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Stephanie Sartori

LAAP: A Centralized Advising Program for the School of Liberal Arts at Sunnyside College

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree  
Master of Education in Higher Education

At

Merrimack College

May 2020

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## Introduction

Academic advising is a component of higher education that can have a large impact on college students' academic and personal success (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013). Students are more likely to have higher GPAs and be retained from the first to second year if they utilize advising services (Kot, 2014). This means that institutions should focus on advising and ensure that their advising services are optimized. Many institutions utilize faculty as advisors, yet faculty do not always have the incentive to give attention to advising students, nor the time to devote to it (Wessel & Smith, 2011). Optimizing advising services would be beneficial for advisors as well as students because it can clearly delineate advisors' responsibilities, therefore making their roles clear to students and those in other divisions on campus (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer 2015). Enhancing advising systems has also been shown to boost student success rates (Steingass & Sykes, 2008). Because of this, the research question used in this project is, how can academic advising be optimized in order to further student success?

A centralized advising model has been shown to be the optimal advising model to positively influence students academically and personally because of its comprehensive nature (Kot, 2014). Centralized advising is defined as "all advisors are located in one academic or administrative unit" (Kot, 2014, p. 529). This advising model facilitates holistic student advising (Steingass & Sykes, 2008). Developmental advising is the advising approach that involves holistically guiding students through their college career, and is defined as "a systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the utilization of the full range of institutional and community resources" (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, as cited in Folsom, Yoder, & Joslin, 2015, p. 68).

A centralized advising model also allows for an all-inclusive program to be developed, complete with student learning outcomes and goals, advising philosophies, program assessments, and professional development for advisors (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). All of these features benefit both students and advisors.

The School of Liberal Arts at Sunnyside College (a pseudonym) does not have a centralized advising program. Currently, the School has 19 majors. Out of these majors, only one department has a professional advisor included in its staff. All other advisors are faculty, which is typical for how other similar small, private, catholic colleges conduct advising (Wessel & Smith, 2011). To optimize academic advising for liberal arts students at Sunnyside, a centralized advising model should be utilized. Implementing this model would make Sunnyside stand out among similar institutions.

The centralized advising program that I have created for the School of Liberal Arts at Sunnyside is called the Liberal Arts Advising Program, or LAAP for short. LAAP will ultimately focus on creating an ideal advising environment in order to lead students to optimal outcomes, as Astin and Antonio (2012) describe in their I-E-O model. To do this, the program will have a space to house multiple advisors so that they are all in one location and students can receive a personalized advising experience. It will also include a training program for advisors so that they will understand how to advise students holistically and have opportunities to further their professional development. LAAP will also include comprehensive resources in the form of technological tools that will allow advisors to get information they need and will facilitate exploration of majors and careers for students. By implementing LAAP, students will appreciate and understand liberal learning. They will also understand where to go for advising and who their advisor is. Advising will also be streamlined and facilitated for both advisors and students.

The development of this program began with collecting literature on academic advising's relationship to student success and persistence. The subsequent literature review details these findings.

### **Literature Review**

Academic advising can further the learning and development of college students. Therefore, it is important that higher education institutions focus on advising and invest in advising resources. Specifically, colleges should utilize a centralized academic advising model because it provides a comprehensive advising center where students can get information on areas of study and curriculum requirements, as well as create a personal connection with a professional advisor (Steingass & Sykes, 2008). If an institution uses a centralized advising system, students will be more likely to achieve success and be retained (Kot, 2014). The following literature will inform the creation of LAAP.

#### **Advising and Student Success**

There are multiple studies that point to the positive influence that academic advising has on student success. First, Campbell and Nutt (2008) make it clear that academic advising is integral to student success and development. They noted that in the current era, "academic advising plays a critical role in connecting students with learning opportunities to foster and support their engagement, success, and the attainment of key learning outcomes" (p. 4). The authors make their inferences mostly from works by Tinto (1993, 2002) and Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005). Academic advising is about student learning and engaging them on campus activities and in their academics. This view has changed over the years because advising is now seen as a way of teaching students. Because of the view of academic advising as teaching, advising now requires curricula, "pedagogy," and "student learning outcomes" (p. 5).

Based on their research, Campbell and Nutt (2008) found five national trends in academic advising: having an advising philosophy; having goals for advising that revolve around student learning; creating assessments that determine changes in advising; having professional development opportunities for advisors; and promoting academic advising on campus. The article names developmental advising in particular as the modern way to advise students because it can be connected to an institutional mission and it is a comprehensive method of teaching students both intellectually and socially (though the article never defines developmental advising).

