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## Academic Advising Strategies for the At-Risk Student

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## Academic Advising Strategies for the At-Risk Student

### Abstract

"They often come to class without a pen or paper, put off buying a textbook, do not complete initial assignments, become erratic in attendance, and one day, they simply disappear" (Rouche, 1993, p.37). This description of an at-risk student was provided by a faculty member expressing concern over the plight of this unique category of students in higher education. At-risk students are students who, through no fault of their own, have been denied some of the advantages granted to the majority of college students. "These advantages include growing up in a loving, supportive family, having adequate financial resources, or having the physical abilities to function in educational surroundings. They are those with a potential for achieving a college degree, but who have a higher than average probability of not reaching their potential" (Jones, 1990, p.xix). These are the students who are often admitted and then ignored, left to sink or swim on their own.

# **ACADEMIC ADVISING STRATEGIES FOR THE AT-RISK STUDENT**

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**by**

**Angie K. Tudor**

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## Introduction

“They often come to class without a pen or paper, put off buying a textbook, do not complete initial assignments, become erratic in attendance, and one day, they simply disappear” (Rouche, 1993, p.37). This description of an at-risk student was provided by a faculty member expressing concern over the plight of this unique category of students in higher education. At-risk students are students who, through no fault of their own, have been denied some of the advantages granted to the majority of college students. “These advantages include growing up in a loving, supportive family, having adequate financial resources, or having the physical abilities to function in educational surroundings. They are those with a potential for achieving a college degree, but who have a higher than average probability of not reaching their potential” (Jones, 1990, p.xix). These are the students who are often admitted and then ignored, left to sink or swim on their own.

Student personnel professionals are often unaware that students are experiencing serious academic difficulties until it is too late. With the exceptions of athletes and special admits (students who do not meet all the admission requirements upon entering the college), it is unlikely that struggling students are noticed. If interventions do occur, most are attempted too late (Beck, 2001).

Academic advising has been described as a crucial component of all students’ experiences in higher education. Within the academic advising context, students can “find meaning in their lives, make significant decisions about the future, and be supported to achieve to their maximum potential” (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 1998, p.17). Through regular contact with students, advisors gain meaningful

insights into students' academic, social, and personal experiences. It is the advisor's responsibility to use these insights to help students "feel a part of the academic community, develop sound academic and career goals, and be successful learners" (NACADA, 2002).

One of the most important challenges facing the field of academic advising is an understanding of the special needs of "academically and psychologically underprepared college students" (Upcraft, 1995, p.101). Advisors need to incorporate support and programs to help these students immediately, before it becomes too late. Advisors can play a critical role in preventing the "revolving door" scenario; where a student gains admission, performs poorly academically and finally withdraws or is suspended (Landward, 1984).

In this paper, such advising services and programs are examined with two major purposes in mind:

1. To examine the research and professional literature to determine the critical components that make a successful program;
2. To recommend a model that will improve academic advising for at-risk students that draws from all of the above.

#### Studies of At-Risk Students

Descriptive studies of at-risk students have produced similar findings; there are certain characteristics that many of these students have in common (Gordon, 2000). The more characteristics a student has, the higher the risk of that student not achieving a college degree. Characteristics of at-risk students include:

1. Minority – those who are categorized as racial minority students;

2. Socioeconomic Status – students who come from families with a low socioeconomic status (SES);
3. Athletes – students participating in organized intercollegiate athletics;
4. Transfer students – students who have transferred from another college or university;
5. First generation college students – students who are the first in their families to attend a college or university;
6. Time management – students who have difficulty with time management;
7. Support System – students who lack a solid support system such as family or friends;
8. Decision Making – students with immature decision making skills;
9. High school performance – students who have a record of poor high school performance;
10. Work – students who work over 30 hours a week while attending a higher education institution on a full-time basis;
11. Goals – students who have unrealistic goals for their future;
12. Asking for Assistance – students who are reluctant to ask for assistance from college or university support services personnel;
13. Perception of Payoffs – students who have a limited perception of payoffs or benefits of completing a four-year degree.

