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Taking the LEAP (Learner Engaged Advising Programs): VCCS Advising Practices and Recommendations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) administration identified the need for adequate and proactive advising programs to foster student success. This paper presents a review of "best practices" in advising to determine commonalities, provides a comparison with current VCCS advising practices, and offers recommendations that support the goal of ensuring high quality advising programs.

BACKGROUND AND CHALLENGES

In 2015, the VCCS administration identified advising as a critical area needing improvement for its 23 member colleges. This was a direct result of poor retention rates and low graduation rates (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System). In 2016, the Virginia General Assembly directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) to review the VCCS (HJR 157). JLARC revealed many students were not receiving needed advising services despite evidence that students who use advising are more engaged and likely to complete a credential (Joint Legislative Audit and Review, 2016). The review recommended community colleges become more strategic about the structure of advising programs and require mandatory advising for some students (Joint Legislative Audit and Review, 2016).
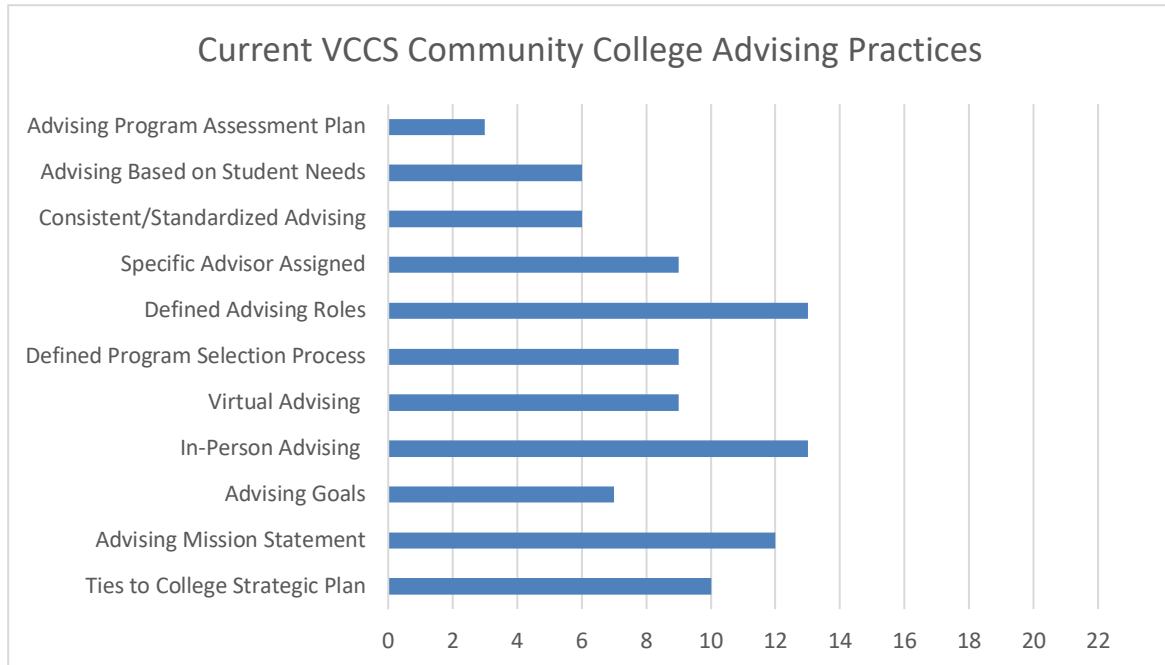
Although establishing student advising as a priority within each institutional strategic plan is a first step, improving student success rates requires a system wide evaluation of institutional barriers (e.g., staff shortages and a lack of consistent guidelines for advising delivery practices and services). Inconsistent and poorly structured student advising programs that vary statewide in delivery, type, assignment, and follow-up negatively impact student success. Utilizing actions based on researched best practices may help address gaps present in the VCCS system.

The chart below summarizes advising best practices that strive to ensure access, equity and opportunity for college students.

BEST PRACTICES IN ADVISING	EXAMPLES
Consistent and Personalized Advising	• Team-based, mandatory, timely advising • Easy access services (e.g. online and in-person) • Knowledgeable personnel giving proactive feedback • Addresses student life, academic, and work goals • Professional development for all advising personnel
Early Identification and Monitoring of Student Risk	• Early identification of at-risk students • Proactive monitoring and response to barriers • Agreements with high schools and 4-year transfer colleges • Extensive new-student orientations • Accelerated development courses • Tiered advising with pre-enrollment, post-enrollment and post-first year advising
Holistic Approach to Advising Beyond Academics	• Addresses career, personal, financial, and social objectives • Ties required coursework to goals • Provides access to financial assistance and links to social services • Involves social structures (e.g. learning communities, experiential learning, tutoring, supplemental instruction, Student Life activities) • Advisors and faculty reinforce behavior and attitudes for success
Variety of Efficient Planning Tools	• Streamlined program pathways with clear milestones • Information workshops and career exploration programs • Electronic course planners and integrated registration systems
Organized Oversight and Accountability	• Clear standards and guidelines for advising services • Designated point person as coach and compliance officer • Sufficient time to develop quality programs over several years

CURRENT VCCS ADVISING PRACTICES

A request for advising program information was sent to all VCCS colleges and an analysis was conducted to determine commonalities and elements of programs indicating "best practices." The response rate was 69% (16 of the 23 VCCS community colleges). Based on the responses, there is evidence of "best practices" in many programs, yet there remains much room for improvement. Highlights of the responses are summarized on the following chart.