These findings infer that academic advising has a larger connection to student learning and success than was originally thought, making it a worthwhile investment for institutions. Also, in addition to advisors, more professionals within an institution need to collaborate to maximize the impact that academic advising has on students because “academic advising is a responsibility in which all constituencies- administrators, students, faculty, and staff- work together to promote student success” (p. 7). This collaboration could occur by forming a committee comprised of advisors, faculty, and staff. This committee could hold meetings to discuss each person’s respective role in student advising and decide on better ways to foster student learning through the advising process.

While Campbell and Nutt (2008) examined qualitative research to make the connection between academic advising and student success, Young-Jones et. al (2013) conducted a quantitative study to prove they are connected. At the university where this study was conducted, students were not required to meet with their advisor after they reached a certain amount of credits. Therefore, the university lent itself to exploring how students utilized the advising services offered. Though the study was done in the Psychology department, 114 majors were

represented among the 611 student participants. Using assessment tools, the researchers collected information on students' self-assessment, their expectations of advising, and their demographics. The results found that students who met with their advisor had higher GPAs as well as higher perceived levels of study skills, self-efficacy, responsibility, and support from their advisor. The researchers pointed out that according to their study, "advisors have an immediately meaningful impact on students during the first year of college and the opportunity for continuing influence as students work toward degree completion" (p. 16).

Because of this connection, it is clear that advisors need to be available for students. It is possible that faculty advisors may not be as available to students as professional advisors because of their many responsibilities, but this study did not look at differences between faculty and professional advisors. This study also did not take student demographics into account when looking at students' advising experiences, so they did not find a connection between student demographics and the advising needs they may have. This article stressed the importance of academic advising and advisors, and their positive effect on student academic success. It also highlighted the personal connection that advisors make with their advisees, mentioning that an advisor can make a student more engaged in their academics. As such, it is clear that advisors encourage and support students on a personal level. Thus, advisors need to understand both the academic and personal aspects of advising. A training program for advisors can help with this by including holistic advising techniques so that those being trained can learn about the effect that advising can have on students academically as well as personally.

Though it is clear that advising can further student success, it is important that there is a focus on the particular advising models that do this most effectively. Kot (2014) examined the connection between centralized academic advising and student academic performance, as well as

its connection to student enrollment behavior. The theory that was used to inform this study was Astin's (1970, 1991) input-environment-output model, where a student's traits that they bring to college will be affected by the college's environment (in this case, academic advising), and these things together will predict the outcome for the student. Kot (2014) collected information on 2,745 first-year college students, including race, gender, SAT scores, students' majors, and GPAs, and followed their advising behavior in the Fall and Spring terms.

The results showed that "students who used centralized advising had higher GPAs (both term and first-year cumulative GPA) compared to their counterparts who did not use advising," and "students who used centralized advising during the second term were more likely to return in the second year" (p. 553). This study only focused on students who used centralized advising compared to no advising at all. Because of this, it may be that the findings are related to utilizing advising and are not specifically connected to the centralized advising delivery model. Nonetheless, this study shows how centralized advising can positively improve academic performance and retention rates. It is clear that the comprehensive nature of centralized advising can offer more to students than other advising delivery models, such as guidance on "completing the core curriculum, choosing appropriate courses, planning educational careers, selecting majors, using campus resources, and developing success strategies" (p. 554).

As the findings above show, centralized advising appears to be an advising system that is most effective in increasing student success because of its comprehensive nature, and institutions that use this model have seen increases in student engagement and learning after implementing it. An example of such an institution is seen in Steingass and Sykes' (2008) study on the advising program at their institution, Virginia Commonwealth University. There have been many changes made to academic advising at the university, including: creating a centralized advising space

with more advisors; a goal to have advisors help students make connections on campus through one-on-one attention; creating personalized advising plans for each student; proactive advising so students understand the benefits of utilizing their advisor and so advisors can immediately address issues their students may be having; collaboration between faculty and advisors to keep track of students and their progress; and weekly training for advisors to stay updated on changes relating to curriculum, policies, or resources. The researchers noted that the university conducted qualitative and quantitative assessments after the changes were made to determine the efficacy of these changes.

