

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Pairing Academic Advising with Enrollment Management: A Strategic and Integrated Partnership

By PJ Woolston and Sean Bridgen

There is a critical intersection between enrollment management and academic advising. Enrollment management plays a crucial role in emphasizing the need for an integrated, student-centered approach. This challenges the traditional view of advising as merely a retention tool and advocates for a more nuanced understanding that aligns institutional success with personalized learner goals and holistic educational experiences.

Enrollment management is a critical component of higher education success. As defined by AACRAO, “Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) is a comprehensive process designed to help an institution achieve and maintain optimum enrollment, where optimum is defined within the academic context of the institution. It’s a concept and process that enables the fulfillment of institutional mission and students’ educational goals” (AACRAO 2025). There is inevitable tension between the institution’s success and the student’s success because their ultimate goals are not exactly the same. They are

not, of course, mutually exclusive, but one or the other inevitably becomes the frame of reference for institutional enrollment planning efforts.

Enrollment Management and Institutional Success

From an institutional perspective, enrollment management plays a vital role in financial sustainability, operational efficiency, and long-term strategic planning. Effective enrollment strategies help institutions maintain stable student populations, optimize financial aid distribution, and enhance student engagement. A mature enrollment management system supports an institution’s ability to forecast enrollment trends, adjust recruitment strategies, and implement retention initiatives that align with institutional priorities.

Institutions that fail to integrate enrollment management comprehensively often struggle with declining retention rates, inefficient resource allocation, and fi-

nancial instability. By contrast, institutions that achieve full integration are better positioned to adapt to demographic shifts, policy changes, and evolving student needs. A strategic approach to enrollment management ensures that institutions are not merely reacting to challenges but proactively shaping their future.

A fundamental goal of enrollment management is institutional success. Clearly, the success of the institution is paramount because if the institution fails, it can no longer serve students.

Enrollment Management and Student Success

From a student success perspective, enrollment management influences every stage of a student's journey, from initial recruitment and admissions through course completion at the micro level and credential attainment at the end of the program. By fostering a student-centered approach, enrollment managers can create environments that support academic achievement, career readiness, and personal development.

A fully integrated enrollment management system ensures that students receive consistent support throughout their academic careers. This includes proactive advising, targeted financial aid support, and comprehensive student services that address barriers to success. When enrollment management aligns with student affairs, academic advising, and financial aid offices, students are more likely to persist and graduate, ultimately contributing to improved institutional outcomes.

A fundamental goal of enrollment management is student success. Clearly, the success of the student is paramount because student learning is core to the institutional mission.

Mature Enrollment Management

Many institutional enrollment management efforts are hyper-focused on new student recruitment efforts. As institutions evolve, they become better attuned to the role of retention in overall enrollment and allocate resources accordingly. Over time, institutions will progress through various stages of enrollment management maturity, evolving from an operation that is transac-

tional in nature to one that is better at managing relationships and where student success and institutional success are perfectly integrated (Dolence 1993, Hossler and Kalsbeek 2013).

Enrollment management operations at more mature institutions facilitate more and deeper relationships between students and all constituencies at the school, especially faculty (Henderson 2005). The student-faculty relationship is particularly important because, irrespective of a student's goals or identity, the one thing that unites all students is that they are engaged in a classroom of some kind, pursuing learning goals with qualified teachers.

The Role of Academic Advisors in Enrollment Management

There is a particular group of professionals at the institution who play a key role in the student experience and the overall success of both the student and the institution: the academic advisors. It is the academic advisor who connects students directly to classrooms. That this role is model-agnostic is evident from the numerous successful examples of both faculty-advisor and staff-advisor models. More mature institutional enrollment management models integrate enrollment strategies across multiple departments and functions to foster a holistic approach to student success. Nowhere is this integration more indicative of institutional maturity than in the relationship between enrollment management and academic advising.

Less mature enrollment management operations, often focused on admissions and recruitment, treat retention as a secondary priority. In such cases, academic advising is not only used as a tool to improve retention but commonly *the* primary tool to improve retention. While advising can certainly contribute to retention, persistence, and completion, this reductive approach fails to recognize the broader impact of academic advising on student success.

The *Handbook of Strategic Enrollment Management* (Hossler and Bontrager 2014), a seminal work in the field, exceeds 600 pages yet only mentions academic advising a handful of times, and even then only in passing.

