

LUMINA FOUNDATION

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Spring 2021

Amped-up advising

On-campus counselors
go beyond the extra mile
to boost student success



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it's all about connecting.

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three-stage approach. **10**



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do more than teach.



On the cover: Patricia Felipe, a 20-year-old student at Miami Dade College, has forged a strong bond with her advisor, Ania Canales Toledo. Like Felipe, Toledo is a Cuban immigrant—and the two often slip into “Spanglish” as they work together to help Felipe navigate campus life. “Ania came here when she was 19 years old,” Felipe says. “She knew everything that was going to happen with me because it happened to her, too.”



Editor's note: The stories in this issue of Focus were reported and written by Susan Headden, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and communications professional with many years of experience covering education issues. Headden, a former staff writer at The Indianapolis Star, also worked nearly 16 years at U.S. News & World Report, ultimately serving as a managing editor. She later held senior positions at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. She now works as an independent communications consultant based in Washington, D.C.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Ask anyone who attended college more than 10 years ago to name their student advisor, and you'll likely be met with a blank stare. Ask them what that advisor did for them, and the response is no less predictable—something like: "He told me where to register," or "She helped me drop a class."

Such an approach may have been benign when the vast majority of college students were 18 to 22 years old, when careers lasted a lifetime, and when a semester's tuition cost little more than a late-model used car. This type of arm's-length advising may have been acceptable when most students had college-educated relatives to guide them through higher education.

No longer—not with student demographics so varied, success rates for certain groups so low, and the economic stakes so high.

Today's students are likely to be older adults with jobs—often with children. They're more likely to be the first in the family to attend college. Like no other group before them, today's students must balance the cost and demands of college with other responsibilities. They're in no position to waste any credits or time.

They also face significant barriers that have little to do with academics. Today's students report record rates of anxiety and depression, as well as substantial and rising rates of food and housing insecurity. And all of this was *before* the pandemic.

To keep students on the path to success, colleges and universities have taken a number of positive steps. They've created one-stop student success centers to offer tutoring and other support. They've established food banks and coat closets. They offer cohort programs, peer mentoring and first-year experience programs. They've trained faculty on how to enhance feelings of belonging for first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income families. Most substantially, more and more colleges are designing clear academic pathways, mapping out courses within broad areas of interest so that students can see clearly how they are going to get from enrollment to graduation.

But no matter how clear the path before them, students still need a seasoned hand to guide them. That's where the advisor comes in. Whether they are professionals who counsel students full time or professors who add advising to their teaching duties, these advisors, once seen almost as an afterthought, are now being deployed as vital components to student success.

That's what this issue of Focus is all about: How college advising is moving to the next level, and how crucial that is to the success of today's students.

In the following pages, you'll see how this trend is playing out to benefit students on three campuses—a state liberal arts university, a large community college, and a two-year technical institute.

- At Eastern Connecticut State University, you'll meet Jean Rienzo, a 32-year-old single mother who found a kindred spirit—and a wise counselor—in her advisor, sociology instructor Nicolas Simon. "He didn't make me feel old and uncomfortable," Rienzo said. "He didn't make me feel like a massive failure."
- At Miami Dade College, you'll read about Daniela Figueroa, an exemplary high school student who nevertheless felt lost and overwhelmed in her first year. Thanks to the community college's "appreciative advising" program—delivered with care by advisor Ania Canales Toledo—Figueroa found her place, progressed steadily, and is now preparing to pursue her bachelor's degree at Florida International University.
- And at Lake Area Technical College in South Dakota, you'll hear from Audrey Urban, an accounting student with a part-time bookkeeping job *and* three young children. Urban keeps it all together with the help of not one, but two advisors: business instructors Lorna Hofer and Kerry Stager. "I have had so much thrown at me—as a mom and as a student," Urban says. "If not for them, there is no way I would be doing this."

In addition to the material in this printed version of Focus, there's a wealth of information on Lumina's website, www.luminafoundation.org. There, Focus offers several extra features, including related links and compelling videos of students and their interactions with their advisors.

As these real-life stories will show, next-level advising takes on different forms at different institutions. Still, common elements emerge. The best advising is holistic, data-driven, and connected to an interlocking system of supports.

But perhaps the most striking similarity is also the most powerful: the advisors' empathy—the care they have for the students they serve. "You genuinely want them to succeed," says Gustavo Cuervo, an advisor at Miami Dade College. "You have to be able to put yourself in their place."

We at Lumina hope this issue of Focus puts you in that same place—the shared space in which dedicated advisors do all they can to ensure the success of today's students.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. P. Merisotis".

Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation

At Eastern Connecticut, 'dual advising' keeps students singularly focused

WILLIMANTIC, Conn. — Jean Rienzo, a state legislative aide and the mother of a 1-year-old, is among the rare “nontraditional” students at Eastern Connecticut State University, a public liberal arts university. Rienzo, 32, graduated from high school in 2007 with, she said, “a negative impression of education and minimal advice.” She knew nothing then about applying for federal aid, and although she was eligible for substantial need-based and merit scholarships, she said no one told her about them. “I left a lot of money on the table,” she recalled.





Jean Rienzo, a self-described “nontraditional student” at Eastern Connecticut, is 32, a mother, and has a demanding full-time job: She works as a legislative aide in the gold-domed State Capitol in Hartford. Rienzo, who is nearing graduation now, credits her advisor with helping her juggle life’s competing demands and stay on track.

Although clearly capable of advanced work, she said she resigned herself to a life “as a non-higher-educated adult.”

Marriage and divorce followed, as did two years at two community colleges. Rienzo did well at both, but one of the schools failed to give her the advice she needed to avoid wasting credits and stay on the path to a bachelor’s degree. Talented in math, she started out pursuing a degree in engineering, but found that she was 10 years behind younger students in the necessary skills. (A sometimes-hostile, virtually all-male environment didn’t help, she said.) Later, knowing that her career plans required a four-year degree, she enrolled at Eastern, immediately finding a bond with advisor Nicolas Simon, an assistant professor of sociology who helped her map out the next several years.

