Benchmarking Strategies for Centralized Advising

HANOVER RESEARCH

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PROJECT OBJECTIVE

This report explores the strategies that selected institutions have used to employ centralized advising models.

✓ Understand how selected institutions **implement a centralized advising model** for undergraduate students

✓ Identify **effective implementation and maintenance strategies** for a centralized advising model, as well as **challenges and roadblocks**

✓ Explore how peer institutions **monitor and evaluate the success** of their advising models

METHODOLOGY

Hanover Research conducted **seven (7) in-depth interviews** with advising professionals at universities with centralized advising models, or that were in the process of transitioning to a new model.

Note:

Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

If institutions wish to change to a centralized advising model:

1   Develop a **multi-year plan with the involvement of all stakeholders**, including advisors, managers, deans, and provosts, that accounts for reporting structures and budgetary allocation.

2   Hire a **new advising director** early in planning reorganization, and pilot centralization with one college to identify any potential problems before a roll-out of changes to the whole university.

3   While integrating advising units, **organize advisors into clusters** that can address specific experiences, programs, or colleges to maximize impact on student success at all levels and years.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Participants at selected institutions find that incremental implementation of a centralized model – via a transitional stage – can be an effective tactic**. Institutions sometimes find that a partially-centralized model effectively achieves their goals behind the transition, namely student retention and graduation, by maximizing support availability. This can save the institution resources before fully centralizing all services.

- **Selected institutions that have adopted a centralized advising model enjoy associated benefits, such as staff flexibility, equitable student support, and standardized methodologies.** Participants did identify challenges with organizational communication and budgetary allocation, however, but find that these problems can be overcome through dedicated planning.

- **Selected institutions implement a centralized advising model by reorganizing advising staff underneath a central manager.** Advisors and advising budgets remain located within individual colleges and programs despite this new organizational structure.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Selected institutions maintain the efficacy of advising programs through standardized training and consistent communication.** These structures help to maintain the essential buy-in and participation from disparate groups, including advisors and deans, across the university and its colleges necessary for centralized advising.

- **Selected institutions evaluate the success of their advising models through university-wide and advisee-specific surveys, and student success metrics.** Participants note decreases in student attrition rates and increases in graduation rates are the primary metrics used to monitor and evaluate the efficacy of their advising systems.

CURRENT ADVISING PRACTICES

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We are moving to a place where we are organized in a way that we can **deploy resources strategically across teams** based on where the student activity is.

-[Anonymous]

CENTRALIZED ADVISING MODELS ADAPT EXISTING STRUCTURES

"When we centralized, **the lines of reports shifted** to [a new director] in a unit known as **University Advising**, but we remained with a dotted line of report to our Dean's offices."
-[Anonymous]

"Before we went to our centralized model, **we started out just having two Bridge Advisors**."
-[Anonymous]

Universities that adopt a centralized model for advising typically adapt existing organizational structures to **create unified management of staff.**

While advising becomes centralized on paper, individual **advisors remain physically and financially linked** to their origin colleges and programs.

Universities facilitate this partially-centralized **"transitional" stage as a first step** towards a more strenuous major reorganization of advising and support.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP AND REPORT CHAINS

The adoption of a centralized model for advising moves advisors from a **report chain** within a specific college to a **separate advising chain** with advising **"clusters" in colleges**.