Current VCCS Community College Advising Practices

Advising Program Assessment Plan
Advising Based on Student Needs
Consistent/Standardized Advising
Specific Advisor Assigned
Defined Advising Roles
Defined Program Selection Process
Virtual Advising
In-Person Advising
Advising Goals
Advising Mission Statement
Ties to College Strategic Plan

0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18 20 22

Ten (10) colleges have advising programs that are tied to the college strategic plan.

Twelve (12) colleges have language indicating an advising program mission or vision statement

and seven (7) colleges have advising goal statements. Thirteen (13) colleges offer in-person

advising (e.g. one-on-one, group, walk-in, appointments, and/or mandatory requirements for

new/first year students) and have defined advising roles. Nine (9) colleges have designated

specific advisors per student (some require two advisors to be assigned), provide virtual

advising options (e.g. text messages, email, websites, phone, Navigate, etc.), and have defined

program selection processes. Six (6) colleges have specific advising steps for data capture,

timelines for initial and follow-up meetings (e.g. checklists, "what to expect in advising," etc.),

and have advising according to student needs (e.g. early alert systems flag at-risk students for

services, plans for non-traditional student needs). Three (3) colleges have plans for annual

assessment of advising program effectiveness. One mentioned the use of specific student and

advisor surveys.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although some VCCS colleges' advising programs include some ideal practices, more can be done to encourage accountability and consistent quality across the entire system. The VCCS has an opportunity to establish standards and an implementation strategy for **L**earner **E**ngaged **A**dvising **P**rograms (**LEAP**) at every college in the system. Coordinated practices will encourage students to "Take the LEAP" by investing in their future. Presented in the chart below are recommended goals and action steps based on national "best practices" in college advising.

ADVISING GOALS	ACTION STEPS
Goal 1 Develop an Advising Accountability Program	• Collaborate to develop standards and guidelines for an advising accountability program • Provide ongoing assessment using predictive analytics • Designate Directors of Advising (system office and colleges) (Tennessee) • Report progress and provide timely feedback (Lane Community College)
Goal 2 Create a Culture of Student Success	• Emphasize customer service and success-centered messaging • Partner with non-profits for services to meet diverse needs (Tennessee) • Offer classes with varied times or modes of instruction • Include Accelerated Development Education, Learning Communities, Experiential Learning, Tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, etc. (Center for Community College Student Engagement) • Develop partnerships for donated resources (Amarillo)
Goal 3 Consistent Available, Student-Centered Advising	• Offer accessible intrusive advising to focus on first year, first semester transfer, and at-risk students • Build relationships early, streamline admissions/registration/services • Standard advising schedule for all students by program (Tennessee) • 3-Tiered system of pre-and post-enrollment and post-first year advising (Hanover Research)
Goal 4 Personalized Student Advising	• Implement holistic advising to address varied student needs • Provide short-term targets for career, degree, or professional goals • Offer exploratory courses aligning with general education requirements so students may define an optimal career path (Hanover Research) • Reduce student to advisor ratios (Georgia State University) • Include social services links in early alert systems (Amarillo)
Goal 5	• Train advisors in best practices, advising tools, and ongoing professional development for post-implementation support

Provide Training to Advising Personnel	• Provide specialized training in transfer credit evaluation; diversity, equity and inclusion; relationship development; recognition and response to social needs; and communication strategies to promote student success (NACADA Kansas State University and Amarillo) • Reframe professional development as a strategy that supports the collective involvement of faculty and staff in organizational improvement (Community College Research Center)
Goal 6 Ensure Intentional and Intrusive Advising	• Hold students to high standards and encourage them to take responsibility for academic and career planning through informed decision making • Institute student alerts for registration holds with drops and withdrawals, major changes, faculty alerts, and underperformance in gateway courses (Georgia State University) • Implement mandatory advising including scheduling, degree planning, transfer requirements, and major and career exploration (NACADA Kansas State University) • Ensure early alert systems capture and direct needs to appropriate personnel (Amarillo)
Goal 7 Employ Efficient Technology Resources	• Support students via user-friendly Artificial Intelligence platforms that provide readily available guidance and improved efficiency. (Georgia State University) • Implement short, dynamic online orientations (Michigan State University) • Use phone apps and virtual appointments (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation) • Utilize modern forms of communication (e.g. text messaging, social media, etc.) that may prove more efficient and result in greater student response (Amarillo)

CONCLUSION

Redesigning VCCS college advising programs will be an extensive, multi-year enterprise with high potential for improvement in student momentum, retention, and completion. Implementing the recommended "best practices" could establish VCCS as a leader among community college systems for collaborative effort that yields notable increases in student success through modern, efficient, and effective advising practices. Overall, crafting advising programs designed to provide access, equity, and opportunity for students is well worth taking the LEAP.

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