Having scrapped engineering, Rienzo initially opted for politics and government, but Simon helped her see that the major was not feasible on a part-time schedule—not unless she wanted to be in college several more years. They settled on sociology, which included many of the same courses, as a more flexible, practical option for a career in politics and public policy.

Simon also urged Rienzo to slow down. (In her first semester at Eastern, she ignored officials’ warnings and took 17 credits. She survived, but the pace was brutal, and she never took such a heavy load again.) Even now, with just five courses to go before graduation, Rienzo has taken Simon’s advice to spread them over two semesters. “Sometimes you have to be realistic that your graduation date may be farther away,” she said. Meanwhile, Simon has helped her design independent studies and other ways to help her reach the finish line faster.

The partnership between Rienzo and Simon isn’t unusual at Eastern. In fact, it’s becoming the norm, thanks to the university’s years-long effort to improve student advising.

Eastern Connecticut State University may not be the most prestigious university in the state—that distinction belongs to Yale—or even the best-known state college—the University of Connecticut can probably claim that title. But Eastern is well-regarded as a public university that is steadily moving up.

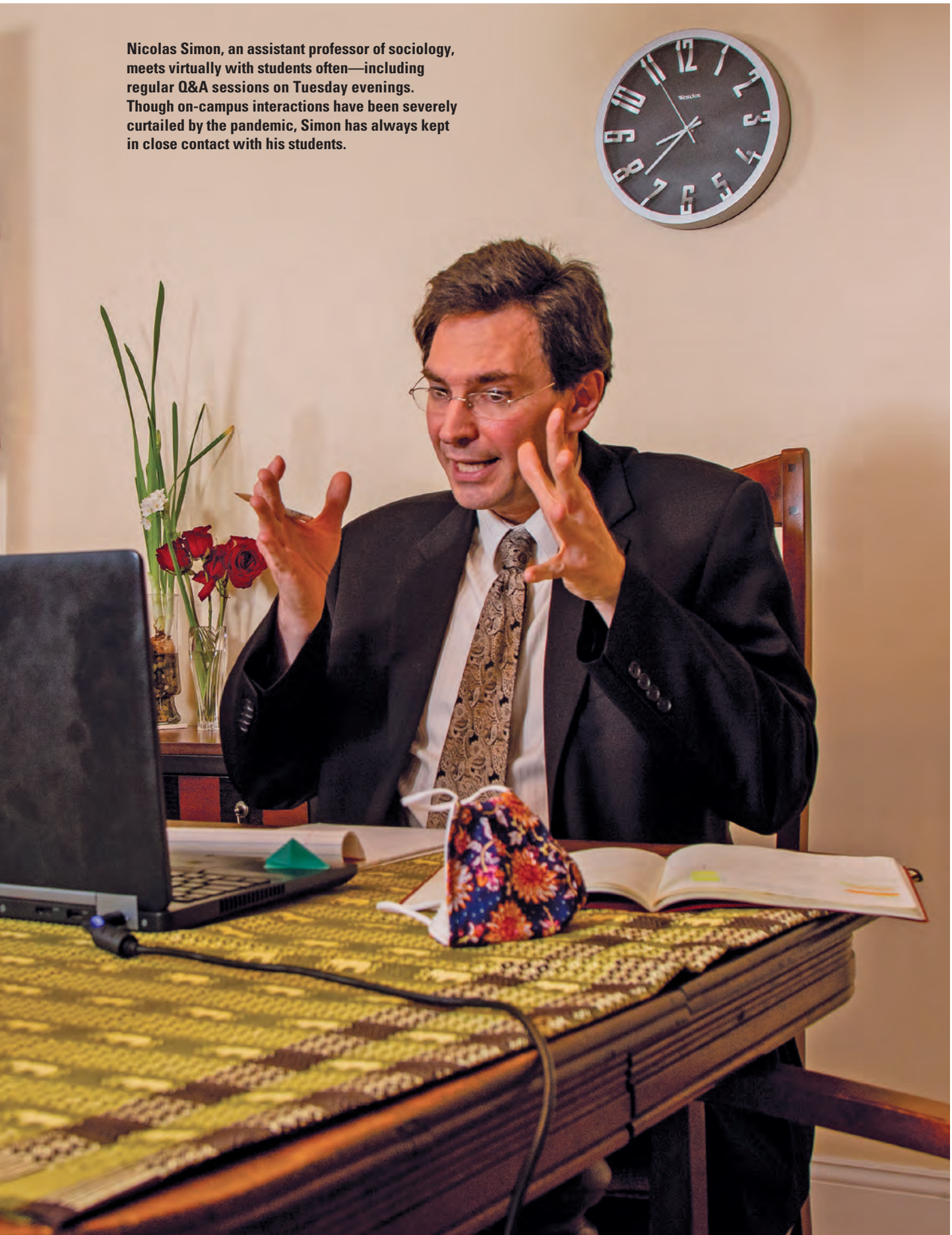
Headed since 2006 by its dynamic president, Elsa Núñez, it has since enjoyed stable enrollment (6,000 students; 33 percent students of color), good and growing graduation rates, and successively stronger incoming classes (as measured by GPA and SAT scores). It’s a record that, for two years running, has put Eastern Connecticut at the top of U.S. News and World Report’s list of regional public universities in New England. The university’s strategic plan lists four main goals, one of which is to “ensure that students, staff, and faculty achieve their full potential.” A key priority under this goal is to provide more resources to faculty and staff to enhance the quality of student advising.

Student (dis)engagement

As far back as 2013, the university’s Academic Services Center had greatly expanded its offerings, and more students were taking advantage of them. The changes



Nicolas Simon, an assistant professor of sociology, meets virtually with students often—including regular Q&A sessions on Tuesday evenings. Though on-campus interactions have been severely curtailed by the pandemic, Simon has always kept in close contact with his students.



stemmed from the revealing responses to questions about advising that were posed in the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). At the time, advising was solely in the hands of faculty, and clearly it wasn't working. Only 46 percent of freshmen and 49 percent of seniors said they talked with a faculty member about their career plans, and on a scale of 1 to 5 they rated advising a 2.9. "They were getting their 'advice' from their mothers, their friends, their cousins," Núñez said. One survey respondent said: "I have seen my advisor once all year, and she causes me more stress than my school work."