Advising "Cluster" For a College

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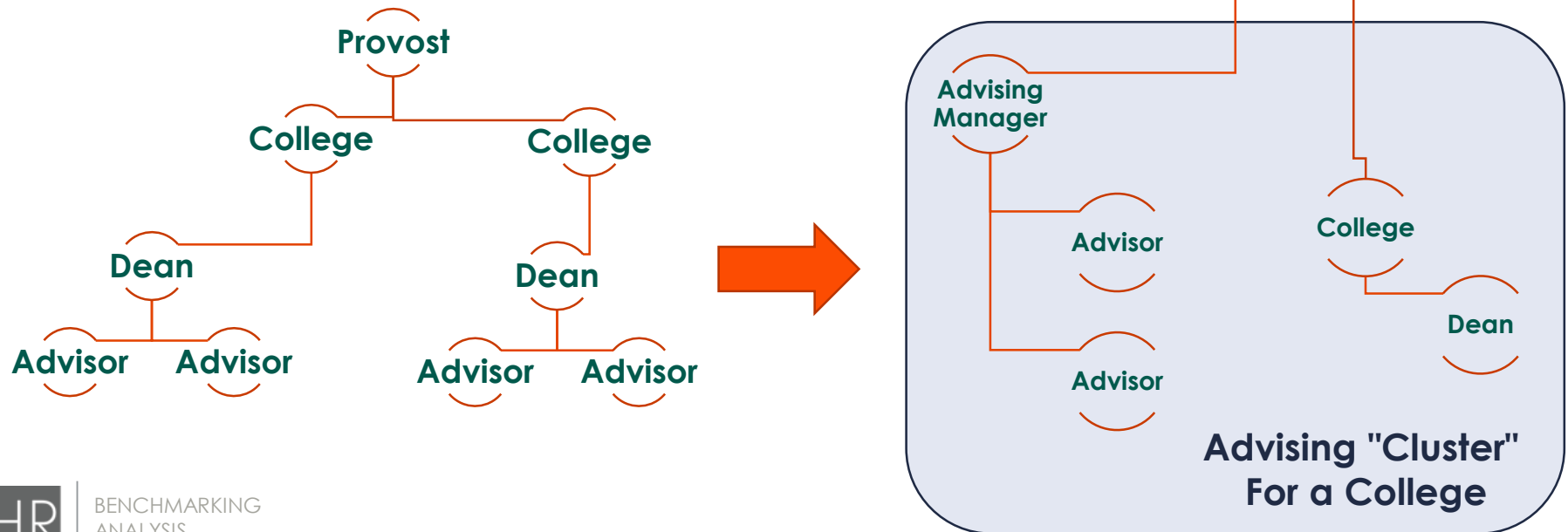
ADVISOR ASSIGNMENT PRACTICES ARE HIGHLY VARIABLE

Within a college's advising "cluster," advisors are assigned by:

College Major

The assignment of advisors based on a student's major is standard for upperclassmen to provide relevant knowledge for complex and specialized programs.

Division of Names

For more generalized advising or for large programs, advisors are assigned alphabetically to create load distribution equity for staff.

Attendance Year

Students are often segmented by their level of study, with freshman receiving separate and more intensive guidance than upperclassmen.

*"We instituted **automatic-advisory assignment** about a year ago which keeps the load **evenly distributed** within the units. We're not having to manually watch that, and we have internal **peace**."*

-[Anonymous]

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IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES & SUPPORTS

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Anybody who is planning to centralize advising really needs to **think about the budget** and the **new alignment of positions to directors** and make sure that that doesn't adversely affect the daily flow of business.

-[Anonymous]

MOVING TO A CENTRALIZED MODEL CAN CREATE CONFUSION AND CONCERN

Negative Associations

Centralization may be viewed by staff as 'downsizing,' triggering fear and uncertainty around the changes taking place.

Staff Turnover

Uncertainly leads to staff turnover, which puts added stress on both staff and students. Staff may feel overwhelmed taking on new advisees, while students can feel unattended to.

Chain of Command

There may be confusion as to whom advisors should report if supervision is not fully removed from individual colleges or programs.

> " Centralization has a very negative connotated feeling towards it (...) **there will be pushback.**
> -[Anonymous] "

> " We've had a huge issue with **advisor retention** (...) that uncertainty of the job shifting really has played an impact on the staff, which then of course plays an impact on the students. Because **if you don't have advisors they don't have somebody.**
> -[Anonymous] "

> " The tension of indirect supervision and not being fully consolidated is always awkward.
> -[Anonymous] "

# FACTORS CRITICAL TO THE SUCCESS OF CENTRALIZED ADVISING

Clear Communication

First and foremost, colleges need to obtain buy-in from all stakeholders, including the provost, deans and advising staff.

