

CUNY CareerPATH:

Implementing a Comprehensive Student Support Model in CUNY CareerPATH



A graphic element consisting of five blue circles of increasing size, arranged in a diagonal line from the bottom left towards the top right, positioned above the text.
CUNY CareerPATH

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Implementing a Comprehensive Student Support Model in CUNY CareerPATH

The CUNY Career Preparation for Adults through Training and Higher Education (CareerPATH) program provided occupational training to adult students and responded to the workforce needs of five local industries. While in CUNY CareerPATH, students trained for new jobs and prepared to advance in their careers and enter college. Eight CUNY colleges were part of the consortium, which was co-managed by Kingsborough Community College and the University's Central Office of Academic Affairs Continuing Education and Workforce Programs Unit (Central Office). The initiative was funded through a \$19.86M award from the United States Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program.

From fall 2012 through fall 2013, CUNY CareerPATH staff created, implemented, and refined a comprehensive student support model. (For an overview of the CareerPATH program, see Appendix A.) Through this process we learned many things—both about effectively advising students and about how to structure program-wide professional development. Here are the most important lessons we learned:

Student Support Model

- Strong, evidence-based advisement models exist at CUNY and around the country. We should use existing resources when designing programs and student support structures. We found that the Community College Resource Center's "What We Know about Nonacademic Student Supports" and Accelerated Study in Associate Programs' (ASAP) advisement model to be the best foundations for a CareerPATH advisement model.
- Our advisement model was built on three core principles. Advising should strive to be **proactive**, **developmental**, and **differentiated in its delivery**.
- A streamlined needs assessment was a simple and elegant way to plan for a proactive, developmental, and differentiated approach to advisement.
- In order to implement this evidence-based approach, advisers need to have reasonable caseloads in the range of 75-150 students per adviser. This is a resource-intensive model. CUNY can only fully utilize this model in grant-funded programs.

- Advisers and other frontline staff need tools and approaches that are efficient. Interventions that are seen as overly time consuming will not be implemented.
- Of all the program staff, instructors usually spend the most time with students. It is important that they communicate with advisers about student progress and barriers to student success. This communication should be simple and short, because most instructors are only paid for their teaching time.

Professional Development for Advisers

- In order to have a true and lasting impact on programmatic practices, professional development for advisers needs to be consistent and developmental. One-time meetings are ineffective. Professional development workshops should be a part of a coherent series that builds off itself.
- Professional development workshops should utilize pedagogical best practices. Workshops should include facilitated discussions, group work, individual work, and other engaging activities. Lecturing should be kept to a minimum.
- Frontline staff desire and benefit from opportunities to network and share best practices with each other. CareerPATH and ASAP staff designed and delivered a conference on advising for 75 professionals from 12 different CUNY programs. The conference was a big success. Regular professional development and networking opportunities should exist for a variety of staff lines including instructors, job developers, program managers, fiscal staff, etc.
- When designing a professional development series, it is imperative to include frontline staff in the planning process. Tools and policies that were shaped in partnership with frontline staff were widely implemented and had lasting programmatic impact.
 - It is crucial to get buy-in from the supervisors of frontline staff. They have the final say in how a frontline staff uses their time.
- Staff will take advantage of online resources if they are engaging and updated regularly.

Detailed Case Study

The CUNY Career Preparation for Adults through Training and Higher Education (CareerPATH) program provided occupational training to adult students and responded to the workforce needs of five local industries. While in CUNY CareerPATH, students trained for new jobs and prepared to advance in their careers and enter college. Eight CUNY colleges were part of the consortium, which was co-managed by Kingsborough Community College and the University's Central Office of Academic Affairs Continuing Education and Workforce Programs Unit (Central Office). The initiative was funded through a \$19.86M award from the United States Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program. Below is a detailed account of CUNY Central Office's experience creating, implementing and refining a comprehensive student support model in CareerPATH.

Part I - An Ineffective Approach to Improving the Capstone Project

In fall of 2012, CareerPATH staff from CUNY Central began a survey of CareerPATH advisement. We found that there was significant room for improvement in how CareerPATH staff advised and supported our students. Our first initiative was to revamp the capstone projects that students were completing during the CareerPATH Seminar, a series of college and career readiness workshops taught by the advisers. CUNY Central spent a great deal of time creating a rubric, a rubric background, and rubric guidelines that would change the way advisers looked at, and the students completed the capstone projects.

CUNY Central unveiled the new project guidelines and rubric during an adviser professional development meeting in December of 2012. After the meeting, we attempted to assist the advisers as they implemented the new capstone projects using the guidelines we created. We found advisers were not interested in changing the capstone projects and were reluctant to use the rubric.

