Workshop: Holistic Advising: Does Your University Have a Safety Net?

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Retention of first year engineering students to the second year and onto graduation remains a challenge. More students intend a major in engineering than complete a major in engineering. [1]. In addition to taking on a rigorous curriculum, students bring outside issues and pressure with them to college. For example, two behaviors that when taken to an extreme can negatively affect academic performance include gaming and partying. In the 2013 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey, approximately 1/3 of students reported spending 1-10 hours per week playing video games and approximately 40% reported partying 1-10 hours per week [2]. If such pre-college behaviors are taken to extremes in college, students risk falling short of academic expectations. Colleges' and universities'' mental health professionals report an increase in the number and severity of student mental health cases [3]. During the transition to college, students are challenged with balancing new found freedom with responsibilities. Students' mental and social well-being can play a significant role in their academic success and ultimate retention to engineering major declaration and graduation.

In 2011, the Lyle School of Engineering at Southern Methodist University (SMU) recognized the need to develop a system to identify and track at-risk students. Prior to the development of this system, faculty, staff and other offices across campus had pieces of information on various students. The individual pieces may not identify a larger problem, but all of the pieces together may indicate a larger issue. The Undergraduate Advising and Student Records office was identified as the office to maintain the repository of information. Faculty and staff within the Lyle School of Engineering were made aware of the new system by which to report concerns about a student. Regular communications to faculty and staff in subsequent semesters have ingrained a culture that proactively identifies possible students of concern. The Advising and Records Office maintains open communication and relationships with other student support offices across campus, so campus resources can easily be made available to students.

The number of students identified as at-risk ranges from 1.5% to 3.6% of the undergraduate engineering student population, which includes first year students through seniors. The proportion of the students on the list is small, but addressing the needs of these students can require significant time and resources. Therefore, a network of campus resources is key to efficiently and effectively assisting these students.

Offices across campus support students in a variety of ways. The Dean of Student Life office maintains an electronic "Caring Community Connections" form (CCC form) that faculty and staff can use to report information on a student of concern. Concerns include medical, academic and behavioral. The CCC form is used by the Lyle faculty and staff to report concerns that are also reported to the Advising and Student Records office. The Lyle Advising and Student Records office also maintains open lines of communication with other student support offices include the Learning Enhancement Center, Disability Accommodations and Success Strategies' office, Memorial Health Center, the Parent and Family Programs office, and faculty and staff across campus.

SMU has three primary attributes that allow faculty, staff and advisers to efficiently and effectively assist at risk students: (1) a culture of open communication, (2) a formal networking group for advisers and student support offices, and (3) a web-based application containing pertinent student information. SMU has an "open communication culture" in which faculty and staff share information on students within the FERPA guidelines and as appropriate. Academic advising follows a variety of structures across campus ranging from faculty advisers to assigned staff advisers to general advising offices in which students see whomever is available. The Mustang Advising Network Group (MustANG) is a formal network in which advisers across campus come together in monthly meetings for the purpose of networking and learning about timely resources and programs on campus. Access.SMU is a web-based application for faculty, staff and students. For the purpose of working with at-risk students, Access.SMU provides faculty and staff with the name and contact information for the student's adviser. The open communication combined with knowing who to call and when provides and efficient and effective framework by which faculty and staff can assist at risk students.

In this workshop, participants will explore actual case studies and have the opportunity to identify and develop their own campus network. Participants will engage in a discussion of emerging issues and needs of first year engineering students.

The system in the Lyle School of Engineering at SMU continues to evolve to meet the changing needs of students, faculty and staff.

REFERENCES

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