According to this research, these changes resulted in positive outcomes and positive attitudes from students about their advising experience. There were higher levels of “engagement and academic success” for first-year students, higher levels of students “making more informed educational decisions,” and higher levels of students collaborating “with other students in studying outside of class” (Steingass & Sykes, 2008, p. 20). This data suggests that centralized advising and a streamlined advising model produces positive results for students in their academics. Because of the many changes made to advising at the university, two ideas can be inferred. The first is that advising systems should change over time as college students and higher education evolve. The second is that an advising center should be comprehensive and be able to offer many resources to students. Advising centers should include everything from advisor training, to proactive student advising, to uniting faculty and staff in supporting students. The services offered should change with the needs of the student population.

### **Advising and Student Persistence**

Academic advising increases student persistence in addition to student success, and there are many aspects of advising that can further student persistence. The first is using advising

techniques that promote satisfaction in a student's major. Milsom and Coughlin (2015) conducted a study to analyze the elements that influence a college student's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the major they have chosen. The researchers modeled their work on grounded-theory procedure created by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Milsom and Coughlin's (2015) participants consisted of 10 undergraduates who were traditional age, not in their first year, with a chosen major. This study was not diverse in the race of the participants or in the majors the participants chose, nor was it a large study. Participants were given a semi-structured interview with questions that probed their experience with declaring and changing their majors. The findings led to the creation of the college major satisfaction model. In this model, opportunities with faculty, peers, advisors, and experiences inside and outside of classes affect a student's self-awareness and career awareness. Being aware of both of these things leads to reflection, and reflection can lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction in a major. According to this model, learning about oneself and determining what one wants in a career is key before making decisions on a college major.

Milsom and Coughlin (2015) noted that "through proactive academic advising focusing on career and self-exploration, as well as identification of and reflection about personal goals, students may gain critical self and career awareness earlier in their undergraduate programs so that they can complete satisfying majors in pursuit of careers that fit their goals and skills" (p. 11). It is clear that advisors can promote self-awareness in students and therefore have a large influence on student satisfaction. In order to help students be satisfied in their major and future career, advisors should utilize strategies outlined by the authors. These include offering career exploration courses, encouraging involvement outside the classroom, promoting self-authorship

in students, and collaborating with career counselors. These strategies are holistic and combine learning about oneself with learning about a career area.

Milsom and Coughlin (2015) demonstrated how advisors can help students feel satisfied with their major in order to support persistence, while Gordon (2007) outlined what advisors can do to get students to choose a major in the first place. Gordon (2007) outlined the many facets of undecided students in great detail using hundreds of empirical and non-empirical studies. In this book, there is no distinction between students who are undecided on a college major and those who are undecided on a career path. No matter what they are undecided on, the author makes it clear that there are many reasons for students to be undecided. The main reasons for indecisiveness include slowed development, elements of one's personality, multiple interests, cultural aspects, anxiety, and external factors. According to this book, the best theories to use when helping undecided students are student development, career decision, and student learning theories.

When it comes to academic advising, Gordon (2007) says that the advising delivery model is inconsequential, as long as it fits the population of students at the institution. The most important point about undecided students, according to Gordon, is that they need resources, services, and advisors specifically for them because they have needs that cannot be addressed with traditional resources. This book indicated that undecided students are multi-faceted, and therefore cannot be lumped into the general student population and cannot be considered a homogeneous group. It is because of this that various resources need to be employed on a college campus in order to help them, such as advising and career services, as well as resources in both academic and student affairs. It is possible that because of the specific needs of undecided students, their departure may contribute to rates of attrition if an institution does not have the

proper resources to guide them. Therefore, it is important that institutions invest in resources specifically for undecided students, including advisors who are knowledgeable on undecided students and an advising system that can focus on undecided students.

It is important that there are advising systems in place that help students understand the degree requirements for the particular major that they declare, as suggested by Capaldi, Lombardi, and Yellen (2006). They posited that one issue that many students face in college is being able to discern their course requirements in order to graduate. Graduation requirements are numerous and can be difficult to understand. To remedy this, the University of Florida implemented a college-wide tracking program in 1996 to guide their students in course selection, major selection, and graduation requirements. The program is “a computerized system that takes the formal elements of the curriculum- majors, with their prerequisites, requirements, and course sequences- and reorganizes this information into a sequential presentation that matches each student’s current transcript and major” (p. 47). This tracking program was found to be helpful for undeclared students and students who are questioning their choice of major because it allows them to compare their transcript with other majors and see what requirements they would need to fulfill if they wanted to declare a certain major. For students, the ability to outline “their interests and capabilities and match them to their requirements of the many majors available” is key when there are many majors to choose from and many requirements to complete (p. 46). By 2000, the four-year graduation rate at the University of Florida increased by 10 percentage points from the year before the tracking program was implemented, proving that the tracking program had positive effects on graduation rates.