This limited focus underscores the historical disconnect between enrollment management and advising. Additionally, enrollment managers often lack direct control over advising functions, instead relying on their influence to drive changes in advising practices (Hinojosa, Luff, and Woolston 2023). This separation can hinder the development of a cohesive institutional strategy for student success.

In this context, then, academic advising is essentially reduced to a tool that helps only with the quantitative metric measuring retention. Often in cases like these, institutions lean on academic advising as the primary lever for improving retention, persistence, and completion. In other words, the enrollment initiative is sometimes little more than this: “*Let’s improve retention by making sure our advisement is better.*” By contrast, advisors view retention, persistence, and completion as byproducts of their work rather than the primary purpose of their work (McClellan 2023).

For enrollment managers to properly understand the impact of academic advising on enrollment health, it is important for them to understand both the clarity about what constitutes advising and the goals that advisors have.

What Advising Is Not

Advising does not equal retention. This common misperception arises from the significant role advisors play in retention efforts. We often hear that “retention is everyone’s job,” and while this statement is generally accepted as true, it lacks the necessary clarification that retention efforts must be differentiated by the distinct roles of various campus stakeholders. Many groups on campus may struggle to define their role in retention, but this is not the case for academic advisors, whose primary job is to guide students through course registration and academic planning. Even within this context, the contrast between institutional and advisor perspectives on student success becomes apparent.

From an institutional standpoint, advisors are often viewed as key figures in ensuring that students are registered for classes in a timely and appropriate manner. This perspective focuses on logistical elements such as

verifying that students enroll in the correct sequence of courses, meet prerequisites, maintain enrollment status (usually full-time), and progress toward degree completion within the expected time frame. However, advisors themselves typically approach their work from a different angle. As detailed below, academic advisors help students to make informed educational decisions, a role that appears simple on the surface but is very complex in practice. This fundamental difference in perspective can lead to misunderstandings about the true purpose and function of advising.

Retention, graduation rates, and overall institutional enrollment health are often viewed as direct outcomes of effective advising. While advising certainly contributes to these institutional metrics, they are not the explicit goal of advising *per se*. Instead, these measures should be considered byproducts of quality advising rather than its primary intention. The distinction is a perfect example of how institutional goals do not always align with individual learner goals. Many institutional benchmarks, such as retention and completion rates, are constructs designed to assess institutional effectiveness rather than individual student success.

For example, consider retention rates, which measure the percentage of first-time, full-time students of any given cohort who persist from one semester to the next. This metric is valuable for understanding broad trends in student engagement, but it does not necessarily reflect the diverse educational paths of individual students. Similarly, the commonly used completion metric of 150 percent of program length assumes that students should complete their degrees within a pre-defined time frame. However, many students intentionally take longer to complete their programs due to work obligations, family responsibilities, or financial considerations. In such cases, institutional concerns about extended time to degree completion may not align with the student’s personal success plan.

In some instances, what institutions classify as a failure, such as a student stopping out, might actually be a manifestation of student success. A student who pauses their studies to gain work experience, care for a family member, or pursue an alternative educational

pathway may be making the best decision for their circumstances. However, institutional frameworks that prioritize retention and completion above all else may not accommodate these nuanced success narratives.

This misalignment between institutional objectives and student realities underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of advising. Advisors must navigate the tension between institutional expectations and student needs, advocating for policies that recognize the complexities of student pathways while also supporting students in achieving their individual goals. Effective advising, therefore, is not simply about keeping students enrolled; it is about fostering an environment where students can make informed decisions that align with their individual aspirations.

What Advising Is

To understand the purpose of academic advising, the most reliable source is NACADA, the Global Community for Academic Advising, a professional organization dedicated to this field. NACADA (2023) defines academic advising as follows:

Academic advising, based in the teaching and learning mission of higher education, is a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes learners' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities, and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and time-frames.

The idea of “student success” is at the core of academic advising. However, this term is both institutionally significant and individually variable. Institutions usually define student success in terms of measurable outcomes such as degree attainment, retention rates, and academic performance. These metrics align with institutional goals and reporting requirements, making them an attractive and convenient measure of effectiveness. Student success, on the other hand, is not always synonymous with degree completion, nor is it a one-size-fits-all concept. Hagedorn (2012) argues that success must be understood in a broader, more per-

sonalized context, one that acknowledges the unique aspirations and circumstances of individual learners.

