

# A Baker's Dozen to Enhance Commuter Student Advising

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## **Abstract**

*This article presents a “baker’s dozen” of suggestions to ameliorate the commuter student advising dilemma and to enhance overall the first year commuter student experience. As with any endeavor to improve academic services, what often determines institutional and student success is to know the students who are entering the system and how they are progressing in it. Thus, a primary emphasis is to tailor the baker’s dozen to the unique need for a positive campus culture for advising first year commuter students.*

Obviously, advising and other essential student academic services should be as readily accessible to commuter students or those who do not live in institution-owned housing on campus as they are to those who do. But as Jacoby (2000) points out, tradition-bound institutions tend to focus their services on students who live on campus and who they consider to be more serious about their education. This is problematic for institutions in general and for commuter students specifically, especially when other prominent issues are added to the commuter student profile like student diversity, and negotiating the first-year experience at more than one institution, which is the case for many commuter and distance learners (Johnstone and Shea 2003; Torres 2003; Cuseo 2003). Furthermore, commuter students are the majority student population (more than 86 percent) of US college students today (Horn and Berkold 1998) yet campus student services behave as if they are a minor or bypassed population. Also, what works for residential students is not necessarily a useful framework for commuter students (Jacoby et al. 2000).

Additionally, other challenges that commuters negotiate as part of their academic career include: (1) working off campus at least part-time; (2) compared to most residence hall populations, a greater percentage of commuters are first generation students and are students of color; (3) because they remain at home most feel marginalized as students because they are disengaged from campus life yet, even though they have more difficulty in making necessary connections, they want and need both the social and academic benefits of the campus; and (4) commuting to campus takes time, money, and energy; therefore, commuters prefer to block their classes and eliminate as many trips to campus as possible, which impacts contacts with student support services, advisors, study time, and out-of-class activities—in many of which they choose to not participate. First-year commuter students must learn to balance multiple life roles stemming from home, work, finances, and school while addressing transportation and family issues.

To finance their education, commuter students work at least part time to pay for their education while concurrently attending classes. Given these general issues to accommodate, the first semester, month, and even week of classes are particularly critical to commuters because the habits and decisions they make during this period set the pattern for the first semester and formulate the way they view and move through their college education in the future (see Jacoby et al. 2000).

While this article does not offer a panacea to resolve the first year commuter student advising dilemma, it does offer several principles for institutions and student services practitioners to consider as means to enrich advisement services and thereby positively impact academic and personal growth and success for commuter students. Although it is no easy task, it is an institutional responsibility to design programs or services that not only accommodate but also effectively enhance the educational experience for all students. Challenges abound. But, as this article documents, good responses and approaches to the commuter advising dilemma are available.

## **Challenges in Advising First Year Commuter Students**

A primary and formidable challenge for most institutions overall in meeting the advising needs of a diverse student population is that academic advising is at best complicated to administer and at worst, uneven if not ineffective in delivery on most campuses. For example, the key components of an improved or qualitative academic advising program are training, evaluation, recognition, and reward. Yet they tend to be the “weakest links” for most institutions. That is, they are found to be unsystematic or inconsistently applied throughout the campus and in many instances are nonexistent (Kramer 1995; Habley 2000). Unfortunately, a summary of five ACT nationwide surveys on academic advising found that institutional support for training, evaluation, and recognition and reward are minimal, perfunctory, and unsatisfactory (Habley 1998).

Another key challenge is the diverse make-up of the student body. Students present a wide range of needs and skills, which calls for sensitive, knowledgeable people in the institution to help them understand institutional identity and fit (Kramer 2002; Torres 2003). First-year commuter students in particular represent both the composite of student needs in general and at the same time present to the institution (and advisors) a unique set of needs and expectations that also need to be satisfied and accomplished. Thus, for advising to be successful and to maximize student growth and success is to base both the advising structure or organization and services delivered around a careful analysis of student needs. This is particularly essential for commuter students because they are not as involved as are residential students with fellow students, faculty, and with the academic community overall (Rubin 2000). When commuter and distance learners are asynchronous in their interactions with the academic community, they have a high need for flexibility and convenience. Obviously, meaningful learning as well as advising occurs as the learning forms of student-teacher/advisor, student-

student, and student-content are interactive and connected (Anderson 2002; Rubin 2000). The challenge is to facilitate and balance the involvement of the commuter student with students, faculty, and the advising community since the amount of time many commuters spend on campus results in minimal opportunities for casual interaction. Time is a precious and limited resource for commuter students and presents special challenges of involving commuters in the social and academic life of the campus (Jacoby 1989, 2000).

A major challenge on many campuses is that advising commuter students, in general, is not part of the academic culture. There is often a lack of vision or clarity about the target audience. Administrative and cultural obstacles exist. Moore (see Berge 2001) asserts: “The barriers...are not (necessarily) technological or even pedagogical. The major problems are with organizational change, change of faculty roles, and connected—change in administrative structures.” Therefore on many campuses there is a lack of advocacy; i.e., the organizational and governance model required may not align with those existing in traditional institutions (see Oblinger 2001). That is, commuter students are found in every institution in higher education and are the overwhelming majority of college students, yet there are seemingly striking differences in the way commuters are perceived in the institution. Although their lives consist of balancing many competing commitments, including family, work, etc., they are no less committed to their education. However, as Jacoby (2000) observed, “Convenience of courses, services, and programs is of paramount importance; therefore, the relative value of an activity is a major factor in their decision to participate...” (p.6). It seems paramount that the institution finds ways to inculcate into the institutional culture an advising structure to respond to commuter student needs.

