

Academic Advising as a Strategic Leadership Function in Credit Hour Systems: A Narrative Review of Best Practices, Institutional Challenges, and Student Success Trajectories

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The credit hour system (CHS) has become the dominant educational framework in global higher education, yet the role of academic advising within this system remains critically under-examined. This narrative review synthesizes contemporary literature to position academic advising as a strategic institutional leadership function rather than a mere administrative task.

Approach: This review adopts a conceptual synthesis methodology, drawing from higher education leadership theory, student development theory, and institutional effectiveness research published between 2000–2024. It integrates empirical evidence, institutional case studies, and policy analyses to construct a comprehensive framework for advising excellence.

Key Themes: The review identifies five pillars of effective academic advising: (1) institutional commitment and resource allocation, (2) developmental and relational advising models, (3) technology-enhanced accessibility and communication, (4) continuous professional development for advisors, and (5) systematic evaluation and quality improvement. Major institutional challenges include unsustainable advisor-to-student ratios, fragmented training programs, and the marginalization of advising within faculty workload structures.

Value: This review offers higher education leaders a strategic roadmap for redesigning academic advising systems to enhance student satisfaction, retention, and academic achievement. It argues that institutions must elevate advising from a transactional registration function to a transformational educational intervention.

Keywords: Academic advising, credit hour system, student satisfaction, student retention, higher education leadership, developmental advising

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1. INTRODUCTION

The credit hour system (CHS) represents one of the most significant structural innovations in higher education history. Originating in the United States in 1875 as a mechanism to standardize high school work for college admissions (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013), the system has evolved into the predominant framework for organizing curriculum, allocating resources, and measuring student progress across the globe. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), implemented through the Bologna Process, has further entrenched CHS as the international standard for higher education (Hedmo & Wedlin, 2008).

Despite its ubiquity, the CHS presents significant implementation challenges that directly impact student success. Central to these challenges is the function of academic advising. Baker and Griffin (2010) define academic advising as the process through which advisors "share their insight into major and degree prerequisites, help students plan their courses, and generally encourage progress to degree in an opportune way" (p. 2). However, the literature consistently reveals that academic advising is frequently under-resourced, undervalued, and poorly integrated into institutional strategy (Hollis, 2009; Vianden & Barlow, 2015).

This narrative review addresses a critical gap in the literature by positioning academic advising not merely as a

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support service, but as a strategic leadership function essential to institutional effectiveness. The review synthesizes evidence on best practices, identifies systemic challenges, and provides actionable recommendations for institutional leaders.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This review is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives:

2.1 Developmental Advising Theory

Crookston (2009) distinguished between prescriptive advising (directive, solution-giving) and developmental advising (collaborative, growth-oriented). Developmental advising views the advisor-student relationship as a partnership in which the advisor facilitates the student's intellectual, personal, and professional development. This approach aligns with the broader goals of higher education to produce self-directed, lifelong learners.

2.2 Student Engagement Theory

Kuh et al. (2006) demonstrated that student engagement—defined as the time and effort students invest in educationally purposeful activities—is the strongest predictor of student success. Academic advising is a critical engagement mechanism, providing students with a consistent point of contact, personalized guidance, and connection to institutional resources (Schwebel et al., 2012).

2.3 Institutional Leadership Theory

Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame model provides a lens for understanding how institutions must address advising through multiple perspectives: structural (policies and procedures), human resource (training and support), political (resource allocation and advocacy), and symbolic (cultural value and recognition).

3. BEST PRACTICES IN ACADEMIC ADVISING

The literature consistently identifies five interconnected best practices that constitute the foundation of effective academic advising.