The college also learned important lessons about advising by examining a less-than-successful summer bridge program. The six-week boot camp, Summer Transition at Eastern Program/Contract Admissions Program (STEP/CAP), serves high school graduates who are the first in their families to attend college or who come from low-income families or other underserved groups. About 80 students are admitted each summer. But until recently, first-year retention for the cohort was only 65 percent. The problem, the college found, was a break in the advising link. "They were spoon-fed all summer," and then would struggle in the fall, Núñez said. The lesson? "You can't let them go," she said. "Advisement is the key. You have to stay close to an advisor freshman year."



Elsa Núñez, Eastern Connecticut University's president since 2006, says there's no mystery about what makes college students successful, particularly in their first year. "Advisement is the key," she says.

The NSSE findings also prompted some difficult conversations with faculty members, who had to be sold on the new plan that featured "dual advising"—with professional advisors assuming advising duties that lie outside the faculty member's academic subjects. The idea was to free up the faculty so they could focus on course-specific counseling. Faculty would also continue to work with the career center to advise students on life after Eastern.

Faculty resisted initially, but with a popular earth science professor helping President Núñez get their buy-in, and with \$4 million from a Title III grant and other sources, Núñez was able to establish the new model. The dual-advising approach gives students advice at four crucial points in their academic journeys: before enrollment, during the first year, when choosing a major, and planning a career.



Brett Harrell, a senior at Eastern studying criminal justice and psychology, also works two jobs: as a resident assistant on campus and also as a teacher in an after-school program. Here he confers with fellow RAs Megan Perrin (center) and Meagan Hanratty.



At the center of the Eastern Connecticut campus, in the shadow of its iconic clock tower, stands the university's massive library building. Inside, on the first floor, the Academic Services Center offers tutoring, writing help, and study skills development.

"I had never had this kind of advising," said Brett Harrell, an Eastern senior majoring in criminal justice and sociology while juggling two jobs: one as a resident assistant, the other as a teacher at an after-care center. Harrell aims for a career in community psychology, working with juveniles and using forensic tools to understand the roots of social problems. After high school, he first attended the University of Maine, where he found himself prepared academically but not culturally. "It was just a very different vibe," Harrell said, adding that advising did little to smooth the transition or keep him at Maine.

At Eastern, he found a campus that was smaller and, to him, more welcoming. And in Nicolas Simon, he found a particularly knowledgeable, candid, and engaged advisor. "Simon got right on my butt," Harrell recalled. Harrell had been pursuing a pre-veterinary program at Maine, but after consulting with Simon he realized that sociology and criminology fed his passion for understanding, not just animals, but humans—in particular, what makes young people tick. Simon helped him carefully map out a three-year academic plan to prepare him for graduate school and a career in the field, and the two have met frequently since.

At Maine, by contrast, he had met with his advisor just once, which is how he made the mistake of taking 17 credits—including biology and astronomy his first semester. "Simon made me see that I needed to be more realistic," he said, as he continued his studies at Eastern.

When Harrell considered adding a minor in psychology to his existing double majors, Simon pushed against it, believing it would overload his advisee. Instead, he showed Harrell how he could get the necessary grounding in psychology by taking independent studies or courses in graduate school. And in one case, with Harrell's upper-level course load already full, Simon frankly advised him to take a lower-level course "just to get a good grade" and earn required credits.

Advisors at Eastern, whether professional staff or peer advisors (student helpers), don't just wait for students to come to them. They set up tables in dining halls and at other campus locations so they can meet with students at key points during the academic year. Advising also goes hand in hand with other efforts to boost student success, including guaranteed tutoring and re-teaching in challenging courses, and special centers (for women, foreign students, LGBTQ students, and others) that enhance students' sense of belonging.

Recognizing real-life priorities

Such efforts were welcomed by students like Rienzo. She says that Simon, who is also a parent, deeply understands her need to put her family first. “He made me feel that making my child my priority was a good thing, a strength,” she said. “He didn’t make me feel old and uncomfortable. He didn’t make me feel like a massive failure.” While her own academics were necessarily the focus of their discussions, they sometimes overlapped with social concepts they were discussing in class. So, in an advising bonus, real-life experiences helped enhance her academic learning.

The improvements at Eastern have had measurable effects. The year after the new advising model took effect, student satisfaction at Eastern rose from 69 percent to 78 percent. From 2008 to 2012, according to NSSE, students increased their ratings 31 percentage points for faculty accessibility, 11 points for a supportive campus, and 12 points for prompt faculty feedback.

All of this feeds into higher levels of student success: In 2018, freshman-to-sophomore retention was 79.3 percent—an increase of six points from 10 years previously. The graduation rate, at 55 percent, is the highest in the state university system. As to the outcomes for the STEP/CAP boot camp, strengthening that advising link to the first semester has led to an 80 percent retention rate in the summer program and higher graduation rates for the students who participated.

Given the trends, officials at Eastern are intent on building on this progress, including conducting even more research on student success. As the university uses forums, focus groups, and modeling to collect more data about students who need support, officials are also improving advisor training and discussing ways that professional advisors and faculty advisors can best complement each other.

A top priority for the institutional research department is to develop models of student success for each major, so that, in the university’s words, “faculty and



Brett Harrell chats often via videoconference with advisor Nicolas Simon. Simon, who earns consistent praise from the students he works with, is helping Harrell plan and prepare for graduate school.



Alison Garewski (left), director of the Academic Services Center, confers with Jessica Ruddy, who serves as assistant director. In-person help has resumed at the center, which served students virtually during the pandemic's worst periods.

students can see the path taken by successful students who have come before them." That means looking more intently for barriers and warning signs, and then documenting them so timely interventions can be designed and implemented by faculty. Officials also are improving ways to identify at-risk students and seeking the most effective methods to communicate with them.

