

Regional

Academic advising a key to student success

There is increasing pressure on state institutions of higher education to raise student graduation rates. Decreasing state support of colleges and universities mean students who do not graduate on schedule face an even greater burden of loan debt.

One solution many schools have taken to address the problem is the hiring of professional advisers, people with the training and skills to help students to – among many other things – graduate on time.

□ One of those experts is Brian Hinterscher. A native of Olney, Ill., he obtained his bachelor's degree in liberal studies from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and his master's degree in education from Grand Valley State University. Today he is coordinator of advising in the College of Arts and Sciences at SIUE. He said that his own college education has made a difference in his ability to help today's students.

"The bachelor of liberal studies degree, when I was a student here at SIUE, was considered a general bachelor's degree," said Hinterscher. "However, I took it a step beyond because I knew that I wanted to go into higher education. So I sat down with my academic adviser at the time and devised an academic plan that allowed me to view different academic areas in a way that I don't think I could have done with any other degree program." This approach gave him the opportunity to combine different academic areas to create a well-rounded education for himself.

"With the undergraduate preparation that I had, I was able to talk very candidly with professional staff here on campus, and also make professional connections with the associate deans and faculty within the College of Arts and Sciences," he said. "I was able to get a well-rounded view of higher education."

□ Although the practice of professional academic advising is becoming more popular, it actually started in the mid-19th century. It was for a long time considered part of the professors' duties, telling students which classes they needed to complete the major and the best ways to utilize their time. Now we see more and more institutions of higher education like SIUE that have professional advisers. But how did that transition come



Brian Hinterscher at work in his office.

about?

"I think there are faculty out there who love advising and I appreciate that they have that love for advising," said Hinterscher. "The professional advisers coming in, however, gives the student the opportunity to have a personal connection with someone who is knowledgeable about the curriculum. At the same time that individual is going to be there for them year round, where a faculty member may end up being on sabbatical, or they may want to really focus on their research." And it is research

that enhances the teacher/scholar model and serves its own role in increasing rates of retention and graduation.

Sometimes advisers have to take on roles outside academics, but which are also important to students' overall success. "There are a lot of times when students come into the office and they tell us about their personal issues, problems they are having at home, breakups with their girlfriend or boyfriend," said Hinterscher. "Getting to know a student on that level does help build that

personal connection because it shows a sense of caring." Besides the personal touch, professional advisers need many other abilities.

"For me, having strong communication skills is key because you need to keep abreast with all of the changes that are occurring with their academic programs, but also keeping students informed of what those changes are," Hinterscher said. "Having an open door, allowing students – if you're not busy – to come in and ask their questions instead of having to wait

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

until you are available or until our walk-in hours is important. This is part of keeping up with best practices within advising."

Despite preparation and skills, professional advisers in colleges and universities face a number of mounting challenges. Hinterscher thinks that one of the challenges they face is the level of preparation of students when they enter.

"It varies so much," he said. "We have some who are coming in with 34 or 36 ACTs and they can do excellent in the math and sciences and they can do excellent in social sciences, but their writing skills may not be as strong. So sometimes there are even challenges with honor students.

"I think another challenge has been our case load," he added. "The numbers of students that we have coming in has been huge. Our balancing of caseloads within our office ranges from approximately 320 students up to 450 per adviser. The amount of time an adviser has in a semester does not equate to the number of openings an adviser has to meet with students on a weekly basis."

□ As higher education is changing, academic advisers also have to be prepared to evolve in the years to come.

"I can see academic advising actually exploding across campuses," Hinterscher said. "There are so many methods that we could be doing when it comes to advising: online advising, doing FaceTime advising with students that are five or six hours away and who want to attend the university. We want to get them knowledgeable about the courses and programs we have. I can see opening up to where advisers across campus can become a stronger front instead of being a disconnected group."

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