A COMPREHENSIVE AND INTEGRATED APPROACH TO MENTORING

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The traditional conception of academic advising has been oriented towards the provision of help to students to enable them to succeed in meeting academic demands; and it has been associated with the importance of the educational approach and the teacher's role in the student's education (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 1992, 2000). The concept of academic advising reflects a much broader reality, however. The objective of academic institutions is to help students succeed in their plans of study (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2000). Such success inevitably requires a coordinated effort towards this end. Academic advising is therefore here defined as all the actions and measures designed to promote students' success in their study plans. All the situations and contexts that could contribute to students' reaching this goal are encompassed in the definition. This conception of academic advising incorporates all the players who act at different moments in students' academic careers; and it applies to all the situations students must face in order to bring their study plans completion.

Given the limited space available for presenting the academic advising model we have designed, we have curtailed our presentation of the print, online sources and experiments that underpin the model's development. However, it is important to mention that this model is derived not only from research on dropout (e.g.: Tinto, 1993; Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda, 1993; Braxton, 2000), but also from papers on the quality of education offered in institutions. The idea behind this was to take into account the fact that creating conditions and a climate around students that promote their learning and their success in their study plans is a major responsibility of the educational institution; and that this responsibility goes beyond coursework and the contact students have with their teachers (Answorth and Harvey, 1994; Freed and Klugman, 1997; Perry, 1994).

THE PURPOSES OF THE MODEL

The purposes of our model are: to operationalize reflection on academic advising; to make it possible to take a position with regard to support activities that are already in place and play its role of helping student; and to identify specific dimensions of student reality for which other activities could be developed. It can also be used as a tool for diagnosis and mobilization, in that it allows for seeing at a glance the objectives targeted by activities offered at different moments in students' academic paths, as well as the measures and strategies that seem most appropriate. The model was designed to be adaptable to all higher education institutions and to all levels of study. In presenting it here, we take into account certain realities specific to the CEGEP context.