For these and other goals, the university is holding itself accountable. It measures the percentage of students who receive financial aid literacy training, use the Academic Services Center, receive targeted intervention, and fail to meet academic standards. The college gauges student satisfaction with academic advising as measured by NSSE. It also tracks progress among the faculty, measuring how well faculty members use the advising system to communicate with each other and how often they take advantage of professional development for

advising. The better the college does on these measures, Núñez says, the closer it will get to its goal of becoming a "university of first choice."

Rienzo, who is set to graduate in December, is happy now about the choice she made to attend Eastern—though she admits that she was initially concerned about the advising requirements. "It's been my experience that the more hands are involved, the more hurdles there are," she said. Luckily, Eastern proved her wrong. "Advising saved my butt," she said. "It kept me from making wild choices."

After graduation, Rienzo expects to build on her current job as a legislative aide with the Connecticut General Assembly. As for Harrell, having excelled at Eastern, he now has his sights on the graduate program in community psychology at the University of New Haven, one of the oldest such programs in the nation. ■

At Miami Dade, 'appreciative advising' means really listening

MIAMI — When Daniela Figueroa started at Miami Dade College, she felt utterly at sea. She had graduated from an area high school with a Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education Diploma, an award from an honors-level program that often allows students to forgo entry-level college courses. She had been a good student in high school, loved science, and was curious about and interested in many other things. But the size and scope of Miami Dade—the nation's largest community college, with 95,000 students—all but overwhelmed her.





Daniela Figueroa, shown here on her “new” campus at Florida International University, credits the staff at Miami Dade College with helping her prepare for FIU. Figueroa has particularly high praise for her advisor, Ania Canales Toledo, who guided her through a host of pandemic-related challenges. “I probably bothered her so much!” Figueroa recalls. “I texted her every four days or so with all kinds of random questions.”

Had it not been for a brother attending the same college, Figueroa might have fallen badly off track. She had hoped for “a helping hand” that first year, she said, but even though she was assigned an advisor, she had to ask for help. She was considering biology as a major only because she had enjoyed it in high school, not because she had any idea of where it would get her in the long run.

“I thought the advisor had to come to me,” Figueroa said. “I was not used to the freedom at all.” She didn’t know how to drop and add courses; nor did she know that her Cambridge certificate allowed her to opt out of freshman English. “So, I retook an English course I didn’t even have to take,” she said.

About eight years ago, Miami Dade reviewed all aspects of student support at its eight campuses, looking at the differences in outcomes for specific populations, from entry to graduation. Advising was one of the facets that went under the microscope. Researchers found that, even though advising was occurring on a large scale, it was more accidental than intentional. If students sought it out, they would get it. Only in certain cases was advising required, such as when a student fell into probation—often too late for the student to get back on track.

Researchers surveyed more than 900 students and convened focus groups over a period of two months. And no matter where they fell in the student population,



Miami Dade student Martin Rivera (left), who’s studying to be an emergency medical technician, works with his advisor, Gustavo Cuervo, on the college’s Homestead campus.

whether honors students or English Language Learners, virtually all respondents gave the same feedback: “They wanted intervention,” said Lenore Rodicio, who served Miami Dade for 18 years, most recently as executive vice president and provost. “They wanted someone to tell them what to do, and they wanted it early. They said, ‘We get all caught up in our classes, and then we wake up one day and we are on academic probation.’”

The overwhelming response prompted the college to look at advising reforms as among the fastest, most effective ways to improve student success. And officials realized that, just by making small changes, they could get students back on track with better ways to relay just-in-time information.

The three-stage approach

Rodicio, who left Miami Dade at the end of 2020 and is now a senior fellow with the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program, looks back with pride at the strides the college made during her tenure to improve advising.

“We wanted to create something that was more intentional based on where students were in their academic journeys,” Rodicio recalled. That meant the college needed to engage students as early as high school. So, they devised a system that supports students at three different stages: in high school, in their first semester, and near the end of their time at the college.



Before the changes, Miami Dade had sent recruiters to high schools, setting up the tables at college fairs and putting out the usual brochures and swag. Sometimes these efforts led to admissions, sometimes they didn't. Under the new system, the college trains these recruiters as high school/college advisors, so they now do double duty. One advisor is assigned to a caseload of high schools and high school counselors and students—mostly seniors—with whom to develop relationships. They hold informational events such as “Career March Madness” and “Financial Aid February,” ensuring that every prospective Miami Dade student has an advisor to contact throughout the enrollment process. The result of the high school effort: A measurable increase in first-year applications and converting applicants to enrollees.

The second stage of Miami Dade advising is the handoff to a professional advisor at the college. This transfer occurs after students have completed an online component of their orientation. “The goal is to teach the students how to use the system, not do it for them,” Rodicio explained. Also, handling some of the nuts and bolts this way frees up advisors to talk about higher-level issues. Advisors also are now becoming specialists in specific areas of academic interest. At this point, some students are ready to develop an academic map. If not, they are required to meet with an advisor to tackle that task later in the semester.

Students’ biggest problems tend to occur in the first semester, said Ania Canales Toledo, a full-time advisor at Miami Dade. They are taking too many classes or the wrong classes; they want to drop or add classes; they want to change their academic plan; they’re having trouble adjusting to college life. They want information about financial aid, clubs and activities and mental health services. Often, they don’t understand the consequences of dropping courses—including hits to financial aid that can occur if they fail to maintain a certain number of hours. Toledo’s job is to make sure students have a full picture. “So often the problem is not academics,” she said. “It’s just because they don’t understand the system.”

In addition to regularly scheduled meetings, Toledo sends countless emails and holds a two-hour daily window for walk-in visits. There are group sessions, as well. “At the end, I’ll ask: ‘Any more questions?’ And they’ll say, ‘No, I’m good.’ And then you get five more emails on the same subject. They still want that one-on-one.”

In the third advising stage, in the second year, the responsibility for reaching out falls more to the student, and the advisor serves more as a mentor who helps the student look for transfer opportunities and jobs. This group of advisors includes faculty volunteers and department chairpersons. The goal is for the student and advisor to have at least one interaction per semester. “This is the most ‘fuzzy’ interaction,” Rodicio said. “The others are a lot more structured.” Toledo tries to send her charges just the right amount of emails at this point (“too many and they will ignore them”) with information about scholarships, summer programs, and the like.