While it is unclear whether the advising model used at the University of Florida is centralized, the software that they used was streamlined across the entire campus. This shows

that if streamlined advising software is utilized, students will be able to pick the major that is right for them and understand all the requirements they need to fulfill in order to graduate on time. It should be noted that this change in software was coupled with personalized attention to students from advisors, so this software acted as an extra support and resource for students in addition to individualized advising. Streamlining the advising software, in addition to streamlining the advising delivery model and utilizing trained advisors, would create a comprehensive advising center and advising experience for students. Including all of these elements in an advising program would facilitate course selection, major selection, and understanding graduation requirements for both students and advisors.

### **Advising Strategies**

To guide students to success and graduation, there are certain advising strategies that have proven to be useful and some that are not as effective. First, Wessel and Smith (2011) believe that advising can improve retention and the student experience at Christian colleges. They examined the methods of academic advising in private, religiously affiliated institutions. In particular, they studied institutions who were members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. This study used surveys to gather information on how each institution advises, including “the delivery of advising services, roles, and functions of academic advising, student development goals for academic advising, and organizational models” (p. 15). Sixty-seven surveys were completed by individuals who were responsible for advising at each institution. The results found that 70% of these institutions utilized only faculty advisors, 28.4% utilized both faculty and professional advisors, and 1.7% utilized only professional advisors. Faculty advisors were found to be not ideal because of the lack of time they have to spend with students outside of class; their knowledge was limited to only their area of study; they did not have proper

advising training; and they were not always willing to advise in addition to their other responsibilities.

If a college is going to utilize faculty as advisors, the authors suggested that “extensive training on developmental advising methods” will allow faculty to understand how advising contributes to student’s development (p. 22). Developmental advising, according to this article, is “a systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational and personal goals (Ender, Winston, & Miller, as cited in Wessel & Smith, 2011, p. 11). The article also suggested that faculty advisors are unhelpful when it comes to undeclared students because they are mainly knowledgeable in their own field, and they may not be able to help students explore other major or career options outside of their area of study. This article points out the many downsides to using faculty advisors, suggesting that there are more flaws to this advising model than strengths. All educators, and those especially at Christian colleges, may wish to use a centralized advising center with professional advisors in order to stand out among peers and to best help undecided students.

If an institution is going to use faculty as advisors, implementing a training program as suggested by Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) may better help them understand how to holistically advise students. In one chapter of their book, Habley et. al (2012) detailed how academic advising influenced student success and persistence rates using many sources of empirical and non-empirical research. This chapter described everything from advising centers, to advising certain demographics, advising with technology, faculty advising, and best advising practices. They noted that advising did not have a direct influence on student persistence, but it did affect many variables that contribute to persistence, including student satisfaction, decision making, utilizing support resources, interactions with faculty, and mentoring from other students.

One main point the authors made was that the delivery model for advising services was insignificant. The person who is doing the advising, whether they are faculty or staff, was also insignificant. Rather, it was whether or not the advisor is trained to do their work that made the difference for students. Habley et al. (2012) outline 11 “best practices in advising training from Brown (2008) and Davis (2003)” that include points on assessment, garnering support from everyone involved, and engaging the participants during and after the training (p. 295). Specifically, it is best if advisors are trained in both academic and career advising.

They noted that the institutions who are the most progressive in their advising practices are community colleges because “these institutions typically have self-contained advising centers that are often staffed with counselors who have the skills to deliver both academic and career services” (p. 298). This chapter implies that the more comprehensive the advising system, the better the effect advising will have on students, and the better the response from students. A centralized advising center will also be able to facilitate training programs for advisors. A training program could include instructions on how to advise students holistically and provide updates to advisors on any changes to curriculum or processes. Implementing a training program will improve the quality of advising that students receive and contribute to the all-inclusive nature of a centralized advising center.

Training advisors as outlined by Habley et. al (2012) may eliminate confusion about the advising profession, which Aiken-Wisniewski et. al (2015) explore. They note that although advisors at one institution may have the same job title, the tasks that are required of each individual may be vastly different. Focus groups were conducted with 47 participants consisting of mostly advisors, while others were faculty or other staff members. Questions asked of the focus group included their responsibilities in their role as an advisor, defining the academic

advising profession, and characteristics of what makes an individual a professional academic advisor. Results showed that advisors do not always have the same background and expertise, leading to a lack of clarity on what the advising profession entails. The legitimacy of the advising profession is also questioned, especially by faculty, leading to advisors feeling disrespected and not being included in creating policies and decision making.