INTRODUCING THE MODEL

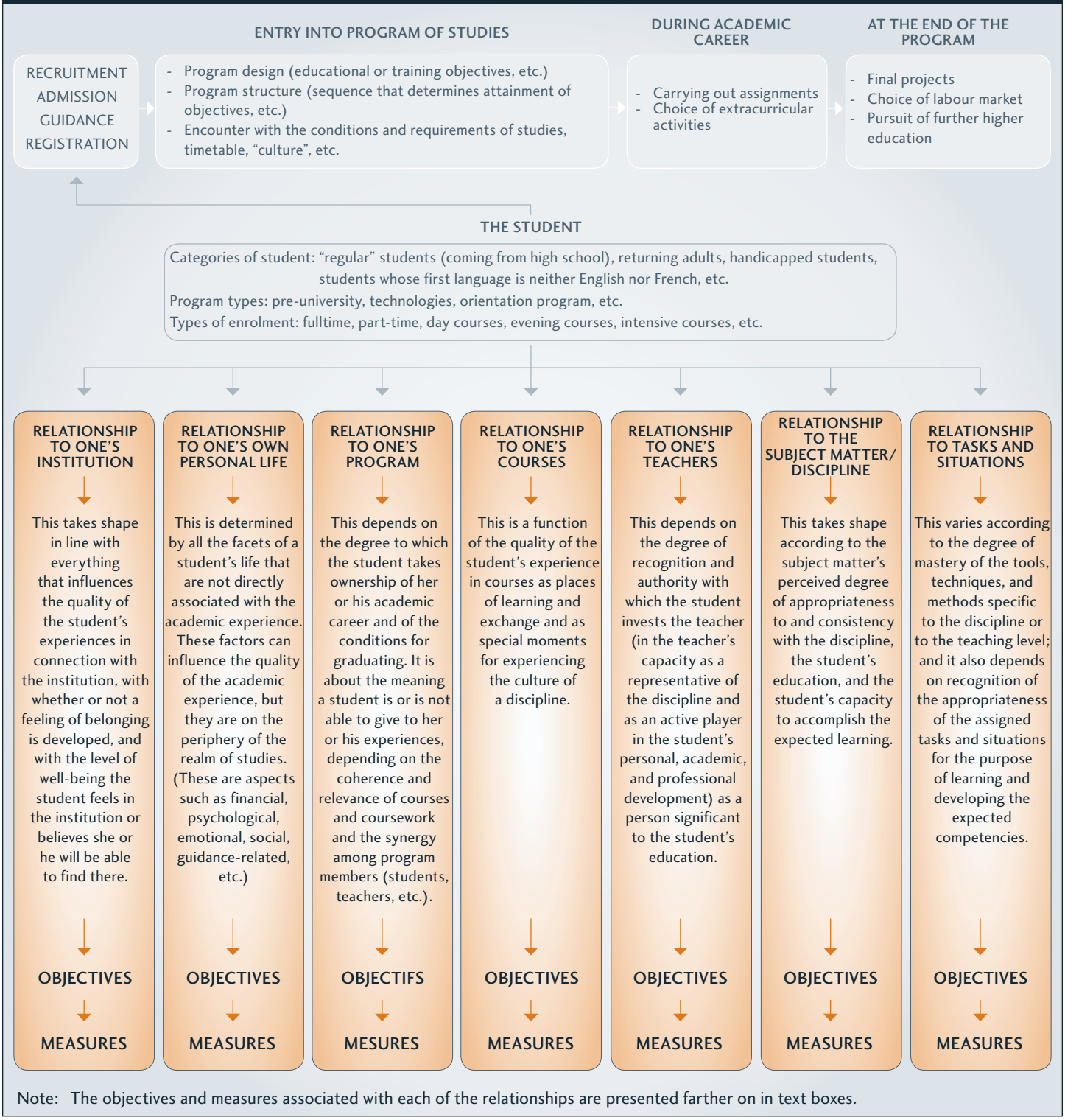
We felt it was necessary to construct the model using two mutually inclusive axes. (See Figure 1.)[1] The horizontal axis consists of the characteristics and key periods of students' academic careers, as they unfold over time during the course of a student's education, while the vertical axis relates to the relationships students establish with the different components of a situation or educational context.

STUDENTS' ACADEMIC CAREERS

The model's horizontal axis corresponds to the stages of students' academic careers and can therefore be conceived of as a continuum going from the initial steps of choosing an educational institution right to graduation. Between these two extremes, students go through several stages, some of which constitute critical moments when they may sometimes waver between persisting and dropping out. One of the most important moments is without any doubt the period of immersion of the student in the institutional setting, a point where factors relating to social integration into the milieu converge with factors relating to integration into the program of study.

[1] The diagram normally includes the targeted objectives and the possible strategies or measures under each relationship, in order to provide a comprehensive view of all the information involved. For readability purposes associated with the format of the text, these data have been extracted from the diagram and incorporated into tables that accompany each relationship description in the main text.

FIGURE1: DIAGRAM OF A MODEL FOR A COMPREHENSIVE AND INTEGRATED APPROACH TO ACADEMIC ADVISING — ADAPTED FOR CEGEPS — (Bégin and Palkiewicz, 1997)



Note: The objectives and measures associated with each of the relationships are presented farther on in text boxes.

Over the course of their academic careers, students also face questions of career choice, the integration of their knowledge, and academic performance. At the end of their programs of study, questions arise regarding their joining the workforce or pursuing further higher education.

These different stages are familiar; but they only provide a macroscopic perspective on key moments for action, without giving precise indications of the factors at play, the types of intervention required, or where interventions should take place. It is why an examination of the relationships students establish or maintain with the various aspects of their academic careers appeared to be the best way to give concrete form to the nature of the academic experience and allow for identifying academic support targets.