In summary, the challenge in personalizing advising, and providing for a qualitative educational experience for commuters is to take into account the following: (1) student demands in time and energy to commute to campus ( i.e., as noted above, commuters need to concentrate their classes into blocks and have little free time to spend on campus)—convenience is a key factor; (2) the reality that “student” is only one of several important and demanding roles for commuters (i.e., commuters often work fulltime and sometimes have more than one job, as well as manage a household). As each semester or term begins, commuters, who are usually first generation students, must negotiate with those who have little or no knowledge about the challenges and opportunities of higher education. This group includes family, employers, and friends, and it is with them that they must establish priorities, responsibilities, and to allot time; and (3) commuter students often feel misplaced or out of sync with the rest of the academic community. Thus, there is a belonging void that advisors, perhaps more than anyone on the campus, can fill. As advisors step up to understand the challenges commuters face, and when they personalize advising based on needs, they create an opportunity to make a difference in the academic career of the commuter population. They can connect commuters to vital services and people as well as establish bridges between commuters’ lives and higher education. How is this to be done?

The next section specifically expands on this notion of mentoring as one concept among others to enhance the institution's academic advising program. The reader will note a number of questions throughout this next section and in the conclusion. These tend to serve the purpose of inquiry—albeit, hopefully organized inquiry. Richard Light in *Making the Most of College* (2002), quoted Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel as follows: “Questions tend to unite our thinking; whereas answers tend to divide us.” Essentially, the questions raised herein are only useful as they help practitioners and administrators better define, acculturate, and overall improve advising for first-year commuters.

## **Enhancing First Year Commuter Student Advising: A Baker's Dozen**

The Baker's Dozen that follows stems from this author's lessons learned in the field and professional experience as a practitioner, researcher, and administrator of advising and student academic services at two- and four-year colleges. As with any academic endeavor including teaching, advising, and the administration of student academic services, what often determines institutional and student success is to know the students who are entering the system and how they are progressing (Hodgkinson 1985). In this regard, aligning institutional goals with those of students—and vice versa—will greatly help students take responsibility for their education (Frost 1995; Stark 1989). In particular, advising students is somewhat like gardening: rather than watering all plants equally, the advisor as gardener realizes the unique needs of each plant and therefore personalizes the care of each one, recognizing the need for differing amounts of water and sunshine.

There are many challenges that confront commuter students and the services they seek from the institution(s) they attend. These are not easily remedied, but there are some things both practitioners and administrators can do to ameliorate the commuter student advising dilemma and to enhance overall the first year commuter experience. As readers review this Baker's Dozen, it is helpful to also consider Kaplan and Norton (1996) who provide an interesting framework and foundation for translating strategy into action through what they entitle the “Balanced Scorecard,” i.e., (1) clarify and translate vision and strategy to gain consensus; (2) communicate and link goals and reward structures; (3) plan and align initiatives with resources and target audiences; and (4) enhance and facilitate feedback, review, and learning. Notably, Kaplan and Norton begin the strategic planning process with the development of vision. Thus, the Baker's Dozen begins with the need to create a vision and continues on to explore other critical success factors essential to strengthening institutional advising programs for first-year commuter students.

### **Suggestion 1: Create a Vision**

Kaplan and Norton (1996) translate their strategic framework into operational terms that include customer and organization processes. For example, they ask as we might of our current practices and vision for first-year commuter student advising, “How



should we appear to our customers (students) and to excel in our work?” (For example, what business processes need to be changed to not only sustain our ability to change and improve but to satisfy overall those whom we serve?) Put another way, do the current advising services positively and effectively respond to the needs of the commuter student? And do we know how these students benefit from the advising services provided to them? As Warren Bennis (1993) advocates, in creating a vision it is important to do things right, but it is only meeting one-half the challenge of the vision process. To do the right things is more important, he emphasizes. Creating a vision of what advising services should do for commuters might stem from knowing the students who enter our institutions, and could center on the following four questions:

- (1) Why have first year commuter student advising? Or, who are the students we are serving?
- (2) What are the strategic goals or outcomes to be accomplished? That is, what are the services we provide them?
- (3) How will the goals be achieved and are they aligned with resources available as well as the needs of students? Or, what is the best possible way to provide the desired services?
- (4) When and how will it be determined whether the goals have been achieved? That is, how do we do know if the services provided benefit and help commuters succeed?