Adaptability

Staff must maintain flexibility during the transition to a more centralized advising structure.

Gradual Plan

Institutions must roll out a plan for centralized advising over multiple steps, thoroughly communicating changes along the way.
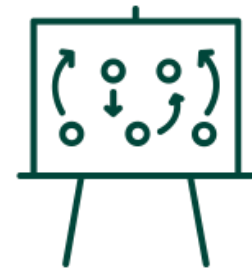
OUTCOMES ARE DEPENDENT ON PLANNING AND STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN

Universities that held **long planning processes** with a high degree of **stakeholder involvement** and feedback had easier transitions.

Dean and advisor **pushback to centralization** was the **primary cause of challenges** with a reorganization process that involves so many different people.

Professionals found that with all advisors, managers, deans, and provosts involved, **meaningful compromises** about **unique needs** and budgetary requirements resolved outstanding issues.

"[Communication] needs to be campus-wide. It may be that you pull everybody together to tell them the next steps so that **everybody's getting that same message** and you're not necessarily relying on the middle manager to do that."
-[Anonymous]

COLLEGES SHOULD PREPARE FOR A STAGED TRANSITION PROCESS

> " *If you're implementing something (…) **have the plan in place before you change it**. Because if you're **constantly evolving** it, and changing it, it just is putting the people that are working in that environment **in a panic.***

-[Anonymous]

Institutions must be prepared for multiple stages of transition as they shift to a centralized advising model. Colleges will make changes in **budget allocation**, **direct supervision** and **lines of report**, and deal with an influx of **new advisors and advising managers**.

Planning and communication are critical to ensuring advising staff and student needs continue to be met when implementing any major and potentially tense changes.

CENTRALIZATION REQUIRES A GRADUAL IMPLEMENTATION

1

Upper administration decides to move forward with implementing a centralized structure.

2

Steps for centralization must be clearly laid-out; New advising director brought on board for the reorganization.

3

Advising director oversees the reorganization and expansion of advising staff under new plan.

4

The advising budget should be made to cover all advisors equally.

"
*[The centralization process] is going to take **longer than you probably think.***

-[Anonymous]

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REQUIRED RESOURCES & SUPPORT

Administration must be in a place to fully support all advisors financially, regardless of what college they initially came from. This includes materials and student services (e.g., educational opportunity centers).

Software programs, such as **AdvisorTrac** and **Handshake** are implemented to help advisors track the progress and success of their advisees.

Financial Support

Software

Training

Consultants

Trainings and professional development opportunities enable advisors to improve their performance and better understand the majors that they are advising for.

Consultants are sometimes sought out to bring a degree of objectivity and expertise that can help ease the transition from a decentralized to centralized model.

REQUIRED RESOURCES & SUPPORT

> *Other colleges [are stuck] in this **fight between upper administration, and the college administration**, of just getting basic essentials (…) like printer paper.*
>
> -[Anonymous]

> *We have a program that's triggered when a student's performance is **below expectations** and that is voluntary.*
>
> -[Anonymous]

Financial Support

Software

Training

Consultants

> *We support and offer funding for **professional development** so advisors can go to conferences if they want.*
>
> -[Anonymous]

> *The consultant focused on project management keeping (…) It was just kind of **helpful to have some of that coming from an external place**.*
>
> -[Anonymous]

OUTCOMES & CHALLENGES

"

The **consistency and availability** [of advising] **has improved hugely**.

-[Anonymous]

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CENTRALIZATION SUCCESS IS DEFINED BY INSTITUTIONAL GOALS

"Trying to use our resources more efficiently in terms of not having students repeating as many classes, being respectful of students' career goals and their financial contributions."
-[Anonymous]

Most frame success in terms of student retention and graduation rates/timelines.

"Better student service and student success and retention. So we're expecting if we're structured well, the students can experience the service well.
-[Anonymous]

"Student success is key (…) And also, graduation timeline I know is important, too. And helping decrease attrition rates.
-[Anonymous]

"Our school had really focused on improving graduation rates.
-[Anonymous]

PROGRAM EVALUATION IS TIED TO SURVEYS AND STUDENT METRICS

Program evaluation often consists of tracking data on benchmark retention, graduation, and withdrawal rates.