At-risk students will tend to view themselves in a derogatory way. They may describe themselves as lazy, worthless, lacking, or inferior and “not able to do anything right” (Pitcher, 1970, p. 29). Unless something happens to interrupt their downhill slide, these negative beliefs and behaviors will become a self-fulfilling prophecy for at-risk students.

### Critical Components of Effective Programs

A review of the literature on at-risk students revealed that the eight most critical program components for addressing the problems of at-risk students are intrusive advising, goal related advising, study skills related advising, peer advising, student self-assessment, continuous advising, meetings between students and instructors, and peer tutoring.

*Intrusive Advising* – One of the biggest problems in working with at-risk students is that usually they will not seek out help. This is why intrusive advising is important. Intrusive advising is a deliberate, structured student intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty in order to motivate a student (Earl, 1988). Advisors do not wait for students to come forward, but insist that students make frequent appointments. Intrusive advising involves concern with academic preparation and a willingness to assist students in exploring services and programs that can improve their skills and motivate them. It also means taking an interest in them personally and approaching them with an open and caring attitude (Upcraft, 1995).

Requiring students to meet with an advisor and being proactive helps them to develop an understanding of their needs and the requirements for their degree. Advisors can help students become more responsible for their actions (Garnett, 1990). Regardless



of a student's words, students who have consistently failed in school have serious doubts about whether they can succeed in college. Advisors must refuse to accept these self-defeating attitudes and work with students to make choices that will lead toward success (Upcraft, 1995).

Earl (1988) described an intrusive advising program at a large public university that consisted of the following steps:

1. A letter was sent to all at-risk freshmen. They were asked to respond in person or by phone by a specified date.
2. Each student met with an advisor for an initial session.
3. The student filled out a questionnaire listing factors they felt most contributed to their at-risk status.
4. The advisor and student discussed the questionnaire.
5. The student and advisor contracted a specific course of action to be taken by the student.
6. Follow-up appointments were made with the advisor.

This model was tested in an experimental study with a control group. The students in the experimental group had higher grades and were retained at a higher rate than the students in the control group.

Johnson (1986) described a similar intrusive advising program used at a large public university. A survey was sent to each freshman on academic probation at the end of their first semester. Each student was also assigned to an advisor to discuss their situation. At midterm advisors sent out progress reports to faculty members of their students' courses and reviewed them once they had been returned. Once again, advisors

met with the students and discussed midterm grades. When the semester ended, the advisor reviewed final grades and sent letters to each student. They sent personalized congratulations to those who improved their grade point average and letters of encouragement and support to those who did not make progress.

Both of these examples of intrusive academic advising describe programs in which the initiative for establishing helpful advising interventions and relationships are taken by the college or university. Consequently, these are proactive interventions for students that help prevent students from moving in a downward direction academically.

*Goal Related Academic Advising*— Programs should emphasize the importance of having students set both long and short range goals. Students must have long range goals to keep them focused and motivated. At-risk students may find it difficult to perceive the payoffs of all their hard work. They are used to “buy now, pay later.” Instead, in higher education, it’s “pay now, have later” (Pitcher, 1970, p.140). It is because of this that programs should be goal oriented. The advisor should serve as both a monitor and a guide, to make sure that the student’s goals aren’t unrealistic (Gordon, 2000).

Goal setting is critical in enabling students to gain or regain control of the environment. Roueche (1993) emphasized that locus of control is important. “If students believe that other people or influences control what happens to them, they will develop a ‘why try’ attitude. If they feel they have no control, they will become depressed and passive” (Roueche, 1993, p.126).

Pawlicki (1981) describes how to use self-management techniques in order to help students develop more realistic goals and plan ways to achieve them. In Pawlicki’s study, 50 probationary students were sent letters encouraging them to make an

appointment with an advisor. Out of the 50, 21 made appointments. Advisors began meeting individually with these students and teaching them a system of self-management. A structured format was used that involved developing a goal, a plan of action, a reward system, and a contract spread over five meetings. By the end of the spring semester, 72% of these students had improved their grade point average. Of these 72%, all but one improved by greater than .5 points.