Patricia Felipe (left) and Ania Canales Toledo have developed a special bond, one solidified by their shared Cuban heritage. Felipe, who came to the United States at age 15, appreciates her advisor's caring approach and her attention to detail. "Ania taught me a lot of things I didn't know about," she says, "like scholarships that were available and that you have to fill out the FAFSA every year."



These and other processes at Miami Dade continue to evolve. The college has adopted EAB Navigate technology, a platform that gives advisors electronic tracking tools and allows them to send students text and email alerts. The idea is to free up advisors and mentors for more substantive interactions. This is important, because despite all the improvements the college has made to the advising process, its student-to-advisor ratio remains high, so far preventing advisors from adopting a classic case-management approach.

Not every faculty member makes an effective student advisor, and Miami Dade wants to ensure the best matches. To make sure only those who really want to serve do so, the college doesn't assign, advisors volunteer. They undergo regular training and attend workshops, and they're given opportunities to shadow an experienced advisor. They must keep certain advising hours and are required to log their student interactions, along with their outcomes. In performance reviews, advising is counted as part of their contribution to campus.

"At the end of the day the most important quality in an advisor, particularly given our low-income population, is empathy," Rodicio said. "These students don't drop out because they aren't doing well in their classes or because their courses are challenging; it's because life happens. They lost their job, their transportation. So, it's vital having an advisor who understands that these are



Ania Canales Toledo, a senior academic and career advisor at Miami Dade, makes it her mission to really listen to students and identify their needs. "So often the problem is not academics," she says. "It's just because they don't understand the system."

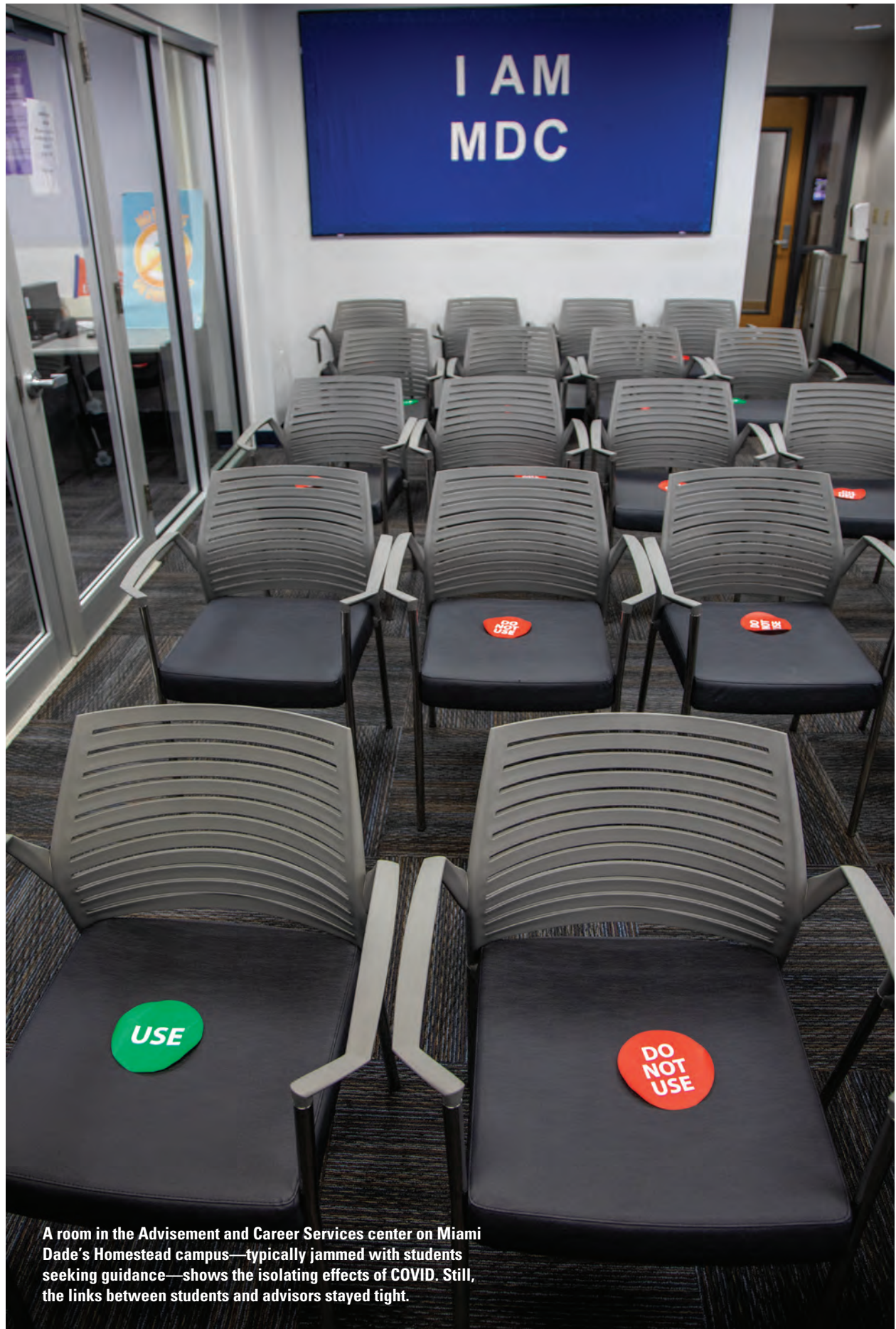
human beings," she added. "Students have a lot of facets that we don't usually think about when they are just a number and a schedule sitting on a screen in front of you."

Chemistry major Patricia Felipe, 20, is not a struggling student. But as one who came to this country at age 15, she particularly appreciates that Toledo is a fellow Cuban immigrant. That means the two can occasionally slip into "Spanglish," and that Toledo can explain important differences in educational practices between Cuba and the United States.

"Ania taught me a lot of things I didn't know about," says Felipe, "like scholarships that were available and that you have to fill out the FAFSA every year." Most important, Felipe found a kindred spirit. "Ania came here when she was 19 years old, so she knew everything that was going to happen with me, because it happened to her, too."