Unfortunately, in higher education the tendency or temptation before completing the visioning process is to reorganize first. But as Drucker (1995) points out, focusing on the needs of the customer—or in this case, the first year commuter student—is tantamount to organizational changes. Furthermore, ProSci (1999) points out, the bottom line is leadership and support from top administration to move the vision forward. Without top management support and a shared vision, change in practices is doomed. Kostenbaum (1994) added that having a clear vision of what needs to be done is effective when it is guided and balanced by other, equally important factors of understanding reality, acting with courage to not only do things right but to do the right things, and by operating with ethics that communicate openly, fairly, and consistently the organization’s core values. Thus, the energy for change in the context of improving advising for commuter students comes from a clearly understood and balanced vision (Kramer 2003). And the energy for creating a lasting vision comes from resolving what Senge (1990) calls “creative tension” or by raising reality toward the vision and by lowering the vision toward current reality.

## **Suggestion 2: Establish Critical Paths to Strategic Planning Efforts**

Key to successful planning efforts is an understanding of the commuter student profile. For example, such commuter student traits as age, sex, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, employment, family status, living arrangements, distance from campus, modes of transportation, educational aspirations, and academic abilities are all part of knowing who is coming to campus and how to plan for their successful

transition. Once a profile of the student population or an analysis of commuter student needs is completed then various aspects of the institution can be marshaled together to reach out and support commuter students. Notably, institutional self-appraisal from the student-as-commuter perspective is essential and should include not only the developed mission or vision as discussed above but also consider the image and appeal the campus wants to portray to its commuter student population; applicability and appropriate student support services of recruitment, admissions, financial aid, scholarships, registration, orientation, educational and career planning, experiential learning; transportation and day care center assistance; faculty and staff advising including development, training, recognition, and reward; commuter information and communication stations; and so forth.

Critical to any program review or enhancement is the role of assessment. This requires not only key measures or evidence for change in hand but also the involvement of those being measured in creating an assessment plan. Germane to this discussion are the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) for Advisement (see McCalla-Wriggins 2003, Suggestion 5 below, and Wilbur's (2003) Advisement Checklist for further information). In addition, having data on commuter student aspirations and needs allows the institution to ask, for example, are the advising goals the same for both the student and the institution? Effective data management can identify how and when the resources of the institution are marshaled to address the needs of the new commuter student.

In summary, ProSci (1999), a non profit organization, offers an executive summary of critical lessons learned from their study of over 248 organizations. These are the "must do" items that strategic planners from these organizations determined as key to successful change management or reengineering of services. These are worth considering in establishing critical paths to strategic planning efforts and in creating a task force or project team to enhance commuter student advising:

- (1) Obtain top management support...there should be agreement on scope and goals with top managers. Furthermore, top managers should be engaged throughout the project with periodic performance reviews.
- (2) Prepare a complete strategic plan that clearly documents goals, scope, and critical success measures. Obtain agreement on the plan from sponsors and other stakeholders—namely, in this case, commuters.
- (3) Employ change management techniques including strong emphasis on communications and training with key stakeholders including (advisers and commuters).
- (4) Select the right team and train members of the strategic planning team properly. They suggest using a senior employee or manager as the team leader and bringing in external experts or consultants when needed.

Fundamental to any project commission is to ask "Is there a need for change?" or "What must change or what are the critical success factors to make commuter student advising more effective?" That is, to what extent are the following components in

place or should be in place to maximize service, organization, and delivery: a student-centered vision; cross-functional and cross-trained teams; anytime and anyplace delivery; self-service and one-stop centers; seamless integration of services including the extent faculty and advisers are well integrated into the student services organization including incentive and reward structures (see Kramer 2003 and EDUCAUSE Electronic Student Services Assessment 2002).

### **Suggestion 3: Connect Technology to Providers to Commuters**

Earlier, the importance of commuter students' timely access to and availability of essential advising and other related student academic services was discussed. The EDUCAUSE Electronic Student Services Assessment (2002) asks to what extent electronic student services are an integral part of the campus mission and overall strategic plan to improve (commuter student) advising. Additionally, one can ask, "Are commuter students able to interface or connect in a consistent and reliable way with both electronic student services and student academic services providers?" If not, is an online approach consistent with institutional values and student needs? Obviously both are needed. While commuter students should have online access to student critical services and information areas such as academic calendars, degree requirements, registration, financial aid eligibility, transfer rules and process, etc., they should also be able to receive as well consistent information through the same resources. Specifically, to what extent is the institution's electronic student services strategic plan attentive to logistical, technical, and maturational variations among commuter student groups and aligned with front-line student academic services staff? And are they trained to answer inquiries across functional areas? That is, to what extent is electronic student services balanced with personal interaction between commuter students and service professionals?

Information technology can complement the institution's goal of encouraging students to be self-reliant, while freeing providers to help commuters make informed, responsible decisions and set realistic goals. The institutional and human challenge is to get better at managing technology as an enabler, to bridge and match technology advances with equally effective student support services (Kramer 2002). Furthermore, while electronic student services—including advising—are essential to commuters, so is the access to key people on the campus who can assist in individualizing the academic, career, and financial planning process (see Gordon and Kramer 2003, Reardon and Lumsden 2003). An indication of success in implementing electronic student services is whether it is a reflection of the institutional vision and priorities, and whether it is not only understood by all stakeholders but also connects them to vital services (EDUCAUSE 2002). Connecting technology to students to providers should result in High Tech + High Touch = High Effect! It's all about bridging the gap between technology and providers to provide consistent, reliable, timely information.