It was clear from the study that the perception of the academic advising profession can vary from person to person, from institution to institution, and even from department to department within an institution. Having many perceptions about advisors can lead to confusion about the profession. This infers that a centralized advising model, where all advisors are in one place and systems are streamlined, may be helpful in clearly delineating roles and responsibilities of advisors. Also, if a centralized advising model is established, it may make the role of an advisor clearer to others, and therefore allow advisors to garner more respect from faculty and other staff at the institution. Improvements in advising at an institution may not only be beneficial for students, but for advisors as well.

A centralized advising model may reduce confusion about what advisors do for students, and it may also allow advisors to better teach students about liberal learning. Robbins (2014) detailed integrative liberal learning and the role of academic advisors in students receiving a liberal education. Integrative liberal learning is defined as “education that includes curricular, cocurricular, and pedagogical innovations offered in a purposeful, collaborative manner to provide a more holistic undergraduate experience regardless of a student’s major or degree program” (Robbins, 2014, p. 26). Drawing from research from many sources on liberal education and academic advising for the current century, Robbins found that advisors are a large part of a students’ learning and can help students achieve liberal learning outcomes that are outlined by

the Association of American Colleges & Universities and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. Advisors can help students understand what a liberal education means, the benefits of a liberal education, and how to connect experiences they have inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, advisors and advising resources and services are important things for institutions to invest in when student learning is a part of the college's mission. This is especially true for liberal arts colleges who promote liberal learning.

Advisors who foster liberal learning ensure that students have a comprehensive learning experience. The article also points out that “employers want a liberally educated workforce” which shows how crucial integrative liberal learning is (p. 28). Because advisors can promote liberal learning in students, like Robbins indicated, they may improve a students' job prospects if an employer is seeking to hire a liberal-minded individual. This furthers the idea that not only are liberal arts areas of study worthy of investment, but that advisors familiar with liberal education and similar advising services are also worthy of investment. Advisors should include liberal learning as part of their goals when advising students and should develop techniques to promote liberal learning in order to do so.

Robbins (2014) found that advisors are integral to promoting liberal learning in students, and Laff (2006) demonstrated exactly how advisors can accomplish this. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) conducted multiple focus groups with students to find out their perception of liberal education, and Laff (2006) used the findings of these focus groups to inform his own advising strategies. The AAC&U asked students about their understanding of and attitudes on core liberal learning. They wanted to see if there was a disconnect between what faculty believe students know about the value of a liberal education and what students actually know. The details of the focus groups are never described, but the author

described the results, which showed that students, in fact, do not know the value of a liberal education. Laff (2006) posited that “advising is one of the best opportunities for students to talk about the values of liberal learning in practice” (p. 38), and he outlines the exact strategies he uses with his advisees to prove this.

Specifically, he utilized problem-based learning, which “drives students to use their learning in new contexts” (p. 38). He mentions thought-provoking ideas, such as “how often do we ask students to explain what they mean when they say they want to major in English [...] How often do we ask prospective business majors to tell us something that isn’t related to business or to talk about the people with whom they expect to work” (p. 40)? This article indicates the positive correlation between advising and students’ understanding of liberal learning. Laff (2006) specifically demonstrated how advising to improve students’ liberal learning is accomplished. In this case, he questions students about their career and major choices and asks them to think about their academic and career areas in a multi-faceted, complex way. Advisors at liberal arts colleges, where there is a broad offering of majors and core general education requirements, should utilize these strategies in order to promote liberal learning and holistic development in students. If advisors are not familiar with these strategies, they may need to be trained in them.

In conclusion, research has proven that academic advising can lead to student success and persistence through certain advising strategies. The best way to accomplish this is by utilizing a centralized academic advising model that can offer many resources to students because of its comprehensive nature, including streamlined technology and help for undeclared students. It can also provide training programs for advisors so they advise students consistently, and understand how to promote holistic development, engagement, and liberal learning in students. The

literature helps to understand the need for centralized advising, provided by well-trained advisors, which is the basis for this project.

### Overview of Theory

To advance the goals of LAAP, I have selected Astin's I-E-O model (Astin & Antonio, 2012) as the framework for this project. This assessment theory was created by Astin and evaluates the relationship between students and a particular environment in order to foster positive outcomes (Astin & Antonio, 2012). The abbreviations in the model stand for inputs, environment, and outputs. The inputs in this model refer to the identities, personal background, behaviors, and skills that a student brings with them to college. The environment is the setting that the institution creates for students. The outputs refer to the effect on the student (Astin & Antonio, 2012). This model posits that students come into college with established inputs, and the interaction between these inputs and the college's environment determines the effect on the student (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Astin specifies that the ideal output in this model is retaining students (Astin & Antonio, 2012). However, he notes that student retention does not always need to be the preferred end result, since this model can be applied to settings and scenarios other than higher education (Astin & Antonio, 2012).

