

## **Faculty—based advising: an important factor in community college retention**

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Community college students are an at-risk group because of their lack of preparation and lack of a firm connection to the institution. Using the literature on student retention that equates a caring and concerned faculty with student satisfaction, the Arts and Humanities department at Atlantic Cape Community College initiated an intense academic advisement outreach to students in the majors of studio arts, humanities, performing arts, and history. Surveys were sent to the general student population as well as the recipients of the initiative. The resulting data revealed a stronger sense of connection to the institution by the Arts and Humanities students than by the general student population and a higher rate of retention than exhibited in previous semesters. This research tended to validate earlier studies that equated student satisfaction with retention in the community college setting.

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This article recounts the efforts by the Arts and Humanities (A&H) department at Atlantic Cape Community College (ACCC) to increase student retention in the spring of 2001 by personalizing academic advisement for the students seeking degrees in studio arts, humanities, history, or performing arts. Discussion of the retention issues concerning the community college is vital since an increasing number of students are using the community college as their entree into the world of higher education (Cohen, 1998). According to Laanan (2001), more than 50% of the students in higher education begin their career at the two-year level, yet only 29.5% of these students actually receive a degree (Tinto, 1987).

In many cases, a community college student is an at-risk student (Cohen & Brawer, 1987) facing almost insurmountable barriers to academic success. Potential impediments to degree completion may include being a first-generation college student, having poor academic skills, being burdened by family and work pressures, being a language minority student, and lacking a consistent connection to the college. The most obvious of these hurdles is the lack of adequate preparation for college-level work. A poor high school record (Bean, 1980) or the passage of time and the commensurate erosion of academic skills are indications of overwhelming hindrances to academic success. In addition, most adult students are faced with competing demands on their time (Stewart, Merrill, & Saluri, 1985). The pressures of family and employment responsibilities can easily frustrate the returning adult student. Another factor that can inhibit the success of the

community college student is that community colleges are designed for the commuting student rather than for participants in a residential life program. Most community college students come to the campus for classes and leave as soon as classes are over. The support group that residential students might form is rarely as developed for the commuting student. When the classes are over, the commuter will typically return to an environment where the support for continued education may be minimal and where a dozen other constituencies may be competing for the student's time and attention (Stewart et al., 1985). For a residential student, leaving college may mean packing up, getting out of a lease, and leaving friends (Stewart et al., 1985), while a community college student can simply stop attending.

## Retention and Faculty

Discussions on community college issues tend to downplay the significance that extracurricular activities play in student satisfaction. One research report (Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar, & Fillpot, 2000) states that "student clubs and government, concerts and artistic events, and athletics do not figure prominently in the community college students' campus priorities. The classroom is the main point of student contact with the college" (p. 591). The literature is consistent when emphasizing the importance of the faculty in student retention. Research (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, 1984; Pace, 2001) clearly demonstrates that greater faculty-student interaction promotes higher levels of student satisfaction with the college experience. As Cain (1999) notes, "the teaching faculty is the key to the community college's work. Other factors in the system, such as the support staff, administrators, politicians and students, might help draw up the route for the trip, but it is the faculty members who drive the bus" (p. 47).

The faculty members represent the authority figure, the mentor, and the role model that may not appear anywhere else in the student's life. Because the faculty members are in such a position, their influence over students can be very significant. In a frequently cited study of student retention, Astin (1993) concluded, "Next to peer group, the faculty represents the most significant aspect of the student's undergraduate development" (p. 410). Studies of transfer students (Volkwein, King, & Terenzini, 1986) and freshman students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977) confirmed the importance of student-faculty contact as an influential factor in student achievement, persistence, academic skill development, and personal development. Although the primary focus of Tinto's (1987) research on student departure was directed at the need for student academic integration at four-year colleges, Halpin (1990) applied a similar model of inquiry at a small open-door, nonresidential community college in rural New York state. The study concluded that Tinto's findings were also valid for the two-year community college. Citing the need for a student connection to the institution, Halpin (1990) said, "While little can be done to influence 'background characteristics' or 'environmental' circumstances of community college students, the creation of institutional mechanisms to maximize student/faculty contact is likely to result in greater levels of integration and hence persistence" (p. 31).