### **Suggestion 4: Provide Quality Faculty-Student Advising**

Chickering and Reisser (1993) concluded that students who reported the greatest cognitive development were also most likely to perceive faculty as being concerned

with teaching and student development and to report a close, influential relationship with at least one faculty member. Similarly, Tinto (1996) found from his research that faculty-student interaction is the single strongest predictor of student persistence. And Richard Light (2001) determined, after researching over 90 institutions and interviewing hundreds of students, that of all the challenges that both faculty and students choose to mention, providing or obtaining good advising ranks number one. In fact, Light stated good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience. The research is clear about the qualitative impact faculty advising has on students. It impacts:

- (1) Student academic success, satisfaction, and retention (Astin 1993; Pascarella and Terrenzini 1991; Tinto 1993; Light 2002; Kramer et al. 2003)
- (2) Student achievement, academic skill development, and general satisfaction with the undergraduate experience (Chickering 1994; Pascarella and Terrenzini 1991; Light 2001)
- (3) Satisfaction with faculty and quality of instruction (Astin 1993)
- (4) Career decision making (Astin 1993)
- (5) Non classroom or co-curricular activities (Light 2001; Tinto 1993)

In short, good faculty advising influences persistence to timely graduation; student campus involvement; satisfaction with college; academic, personal, and career connections; personal and academic learning; effective use of time; and meaningful relationships with faculty. Simply, quality faculty advising can do more to set the academic tone of the collegiate experience and positively influence student academic success. On one hand, faculty are either the only source for assisting students or they function as part of a larger centralized or decentralized advising system. On the other hand, some faculty complain that advising is foreign to them, requiring too much involvement with students' personal lives. Others are concerned that they are not prepared or trained to offer advising (Kramer 2003). While it is evident that faculty advising can and does make a difference in the lives of students, how can faculty effectively balance advising with the rigors of teaching and research? A solution, perhaps, is found in keeping faculty advising simple and related to their primary function of teaching. To improve faculty advising on the campus, consider these five qualities (see Table 1.1 below).

**Table 1.1** Providing Quality Faculty Advising

- **FOCUS ADVISING ALONG STUDENT-CENTERED LINES**  
(Build meaningful community out of connections)
- **DELINEATE EXPECTATIONS AND ROLES**  
(Differentiate between institutional, advisor, and student responsibilities)
- **ASSIST STUDENTS WITH TIME MANAGEMENT**  
(Commuters can particularly benefit from faculty who are experienced in managing time effectively)
- **INTEGRATE FACULTY ADVISING AS A COLLABORATIVE SERVICE**  
(Enlist the aid of others in the academic community to assist the students they advise)
- **USE ADVISING AS TEACHING FRAMEWORK**  
(The advisor as teacher stimulates a positive, shared, and active approach to intellectual and interpersonal learning)

Researchers on faculty advising conclude that the most successful advisors are those who build relationships with students by tailoring advising sessions to each undergraduate's unique situation. Faculty advisors are usually the first and last contact between students and the institution. Thus, faculty advisors have the opportunity to represent the best of the institution to the student and the best of the student to the institution (Kramer 2001). If student success in the classroom is dependent upon a framework or organization of teaching, can similar strategies be applied to the advising situation? Finally, in its most simplified form, Light (2001), Crookston (1972), and Kramer (2003) suggest that effective advising:

- is interested in what matters to students,
- asks questions that unite,
- assists students in connecting academic work to their interests and passions,
- tailors advising to students' unique situation,
- develops a great human relationship,
- helps students think about the relationship between academic work and their personal lives,
- personalizes advising by asking about student's goals in college,
- discusses how students spend their time,
- encourages students to join a campus organization, and
- advocates ethical and professional conduct in academic endeavors.

While faculty advising may not be the panacea for addressing all of the challenges commuter students face in higher education, an adaptation on any one of the suggestions above by a faculty advisor could make a difference in the academic life of the commuter student.

## **Suggestion 5: Use Quality Educational Principles**

Achieving excellence in academic advising is a goal of all educational institutions, and quality educational practices and collaboration among student services professionals and associations are an essential part of this pursuit as presented by Creamer et al. (2003) and Schuh (2003). Their works highlight several reports that call for a higher degree of integration and activity among practitioners in the field to better serve students on the campus. In this article, the author recommends the use of the educational principles found in these reports and in other performance measures identified below in the institution's planning process. When thoughtfully examined and applied, these principles can assist in enhancing commuter student advising as well as connect and strengthen student academic services in behalf of students. (See the reference section for complete citations of the following reports and program review resources.)

