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## Many U.S. Colleges Overlooking a Potential Cure for College Dropouts

*Academic advising services key to student retention, but underutilized*

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IOWA CITY, Iowa—Many colleges and universities in the U.S. are missing the boat when it comes to one potential way to help keep students in school: effective academic advising services.

A survey of college officials conducted by ACT, in cooperation with the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), suggests that many U.S. colleges and universities are underutilizing and poorly administering their academic advising programs. Specifically, the survey results indicate many colleges fail to capitalize on the benefits of quality advising, particularly when it comes to helping students stay in school.

"On most college campuses, advising is still looked upon primarily as the practice of choosing and scheduling classes for students," said Wes Habley, director of ACT's Office for the Enhancement of Educational Practices and author of the report. "In fact, advising can be an effective tool to increase retention and graduation rates."

The research on college retention and graduation suggests that the primary factor directly impacting whether or not a student stays in college and graduates is the quality of the interaction he or she has with a concerned person in the campus community. The advising process is one of the few ways in which a college can formally implement this type of interaction.

"Academic advising is the only structured activity on the college campus in which all students have the opportunity for one-on-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution," said Habley.

The survey results suggest few colleges have a formal, structured program in place to effectively promote advising as a tool to increase retention. Most, in fact, don't even have a consistent, campus-wide advising program. College faculty are typically allowed a great deal of autonomy, and each department may have its own approach to advising students.

"Too often, college advising is not carried out in a methodical, organized manner," said Habley.

Statistics compiled by ACT suggest college retention and graduation rates are lower than desirable. Nearly a third of first-year college students don't return for a second year. In addition, only a little more than half of all students who attend four-year colleges typically earn a degree within five years of entry, according to the ACT data.

Despite the shortcomings identified by the survey, the findings suggest progress has been made in academic advising practices over the past few decades. Specific advances include:

- An increase in the percentage of institutions that identify an individual with responsibility for coordinating or directing campus advising services (from 69% in 1987 to 84% currently)
- An increase in the percentage of institutions with an advising office or center (from 60% in 1987 to 73% currently)
- An increase in the percentage of institutions that conduct regular program evaluation of advising services (from 43% in 1987 to 58% currently)

"Academic advising has certainly come a long way over the years," said Habley. "Thirty years ago, it was difficult to find anyone with the title of 'Director of Academic Advising' on college campuses, let alone a structured advising program. But, we still have a long way to go."

The Sixth National ACT Survey of Academic Advising in colleges and universities was conducted in 2003 by ACT in cooperation with NACADA. The study is the sixth in a series of ACT tracking surveys started in 1979. Other surveys were conducted in 1983, 1987, 1993, and 1998.

The sample comprised 1,421 advising officials and leaders from colleges and universities around the country. Surveys were mailed to 3,019 two-year and four-year institutions, yielding a response rate of 47 percent. The sample is representative of the survey population in terms of school type and size.

The full report is available for purchase through the NACADA website.

[More information on NACADA](#) (*Opens new window*)

ACT annually reports statistics on the retention and graduation rates at colleges and universities around the country. New results and further findings analyzing the association between advising and retention/graduation are underway and will be reported in the future. In addition, ACT will release a report this fall summarizing effective campus retention practices based on research at more than 1,000 campuses across the nation.

NACADA's mission is to enhance student development through effective academic advising, and the association seeks to assist individuals and institutions in this endeavor.

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