## Advisement as a Retention Tool

Clearly, community college leaders cannot overlook the significance of the research indicating such an important role for the faculty in student retention. Of course, the primary function of the faculty is to facilitate learning, but because the student experience on campus is so transitory, the faculty role becomes even more crucial at a commuter college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). One of the ways that the faculty can have additional impact on the life of the student is through a program of quality academic advisement. According to King (1993), academic advisement and the role the faculty plays in the delivery is the most critical service available for community college students. Citing a survey by the American College Testing Program, King (1993) revealed that inadequate academic advising emerged as the strongest negative factor in student retention, while a caring attitude of faculty and staff and high quality advising emerged among the strongest positive factors. Based on several studies on the relationship between advising and retention, Gordon (1985) suggested, "If there is an active, involved, ongoing relationship between students and faculty advisors, a faculty advising system can be an important ingredient in the retention process" (p. 127).

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the assumption that increased interaction between faculty and students in the form of developmental academic advising as described by the literature affects student persistence in a specific community college. Atlantic Cape Community College is a suburban institution of approximately 5000 students and offers a wide variety of transfer and career programs.

The research was conducted using the framework of Crockett's (1985) categories of developmental advising emphasizing the need to realize that an advisor must serve a variety of roles. These roles include facilitator of communication, coordinator of a student's educational experience, frontline interpreter of the value and benefits of higher education, caring and concerned individual, and referral agent.

## Methodology

During the fall semester of 2001, the members of the faculty in the Arts and Humanities (A&H) Department decided to augment the college's existing advisement process through concerted faculty outreach. Under the prevailing procedure, students at the college were simply sent a postcard with a faculty advisor's name. It was up to the student to initiate contact. In reality, the vast majority of the students were advised and scheduled through the college's Career and Academic Planning Center (CAPC), which is staffed by non-faculty advisors. The goal of this Arts and Humanities departmental project was to create a more proactive effort to personalize the academic advising program using faculty

resources. As a result, the Arts and Humanities faculty initiated a letter writing and phone call campaign to each of the students enrolled in the four departmental majors. In addition, each of the Arts and Humanities faculty members received specialized advisement training from a developmental education counselor.

In order to assess the value of the initiative, questionnaires were given to ACCC students (see Appendix A) grouped by Arts and Humanities (A&H) majors and the general student population (GSP). The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine the student perceptions of faculty-based advising. The GSP surveys were given to students in the other liberal arts disciplines such as English and Psychology classes in order to have a close comparison to the academic experiences of the A&H students. The surveys were administered by faculty volunteers from the other disciplines at the same time the A&H surveys were mailed. A total of 300 surveys were distributed to the GSP students and 222 were collected, having been given to both day and evening students on the main campus of ACCC during the fall of 2001. At the same time, a separate set of the student surveys (see Appendix A) was sent to the entire population of 104 students with majors in the Arts and Humanities department. After two mailings and an attempt at a follow-up phone call from the faculty, a total of 33 surveys were returned from the Arts and Humanities students out of a total of 104 (32%). The purpose of the surveys was to determine if there was any difference in the sense of integration into the college between the general student population (defined by the cohort specified in the survey) and the students who had been the recipients of the Arts and Humanities departmental academic advising initiative. Comparing the two sets of data would reveal if the departmental initiative had any impact on student attitudes towards advising. In addition, data were gathered on the retention of the Arts and Humanities students over the course of the previous three fall to spring registrations. That data were used to compare the retention of the Arts and Humanities students and to see if there was any change in the percentage of student retention after the departmental initiative.

The survey mailing for the Arts and Humanities (A&H) majors corresponded with the timing of the faculty outreach because it was important for the students to have sufficient time to evaluate and respond to their perceptions of faculty-based academic advising. During the last week of November, the 222 GSP and the 33 A&H surveys were loaded into a database. Separate databases were created to compare the data from both the GSP and the A&H surveys.