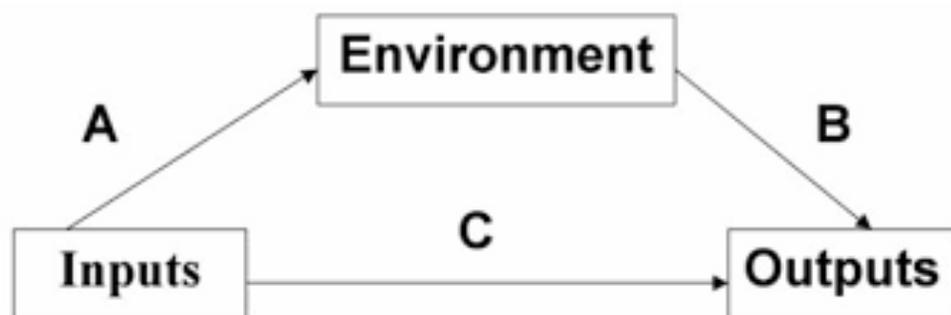


Figure 1. Astin's I-E-O Model. From Cb, 2014

In examining Figure 1, one can see how the three variables in the I-E-O model are depicted as affecting each other. Arrow B is the area that higher education professionals are most interested in (Astin & Antonio, 2012) because they want to create college environments that are conducive to positive student outcomes. However, arrows A and C indicate how important the inputs variable is. A student's inputs will determine the college environment that they choose (arrow A) (Astin & Antonio, 2012). A student's inputs are also consistent over time, meaning that behaviors, identities, backgrounds, and skills that have been established in the past will most likely continue in college (arrow C) (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Since inputs directly relate to both the environment and the outputs, they tremendously affect whether a student is successful or retained. This means the habits that a student develops in high school are crucial to determining success in college. This also means that since college student populations are increasing in diversity, students are going to bring a multitude of inputs with them to campus. Therefore, institutions need to work to accommodate all students with myriad kinds of inputs.

The I-E-O model (Astin & Antonio, 2012) utilizes the college environment as the catalyst for change in college students. Without the addition of the environment in this model, students' inputs would remain the same; there would be nothing to assess because there would be no change in the student. Since the output is determined by the inputs combined with the environment, the factors involved in the input and environment variables are the ones that impact change. For example, if a student's inputs are not conducive to college academics, they may not succeed in their coursework. If their inputs are not suitable for integrating themselves into new social groups, they may also fail in feeling a sense of belonging on campus. Also, if the college environment lacks certain resources, a student may not get the support that they need.

I chose the I-E-O model as the framework for a centralized advising program because it will allow me to create an optimal advising environment for students so that they are more likely to achieve optimal outcomes. In order to implement this model as the framework, the outputs must first be identified in order to determine how the environment will change students. Then, the features of the environment will be determined in order to lead students to the desired outputs. The outputs that the advising program will focus on are student success and student persistence to graduation. I define student success as being engaged in academics and on-campus activities, and I define persistence as a students' endurance to graduation. In order to lead students to these outcomes, the environment of LAAP will thus be comprehensive and holistic.

To create a comprehensive and holistic environment, students' inputs will be assessed to determine what features will be included in the advising center. Advisors in the program will seek out information about their students' inputs in order to select what resources and information need to be implemented in the program in order for students to achieve success and persist to graduation. The center will include material handouts and technological tools to disseminate the selected resources and information to students, which may include information on financial aid, how to get involved in extracurricular groups, or how to choose a major. Including these materials will create a comprehensive environment because they will allow students to learn about different areas of the college experience that may impact them, and also explore personal, academic, and professional development.

Advising practices utilized by advisors in the program will also help create a comprehensive, holistic environment for students. Advisors will counsel students based on their inputs, so advisors will tailor the environment during advising appointments to students' needs. This means that advising meetings between students and advisors will flow organically

according to students' needs, the aspects of themselves that need to be developed, and their motivation to succeed and persist. In this way, advisors will guide students holistically and comprehensively so they can be supported personally, academically, and professionally.