Patricia Felipe, a Miami Dade chemistry major who hopes someday to go on to medical school, is also a member of the college's Tech Squad. Here she works on a computer in the library on the college's West Campus—nearly deserted because of the pandemic.



A room in the Advisement and Career Services center on Miami Dade's Homestead campus—typically jammed with students seeking guidance—shows the isolating effects of COVID. Still, the links between students and advisors stayed tight.

‘We WANT you to bug us’

Some educators and experts advocate what they call “intrusive advising,” perhaps as a counterpoint to the type of disconnected, infrequent interactions that have traditionally defined the student-advisor relationship.

However apt the term may be, it’s not one Rodicio cares for.

“I don’t think advising can ever be too intrusive,” she said. “We hear from students: ‘We *want* you to bug us. We want you to tell us what to do. Don’t assume we have got this figured out because we don’t.’”

To meet students’ needs, Miami Dade practices what Rodicio and others call “appreciative advising,” training advisors to listen intently—not just to answer questions but to uncover students’ reasons for asking them. “If they say, ‘I need to drop this class; how do I do that?’ You don’t just say, ‘Oh you go here and click this button,’” Rodicio said. “You ask: ‘What is happening? Why are you not doing well? Can I help connect you with a tutor?’ You want to get what we can do to keep them on track. And quite a bit of training goes into that.”

“Advising is critically important to student success,” Rodicio said. “At the beginning of the pandemic, for instance, we put out college-wide emails, but it doesn’t matter how detailed the instructions on a website or how many FAQs. A lot of times, students just need someone to listen to them and talk things through with. Many times, we rely on the faculty to do that, but having someone with them the entire journey is important. They need to know there is someone who cares about their progress and can serve as mentor in many ways. And we have seen some really beautiful relationships that can develop.”

One such relationship bloomed between Figueroa and Toledo. The two were matched because Toledo was the biology advisor. But Figueroa was starting to question her initial choice of major and was wildly undecided about the alternatives. Once again, she found herself weighing immediate and genuine interest against long-term career prospects. She was working at the time as a teacher at an after-care center and was pondering a switch to social work. But she couldn’t imagine herself in that field forever. At the same time, she was doing well



Gustavo Cuervo, a senior academic and career advisor at Miami Dade, looks forward to the post-pandemic era and the return of more than 1,800 students to the Homestead campus.



Daniela Figueroa, a third-year student after her recent transfer to Florida International, looks back gratefully to advisor Ania Toledo, and to her time at Miami Dade. “It was totally worth it in terms of academics, preparation, and advising,” she says.

in a Japanese class, and she loved language in general, as well as politics. Toledo helped Figueroa see where she was headed: international relations. That is the major she is now happily pursuing after transferring to Florida International University.

At Miami Dade, Toledo and Figueroa forged a particularly meaningful advisor-advisee bond. Toledo had originally reached out to Figueroa, and the two talked every couple of weeks at first. But as Figueroa closed in on graduation, she sought out her advisor more often. “I probably bothered her so much!” she says. “I texted her every four days or so with all kinds of random questions.” Toledo always had a fast answer or knew someone who did. Figueroa also had to leave Miami Dade a semester early so she could start on time at Florida International, and the only way to do that was to test out of some courses. Figueroa said Toledo found all of the resources she needed—tutors, study guides, and the like—to do that.

The pandemic hit Figueroa and her family particularly hard. She temporarily lost her after-care job, and her single mother and sister also found themselves out of work. When Miami Dade moved all its classes online,

Figueroa was concerned that she wouldn’t get the advising that she now needed more than ever. She needn’t have worried. Toledo was with her through it all, meeting with her online once or twice a week, helping her figure out the right combination of courses for her new major, assisting her with scholarship applications, and providing moral support. “I had been a little disappointed at first to go to a community college,” Figueroa admitted, looking back on her two years at Miami Dade. “But it was totally worth it in terms of academics, preparation, and advising.”

Thousands of other students appear to be benefiting from the college’s efforts, as well. With 90 percent of its population students of color, 67 percent from low-income households, and about half speaking English as a second language, Miami Dade has posted some impressive outcomes. Its three-year graduation rate for first-year, full-time students, at 33 percent, is considerably higher than average. And, remarkably, the college shows virtually no difference in success rates between white students and students of color. Officials are convinced that “appreciative advising” has contributed significantly to these impressive results. ■

At this South Dakota college, advising and teaching go hand in hand

WATERTOWN, S.D. — As a part-time bookkeeper and the mother of three young children, Audrey Urban was already spinning several piled-high plates. And then she signed up for a full load of classes at Lake Area Technical College, aiming for a career in agricultural finance—a particularly complicated field of accounting. Along with the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, it hasn't been easy. But Urban fully credits her faculty advisors for helping her keep it all together, and for guiding her to an engaging major she never knew existed.





Lorna Hofer (left) and Kerry Stager are instructors in the financial services department at Lake Area Technical College, but they do more than teach classes. Between them, thanks to the South Dakota college's intensive approach to student advising, the pair also serve as advisors to 80 students.

"[Elsewhere] you wouldn't get that one-on-one," Urban said, praising her advisors, Lorna Hofer and Kerry Stager, for going the extra mile to make their students feel a sense of belonging. "They both really, truly care," Urban said. "I have had so much thrown at me—as a mom and as a student. They can see your potential before even you can. If not for them, there is no way I would be doing this."

Lake Area Technical College is a two-year institution in eastern South Dakota, 100 miles north of Sioux Falls. It trains about 2,600 students each year for careers as airplane mechanics, computer programmers, accountants, emergency medical technicians and scores of other in-demand jobs. The college produces truly impressive results: Nearly 75 percent of its students complete their programs within three years, almost triple the national average for community colleges. The employment rate for graduates is virtually 100 percent, with average starting salaries that are higher than most.