A program developed to help at-risk students must involve a discussion and reflection of goals and ways to achieve them. Students must be able to understand how to break a large goal into manageable parts that they can control.

*Study Skills Related Academic Advising*— Many at-risk students hope that their urge to do better will propel them from probation to success. Unfortunately, few get the results they are hoping for. Motivation does count for a lot, but it does not take care of everything. Doing better academically has to involve “changing how one goes about being a student” (Weinshimer, 1993, p. 40). Part of the problem, some researchers believe, is that students have difficulty realizing that college is not grade thirteen of high school. They come to college and they have a problem with too much freedom. They are left on their own. “Class may only meet two or three times a week, and often attendance is not taken” (Pitcher, 1970, p.140). At-risk students will usually need more structure in their lives in order to be productive. Weinshiemer (1993) suggests that students need to give the following questions serious thought:

- How do I put together a course schedule that will help me do my best?
- How do I know what is important for me to learn in my classes?
- How much study time should I allow?

- How can I make the most of my learning style?
- How can I use my class time and free time best for learning?

The most common way of addressing study skills is in a course format. Ender (1983) developed and researched a study skills course for athletes that involved such topics as time management and scheduling. It was offered to students on a credit/no credit basis. Each student in the class was also required to have two formal meetings with their advisor. At the end of the semester, the treatment group had increased their average GPA from a 1.55 to a 1.86, compared to the control group whose GPA had fallen from a 1.63 to a 1.53.

Lipsky (1990) also used a study skills course to help students who were at-risk. The goal was to provide structured treatment that emphasized “how to” techniques. Course topics included goal setting, time management, study environment, note taking, textbook reading, and concentration. Participation was voluntary. Results of a research study conducted by Lipsky indicated that the course had a positive impact on both GPA and retention.

The previous examples provide an excellent format for helping at-risk students develop effective study skills. If students are trained in how to study and manage their time, it will help them in raising their confidence and their GPA.

*Peer Advising* – Peer advising is also an important component of programs for at-risk students. Many times at-risk freshmen feel unconnected to the college. It is important for them to have some kind of support to keep them connected. Peers may help freshmen in their adjustment to the university environment. They can answer questions and explain resources that at-risk students might not have otherwise found out

about. It is important for at-risk students to not feel isolated, and the use of peers is one way to accomplish that.

Davis (1985) describes a peer advising program that has shown great effectiveness with freshman in academic difficulty. Peers were selected on the basis of communication skills, scholarship, extra-curriculars, empathy, and upperclass status. They went through 100 hours of intense training during the summer, covering such areas as scheduling, financial aid, housing, health services, and alcohol education. The peers were expected to take their services to the students (intrusive). They taught a career planning course for undecided students. They planned and organized programs for these students. They met on a regular basis with the students assigned to them. A research study done on the impact of the peer advisors revealed a significant difference in grade point averages between a treatment and a control group.

Noel (1985) also gives several suggestions for peer support. These include getting student volunteers to help new freshman move into the residence halls, big brother/big sister programs with freshman and seniors, and placing peer tutors in residence halls on each floor.

Forming positive relationships with peers is crucial to the at-risk student's success. These relationships will help the student to feel "connected" to the institution, a critical factor in retention of these students.

*Student Self-Assessment* – Advisors must help students identify the specific factors, behaviors, and academic deficiencies that contributed to their difficulty. These issues must be resolved, or they may repeat themselves. Students need to be able to

determine what went wrong? Weinsheimer (1993) gives an outline of five major factors that may have interfered:

1. Personal factors (health, money, job, family)
2. Unhappiness with the institution (poor advising, teaching, facilities, lack of diversity)
3. Problems with courses (no interest in courses, courses too difficult, courses not available)
4. Approach to studying (lack of concentration, poor notes, unprepared for classes and assignments, not enough time)
5. Not sure about being in college (expected to go, no motivation, prefer job to school, unsure of goals)

The advisor needs to be able to understand which of these reasons may have played a role. Altmaier (1983) suggests sending out a questionnaire with a list of possible reasons. The students can then indicate the extent to which they endorse potential causes as being a factor in their own situation, as well as what they've done to correct their problems.