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS' RELATIONSHIPS

An educational institution is not just a "place" into which students must become integrated, just as students are not beings isolated from all relationships. On the contrary: the choices each student makes are motivated by a search for quality relationships with every aspect of the student's environment, based on the student's own characteristics. The better the quality of these relationships and the better the fit between students' experiences and who they are and what they desire, the more students will find their educational experiences meaningful, enriching, and formative and thus have the feeling they are benefitting from conditions favourable to their persistence and the completion of their programs.

These relationships can be conceptualized under seven aspects: 1) relationship to one's institution; 2) relationship to one's own personal life; 3) relationship to one's program; 4) relationship to one's courses; 5) relationship to one's teachers; 6) relationship to the subject matter/discipline; and 7) relationship to tasks and situations.

As the diagram of our model shows, students embark on their academic careers (the horizontal axis) with the whole set of relationships yet to build. It is their progression through the stages of their academic careers that will lead them to develop their various relationships; and it is these relationships that will determine their degree of satisfaction with their education and, ultimately, their decisions to continue on the same path, change institutions or programs, or even drop out. These relationships are coloured by students' expectations, based on the image they have of their chosen educational process, the specificity of their intentions, and also their current and previous experiences, which determine the reference point they use to evaluate each aspect. Actions and measures taken to support students must therefore be consistent with the meaning each of these relationships might have for a student.

Supervision objectives for each relationship

As the following tables illustrate, our model incorporates into each relationship the objectives that should be targeted in order to ensure the quality of the various relationships and improve the educational conditions and enhance persistence. With this in mind, two sets of agents can play a role: students themselves and the various institutional players.

Support strategies or activities

Also presented in the following tables is the "Measures" section of the model. This includes, for each relationship, a list of various types of activity, intervention, and service that could help in reaching the targeted objectives for improving the conditions of students' relationships with the various facets of their educational environment. These suggested interventions could make it possible to achieve one or several objectives within a single relationship or affect several relationships at the same time. It is the objectives that should determine the conditions for applying and developing strategies.

The proposed list of strategies is obviously not exhaustive, due to the space available for this article; but it does provide some indication of measures that could be appropriate.

Academic advising is... here defined as all the actions and measures designed to promote students' success in their study plans. All the situations and contexts that could contribute to students' reaching this goal are encompassed in the definition.

DESCRIPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS

In this section, the various relationships are described more precisely; and examples are provided of the model's application, in order to demonstrate how to conduct an analysis as well as how to select which support strategies to develop.

RELATIONSHIP TO ONE'S INSTITUTION

This relationship consists of the relations students establish with their educational environment. It is the very first relationship that students have with their new environment.

These relations are characterized by the contact a student has with the physical facilities, the institution's values, the services and resources offered in the institution, and the feeling of belonging the student can develop there. In this perspective, it is not necessarily the services or resources offered that will allow for a positive relationship between students and the institution, but rather the fact that students are aware of the services and resources and especially the fact of having easy access to them as needed. The more the conditions and measures taken promote students' feelings of belonging towards the institution, the more students' relationships with the institution will strengthen students' desire to spend time there and keep their relationship with it intact.

The objectives are therefore to intervene on all aspects that can help students find their place in the institution, feel at home, and consider their environment a pleasant life setting.

OBJECTIVES

- facilitate adjustment to the new setting
- provide information about services and resources
- facilitate contacts with fellow students and other players, etc.

MEASURES

- pre-intake and intake activities
- information sessions
- venues for getting integrated; rooms
- buddy system (more experienced student paired with incoming student), etc.

To achieve this, various strategies and activities are possible. These include setting up rooms or areas where students will have the opportunity to mingle with fellow students from their own program. Pre-intake and intake activities that provide tools and information for learning about the conditions and features of the education students are about to embark on are also helpful. As well, making it easier for students to work on their assignments at school is another way of increasing the odds of their developing feelings of belonging towards their institution, since they will be inclined to spend more time there.