It helps, certainly, that South Dakota has enjoyed one of the country's lowest unemployment rates over the past several years. In December, even in the midst of a spike in COVID-19 cases, the jobless rate in the state stood at 3.5 percent. Lake Area Tech's student body is also far less diverse (92 percent white) and of higher income than that of many other two-year colleges. And 85 percent of students attend full time. Still, students face plenty of challenges here. And what helps them meet those challenges—along with relevant, hands-on instruction and close alignment to employer needs—is unusually intensive, consistent, one-on-one advising that focuses intently on making sure students stay on track.

Getting personal is professional

Lake Area Tech differs from most higher education institutions in that all advisors are also faculty members, and for all of them, advising is a far bigger part of their jobs than at most schools. Instructors here are well aware that they can't just be knowledgeable about their field and able to convey that knowledge well. They know they must work with students in a more personal way—counseling them, nudging and encouraging them, often after business hours, to make sure they succeed in their courses and graduate on time. In short, the teacher-advisor role is highly integrated here, and deeply holistic.

Intense advising starts immediately upon enrollment, with students choosing a clearly defined pathway right at the start. The first advising session ensures that students understand the route and the expectations clearly. Stager and Hofer, both instructors in the financial services department, co-advise 80 students, along with teaching them the business and finance skills they'll need in their careers. The advising function helps their teaching, and vice versa, the educators say. To do both things well, they must get to know their students: their circumstances, their behaviors, and their learning styles. And, as instructors, they must be highly responsive.

Accounting student Audrey Urban (left) meets with instructor/advisor Kerry Stager prior to class. Urban, a busy mother of three as well as a full-time student, has high praise for the help she's had from both Stager and Hofer. "They both really, truly care," Urban says. "If not for them, there is no way I would be doing this."



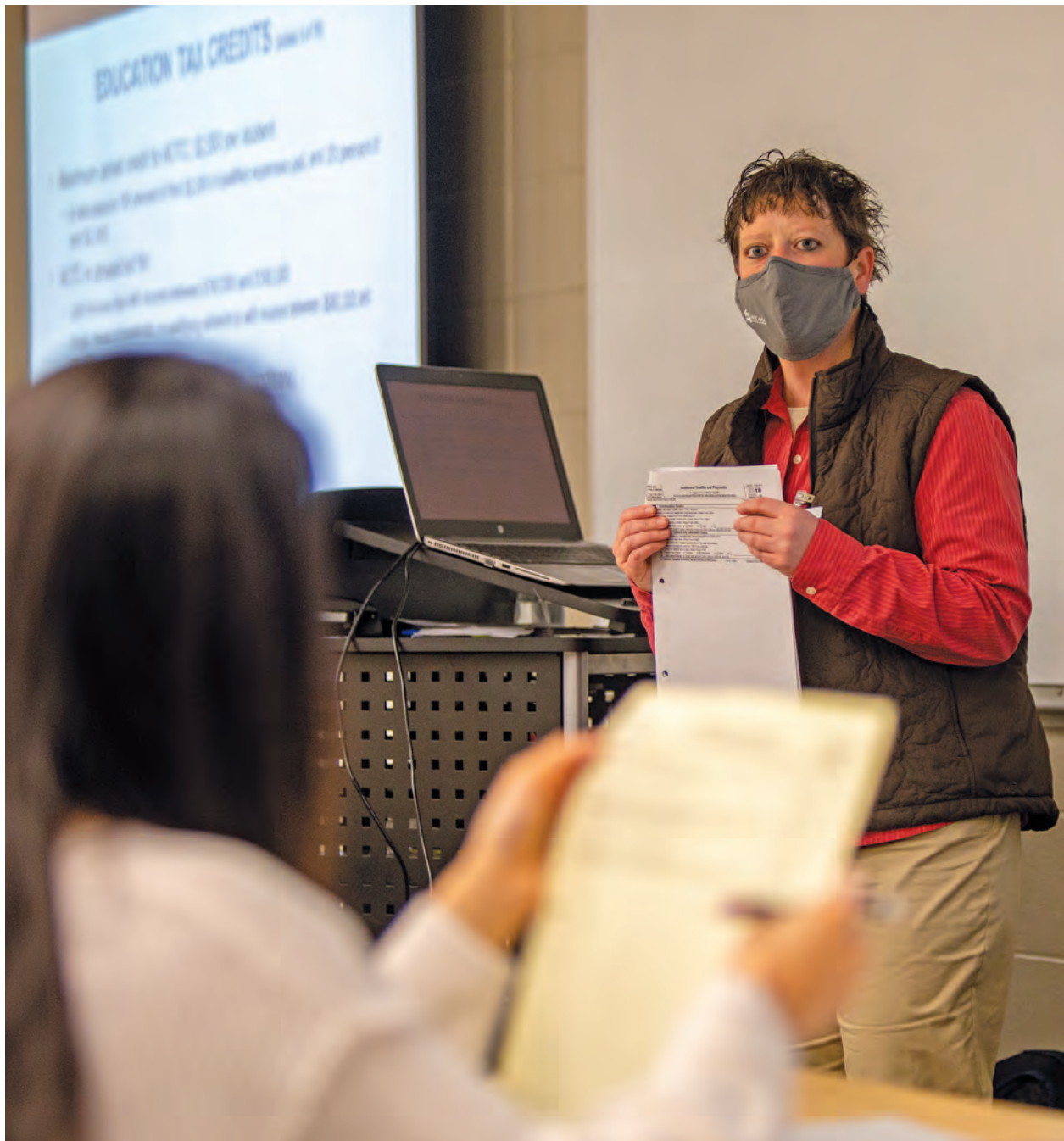


"One of the components of our overall philosophy is that every person here has a role in contributing to overall student success," said Diane Stiles, vice president at Lake Area Tech. "Having the advisors being the instructors makes the most sense because they have those relationships with students. When a student builds a relationship outside of college, that's a better indicator of graduation than even test scores, so everything we do is based on relationship building and building trust with students."

By all accounts, Stager and Hofer embrace this culture, cultivating relationships starting with enrollment and continuing with required meetings once each

semester for each student. Along with a sign-up sheet, all of their students receive a spreadsheet displaying their classes and grades for that term. Students must also respond in writing to questions that will inform later discussion: "What were your strengths this semester? What do you need to work on? What do you want to do in the future?"