### General Student Population Survey (GSP)

The most prevalent statement from the 222 members of the GSP group was a variation on the comment, "I didn't know I had a faculty advisor." Although many responses incorporated more than one of the themes, 55 of the 222 students (25%) said they either had no idea that faculty advising was available or they knew it existed but had never met with a faculty advisor. A typical response was, "I've been at ACCC for two years and never met with an advisor. I was never even

introduced to one." Another student added, "It would help me if I actually knew who my advisor was."

Many of the students complained bitterly about the poor advice they received, and a number of students were especially critical about the advisors' lack of knowledge of the transfer process. One student suggested, "Faculty advisors could be a little more helpful and knowledgeable. My advisor can never give me a straight answer about what classes I need to graduate. Things are always changing; however, I don't feel as if my advisor is keeping up." Another student wrote:

I think the faculty advisement process could be improved in many ways. When I need help in regards to what classes I need to take for my degree or when I have questions about transferring, I then ask for advisement from faculty and counselors and they [the advisors] 90% of the time do not know the answers to any of my questions.

Because of alleged poor advising one student complained, "I have about 12 useless credits towards my major right now." "The faculty advisement ... was completely unhelpful and actually misleading. Maybe they need more training ..." was the response of another student.

Perceiving the faculty as not caring about the students was a third theme emanating from the GSP in the open-ended survey question. The students thought it was incumbent upon the faculty to contact them other than through a postcard from the CAPC. Their responses indicated that they expected the advisors to reach out to them by phone and letter. Other students commented that the faculty were hard to find. "I can't get in touch with my advisor," commented one student. Another student stated:

When I tried to contact my faculty advisor, she never responded. I left notes, messages, and e-mails and still nothing. I finally went to J Building (CAPC) and had someone else help me. If they are going to assign you a person, they should be there for you.

If "the advisor could be in his office at his scheduled time and actually call or write back to the student who may be in need of academic help," it would go a long way towards resolving the caring issue, according to one student. Along the same lines, another commentator wrote that the system would be more effective "if the person would be available at night

or return phone calls."

There seemed to be a strong student sentiment that the faculty advising system was either invisible or did not work very well. The students' responses ranged from surprise that advising even existed to a sense of anger that it did not work very well. The data revealed a student concern that the faculty did not take advising very seriously and were not available at convenient times. In addition, the students appeared to feel that the faculty were not caring in their advising role. These data items, coupled with the students' feeling that the advisors were not very well trained and were prone to giving erroneous advice, pointed to an advising program in need of revision.

### GSP Student Suggestions

A number of students offered suggestions about ways to improve advising systematically. "I think improvements could be made by assigning advisors and setting up days when advisors must meet with their students," said one student. Another suggested that perhaps there were too many students for each advisor and that the college could alleviate that problem by limiting the number of advisees per faculty member. Still another thought the faculty advisor should be assigned when the student first registers for college; therefore they could work together for the entire college career. A couple of respondents felt the faculty needed additional training in order to do a good job. Although some of these suggestions may not be practical given the number of students and faculty members, they did indicate a desire on the students' part to develop a closer advising relationship with the faculty.

### Data From the Arts and Humanities (A&H) Students

The data from the 33 A&H students revealed a higher sense of awareness of faculty advising compared to the 222 responses from the GSP. The Arts and Humanities students appeared less willing than the GSP students to write their thoughts and were content to simply fill out the responses on the Likert scale and return the survey. Those 15 students who chose to comment generally had positive things to say about their experience with their Arts and Humanities faculty advisor. "My advisor actually sat down with me and asked me what classes I would like and discussed them with me. He really seemed to care," was one student's response to the open-ended comments. A different student indicated that "the results were excellent, and I felt comfortable with the information returned." An art student stated, "I'm completely satisfied with my teacher and my progress." "Faculty advisement is important and has been very supportive of my success," was a comment by another student. These responses differed greatly from the GSP comments that seemed to imply a less caring attitude from the faculty servicing the general population. The data are illustrated in Tables 1 through 7.