Heerman (1994) describes a portfolio approach in which students on probation attend a three week class where they complete guided self-assessments, identify problem areas, and complete a formal written plan of action. This is done in the form of a portfolio. The portfolio would include such things as a reflective problem statement, grade analysis, time and money analysis, and career goal analysis. The final part of the portfolio is setting future directions. This reflective portfolio will help the students to learn and to grow from their mistakes.

At-risk students need to spend time reflecting on their situations. From this reflection will come a greater understanding and the formulation of a plan for success.

*Continuous Academic Advising* - In order to be successful, the intervention must be continuous, not a one time instance. Meeting with an advisor once or attending a one-time workshop is not likely to be enough. One way to do this is to have a semester-long course for at-risk students. Using a combined role of teacher and advisor would allow for additional continued interaction (Higbee, 1990). Patrick (1988) describes a “freshman experience course” for at-risk students. Students who participated were also assigned a specific advisor who met with them every other week to further address their problems. The freshman experience course covered such topics as career planning, study skills, decision making, and personal adjustment to college. When the semester ended, these students were compared to other freshman. The at-risk group was actually retained at a rate of 13.2% better than the other students, despite having lowered academic credentials.

Lipsky (1990) examined the impact of a one-credit study skills course on the performance of freshman students who were on probation. Course topics included goal setting, time management, note taking and concentration. It was a voluntary course, taught by one of three reading and study skills specialists. The class involved structured treatment that helped to maintain frequent and consistent contact with these students. By the end of the semester, the experimental group had a significantly higher GPA (1.84) as compared with the control group (1.31).

Both of these examples provide a source of continuous support to the at-risk student, which is a key factor to their success. For students who are at-risk, more effort and time is often necessary in turning their situation around.

*Meetings between Student and Instructors* – Faculty members play a crucial role in student development and should be involved whenever possible. Jones (1990) believes that professors who have negative attitudes and use inappropriate instructional techniques may elevate risk. Improved strategies could involve broadening techniques so that methods other than lecturing are used. Mentoring programs are also useful, where participating faculty are assigned an at-risk student protégé. The faculty member would then act as a friend and advisor to the student. Garnett (1990) recommends that students meet at least three times a semester with their instructors to demonstrate a “maturity that can change the learning environment for both.”

Roueché (1993) suggests linking a faculty member with individual freshmen to monitor their first critical months. He also points out that administrators need to hire faculty members who realize that “perhaps the most important time they spend with students is outside the classroom” (p. 26).

Bedient (1992) describes a program where retired faculty members mentor at-risk students. These students are required to enroll in a semester course stressing study skills and college adjustment. Mentors typically work in teams of two or three with the same five students all semester. The faculty members can bring history and experience to the students. The program only targets retirees with reputations for excellent teaching and positive relationships with students. Bedient reports that the mentored students are “more cooperative and appear more interested in succeeding in college” (p. 467).

By encouraging students to interact with faculty, positive relationships will often develop for both. Faculty members play a crucial role in a student’s experience, so it is important that they make a positive impact on the at-risk student.



*Peer Tutoring* – Another important component of academic advising for at-risk students is tutoring. Tutoring is important in helping students succeed in areas where they are experiencing difficulty. It is very important to keep in mind that tutoring must be made available at hours that are convenient to all students. The best type of tutoring according to Levin (1991) is small group tutorials, because low achievement is associated with isolation.

Abrams (1984) described a program called PASS (Promote Academic Survival and Success) that provides advising assistance and peer tutoring for provisionally-admitted freshman. Abrams found that the number of hours and the number of visits made to tutors was significantly correlated with college grade point averages and retention of at-risk students. The study demonstrated that for at-risk entering students, willingness to seek assistance from tutors and other support staff is the most accurate predictor of first semester grade point averages.