Finally, institution staff whom students come into contact with also serve as one of the determining factors in the quality of students' relationship with the institution. One-on-one learning help is probably one of the most significant instances of this.

RELATIONSHIP TO ONE'S OWN PERSONAL LIVES

Even though all the way along their academic careers the context is an educational one, students cannot simply disconnect from the demands of their personal lives, with all the facets this includes (work, family, financial obligations, etc.). This is why the student's relationship with her or his own personal life is a significant factor. These aspects should not be considered to be external to a student's educational process, because they are intimately connected with that process on many levels. Students' financial situation, their reasons for deciding to embark on their studies or continue them, and their social and family lives are all aspects that will affect their studies or will be directly affected by it . For this reason, the more their relationships to various aspects of their personal lives is facilitated or strengthened during their education, the easier students will find it to harmonize school with the demands of their personal lives.

OBJECTIVES

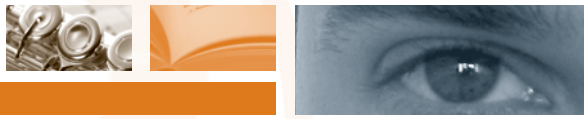
- help with funding or with finding employment
- facilitate contacts with others
- facilitate adjustment to new situations and to personal factors that influence well-being
- encourage social-psychological integration, etc.

MEASURES

- peer network
- financing for studies, bursaries, etc.
- activities dealing to personal support
- buddy system (more experienced student paired with incoming student)
- budgeting activities, help in the student's apartment, etc.
- organizing timetable, free periods, etc.

When students develop a harmonious relationship between aspects of their personal lives and aspects of their educational context, it is easier for them to meet the demands of both and fulfil the responsibilities they must assume. On the other hand, to facilitate the relationship with their personal lives, it may be necessary to implement support activities and strategies aimed at helping students improve the conditions of their personal lives or at easing their adjustment to their educational demands.

Strategies and activities should thus be oriented towards the possibility of increasing students' sources of income by favouring student employment in particular, but also by favouring the establishment of meaningful relationships among students that will enhance the quality of their integration into



their setting. This aspect is especially important for students who must change settings and whose personal environments are thus significantly altered. These students need interventions that will help them ease their adjustment to their new living conditions (apartment, maintenance, budget, food, social life, etc.). Student associations; workshops on adjustment, anxiety, self-esteem; and any other interventions related to the more "personal" aspects of life could be appropriate. Budgeting assistance or a referral or activity service for students in residence or in an unfamiliar town are ways of intervening in order to make students' relationship with their personal lives as positive as possible.

Relationship to one's program

The relationship to the program covers everything that affects the student's academic career. It is through their programs that students can make sense of their decisions to pursue their studies and of their plans for academic and professional achievement. The meaning students are able to give their programs of study and the possibilities for creating, updating, or further developing their future professional and educational plans determine the quality of their relationship with their programs of study.

OBJECTIVES

- make known opportunities, employment prospects, possibilities for further studies, etc.
- help develop a feeling of belonging to program study
- develop the student's ownership of the ethos of the discipline
- make known the educational rules and regulations and the resources available

MEASURES

- immersion and integration courses
- progression by cohort
- portfolio
- peer mentoring, peer networks
- student guidebook
- designation of program resource persons

This is why the targeted objectives for the relationship to the program should seek to ensure there is a good fit between the program's various courses and coursework and the career or educational objectives the program is supposed to correspond to and that students aspire to. The strategies used should foster linkage between courses, in order to help students perceive the shared meaning and consistency among their courses and coursework, grasp the role of their courses and coursework in the unfolding of their education (a consideration related to course sequencing), and have their perceptions of the education being offered to them either borne out or corrected.

Any activity that fosters the integration of students into their programs of study and gives students an opportunity to develop a coherent vision of program courses and coursework and their own learning will help improve students' relationship with their program. Thus courses and coursework that are likely to help a self-questioning student discover or update her or his aspirations and skills are also appropriate for fostering a significant relationship to a program, whether a student's current program or one being contemplated. In those circumstances, support actions will serve to give a more consistent meaning to the steps a student is taking and to the relationship he has with a given program. Strategies are many and varied, depending on the specific objectives targeted.