According to Crockett (1985), one of the major roles of a developmental academic advisor is to be the coordinator of a student's educational experience. When asked to respond to the statement "My faculty advisor is knowledgeable about academic and career options," the data (see Figure 1) revealed a wide divergence between the perceptions of the Arts and Humanities (A&H) students and the general student population (GSP).

Looking at the responses, it was evident that the A&H students have much more confidence in the expertise of their faculty than the GSP students do. While 78.8% of the A&H students agreed strongly or agreed that their faculty advisor was knowledgeable, only 25.7% of the GSP concurred. The faculty consider their own expertise to be of major importance and an attraction to students, but that perception was not enthusiastically endorsed by the GSP. Among the statements by the GSP were, "they [the advisors] 90% of the time do not know the answers to any of my questions," and, "The faculty advisement ... was completely unhelpful and actually misleading." By contrast, an A&H student indicated, "The results were excellent, and I felt comfortable with the information returned."

The coordinator of a student's educational experience (Crockett, 1985) is a significant role for an advisor; therefore students were asked to respond to the statement, "My faculty advisor presents new and different academic options for me."

The response to this question (see Figure 2) demonstrated some ambivalence from the A&H students about the need for academic options. Although 45.5% of the A&H students agreed, only 15.2% of them strongly agreed. Perhaps this finding is not so significant because the students already are focused on a specific academic program and are not searching for alternatives. The GSP appeared to have little faith in their advisors because only 15.8% agreed or strongly agreed, and 39.2% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. None of the A&H students disagreed with the statement. The percentage of students who neither agreed nor disagreed was fairly close between the two groups.

Crockett's outline on developmental advising acknowledges the importance of caring in the advisor's role. When asked to respond to the statement, "My faculty academic advisor cares about my academic progress," the results (see Figure 3) showed a distinctly higher percentage of the A&H students believing that their faculty advisor cares.

Based on the student responses, only 20.3% of the GSP either strongly agreed or agreed, while 75.8% of the A&H students either strongly agreed or agreed that their faculty advisor cared about their academic progress. This finding is important because it highlights the students' perception that their advisement relationship lacks a caring attitude. The GSP student statements such as, "If they are going to assign you a person, they should be there for you, and, "When I tried to contact my faculty advisor, she never responded" corroborated this data. A&H student reactions were more positive. Among the statements were, "He really seems to care," and, "Faculty advisement is important and has been very

supportive of my success."

As has been indicated earlier, the typical community college student is busy and has multiple demands on his or her time (Stewart et al., 1985) including work and family. Many students must schedule their day carefully and do not have the luxury of an abundance of idle time. In light of this information, the data emerging from the statement, "The time I spend with my faculty advisor is valuable to me," (see Figure 4) were revealing.

While 66.7% of the A&H students felt the time spent with the advisors was valuable, only 25.7% of the GSP either strongly agreed or agreed. One of the goals of a developmental academic advising relationship is to achieve a quality relationship that is beneficial to the student. If the student perceives the time with the advisor as wasted, the association is unlikely to be productive or to continue for subsequent semesters.

Advisors need to be available for the students. Because advising is not mandatory at ACCC, each student has to make his or her own determination whether to meet with an advisor. Their response to the statement, "I meet with my faculty advisor whenever I think it is necessary," was an indicator (see Figure 5) that the students control the process and utilize an advisor at their convenience.

Because 66.7% of A&H students strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, it would appear to be an indication that those students felt in charge of their advising experience and were actively determining their own agenda. On the other hand, only 25.7% of the GSP felt the same way.

The retention literature (Tinto, 1987) emphasizes the need for a connection to the institution if a student is to be retained. A proactive faculty outreach can be a significant part of the student's decision to persist (Winston et al., 1984). When the students were asked to respond to the statement, "My faculty advisor made an effort to contact me," the difference from the data between the two groups (see Figure 6) was readily apparent.