3.1 Institutional Commitment and Resource Allocation

Institutional leaders must demonstrate visible commitment to advising through resource allocation, policy development, and recognition systems. Hollis (2009) argues that "administrative ignorance or neglect of advising will usually mean that students will receive less than they deserve from their college education" (p. 37). Effective institutions:

- Assign manageable advisor-to-student ratios (ideally 1:15–1:20)
- Provide dedicated advising time within faculty workloads
- Establish formal advising centers with professional staff
- Implement reward and recognition programs for quality advising

3.2 Developmental and Relational Advising Models

The shift from prescriptive to developmental advising represents a paradigm shift in advising practice. Hale, Graham, and Johnson (2009) found that students who experienced developmental advising reported higher satisfaction and demonstrated greater academic self-efficacy. Key components include:

- Collaborative goal-setting and educational planning
- Exploration of student interests, values, and career aspirations
- Regular, longitudinal advising relationships across the student's academic career
- Integration of academic, personal, and career development

3.3 Technology-Enhanced Accessibility

Technology has transformed the advising landscape. Amador and Amador (2014) demonstrated that electronic advising platforms—including email, scheduling applications, and social media—significantly enhance student access and engagement. Effective electronic advising systems:

- Provide 24/7 access to advising resources and information
- Enable efficient record-keeping and documentation
- Facilitate automated reminders and proactive outreach
- Integrate with institutional student information systems
- Support diverse communication preferences (text, email, video)

3.4 Continuous Professional Development

Noaman and Ahmed (2015) emphasized that advisors require comprehensive training to fulfill their roles effectively. Professional development should address:

- Institutional policies, procedures, and curriculum structures
- Advising models and theoretical frameworks
- Communication, counseling, and conflict resolution skills
- Technology tools and electronic advising systems
- Student development theory and diverse student needs
- Referral processes and campus resources

3.5 Systematic Evaluation and Quality Improvement

Powers, Carlstrom, and Hughey (2014) found that institutions with formal advising evaluation systems demonstrated higher levels of advisor effectiveness and student satisfaction. Effective evaluation systems:

- Assess student satisfaction with advising services
- Monitor student retention, progression, and graduation rates

- Evaluate advisor knowledge, accessibility, and communication
- Incorporate student feedback for continuous improvement
- Align advising outcomes with institutional strategic goals

4. INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Despite widespread recognition of advising's importance, significant barriers persist:

4.1 Unsustainable Advisor-to-Student Ratios

In many institutions, advisors are responsible for 25–30 or more students, severely limiting the time available for meaningful interactions. This challenge is particularly acute in large public universities and institutions with growing enrollments.

4.2 Marginalization of Advising in Faculty Workloads

Faculty advisors face competing demands from teaching, research, and service. Advising is often treated as an additional duty rather than a core responsibility, leading to advisor burnout and inconsistent quality (Shellenbarger & Hoffman, 2016).

4.3 Insufficient Training and Professional Development

Many institutions provide minimal formal training for advisors, relying on informal mentorship or self-directed learning. This results in inconsistent advising quality and limited advisor confidence.

4.4 Student Disengagement and Apathy

Many students fail to utilize advising services effectively, particularly when advising is not mandatory. Pizzolato (2008) found that students who actively engaged with their advisors demonstrated higher levels of academic integration and satisfaction.

4.5 Technology and Infrastructure Limitations

Inadequate institutional technology, unreliable systems, and insufficient training limit the effectiveness of electronic advising platforms.

5. Implications for Institutional Leadership

This review offers several strategic recommendations for higher education leaders:

5.1 Elevate Advising to a Strategic Priority

Institutions should recognize advising as a core academic function and allocate resources accordingly. This includes staffing, training, technology, and reward systems.

5.2 Invest in Advisor Development

Comprehensive training programs should be developed for both new and experienced advisors, addressing procedural knowledge, developmental skills, and technology competency.

5.3 Implement Electronic Advising Systems

Institutions should invest in robust electronic advising platforms that facilitate student access, proactive outreach, and efficient record-keeping.

5.4 Adopt Developmental Advising Models

Institutions should shift from prescriptive to developmental advising approaches, emphasizing collaboration, student empowerment, and holistic development.

5.5 Establish Systematic Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Institutions should implement regular assessment of advising effectiveness, using data to drive improvement and accountability.

6. CONCLUSION

Academic advising is a strategic leadership function essential to student success in credit hour systems. The literature consistently demonstrates that quality advising contributes to student satisfaction, retention, and academic achievement. However, significant challenges—including unsustainable ratios, inadequate training, and institutional marginalization—undermine advising effectiveness. Higher education leaders must recognize advising as a core institutional priority and invest in the structural, human, and technological resources necessary to support effective advising. By doing so, institutions can fulfill their educational mission, enhance student outcomes, and strengthen institutional effectiveness.

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