Institutions also use student surveys to collect student feedback on the perceived efficacy and quality of their advisors.

" *So some of our units piloted some-- not really student satisfaction, more s**tudent perception of advisor competency.** Were they available? Were they professional? Were they able to explain things to you? Did they provide you with accurate information? (...) And then longer term, we have committed to **looking at suspension rates, time to graduation rate**.*
-[Anonymous]

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PERCEPTION OF OUTCOMES VARIES BETWEEN STAFF AND STUDENTS

" Advisors **can take vacation time now** (…) We're going from January to December, so being able to see advisors able to take time off has been **really rewarding**. "
-[Anonymous]

" There's been **increases in student satisfaction** with much greater **availability** of advisors. "
-[Anonymous]

The direct outcomes of the centralization process are **more visible to advising staff than to the students** that they are advising.

Students might notice increased efficiency in advising wait times and scheduling, but this outcome **results from equitable distribution of workload** among staff.

Staff opinions on centralization are **dependent on the equity of both workload and resource allocation** among advising units.

POSITIVE & NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

Positive Outcomes

Adoption of centralized model features provide:

- Balanced advisor-student ratios
- Standardization
- Increased student success
- Staff schedule flexibility and retention

Incomplete model or unclear transitions create:

- Organizational confusion
- Budget allocation problems
- Loss of trust between deans and advisors

Negative Outcomes

CENTRALIZATION BALANCES ADVISOR-STUDENT RATIOS

Decentralized

When managed at the college level, advisor-student **ratios vary widely between individual colleges'** advising programs due to differences in enrollment, budget, staffing, and subject complexity.

Centralized

By using a centralized advising model, advisor-student **ratios can be equitably distributed by leadership** based on need so that one program does not have more favorable staffing than others.

" In our college, our ratios were about **650 students to 1 advisor** [before centralization]. "
-[Anonymous]

" Initially, **it was an 850 to 1 ratio and now it is 188 to 1.** It was a real dramatic change [with centralization]. "
-[Anonymous]

CENTRALIZED ADVISING IMPROVES QUALITY AND IMPACT

> " *Just **standardization and availability** seem to be working really well. The hope is that standardization, availability, the more timely communication with struggling students will **improve retention and graduation rates**.*
> -[Anonymous] "

Advising Standardization

Standardization ensures that new hires undergo training such as familiarization with FERPA, Gen Ed requirements, and each major's pathway to graduation.

Participants suggest that advisors attend regular professional development opportunities like trainings and conferences to further enable professional growth and continue to improve the staff knowledge and quality within the clusters.

Effect on Students

Centralization also allows for increased availability for student appointments, facilitating quicker resolution to student questions and concerns.

RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION IS A MAJOR INTEGRATION PROBLEM

Budgetary Stress

The centralization of advising staff is not always followed by a corresponding reorganization of college and unit budgets, creating a tense situation between Dean's Offices and advisors they support, but no longer control.

Advising Fee Issues

Even when new student fees are approved to cover the cost of centralized advising, training, and additional advising staff, the money flows through college administration, not the new advising unit.

" That's been a rough challenge too. **Just the budget** side of it. Who's in charge of salaries? **Who's in charge** of dollars? "
-[Anonymous]

" Because there were existing advisors and college support prior to this consolidation, that **support was expected to continue**. It wasn't expected to be replaced by the student fee. "
-[Anonymous]

CENTRALIZED ADVISING FACES ORGANIZATIONAL CONFUSION

*"The **reporting structure can be very challenging** (...) because our location is in our college (...) but our appraisals are done by the executive director who we meet with **once a month**."*

-[Anonymous]

Advising staff working within clusters find it difficult to report to a separate centralized advising structure while their daily work remains focused at the college-level.

Similarly, **college deans** feel less obligated to provide full support for advising staff who are no longer under their complete control, even though they are still part of their budgetary requirements.

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