For those students who take advantage of tutoring, the gains in skill level are well worth the time. A student's use of tutors is very beneficial for their learning and understanding.

*Other components* that have been emphasized in the literature include program evaluations, referrals, caring and empathic staff, and possessing immediacy. Program evaluations as described by Austin (1997) and Landward (1984) help to improve programs. Letting students give feedback is critical in developing the best programs as possible. Referrals are important in any kind of college program or department, in order to guide students to the best sources of information. If a problem comes up that someone else could better assist with, students should be referred. Upcraft (1995) emphasized the

importance of having caring and empathic staff. He stated that staff should show a personal interest in each student, and approach them with an open and caring attitude. Finally, a program for at-risk students needs to possess immediacy and relevance (Landward, 1984). At-risk students are usually not as concerned with talking about the future as they are the present. Programs need to address issues and problems that students are dealing with at the current time in order to motivate these students.

### A Recommended Model

Based on a review of research literature and “best practices” in academic advising for at-risk students, a model has been developed that contains multiple elements identified from all 8 components mentioned earlier in the paper. This model would be best suited for a large institution, in that a great deal of time and resources would need to be available to the administrators of the program.

1. Intrusive Advising
2. Goal Related Advising
3. Study Skills Related Advising
4. Peer Advising
5. Student Self-Assessment
6. Continuous Advising
7. Meetings between Student and Instructors
8. Peer Tutoring

The model is structured around a one-semester freshmen orientation course, available on a credit/no credit basis for at-risk students. These students would be selected

from incoming freshmen who exhibit high-risk characteristics and from second-semester students who have been placed on probation.

The selected pool of students would be sent a letter explaining the class and how taking the class would be very beneficial to their success. Students would be strongly encouraged to sign up. Those who do not would at least receive a follow-up phone call to find out their reasons for not taking advantage of this opportunity.

The course would be taught by an academic advisor, a team of academic advisors, or an academic advising administrator. There would be at least two sections of the course available, hopefully offered at times convenient to all students who wish to participate. One or two peer tutors, who have been trained in student services, would also be a part of the teaching staff.

The topics of the course would include student self-assessment, study skills, time management, career planning, stress management, goals, university policies and resources. The class would be very “hands on” with high involvement of the students, rather than lecture based.

In addition to attending class, students should be required to meet with their advisor/instructor at least three times during the semester (beginning, middle, and end). The focus of these meetings would be to discuss problems and a plan for the future. Advisors would work with students to help them become more independent and responsible by the end of the semester.

Students would also be required to meet with peer tutors in large groups. These meetings could be either during class or outside of class. The purpose of these meetings would be to answer questions about the course, work on assignments for the course, and

explain resources (such as where to find tutoring for other classes). Another major purpose of the meetings should be to build trusting relationships among students and peer tutors.

By the end of the semester, students would hopefully have met the following objectives:

- \* Students would be challenged to confront the causes of their academic problems and make changes before it is too late.
- \* Students would have a plan of action, including clarified goals and purpose.
- \* Students would become more responsible for their own actions and behaviors.
- \* Students would have a sense of confidence in themselves and their ability to handle individual concerns.
- \* Students would have developed a network of people to whom they can turn for both information and support.

This course would be evaluated by students at the end of every semester, and changes would be made as necessary.

### Conclusion

There is a large body of research that supports the creation and design of programs to help at-risk students. It is important that student affairs professionals design programs and options for students who are at-risk because such programs have been found to result in improved grade point averages and retention. The eight components of a model presented in this paper can be used as a guide. Programs should be designed and

structured to fit the size, need, and resources of the college or university in which they are used.

At-risk students do have the potential for achieving a college degree. Academic advising may be that crucial component that makes the difference for these students.

Rather than waiting and leaving at-risk students on their own, advisors should be proactive and reach out to students at the beginning of their college careers. If advisors have a good understanding of the special needs of at-risk students, they can effectively help them before it becomes too late.

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