- **The Student Learning Imperative** (American College Personnel Association 1996) emphasizes collaboration among student academic services and sets the stage for student learning and development (Schuh 2003).
- **Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs** (Blimling and Whitt 1997) encourages active learning, the development of coherent values and ethical standards, high expectations, systematic inquiry, the effective use of institutional resources, partnerships in advancing student learning, and supportive and inclusive communities.
- **Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning** (American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators 1999) provides an excellent framework for how all components of the college community can work collaboratively to deepen student learning, especially in the advising context.
- **Council for the Advancement of Standards** (discussed in greater detail in Suggestion 12 below) is a consortium of professional associations that are devoted to the promulgation of standards for educational practice and quality assurance in higher education (Creamer et al. 2003). CAS emphasizes organizational optimization and collaboration—believing that educators and students work together to achieve educational outcomes.
- **Baldrige National Quality Program** (2001) emphasizes quality practices that include leadership, student and stakeholder focus, the use of information in measuring institutional performance, and a focus on faculty and staff members' work systems and training and development (Creamer et al. 2003).
- **American Productivity and Quality Center** is a resource for process and performance improvement for organizations of all sizes across all industries. The evolution of using best practices and benchmarking as tools for breakthrough improvement led APQC to form the **International Benchmarking Clearinghouse** (1992).



- **EDUCAUSE Electronic Student Services Survey** (2002) is one of the most relevant documents in the higher education-information technology field today. It defines and measures the success of electronic service delivery. (See <http://www.educause.edu> for more information.)
- **Regional Accreditation Association Standards** provide excellent guides to analyze, describe, and improve services for students, especially advising. Most accreditation handbooks include detailed standards for students, student learning, and the services provided to them. For example, see the Northwest Association's Handbook and North Central Association's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP 2000).
- **NACADA Consultant Bureau and Core Values** (see <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu>) is an excellent guide in formulating standards for institutional advising programs. The Values emphasize the shared responsibility of the institution, advisors, and students for the advising process and learning overall. In addition, this organization provides advising consulting. NACADA has organized recognized leaders in the field of advising to assist with institutional program development.
- **The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition** is a vast resource for assisting institutions, leaders, and practitioners in developing strategies and governing principles to guide students in transition. The NRC sponsors many national conferences and workshops and has an extensive publications and resource list.

### **Suggestion 6: Advocate Principles of Shared Responsibility**

In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, higher education must serve groups of students, such as nontraditional, commuter, disabled, and international students. In fact, 31.2 percent of the net increase in higher education enrollment is due to students 30 years of age or older (Murdock and Hogue 1999). Thus, perhaps, the most direct ways to support commuter students are to (1) recognize, embrace, and respond to their diversity, and (2) align and deliver relevant academic support services based on their needs, especially during their first year (Cuseo 2003; Torres 2003). Applying these two fundamental principles, in addition to treating students as having unique needs and concerns, is to promote concepts of shared responsibility for the student, the advisor, and the institution, which can lead to: (1) student learning rather than merely supplying answers to specific questions, (2) student involvement in their own academic and career futures, and (3) collaborative planning that engages and motivates students to plan for success through strategic and quality efforts (Frost 1995). Shared responsibility, when students can rely on advisors to take a personal interest in them and with whom they feel comfortable sharing their concerns, experiences, and goals, can have a powerful influence on student growth and development. Likewise, when commuter students keep appointments, follow through on assignments, or share the responsibility for advising, advisors are able to help them sort through and help deal with problems before they become too serious. In this sense, advisors view students as partners actively engaged in intellectual and personal growth. In shared responsibility advising, advisors can also help students think about and articulate what is important

to them in their academic as well as their career and personal lives. As a result of this kind of advising, students can set short-term as well as long-term goals with advisors, and discuss ways to achieve those goals. Thus, advisors can be most helpful by helping students monitor progress and pace their efforts and time in fulfilling educational goals (Frost 1995, 2003; Gordon and Kramer 2003).

### **Suggestion 7: Embrace and Respond to Commuter Student Diversity**

Advising practitioners and administrators might ask: “Does the environment (culture) on the campus truly support all students, including commuters?” Torres (2003) challenged colleges to be in a position to clearly respond to this question and those that follow below so that they might be successful in creating a supportive, student-centered environment for all students. For example:

- Are students clear about how to proceed through the academic maze? How is this information disseminated?
- Is there intentional outreach to first-year students who may not understand processes? Is the information free of academic lingo that a first-generation or international (or commuter) college student may not understand?
- Can all faculty members and academic advisers articulate what services (with locations and phone numbers) are available for students with special needs?
- How is the communication and collaboration between faculty members and academic services offices maintained?
- How often is the campus environment assessed by new students?

Creating a systemic or campus culture audit on a regular basis can help strengthen its collaborative endeavors and in turn create a supportive environment for diverse students (see Wilbur 2003). A systemic review along with systematic planning efforts could enhance collaboration between faculty and the administration in behalf of students and, just as importantly, reduce fragmentation. Unstated values of the academic culture are particularly hard on commuter and diverse students who are not familiar with or who are severely affected by campus innuendo (Torres 2003). Woodward, Mallory, and DeLuca (2001), in the context of institutions wanting to understand student diversity issues, suggest including appropriate structural representations, or voices, of the diverse constituents to review the “dynamic interaction that occurs between students and institutional culture” (p.51).