We discovered two major problems with our attempt to improve the capstone projects. The first problem was that the rubric and new projects, while well-received conceptually, represented an increase in the paperwork and administrative burden put on the advisers. Advisers already felt overburdened by documentation. They were reluctant to fill out more paperwork for every student. The second major problem was that CUNY Central did not involve the advisers, the frontline staff, when determining the focus of the advising initiative.

CUNY Central maintained a commitment to improving advisement and student support in CareerPATH, but it was clear that we needed a different approach to make that happen.

Part II - Engaging Advisers

As we were thinking about how to move forward, CUNY Central called the individual advisers at each college and posed a simple question: how can we help you? This represented a marked shift in tactics. We moved away from a top-down approach to change, and positioned ourselves as co-collaborators with the frontline staff. We would work together to define and implement program improvements from this point forward.

While we heard many different responses to the question of “How can we help you,” one major theme emerged. CareerPATH advisers were feeling overwhelmed. They felt as though they didn’t have enough time or tools to deal with the myriad of issues facing their CareerPATH students. (CareerPATH served unemployed and unemployable adults. These adults often had multiple family obligations. They were often low-skilled academically. They usually lived in precarious economic positions. They often lacked the skills, tools, and supports to deal with the minor and major crises they faced on a day-to-day basis.)

CUNY Central decided to hold another adviser meeting in March of 2013. That meeting focused on sharing tools, resources, and strategies to help advisers more efficiently serve their students. A representative from Accelerated Study in Associate Programs’ (ASAP)¹ presented the advisement model they used. A representative from NYCcollegeline.org discussed how the website functions and how it could be used by advisers and students to easily find information about college enrollment (one of the major goals of CareerPATH). During this meeting we also conducted an activity on ways to shorten and streamline the intake and assessment documents advisers were completing.

As we followed up with advisers individually following the March meeting, there was a palpable excitement about the workshop. Advisers felt like their concerns were heard. All the tools and strategies presented offered the real possibility for advisers to more efficiently and effectively support students.

The advisers expressed a desire to continue the conversations that were started at the meeting. We agreed to hold adviser workshops quarterly. The next question was how to maintain momentum during the three months between workshops.

Part III- Maintaining Momentum

CUNY Central maintained consistent contact with the advisers after the March meeting. There were personal thank you emails sent to each adviser. There were phone calls to check in. CUNY Central held optional conference calls to plan for the next quarterly workshop.

CUNY Central also created an online adviser group through its Ning website to maintain an ongoing dialogue about advisement research and resources. (Ning is an online platform that CareerPATH used to create a program-specific social network.) The online group posted advisement resources and created a

digital space for discussion. Advisers shared articles, posed questions, and engaged in an open dialogue about what they were learning (see Appendix B.)

Some CareerPATH program directors, the supervisors of CareerPATH advisers, were hesitant to have their staff participate in the online community or participate in the conference calls. These program directors were wary of overburdening their advisers with tasks outside of their core duties at the college. Other program directors were enthusiastic supporters of this work, and participated in the activities themselves. The programs with the most engaged directors also had the most engaged advisers. In the future, CUNY Central should work closely with the supervisors of frontline staff when creating a professional development structure and delivering workshops. The greater the buy-in from higher-level staff, the more successful the initiative will be.

Part IV - Developing a CareerPATH Advisement Model

Much of the enthusiasm following the March advisement meeting was due to ASAP's presentation. The advisement model they presented fully resonated with CareerPATH staff. It felt like a tangible, replicable model that would work well for CareerPATH advisers. The articles and resources shared on the Ning website, which validated the ASAP approach, further solidified advisers positive view of the ASAP advisement model.

Still, we had to translate ASAP's model for CareerPATH. We used the Community College Resource Center's (CCRC) practitioner packet [What We Know about Nonacademic Student Supports](#) as inspiration for how we would define and discuss CareerPATH's advisement model. We decided that the CareerPATH advisement model would have three main goals. CareerPATH advisement would strive to be [proactive/intrusive](#), developmental, and [differentiated in delivery](#).

