons previously taught but not learned, support the long-term success of students motivated to complete them. Which of these methods will be most effective for an individual student ultimately depends on discovering the student’s skills, knowledge, goals, and motivation, and building the foundation of success from there.


Welcome Packets and Student Handbooks Distributed

All first time, full-time and first time, part-time students received welcome packets in their College Forum class or by mail. The packets contained information regarding parking, student services, ACE, Marvin Library, plagiarism, academic support, and many other topics. The folder also included guides to public safety and the student insurance plan. The packets were prepared by the staff of the Office of Instructional Support Services and Retention.

Revised Student Handbooks also were passed out. In addition to covering every aspect of student life and all campus policies, the new edition of the handbook includes a weekly planner with events from the registration, athletic, and cultural affairs calendars in the margins.

Call Center Supports Enrollment Activities

The Student Outreach and Support Call Center assists the Admissions Office by contacting students at certain points in the academic calendar to encourage them to complete the enrollment process or to include Hudson Valley Community College in their education plans.

Six groups of students are called in support of enrollment activities. New applicants who have taken the placement test or were waived from testing are called to remind them to schedule classes. Students in College in the High School courses are called to register for college credit. Conditionally accepted students are contacted to remind them to send in transcripts. Students with incomplete applications are called to complete the registration process. Students who applied but didn’t enroll are called about future enrollment. Lastly, students who enrolled for one semester but did not return are called about continuing their education at Hudson Valley.

The Call Center is working with the Admissions Office to review the calls presently made and determine whether additional calls should be scheduled to support enrollment activities.

December Call Center Sessions:

Encouraging Returning Students to Schedule Classes and Encouraging Students with Incomplete Applications to Submit Documents: Monday, Dec. 5 through Thursday, Dec. 8

Reminding Returning Students About the Billing Process, Encouraging Conditionally Accepted Students to Complete Paperwork and Encouraging New Students to Schedule Classes: Monday, Dec. 12 through Thursday, Dec. 15

Did You Know?

The Instructional Support Services and Retention Web site not only describes the structure, functions, and staffing of this office, but also provides links to other pages, such as College Forum activities, a “how to” page on basic computer skills, sample placement test questions, CLC and LAC workshop schedules, peer tutoring, academic advising resources, enrollment procedures, the online LAC, and much more. So get out your (key)board and surf www.hvcc.edu/issr today!

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Call Center Looking for More Enrollment/Retention Technical Assistants

Are you interested in doing more to help students achieve their educational goals at Hudson Valley Community College? The Student Outreach and Support Call Center is seeking current and former Hudson Valley employees with substantial knowledge of the college’s scheduling/registration process and student support services. Enrollment-retention technical assistants contact students to welcome them to Hudson Valley, remind them of registration deadlines, and guide them to student services. Call sessions are held weekday evenings periodically throughout the year. If you would like more information about this part-time, paid position, please contact Kevin McNeelege, retention specialist, at (518) 629-7638
Workshops Offered By the LAC

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FOR INFORMATION ON SPRING SEMESTER WORKSHOPS, PLEASE VISIT THE LEARNING ASSISTANCE CENTER, LOWER LEVEL OF MARVIN LIBRARY OR CHECK OLAC.HVCC.EDU

Paired Courses

► Would you like your course content reinforced?
► Would you like to have students more engaged?
► Would you like to promote communication skills?

Paired courses show students how the skills and knowledge they are learning in one course connect with the content of other courses, and they provide outlets for diverse learning styles. Faculty members team up to prepare and teach two or three classes linked by a common theme. Students register for all of the classes, creating a learning cohort. Instructors plan projects and activities that promote interaction within the cohort.

If you are interested in developing paired courses with a colleague, please contact Kathy Quirk at x7234 or Kevin McNeelge at x7638.

Group Work

How do you use group activities in class to engage students?

Do you use groups throughout the semester?

How do you form groups?

What kinds of assignments do you give groups and what output do you expect?

How do students respond?

We would like to hear from you about group work in your classes for a future article. Please contact Kevin McNeelege at mcneelge@hvcc.edu.

Winter is the time for study, you know, and the colder it is the more studious we are.

— Henry David Thoreau