### **Suggestion 8: Learn from Others**

Earl Potter (2003) explains that the term “benchmarking” is often used as a synonym for best-practice research and it is the process of finding comparison data for a given set of measures. For years, IBM’s Higher Education Group and the Society for College and University Planning have identified, recognized, and published institutional best practices. They used the following criteria, which are applicable to readers of this article as they seek to raise the advising bar for commuter students, in selecting best practices institutions for review: (1) they are engaged in a process of

redesign, (2) they have consolidated functions into one-stop centers, (3) they have evaluated organization models for appropriateness, (4) they have educated, trained, and cross-trained staff, and (5) they have developed Web-based systems that allow for the integration of information and processes (see Burnett and Oblinger 2003, 2002; and Beede and Burnett 2000)

While this author makes no claims that all the institutions identified in Table 1.2 below follow the guidelines above, these institutions do offer, nevertheless, some interesting approaches and focuses in addressing and tailoring student academic services and advising in collaborative ways to meet commuter student needs.

**Table 1.2 Best Practices**

Model	Institution	Emphasis
Commuter Student Center	Ohio University <a href="http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/990804lm.htm">http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/990804lm.htm</a>	Mentoring, Advising
One Stop Service Culture	Johnson County CC James Madison University University of Delaware Fordham University Univ. of Minnesota (Twin Cities)	Student Success Center
	Boston College (see Burnett and Oblinger 2003 for One Stop Service Model)	Commuter students
Commuter Student Station	Southern Illinois University Edwardsville <a href="http://www.siu.edu/AQIP/goal2/CommuterStudents.html">http://www.siu.edu/AQIP/goal2/CommuterStudents.html</a>	Academic Quality
Improvement Program	University of Maryland (College Park) <a href="http://www.inform.umd.edu/outlook/2000-02-22/commuter.html">http://www.inform.umd.edu/outlook/2000-02-22/commuter.html</a>	Commuter Affairs and Advisor Development
Commuter Student Adviser	Miami University Ohio <a href="http://orlphp01.rsl.muohio.edu/orl/employment.php?page=jd_csa">http://orlphp01.rsl.muohio.edu/orl/employment.php?page=jd_csa</a>	Commuter Advising Center
Orientation	Whittier College <a href="http://www.whittier.edu">http://www.whittier.edu</a>	Orientation for Commuters
Collegium	Trinity Western University <a href="http://www.twu.ca/news/news_detail.asp?NEWSID=25">http://www.twu.ca/news/news_detail.asp?NEWSID=25</a>	Commuter Gathering Place
Commuter Life	Meredith College <a href="http://www.meredith.edu/students/commuter/commlife.htm#Services">http://www.meredith.edu/students/commuter/commlife.htm#Services</a>	Support Services
Off-Hill Council	Tufts University <a href="http://www.tufts.edu">www.tufts.edu</a>	Commuter Student Resources
Commuters' Room	South Seattle CC <a href="http://www.southseattle.edu">http://www.southseattle.edu</a>	Place for Home-work, tutoring, advising, relaxing
Advising and Support	Simmons College <a href="http://www.simmons.edu/students/support/commuter.html">http://www.simmons.edu/students/support/commuter.html</a>	Advising, news-letter, commuter student org.
Commuter Freshmen Center	Nazarene University <a href="http://www.ptloma.edu">http://www.ptloma.edu</a>	Commuter One Stop Center
Commuter Retention	St. Louis University <a href="http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/">http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/</a>	Extended orientation

## **Suggestion 9: Apply a Framework**

As discussed above, choosing an advising framework that focuses on commuter students must be done in light of student and institutional dynamics; today's student population is more diverse than ever; colleges are in a constant mode of curricular change and delivery; the average undergraduate is older and is socio-economically diverse; has a wide range of physical and learning abilities; and comes from any one of a number of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Additionally, today's new students are not as loyal to a single institution as students were a generation ago (Ewell 2002; Johnstone and Shea 2003).

Whether the student academic services framework is clothed in Web-technology completely and/or interfaced with service providers or is delivered through a highly interconnected and collaborative structure, it must first flatten organizational barriers to effectively impact commuter students by increasing student access to the services they need, and empower them by unbundling institutional policies and practices that tend to be designed holistically and do not serve students well, particularly commuter students (Potter 2003). To set the stage as well as promote and sustain a framework that works for commuter student advising, institutional leaders must measure what commuter students care about (e.g., student satisfaction with academic services provided on campus) and use the information gathered to shape and support decisions for improving campus advising for first-year commuter students.

Specifically, from the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Program, student academic services leaders might develop an advising framework for commuter students by addressing the following criteria:

- How do we determine key advising requirements, incorporating input from students, faculty, staff, other stakeholders as appropriate?
- What are the key requirements for these services?
- How do we design and deliver these services to meet all the key requirements?
- What are the key performance measures/indicators used for control and improvement of these services?
- How do we improve our student services (commuter student advising) to keep them current with educational service needs and directions, to achieve better performance, and how are improvements/needs shared with other organizational units and processes as appropriate? (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2002).