Problematically for the institution and indeed by necessity, student success is individually and sometimes ambiguously defined. It is easy for institutional authorities to equate student success with degree attainment; after all, this happens to be the goal for the majority of learners. In addition, this kind of achievement is highly measurable. However, it is not always the learners' goal, which means we need other forms of measurement. Student success does not necessarily or even usually exclude program completion, and in fact, the two are often highly synchronous.

A useful way to conceptualize this challenge is through the jobs-to-be-done framework, as described by *Harvard Business Review* (Christensen, *et al.* 2016). Students enroll in degree programs not necessarily for the diploma itself, but for the opportunities—often career-related—that the degree can facilitate. This perspective helps to frame advising as more than just course selection and degree mapping; rather, it is about understanding and supporting the underlying goals that drive students to pursue higher education in the first place. Learners enroll in a degree program in college, but it is not necessarily the actual degree that they want; it is the opportunity (usually read: jobs) to which the degree provides access.

Academic advisors play a crucial role in helping students articulate and achieve their personal definitions of success. This is precisely where advisors excel: in learning about and supporting learners' priorities at an individual level. In many ways, the academic advisor resembles the classroom teacher in how they teach, stretch, and guide the learner in their interactions. Additionally, just like in the classroom, advisors want learners to come to their advising appointments prepared. Advisors do not merely enforce institutional requirements; they act as educators and mentors who help students navigate the intersection of their academic experiences and life aspirations. Lowenstein (2005) describes advising as a form of teaching where advisors guide students through a curriculum of decision-making, critical thinking, and self-reflection.

Just as instructors expect students to come prepared for class, advisors expect students to engage actively in the advising process and take ownership of their educational journey.

Treating advising as an educational endeavor is the practice of a more mature institution. It is relational rather than transactional. In this way, institutions can foster a more holistic approach to student success. This approach aligns with NACADA's vision, emphasizing intentional, meaningful interactions that extend learning beyond the classroom and empower students to make informed choices about their futures. Ultimately, the value of academic advising lies in its ability to bridge institutional expectations with individual student needs, ensuring that students not only persist in their programs but also find personal and professional fulfillment in the process.

A Successful Partnership

Successful placement of academic advising within the enrollment management framework, regardless of the formal reporting structure, requires true collaboration between academic advisors, enrollment managers, and campus leadership. For advising to function effectively in this framework, institutions must ensure adequate investment in advising services and provide strong leadership support at all levels, extending upwards through the executive administration. Understanding the fundamental role and impact of excellent academic advising offers an opportunity for institutional education and transformation regarding the purpose and scope of advising (Troxel, *et al.* 2022).

Above all, effective academic advising relies on building strong relationships, particularly the relationship between the learner and the advisor. Advisors serve as essential points of contact, guiding students through their academic journeys and helping them align their goals with institutional resources and opportunities. More broadly, however, a successful advising framework within an enrollment management operation also depends on broader institutional relationships—between advising leadership and the rest of the campus community. These relationships include collaboration be-

tween faculty and deans within colleges and schools, integration with enrollment management leadership and admissions operations, and engagement across the entire institution.

Academic advisors are uniquely positioned to support institutional goals precisely because their focus is on learner success. This positioning grants them direct access to students' aspirations, challenges, and evolving needs, allowing them to provide crucial insights that inform institutional policies and practices. Advisors' ability to bridge institutional expectations with individual student goals makes them valuable contributors to retention and completion efforts, ensuring that institutional success is intrinsically tied to student success (White 2015).

For an advising and enrollment management partnership to thrive, institutions must prioritize communication, collaboration, and shared vision. This involves creating intentional spaces for dialogue between advising units and other administrative and academic stakeholders. Offices of enrollment management are a particularly convenient nexus for these connections, given the campus-wide scope of enrollment management work. Furthermore, professional development opportunities for advisors, supported by institutional leadership, can enhance advising effectiveness and ensure alignment with evolving student and institutional needs.

Recommendations for Professional Practice

To more effectively pair academic advising with enrollment management and better support both student and institutional success, institutions can implement several approaches.

Convene relevant parties on campus to establish clear and transparent goals and priorities

Only by being clear and transparent about the institution's goals and priorities can we ensure a better student experience and faster progress toward institutional goals.