Overall, the I-E-O model (Astin & Antonio, 2012) connects meaningfully to the creation of a new advising program for liberal arts students at Sunnyside College because it will prioritize student inputs, the advising environment, and student outputs. Focusing on these factors will create an optimal advising program that is effective in leading students to success and graduation. To achieve these outcomes, the program will be comprehensive and holistic. These qualities will be beneficial for liberal arts students because liberal arts majors are broad; their curriculum can be applied to different contexts and students can use liberal arts majors to launch themselves into many different career paths. The comprehensive and holistic nature of the program will allow students to develop in the way that will fit them best and guide them down their own path towards success and graduation.

## **Project Plan**

### **Introduction and Outcomes**

The literature and theory I selected helped inform the creation of my project by generating ideas on best outcomes, intentional activities, and determining the optimal advising environment to lead students to success and persistence. The centralized advising program that I have created for the School of Liberal Arts is called the Liberal Arts Advising Program, or LAAP for short. This advising model will have a space to house multiple academic advisors, technological resources for both students and advisors, and also include a training program for advisors. This program will ultimately facilitate student success and persistence through a

combination of skilled advising, career and self-exploration for students, and including various kinds of student resources. Overall, these aspects will make a comprehensive, holistic program for both students and advisors that will facilitate the advising process.

The successful implementation of LAAP will have three defined outcomes. The first outcome is that students will understand and appreciate liberal learning. Advising has a strong connection to student learning (Campbell & Nutt, 2008), and advising scenarios in particular have proven to be optimal opportunities to teach students about liberal learning (Laff, 2006). LAAP advisors will be trained to advise students holistically and in how to utilize liberal learning techniques with students. Utilizing liberal learning techniques in advising scenarios will lead to student engagement in their academics, as well as career and self-exploration in students (Laff, 2006). This will create an engaging advising environment for students (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Since liberal arts areas of study can be applied to many contexts, liberal learning is especially important for liberal arts students to understand how their major is relevant to the world around them.

The second outcome of LAAP is that students will understand where to go for advising and who their advisor is. It is crucial that advisors are accessible to students (Wessel & Smith, 2011). If they are, they will be more likely to make a positive impact on students (Young-Jones et. al, 2013). This will allow students to have meaningful advising experiences. The advising center space will house all advisors, so all liberal arts students will know where their advisor is located. Since advisors will be trained in many areas, they will have the knowledge to help students in myriad ways. LAAP will also house many kinds of resources for students, such as advisors, pamphlets of information, and technological tools. A comprehensive advising space has been shown to lead to student success, so this kind of environment will be optimal for positive

student outcomes (Astin & Antonio, 2012; Kot, 2014). This, combined with students getting to see a familiar face in their advisor, will make the environment productive and comfortable for students as recommended in research (Astin & Antonio, 2012).

The third outcome of LAAP is that advising will be streamlined and facilitated. This will be achieved by utilizing a centralized advising model. Research has shown that students are more likely to have higher GPAs and retention rates if their advising is centralized (Kot, 2014).

Similar to the above outcome, a comprehensive space will allow students to get the information they need to succeed (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Technological resources can be especially useful because they allow access to information from anywhere, at any time. They will also help make the program modern to address the needs of the current student population, allowing LAAP to feel relevant (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Technological resources can also allow advising processes and student decision-making to be accurate and efficient (Capaldi et. al, 2006).

Advising can also be streamlined and facilitated by having a centralized space because the purpose of the program and the responsibilities of staff members are clear (Aiken-Wisniewski et. al, 2015). All three of these outcomes have informed the intentional activities implemented in LAAP.

### **Intentional Activity #1: Creation of the LAAP Office**

The first intentional activity of LAAP is creating a space to house the program. National trends for advising centers include creating a philosophy, goals, and assessments for advising, as well as professional development opportunities for advisors and advocating for advising on-campus (Campbell & Nutt 2008). LAAP's mission statement, which includes the advising philosophy and goals of the program, is:

LAAP will advise liberal arts students academically, personally, and professionally throughout their college career at Sunnyside. The philosophy of advisors is to advise students holistically to guide them down the path that is best for each individual. LAAP will aim to further learning for students, whether it be learning academically, or learning about themselves and the world around them.