## **Suggestion 10: Develop Staff**

This Baker's Dozen of ideas to enhance first-year commuter advising began with "create a vision." Those that follow assist in developing this important strategic step and in transforming it into institutional practice. Student services providers, especially advisers, must through appropriate training and development not only own the institution's mission statement once developed but also transform its accompanying values, philosophy, and

culture into practice. Sandeen (2001) asked “Does what we are doing and how we are organized help advance the mission of the institution?” (p. 204). Furthermore, Foucar-Szocki, Larson, and Mitchell (2003) examined this notion of organizing staff in a chapter about developing student academic service providers and inspiring better performance, all in the context of a learning organization. They emphasize the importance of developing and coordinating the work of providers to deliver quality, timely, comprehensive, collaborative, and accurate services to students in a student-centric context and in what they entitle an “inspired” or motivated learning-oriented environment. In this context, Senge’s (1990) concept of organizations as generative learning institutions adds a useful framework for thinking about developing providers. He challenges: an organization needs to be “a consummately adaptive enterprise,” (p.12) which implies a course of action that produces, creates, and looks at the world (in this case, perhaps, commuter students) in new ways. In this context, institutions are positioned to expand and focus the capabilities and concentrated work of providers with students, but also to foster systemic or cultural adjustments in the organization or institution as it seeks to improve advising services to first-year commuter students.

So, how do institutions develop and organize staff to promote the campus mission statement for advising and thereby deliver services more effectively? Foucar-Szocki et al. (2003) outline three conditions and related outcomes through which student academic services organizations can improve program staff delivery:

- (1) Performance improvement, or expanding the capacity of the student academic services staff to assist students in making educational progress.  
Outcome: Staff-cross training and cross-functional teams.
  
- (2) Place improvement or facilitating more accessible, flexible, and integrated delivery of services.  
Outcome: One-stop centers supported and parallel to Web-based services.
  
- (3) Process improvement, or making student academic services more efficient for the institution and more effective for the student.  
Outcome: Process mapping to identify bottlenecks and breakdowns in services; generalist approaches to resolve issues and complete tasks.

For more information on these three domains of developing staff to create a collaborative and learning oriented environment, refer to Foucar-Szocki et al. (2003). In promoting partnerships in the context of a learning oriented environment, Kuh (1996) emphasized that students are served best when services, programs, and learning opportunities are linked. As institutional leaders seek to organize staff to affect the mission statement, Kuh identified six principles that may help accomplish this aim and also create a seamless learning environment for students: (1) generating enthusiasm for institutional renewal, (2) creating a common vision of learning, (3) developing a common language, (4) fostering collaboration and cross-functional dialogue, (5) examining the influence of student cultures on student learning, and (6) focusing systemic change—all to develop providers to better serve students.

## Suggestion 11: Raise the Advising Bar

Campuses must become more accessible to students, especially in aligning advising needs and program access from the perspective of commuter students. Can the bar of excellence be raised to a higher level of performance and delivery? If so, what are the indicators of inefficient, inaccessible, perhaps disconnected student academic advising services on the campus and, on the other hand, what are the critical success factors to improve advising for commuter first-year students? (See Table 1.3 below for a general sampling of some indicators that are focused on raising the student academic services bar of excellence.)

**Table 1.3** Raising The Bar

<b>Inefficient Service Indicators</b>	<b>Critical Success Performance Factors</b>
Silo Structure (Vertical Organization) No cross departmental-communication Students wait in lines Specialists Only Disconnected Technology Limited Access to Services Sporadic Assessment Top-Down Leadership	No Silos (Horizontal Organization) Cross-Department Training One-Stop Academic Services Use of Generalists and Specialists Connected/Seamless Technology 24/7 Access via Web Technology Continuous Improvement Plan Empowered Staff

Issues that often prevent institutions from reaching their potential in delivering advising services have root causes. For example, a systemic (or campus-cultural) issue of customer-student service that does not meet expectations may stem from institutional root causes or lack of relevant training, staff disempowerment, not understanding student expectations and needs, or of ownership—i.e., not owning a problem presented until it is resolved. Regarding issues of inaccurate, timely, and coordinated communication, root causes may be linked to a lack of shared or collaborative knowledge, consistency, integration of services, a campus-wide student information system, and so forth.

To raise the bar of excellence in first-year commuter advising, as indicated in Table 1.3 above, campus leaders must more carefully study systemic issues and their root causes, and give greater emphasis to and support for dialogue within the campus community, a dialogue that brings together people, processes, policies, technology, communications, and resources. With a resolve to raise the bar, essential performance indicators of responsiveness, reliability, caring, accessibility, availability, accuracy, and timeliness may not only be more clearly manifested but also at the same time bring to the surface a need for greater collaboration among resources and service providers. Service providers working together with the support of engaged campus leaders to address ineffective performance indicators is an excellent way to increase student satisfaction with services. Naturally, each of the critical enablers discussed herein deserve further expansion and meaning in specific, strategic, and adaptive ways that are unique to the culture of the institution. When campus student academic services and advising leaders seek to raise the bar they, at the same time, convey a willingness to support the student



community. Raising the bar in advising is about proving to commuter students that the institution cares about them, takes them and their time seriously, and is committed to providing them easy access, convenience, personalized service, good and useful advice, and to creating a sense of community focused on lifelong learning! Finally, campus leaders and service providers, when focused on small, incremental wins, are bound to be successful. Improvement projects tend to suffer from ever-expanding scope and, with too many tasks to complete, the projects often become unmanageable and largely incomplete. On the other hand, accomplishing small wins (e.g., like those identified in Suggestion 8 and Table 1.3 above) can set the tone for current practices and lay the foundation for future advising enhancement projects.