At the check-in meetings, a marathon two days of back-to-back 20-minute sessions, Stager and Hofer ask harder questions: "What are we going to do about this? What changes do you need to make? What resources do you need?" Then they draw up a specific action plan. For



Instructor/advisor Lorna Hofer leads a tax-preparation class at Lake Area Tech. Hofer, who's been at the college since 2013, combines her experience in educational technology and business education with a commitment to personally connect with each student.



Greg Klein, an instructor in aviation maintenance technology, offers real-world advice to students Samuel Isaac (left) and Yassine Ben Saida. Klein, himself a 1977 Lake Area Tech graduate, is an Air Force veteran with experience maintaining a variety of aircraft, including F-4D Phantoms and F-15 Eagles.



Lake Area Tech accounting graduate Ricki Boyle works from home on a hospital payroll as daughters Aspen, 4, and Gracie, 1, entertain themselves. She can't say enough about the support she got at the college, particularly from Hofer and Stager. "They became my second family," Boyle says. "They were 100 percent in my corner 24/7—and they never let me stop knowing that."

instance, a struggling student who was appealing a dismissal action was asked to sign a contract with Stager to meet with her twice a week. (She did, and she finished the next term with straight Bs.)

The instructor/advisors at Lake Area Tech have encountered every imaginable barrier to student success, both academic and personal, including mental illness and substance abuse. Though advisors obviously are not the ones to treat the latter issues, their knowledge of their students ensures that problems are unearthed, and that students get the help they need. For instance, when Urban was struggling with a hospitalized child and the complications of the pandemic, the advisors urged her to focus exclusively on her family, assuring her that the work would get done. They also referred her to a counselor.

The college's advisors also serve as career mentors, drawing from their own work experience and modeling the so-called soft skills that employers often find lacking. And the best of them offer that extra something: "Some have said we're like their second mom," Stager said.



Rebecca Honeyman, a 32-year-old mother of two, is studying business at Lake Area Tech. She says the advisors at the college helped her resurrect an academic career that derailed years ago at a Minnesota university. "I wasn't ready," Honeyman now admits.

"Well, I'm glad to play that role." Rebecca Honeyman, another Stager advisee, happily confirms that. "The instant I got to know her, I knew her passion is in mentorship," Honeyman said. "I can go to her about anything."

Honeyman, a 32-year-old mother of two, started college years ago at Minnesota State University-Moorhead, but left after just over a month. "I wasn't ready," she said. Likewise, recent Lake Area Tech graduate Ricki Boyle, 32, had changed schools and career plans several times



Honeyman, here working on forms for her tax-preparation class, has special praise for her advisor, Kerry Stager. "The instant I got to know her, I knew her passion is in mentorship," Honeyman says. "I can go to her about anything."

before arriving at the college. She earned two certificates—one as a nurse's aide and another as an emergency medical technician—before settling on a career as a helicopter pilot. But then a chronic illness “shattered my plan for life,” she said. She quit school.

While working as an administrative assistant for a state aviation agency, Boyle discovered an interest in accounting, and enrolled part time in the finance program at Lake Area Tech. “They became my second family,” Boyle said of Stager and Hofer and her fellow students. “I was nontraditional and completely online, and that added to the challenge, but I had 24/7 support. I went through some life events, including the death of a very young brother. But (the advisors) gave me their cell phone numbers and said to call them at 9 p.m. if it meant my baby would be sleeping. They were 100 percent in my corner 24/7—and they never let me stop knowing that.”

The deep integration of teaching and advising, which

has been the rule here since Lake Area Tech's inception, differs from the approach taken by South Dakota's other technical institutions, where non-teaching staff, called student success coaches, do the advising, Stiles said. Lake Area Tech's administrators and faculty can see the appeal of this bifurcated approach, but they're convinced it doesn't serve students well.

Stiles concedes that the intense advising responsibilities can give new faculty members pause. Because they are still learning their craft, the curricula, and the academic pathways to degrees, many see it as one more burden to bear. Some don't work out. But turnover is low here. And the instructor/advisors get plenty of professional development opportunities, both in the mechanics of registration and scheduling and in the more personal aspects of the job. All instructors are matched with peer mentors who are purposely chosen from outside the department so they can provide a broader perspective.



Troy Breitag, supervisor of the Med/Fire Rescue program at Lake Area Tech, runs his students through accident scenarios. Having served 24 years as a firefighter and paramedic for Watertown Fire Rescue, Breitag is well positioned to offer practical career advice.



Darren Shelton, an admissions counselor at Lake Area Tech, meets with prospective student Jacob Berberich and Jacob's father, Tom. The college's intensive, personal approach to advising is always part of the pitch.

An exemplary outlier

"It's great to see these welding instructors who have had no formal training in counseling and advising to get the training here," said LuAnn Strait, director of student services. "They have such a different outlook on things, and just to see them be these advisors, it's amazing how well they do. I can't think of a faculty member that does not go above and beyond for these students."

In its mission, its makeup, and its particular niche in higher education, Lake Area Tech is in many ways an outlier. It is certainly distinct in its approach to student advising, and in the resources dedicated to it. The college's advisee-to-advisor ratio is about 17-1. Many other institutions have ratios of hundreds to one.

So, what can other institutions learn from Lake Area

Technical College? Stiles offered at least one piece of advice on how to improve advising:

"No matter how many students you have, whatever model you have, whether you have student success coaches, make sure that faculty members play an active role—whether they're advisors or not," she said. "And give them support, because they are the ones seeing the students in class, observing behaviors. Just make sure faculty plays *some* role in that advising process."

And her advice points to another lesson: that the capacity for academic/professional/social intimacy beats in the heart of every teacher. It's rarely easy. In fact, especially with the complications of the pandemic, Hofer and Stager admit that their jobs can be all-consuming. But neither can imagine working any other way. "You just do it," Stager said. "You make the time." ■



Lumina Foundation
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March 2021

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Photography: Shawn Spence Photography and Al Ferreira Photography • Printing: Post Printing