1. "Intrusive supports can come in a number of forms. Making participation in traditional non-academic support activities such as advising or students success courses mandatory is one way. Early warning systems... are another. They key is to find ways to reach out to students before they are in dire need of help— before they even realize they need help themselves— and offer [proactive](#) assistance." ² (Emphasis added.)
2. "Theorists refer to this as a "[developmental](#)" approach to guidance and counseling because it is a process that occurs as an individual "develops" over time. Notably, the developmental approach requires sustained interaction and multiple meetings between counselor and student... The advisor is viewed as a partner in a multiphase process that includes guided exploration of the self, structured investigations into various career options; and the melding of interests, goals, and strengths into a coherent plan for

academic and career progress.” “In essence, developmental theories implicitly support a “pedagogy” of counseling and advising— a set of activities and orientations that lead to teaching students how to develop self-awareness, identify options, weight information, set goals, and make realistic plans.”³ (Emphasis added.)

3. Advisement can be differentiated by delivery. Advisement can happen in college success courses, one-on-one advising, group advising, whole-class workshops, e-advising, and peer-to-peer advisement.⁴

These core elements were embraced and championed by CareerPATH advisers, not only because they were evidence-based best practices, but because they held the possibility of increasing efficiency and decreasing the paperwork burden on advisers.

It is important to note that this advisement model is resource intensive. Approaching advisement in a proactive and developmental manner assumes that an adviser will work with a student consistently over time, helping them to identify and eventually overcome barriers. This approach has proven to be effective⁵ at increasing completion rates, but it can only work if advisers have a manageable case load of 75-150 students. Often, colleges and programs wish to implement proactive, developmental advising for all of their students, but can only afford to offer this support in grant-funded programs. Traditionally, community college advisers have caseloads of hundreds, even thousands of students. It is impossible to be proactive and developmental with caseloads that large.

Part V - Implementing the Model

In June of 2013, we held our next quarterly meeting with advisers. While the March meeting sketched a general outline of advising best practices, the model was formally rolled out in June. The model was already well accepted, since it had been crafted cooperatively over the past few months. Along with the discussion and roll out of the advisement model was a professional development activity centered on using a newly-created needs assessment. The needs assessment was based on ASAP’s advisement model.

ASAP’s advisement is developmental and proactive. ASAP organizes students into three needs groups: high, medium, and low. Both the amount and type of advisement students receive is based on their need level. This seems intuitive, but often advising is delivered without this type of organization. Advisers usually have an open-door policy. Students that need assistance actively seek out help by stopping by an adviser’s office. CareerPATH advisers were using a “drop-in advising” approach. This was problematic for a few reasons.

First, the amount of advisement someone received depended upon the student’s initiative. Many CareerPATH advisers lamented the fact that most of their neediest students did not seek help. High-achieving

individuals with a strong internal drive were the ones who utilized advisement the most. Secondly, students were only coming to advisers when their problems became critical. Students were dealing with low-level issues on their own. By the time students did share their problems, these small issues had become overwhelming problems too complex and too entrenched for the advisers to solve. Often low-level issues are a flag for larger barriers facing students. By flagging—and dealing with—low-level issues early, many crises could have been averted.

Second, drop-in advising was inefficient. Almost all interactions with students were happening on a one-on-one basis. Advisers noticed that many of these one-on-one conversations were being repeated with multiple students. Advisers could save time by answering common questions and addressing common concerns in group settings.

CUNY Central developed a needs assessment to solve some of the problems with the drop-in advising approach. The needs assessment was created by CUNY Central in partnership with Queensborough Community College's CareerPATH adviser. This collaborative process perfectly melded the system-wide CUNY Central perspective with the on-the-ground college perspective. We created a simple, elegant form that fit on two sheets of paper (see Appendix C, including a detailed example for how to use the tool). The first sheet outlined the support needed to successfully move students toward completion. This sheet “Support for Completion” 1) identifies each student's individual needs; 2) determines a student's comprehensive needs and assign them to a need-level group (high-, medium-, or low- needs); and 3) tabulates how many students within their cohort had the same type of need (i.e. time management needs). Previously, student support information was organized on a separate, narrative sheet for each student called an individual service plan (ISP). Using the ISP was time consuming, and it didn't allow the adviser to get a snapshot of the cohort and plan their delivery method accordingly.

The second sheet “Support for Future Goals” 1) outlines each student's individual needs as s/he progresses to the post-program stage and pursues either employment or further education; 2) tallies how many students within their cohort had the same type of need (i.e. resume writing); and 3) organizes and tallies post-program goals for individuals and the cohort.

Together, these two sheets held all the information an adviser needed to plan both the individual and cohort-wide student support interventions. Reading across the sheets an adviser could plan out a student's individualized support plan. Reading down the sheet, an adviser could make a decision about whether to address specific topics in small group, whole class, or one-on-one counseling.

As we walked the advisers through this document during the June meeting, it was very well received.