### **Suggestion 12: Know and Apply Advising Resources**

McCalla-Wriggins (2003) describes a variety of current resources available for improving campus advising, including the CAS Standards. However, as mentioned in Suggestion 5 above, we emphasize as a key resource the CAS (Council for the Advancement of Standards) Standards for Advising. Coupled with the CAS Standards for Advising is the self-assessment guide, which is a comprehensive resource for leaders to affect advising campus-wide or within a department (Yerian 1988). In tandem with the CAS Standards, these tools provide a step-by-step process for institutions to assess and thereby improve advising for the campus across the 13 CAS advising components (see <http://www.cas.edu> for more information).

Similar to the CAS Standards is a useful, simplified resource entitled *Building an Effective Campus Academic Advising System: An Administrative Leader's Checklist* (Wilbur 2003). This resource is an excellent tool to assist campus leaders in taking stock of the critical components of advising and identifying those that are in place as well as existing voids and inadequacies.

There are, of course, a number of resources spread across national association conferences, publications, videos, institutes, clearinghouses, and other networks that are designed to assist service providers and campus leaders to improve campus advising. But the distinct advantage of the CAS Standards and Assessment Guidelines for Advising is found in the CAS organization itself. It is comprised of representatives from national student services organizations like NACADA, ACPA, and NASPA who through cross communication establish relevant standards and operating principles for the purpose of strengthening student support programs in higher education.

### **Suggestion 13: Plan for Student Success**

A corollary to the institutional challenge of knowing who is entering the system and how they are progressing is the idea that students are admitted to succeed. If institutions at the onset plan for student success and then thoughtfully and effectively marshal institutional resources in behalf of students, then perhaps such aims can be realized.

This final suggestion in the Baker's Dozen series summarizes several concepts that support and assist students and institutions in planning for student success. In particular, the first year of college continues to be the most critical or vulnerable period for student attrition. While all students including commuters must realize the importance of long-range planning, the reality is that most cannot see beyond the first year or even the first semester. On the other hand, as Cuseo (2003) points out, the first-year experience may represent "a window of opportunity" for promoting student learning and success. For example, students who seek and receive academic support have been found to improve their academic performance and their academic self-efficacy, which develops higher expectations for future academic success (Smith, Walter, and Hoey 1992). Specifically, planning for student success is best achieved when collaboration (the key to comprehensive and effective academic support for first-year students) is in place among the following (see Cuseo 2003):

- peer support programs that promote academic collaboration among students including peer tutoring, mentoring, study groups, and so forth;
- instructional faculty and academic support services including early alert systems;
- the divisions of academic and student affairs (see Suggestion 5 above); and
- academic and student affairs, including living-learning centers, learning communities, extended orientation or first-year experience seminars.

Involving multiple constituencies in the planning, development, and continual enhancement of academic advising and student services is essential to successfully addressing the commuter student first-year experience. Promoting dialogue among stakeholders (including commuters) through officially recognized administrative structures such as steering committees, commissions, etc. to review college-wide policies and campus governance matters is an important way to operationalize collaboration. Powerful first-year programs are intrusive or proactive, oriented toward, focused on, and driven by the intentional goal of promoting student success. Such programs take commuter students and their needs seriously by reaching out to them through the institution's support systems. Nearly two decades ago, Ender, Winston, and Miller (1984) stated: "It is totally unrealistic to expect students to take full advantage of the intellectual and personal development opportunities (on campus) without some assistance from the institution" (p.12). This is particularly true of and important for first-year commuter students (as pointed out earlier in this article) who are usually under-prepared, feel marginalized as outsiders on the campus, and are often first generation students.

## **Conclusion**

This article suggests ideas and resources relevant to the need to create a positive campus culture for advising first-year commuter students. Equally important and germane to this paper is how to create intentional change in the campus culture. Although it has been suggested throughout that this is most likely accomplished through greater collaboration on the campus, through other strategic steps involving both systematic and systemic change as outlined in the Baker's Dozen, and by a

caring, prepared approach to advising commuters, this article, nonetheless, is not conclusive; rather, it is intended to be a series of observations from the author and others cited herein on what might be considered to intentionally improve the campus culture for advising commuter students.

What constitutes a comprehensive institutional response or blueprint for change to improve advising for first-year commuters? It's decidedly in the hands of campus leaders. They know best their constituencies, structures, and students; however, in the spirit of this article, which has posed several questions, can campus student academic services leaders conclusively and positively respond to the following questions? If so, perhaps there is no case for change. If not, perhaps, these questions provide a launching pad for institutions to look more closely at improving advising services for first-year commuter students.

- Is the institutional mission statement on advising commuters a clear commitment to a quality educational experience?
- Are campus leaders able to consistently articulate the institutions' commitment to commuter students?
- Is there a system in place to gather data about the experiences commuters are having on the campus?
- Are long- and short-range governance decisions made with the commuter student in mind?
- Are service providers effectively developed and rewarded for their work with commuters?
- How well-informed and involved are faculty in engaging commuters in the campus educational experience including in/out of the classroom opportunities?
- To what extent is information technology used to produce high effect and high touch with commuters?

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