■ This necessitates frank conversation with all parties about working within the constraints and needs of the institution. In this sense, such discussions be-

come a sort of “negotiation” or “conflict resolution” in the strictest sense of the terms.

- Enrollment managers, advisors, and other staff and faculty must work together to develop shared goals and data-driven strategies that prioritize both student and institutional success.

Define institutional and student success holistically

Over the course of such discussions, institutions should adopt a broader definition of success that includes not just retention and graduation rates but also personal and professional student growth, career readiness, and student well-being. While advising should obviously contribute to institutional goals, it must remain centered on student learning and development. We must avoid reducing advising to a transactional process measured solely by changes in retention rates.

- Define metrics for student success at the institutional level. This can be irrespective of what institutions are required to track and report at the federal and state levels. These institutionally-defined metrics can and should be unique and tailored reflections of institutional priorities, student populations, capacity, etc.
- Use the unique data tracked at your institution to exert influence on practice and policy throughout the wider higher education community. This is particularly relevant at the state level, where policy is at least more malleable than at the federal level, and meaningful scale is still achievable.

Align academic advising and enrollment management as interdependent partners

Institutions should intentionally align academic advising with enrollment management to create a cohesive student experience, and the relationship is one of true interdependence. Advising should be viewed as a strategic component of the overall enrollment management operation. This does not necessarily have anything to do with structural or organizational charts. Effective alignment can be either formal or informal. Techniques to do so include:

- Use data to inform and enhance advising practices: Institutions should equip advisors with access to real-time student data and predictive analytics to support proactive interventions that improve student engagement and completion. These same data should be available to enrollment managers as well, so that both teams are working from the same information.
- Enhance the influence of advisors in enrollment management decisions: Academic advisors should have “a seat at the table” in enrollment planning discussions to ensure that student needs and educational experiences are adequately represented in decision-making. Traditionally, many parties are involved in these discussions, including the admissions team, the business office, a retention group, etc.; too often, however, such a group does not include advisors.
- Empower advisors as educators: Where academic advising is an extension of the teaching and learning mission of the institution, advisors should be empowered to embrace that role openly. Many advisors recognize the importance of this, but do not feel comfortable doing so in their institutional environment. Further, advisors should be provided with professional development opportunities that emphasize their role in shaping student experience.
- Create clear communication pathways between enrollment management and advisors: Institutions should develop structured mechanisms for communication between advising teams and enrollment leaders to facilitate and ensure consistent messaging and feedback.

Consider even greater investment in advising

These are recommendations that are implementable relatively quickly with intention and commitment. Over the longer term and with the commitment of greater resources, institutions should also consider the following:

- Develop institutional policies that support varied student pathways: Institutions should ensure that they have policies that accommodate all students, not just a majority of students entering the insti-

tution in historically traditional ways and pursuing traditional degree programs. This includes students who have stopped out previously, part-time students, students pursuing alternative credentials, etc.

- Support and invest in advising infrastructure: Of all the aspects of enrollment management, admissions is generally the most robustly supported, given the high stakes and visibility of the incoming class. Advising is often not as well-resourced. Institutions should allocate appropriate resources to advising units, including staffing, technology, training, and compensation, to ensure that advisors can effectively support students across all stages of enrollment.

Conclusion

Academic advising is not merely an administrative function but a vital component of the enrollment management ecosystem. When advisors are supported and empowered, they can play a transformative role in student achievement and institutional success, reinforcing the necessity of a well-integrated, cooperative approach to advising within the broader higher education landscape.

Similarly, enrollment managers play a critical role in academic advising irrespective of the place of advisement within or outside their portfolio. It is imperative that the enrollment manager be a good partner with colleagues in advisement. Enrollment managers can empower advisors to prioritize and highlight the learner, defining student success beyond simple “degree attainment.” Enrollment managers should empower advisors to lead this conversation across campus and to give academic advising an equal seat at the table, rather than treating it as an imperative to improve retention or a list of assignments.

As higher education continues to evolve, institutions must recognize the need for deeper integration between enrollment management and academic advising. A stronger connection is imperative for institutional success *and* student success.

While advising plays a role in promoting student persistence and success, its primary function is to support students in crafting educational experiences that align with their goals. By acknowledging and respecting this distinction, institutions can create advising models that truly serve students rather than reducing their success to institutional metrics alone.

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