Advisers were happy that this tool significantly cut down on paperwork. It helped them organize their interventions into efficient delivery methods. Also, it forced advisers to identify and address a student's needs early. This sheet rationally and efficiently enabled CareerPATH advisers to be proactive, to be developmental, and to differentiate their delivery method.

Part VI - Working with Instructors and Other Staff

Over the summer, CUNY Central worked closely with the colleges as they implemented the advisement model and used the needs assessment. Through our discussions, we learned about the limitations of the adviser's role in student support. CareerPATH advisers worked closely with students during the intake process. They usually taught seminar/vestibule—an orientation-like experience at the beginning of the program. After seminar was over, advisers did not have much structured time with students in a classroom setting. On the other hand, instructors spent many hours with students each week. During informal discussions between advisers and instructors, the advisers noticed that instructors intuited many of the challenges students were facing. Issues with attendance and tardiness also served as indicators of individual issues. The information that instructors were collecting both formally (poor attendance) and informally (student's academic/personal challenges that came up in conversation) was extremely useful for advisers as they determined which students needed support, and the type of support they needed.

We asked ourselves, how can we effectively share important information about students between instructors and advisers? This process had to be efficient because instructors are usually only paid for their teaching time. It also had to be simple, capturing only the most relevant information about students.

CUNY Central worked with a college adviser from LaGuardia Community College to create a simple instructor-adviser communication tool (see Appendix D). It was decided that the tool would only capture three essential pieces of information: attendance, red flags, and green spotlights. At the end of each class, an instructor simply had to put a "1" if a student attended class on time, a ".5" if a student attended class and was late, or a "0" if a student missed class. At the end of each week, instructors added any notes to the red flag column or the green spotlight column. The green and red columns were optional.

As patterns of tardiness or absences emerged, or as advisers became aware of red flags, advisers worked with these students. They developed strategies and plans that would help the student to successfully complete CareerPATH. Advisers also used this document to encourage students about the successes documented in the green spotlight column.

Some schools piloted the use of this document during the summer. In August, we shared this tool during

our quarterly meeting with advisers. Both instructors and advisers were enthusiastic about this document. Instructors often felt overwhelmed dealing with students' personal issues. They were relieved to have a structured outlet for relaying this information to a professional who was better equipped to deal with non-academic challenges. Advisers were happy to have a way to keep track of students after they left seminar/vestibule.

Discussing the instructor-adviser communication tool was not the only item on the agenda at the August adviser meeting. We also posed the question to the group, "Now that we have an advisement model and tools to implement the model, how else can we support you?" The advisers agreed that one of the most informative activities from the year's workshop series was the presentation about ASAP's advisement model. Advisers expressed interest in hearing from other advisers across CUNY in order to network and share best practices.

Part VII - Sharing Our Knowledge

CareerPATH staff, in partnership with ASAP staff, led a CUNY-wide conference on advising in the fall of 2013. It was the first conference of its kind. CUNY does not have a formal structure for convening frontline staff of grant-funded programs.

The conference was attended by 75 advising staff from 12 separate CUNY programs. CareerPATH staff not only organized the event, but also co-facilitated the breakout sessions—Kingsborough's CareerPATH adviser led a session on how to create and implement developmental goal-setting tools, LaGuardia's adviser facilitated a session on how to plan and implement group advising. CareerPATH staff also shared a variety of tools and resources they used in their work (see Appendix E).

As requested by participants, there was plenty of time for networking and sharing best practices among the advisers. The conference was a big success—a culminating event showcasing what CareerPATH advisers accomplished in a single year. In one year we had created an advisement model, made significant changes to the practice of advisement, developed tools to support implementation, created a strong community of frontline professionals, and widely disseminated what we learned. With strong Central Office support and dedicated college staff, this professional development model can be replicated across CUNY's many grant-funded programs.

Part VIII - Thank You

I want to end with a thank you to all the advisers who worked hard every day to support students in their quest to improve their lives. You are appreciated.

Footnotes

1

www.cuny.edu/ASAP

2

Melinda Mechur Karp, *Toward a New Understanding of Non-Academic Student Support: Four Mechanisms Encouraging Positive Student Outcomes in the Community College*, CCRC Working Paper No. 28, February 2011

3

Melinda Mechur Karp, *Entering a Program: Helping Students Make Academic and Career Decisions*, CCRC Working Paper No. 59, May 2013

4

Donna Linderman, *2014/2015 ASAP Policy Memo*, November 2014

5

MDRC Study, *Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-year effects of CUNY's ASAP program for Developmental Education Students*, February 2015, <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/doubling-graduation-rates>