It seems that the percentage of A&H students who strongly agreed or agreed (84.8%) versus the GSP (15.4%) is a reflection of the departmental initiative. Every student received the postcard from the CAPC, but only the A&H students were recipients of a concerted outreach effort on the part of the faculty. The fact that 59% of the GSP either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement was another indicator that the present system of sending a postcard did not result in student acceptance of the present contact process.

The ease of student access to the faculty is tied to the whole question of establishing a serious advising connection. When

students were asked to respond to the statement, "My faculty advisor is accessible to me," the data (see Figure 7) revealed a distinct difference between the opinions of the A&H students and those of the GSP.

While 66.7% of the A&H students strongly agreed or agreed, only 29.3% of the GSP concurred with this statement. Access and availability are important factors in the decision to use a faculty advisor (Gordon, 1985; Dunker & Belcastro, 1994). The data indicated that the A&H students believe that the faculty are ready and willing to meet with them, while that perception is less prevalent for the GSP.

The most encouraging data concerned the analysis of the actual retention figures. The data in Figure 8 show a comparison of the recent history comparing the overall college rate of retention to the rate of student retention within the Arts and Humanities Department. Using the fall enrollments as a baseline, students were tracked over the course of four years to determine the return rate for the subsequent spring semester, eliminating the figures for those students who graduated in mid-year. In the spring of 1999, 40 of 68 (59%) of the A&H students returned. In the spring of 2000, 37 of 66 (56%) returned. In the spring of 2001, 42 of 75 (56%) A&H students returned. In comparison, in the spring of 2002, 75 of 104 A&H students registered (72%). This figure represents a 15% increase over the average retention rate of the three previous data sets. One of the major differences between the period from 1998 to 2001 and 2001 to 2002 was the departmental academic advising initiative. The data (Figure 8) show the college-wide enrollment for the same period. In the spring of 1999, 2900 of 4296 eligible students returned (67.5%). In the spring of 2000, 3029 of 4359 returned (69%). In the spring of 2001, 3211 of 4619 returned (70%). In the spring of 2002, 3443 of 4979 returned (69%). The comparative data show that the retention in the Arts and Humanities department lagged behind the rest of the college (an average of 57% compared to 69% retention college-wide) during the period 1998 to 2001. The reasons for this discrepancy are unknown and would require further research to determine the cause. For the spring of 2002--after the departmental advising initiative--the Arts and Humanities retention figures surpassed the rest of the college by 3%.

The data from the student surveys and the data from the enrollment statistics indicated a difference in the A&H students' perception of academic advising compared to the GSP. Although it is not possible to draw a direct connection between the departmental initiative and the increased percentage of retained students, the survey data suggest that the A&H students were much more connected to their faculty members.

The persistence literature (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1993) shows that association is an important factor in student retention and might be an indicator that the initiative had a positive impact on retention within the Arts and Humanities Department. It is also important to realize that enrollments in community colleges are generally higher than in the past and enrollment numbers may reflect new demographics as much as anything else. One writer (Evelyn, 2002) indicated, "... the swelling number of high school graduates across the country is having a bigger

impact on headcounts than the current blip in the economy" (p. 41). Although enrollment was up at ACCC, the most important statistic was the percentage of students retained from one semester to the next.

When examining issues in higher education, it is important not to overlook the contribution of the community college. The literature on retention (Tinto, 1987) and academic advising (King, 1993) indicates a strong connection between faculty activities and student persistence at the four-year level, but the research is less developed at the two-year level. The foundation of this present research was an attempt to determine the applicability of those university-level findings and apply them to the two-year sector. An outcome of the study was an affirmation from the data that integration into the college through faculty outreach based on developmental academic advising such as Crockett's (1985) model may have a positive effect on student persistence. The student data indicate that in response to the Arts and Humanities outreach more students were aware of advising and acknowledged the faculty's effort to contact them. The data indicate that the students felt that the A&H faculty cared about their progress and were more accessible than the rest of the faculty. The students appeared to appreciate faculty attempts to expand their affiliation beyond an impersonal postcard. These data tend to validate the assumptions found in the retention literature that correlate student integration and persistence.