[T]he more their relationships to various aspects of their personal lives is facilitated or strengthened during their education, the easier students will find it to harmonize school with the demands of their personal lives.

Relationship to one's courses

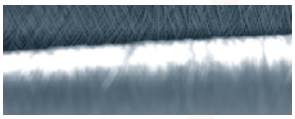
On a daily basis, in their respective programs, students enter into relationships with courses, which constitute a program's mode of implementation. Courses serve as the context in which students compare their expectations with reality. The relationship students have with their courses is thus defined by any aspect for which the students establish a correspondence between their expectations, the program requirements, and factors that could positively or negatively affect their own abilities to meet course objectives (course organization, educational approach, etc.).

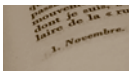
OBJECTIVES

- create meaning for courses
- help in achieving course objectives
- promote a grasp of the place of the course within the program of study and the educational process

MEASURES

- peer mentoring
- peer tutoring
- course organization (workshops, labs, discussions, etc.)
- specific educational approach, etc.





Thus as regards the student's relationship to a course, the activities and strategies to implement must aim to ensure solid coherence between the course and the program as a whole; but they must also promote the achievement of the course objectives. The relevant strategies are thus ones that should be integrated right into courses, be it through the course's specific educational approach, the organization of the course's delivery, or supplementary activities such as peer mentoring and peer tutoring designed to foster the attainment of course objectives. Careful thought about the pedagogical approach taken to teach first year students is one component of the development of strategies for strengthening students' relationship with a course.

Relationship to one's teachers and to other course staff

During the progress of a student's education, the teacher is often the most significant person with whom the student will develop a relationship. It is largely through this relationship that students construct their images of professional identity and, above all, of the quality of their education or training.

OBJECTIVES

- facilitate the establishment of a context conducive to the exchange of ideas
- promote the establishment of informal ties/discussions

MEASURES

- peer tutoring
- meetings and activities hneld outside class
- venues for meetings between students and teachers
- actions to support learning, etc.

It is acknowledged that students assign great importance to the kind of relationship they can establish with their teachers. The objectives of interventions should therefore be geared to establishing meaningful connections with the teachers, whether as regards a course's delivery (i.e., the educational approach) or as regards the teacher's role as a resource person for the student's progress through the program or entry on a professional or academic path after graduation from CEGEP. Setting up methods and venues that encourage increased contact and exchange, both formal and informal, between students and teachers is in and of itself a good way to improve their relationship.

In some programs, the technicians who contribute to certain courses play important roles by virtue of the frequent contacts they come to have with students. Some of the support measures related to students' relationship to their teachers could be addresses to teachers themselves to provide them with tools to help students.

> *The less the students deem the course content to be relevant, the less they will acknowledge its value; and the less the course content corresponds to the idea they had held of it, the less they will be tempted to engage in it.*

Relationship to the subject matter/discipline

The relationship to the subject matter or discipline is a function of the idea students had about the specific contents of their education. The type of relationship they have with the subject matter or discipline will depend to a great extent on their previous experiences with the subject matter or similar content and their degree of preparation for tackling the new content. The less the students deem the course content to be relevant, the less they will acknowledge its value; and the less the course content corresponds to the idea they had held of it, the less they will be tempted to engage in it.

OBJECTIVES

- facilitate the learning of the content
- facilitate the integration of learning
- facilitate initiation into the content and the discipline

MEASURES

- peer mentoring
- peer tutoring
- course organization
- organization of study groups
- remedial activities
- pre-CEGEP initiation activities, etc.