The challenge to the institution is to examine the data from this research and to understand the connection between quality advising and student persistence. The success of this program should inspire the administration to give greater support for faculty training and to recognize the significance of developmental academic advising for consideration in promotion and tenure decisions. That connection is described in the literature (Austin & Baldwin, 1991; Ramos, 1993; Frost, 1995; Hecht, Higginson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999) and confirmed by this research.

This research was a preliminary study involving a small number of students, but the implications for further study are evident. More studies with a larger population would be warranted to confirm the results of this initiative. It is clear that when the administration gives academic advising the full recognition it is due, there is increased incentive for faculty members to become better and more committed academic advisors. That action can only have a positive effect on student persistence. These insights have important implications for academic leaders in the community college setting.

Figure 1

"My Faculty Advisor is Knowledgeable About Academic and Career Options"  
(Percentages)

A&H Students (N=33)      GSP (N=222)

Strongly agree	42.4	11.3
Agree	36.4	14.4
Neither agree nor disagree	12.1	20.3
Disagree	0	14.9
Strongly disagree	0	16.7
N/A	9.1	22.5

Note: Table made from bar graph.

Figure 2

"My Faculty Advisor Presents New and Different Academic Options for Me"  
(Percentages)

	A&H Students (N=33)	GSP (N=222)
Strongly agree	15.2	8.1
Agree	45.5	7.7
Neither agree nor disagree	27.3	23.4
Disagree	0	15.8
Strongly disagree	0	23.4
N/A	12.1	21.6

Note: Table made from bar graph.

Figure 3

"My Faculty Advisor Cares About My Academic Progress"  
(Percentages)

	A&H Students (N=33)	GSP (N=222)
Strongly agree	45.5	10.4
Agree	30.3	9.9

Neither agree nor disagree	15.2	27.5
Disagree	0	11.3
Strongly disagree	0	19.4
N/A	9.1	21.6

Note: Table made from bar graph.

Figure 4

"The Time I Spend With My Faculty Advisor Is Valuable to Me"  
(Percentages)

	A&H Students (N=33)	GSP (N=222)
Strongly agree	30.3	11.3
Agree	36.4	14.4
Neither agree nor disagree	21.2	21.2
Disagree	3.0	12.6
Strongly disagree	0	18.5
N/A	9.1	22.1

Note: Table made from bar graph.

Figure 5

"I Meet With My Faculty Advisor Whenever I Think It Is Necessary"  
(Percentages)

	A&H Students (N=33)	GSP (N=222)
Strongly agree	30.3	11.3
Agree	36.4	14.4
Neither agree nor disagree	21.2	18.9
Disagree	3.0	17.6

Strongly disagree	3.0	25.5
N/A	6.1	15.3

Note: Table made from bar graph.

Figure 6

"My Faculty Advisor Made an Effort to Contact Me"

(Percentages)

	A&H Students (N=33)	GSP (N=22)
Strongly agree	60.6	8.6
Agree	24.2	6.8
Neither agree nor disagree	6.1	14.0
Disagree	6.1	18.9
Strongly disagree	3.0	40.1
N/A	0	11.7

Note: Table made from bar graph.

Figure 7

"My Faculty Advisor Is Accessible to Me"

(Percentages)

	A&H Students (N=33)	GSP (N=222)
Strongly agree	48.5	13.1
Agree	18.2	16.2
Neither agree nor disagree	30.3	23.9
Disagree	3.0	14.9
Strongly disagree	3.0	19.4
N/A	0	12.6

Note: Table made from bar graph.

Figure 8

Percentage of Retained Students From Fall to Spring

	A&H Students	College Wide
1998-1999	59	67.5
1999-2000	56	69
2000-2001	56	70
2001-2002	72	69

Note: Table made from bar graph.

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