The objectives targeted for ensuring the establishment of positive relationships to the content and the subject matter will relate primarily to the integration, comprehension, and acquisition of the course contents and their application. Strategies should serve to fill in the gaps related to the understanding of the subject matter or foster the development of knowledge and experience enabling students to better master content learning or get a more accurate notion of it prior to the CEGEP experience (e.g., in high school). These strategies can take the form of peer mentoring and peer tutoring for more abstract or complex subject matter, organizing the course differently (workshops, study groups, etc.) so that it promotes or ensures the integration of course content or other subject matter, and complementary activities for filling in gaps related to prerequisites.

RELATIONSHIP TO TASKS AND SITUATIONS

Assignments and situations constitute the means by which learning and the verification of learning are accomplished. In some cases, less than adequate mastery of the tasks and situations a student is faced with could have dramatic effects.

OBJECTVES
- promote the development of skills related to the requirements of the student's studies and the job market - help students become as autonomous as possible - develop abilities and work methods specific to a discipline or the relevant area of study
MEASURES
- activities and tools for becoming familiar with required study methods (IT, library use, etc.) - activities on general methodology or the methodology specific to the discipline - peer mentoring, etc.

The relationship to assignments and situations can thus vary enormously, according to students' prior experiences and the support offered in order to help student master tasks and situations and carry them out. The objectives relevant to implementing support strategies for this relationship should aim at developing or strengthening skills, tools, resources, and knowledge specific to the field or level of studies.

Support activities can take various forms. They can be integrated right into the program (for example, a course on the methodology specific to the program), offered by the program as complementary activities (writing workshops, training for specific situations such as teamwork, reading workshops as part of PBL task [Personalized Teaching], etc.), or offered intermittently as needed (workshops, courses, etc.).

THE DYNAMICS OF THE RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships presented in this model make it possible to evaluate academic advising measures and all the actions directed towards contributing to success in study plans. These relationships can be placed in relations to each other in order to pinpoint, for a single measure, its potential effects on the various aspects it will affect. Thus we can more easily aim for interventions and measures that will meet several needs at the same time. For example, the relationships a student establishes with her or his institution and program aim, among other things, at developing the student's feeling of belonging. While these relationships exist at different levels, they still have the common goals of developing a feeling of belonging and fostering the student's integration. We have here the possibility, then, of ensuring that interventions targeting the same objectives are not carried out in an isolated and separate manner, but rather are integrated with each other in a way that enhances a given measure's cumulative impact.

Thus peer mentoring is a mentoring activity often set up at the course or program level, but for a specific target group or specific content. The possibility could be envisaged of training peer mentors so that they can act at different levels, such that a mentor could become a significant figure for a student on broader fronts than just those of specialized content. Peer mentors could play a much better adapted and fuller role, providing they are properly equipped to do so.

It also becomes possible to analyze the quality of academic advising by considering those relationships that are affected by existing measures, the role these measures are intended to play, and the aspects that actually are affected. Relationships for which no support measures are planned or already in existence can then be targeted. Obviously, activities must also take into account students' individual characteristics and background, since activities are only as effective as students' ability to see in them help that corresponds to their needs.

Using this model to analyze situations helps in carrying out a much more systematic reading of the needs, the measures for responding to needs, and the players who can contribute. In playing this role, the model also serves as an analytic instrument for targeting those aspects whose impact on the success of a student's study plans need to be deepened. For example, a commitment to take action with regard to the relationships with the institution and with the program could take shape through recourse to a single measure; but it is necessary first to grasp in a precise way which factors are at play in each of these relationships. Conducting this analysis is fundamental; doing so will prevent the development of measures based solely on intuition and goodwill. Analyzing the objects and relationships targeted by given measures makes it possible to develop evaluation tools much better suited to what is expected from the measures' implementation. This is an approach that has unfortunately been left underdeveloped within teaching institutions (Bégin and Ringuette, 2005). When it is implemented before a decision is made regarding a choice of measure, this approach makes it possible to pinpoint the level at which a needs analysis should be done and what the impact should be, in order to achieve more appropriate and better defined interventions for student support and the success of students' study plans.

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