The physical space will be located in either Stephen or Grant Hall (names anonymized) on Sunnyside's campus, where the majority of liberal arts classes and departments are located. There will be seven advisors appointed to serve in LAAP, and two of these advisors will be designated to serve only undeclared liberal arts students. Including many advisors in the program allows for smaller numbers of students in each advisor's caseload, allowing advisors to give one-on-one attention to each student to create personal connections and facilitate proactive advising (Steingass & Sykes, 2008). Students will be assigned to advisors based on their major, and each advisor will be assigned all students in 3 to 4 different majors in the School of Liberal Arts. Advisors will be specialized in their assigned majors by understanding the degree requirements, curriculum, and potential career paths of each, which they will learn through advisor training workshops and working with the faculty chair of each academic department. Assigning advisors to certain majors while incorporating holistic advising practices is similar to the advising program at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University (Northeastern University College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2019a; 2019b), which I found by benchmarking.

The two advisors for undeclared liberal arts students will be particularly knowledgeable on advising this population. Undeclared students have needs unlike the rest of the student population, such as needing extra guidance in decision-making on academic and career options

(Gordon, 2007). Because of these particular needs, there must be resources available that can specifically address them (Gordon, 2007). Including two advisors for undeclared students who have the knowledge to work with this population will give undeclared students the resources they need to declare a major in order to persist to graduation. There are currently around 200 undeclared liberal arts students at Sunnyside. If this number remains the same, this will create caseloads of around 100 students for each LAAP advisor working with undeclared students. There are currently around 600 students in the School of Liberal Arts with a declared major, which will create caseloads of around 120 students for the 5 LAAP advisors working with this population.

Upon entering the space, there will be a lounge area with comfortable chairs and side tables, as well as chairs and full-sized tables. This space will be known as the “LAAP Lounge.” Students will be able to sit in the lounge space and relax quietly, do homework, or wait for their meeting with their advisor. Having a space for students to sit will make the space feel inviting, creating a welcoming atmosphere (Astin & Antonio, 2012). It also gives students the opportunity to be around their advisor more often, which may help build rapport between advisors and students. Around the perimeter of the space will be private offices for all LAAP staff; there will be eight total offices for seven advisors and one for the director of LAAP. All of these offices must be private in order to maintain confidentiality for students. Though the director of LAAP will not advise students in order to focus on administrative and supervisory work, their office will be in the LAAP space in order to facilitate interaction with advisors. There will be signs outside each office door to number the offices and list the name of each advisor, which will make it clear to students where to find their specific advisor.

On one wall of the LAAP Lounge will be a shelving unit to display flyers and pamphlets for students such as resources on financial aid, how to choose a major or classes, and extracurricular student organizations. Centralized advising is the best advising model to offer comprehensive resources for students, and including multiple resources will also create a comprehensive environment (Kot, 2014; Astin & Antonio, 2012). LAAP's design will help students perceive their advising experiences to be positive, be more likely to be engaged in their academics, make responsible decisions about their academics, and work together with students on their classwork, which researchers have signaled are all important features of effective advising (Steingass & Sykes, 2008). These components will lead to a positive, personalized, and supportive environment (Astin & Antonio, 2012). The centralized LAAP office design aligns with the program's outcomes of streamlining and facilitating advising students knowing who their advisor is and where to go for advising by keeping all advisors and resources in one location. This way, students and advisors have access to resources they need to collaborate in the advising process, and there is only one space where liberal arts students will be advised by their LAAP advisor.

Students will be able to utilize the lounge space whenever they desire in order to make them feel comfortable around their advisor and in the space. For this reason, there will be no reception desk or administrator to monitor students as they enter, so they will be free to travel as they please. Advisors will keep their office doors open unless they are in a meeting, so students know they are welcome to enter their advisor's office. Allowing students in the lounge at all times and keeping office doors open makes it clear that advisors are accessible to students; advisor accessibility has been found to be key in making an impact on students (Young-Jones et al, 2013).

The only time the lounge space will be closed to students is when it is being utilized for training workshops for advisors, which will occur four times each semester. The lounge space will also be utilized for social events for students. These social events will happen at various times during the semester; for example, there will be social events around major holidays and seasons, with themed music, snacks, games, and activities. These events will give students the opportunity to relax and meet other LAAP students. There will also be workshops for LAAP students held in the lounge space, including workshops on how to use LinkedIn Learning and Burning Glass tools, and how to register for courses.

To continue to keep LAAP up to date with advising trends (Campbell & Nutt, 2008), professional development must be implemented in the program. This professional development will come in the form of training workshops. To assess the effectiveness of the program, anonymous surveys will be disseminated at the end of the semester by the director of LAAP to assess what needs to be improved in the program in the next semester. These surveys will be completed anonymously by LAAP advisors. LAAP students will also be sent surveys which will assess their advising experience during the semester, what was helpful to them, and what could be improved. To make students aware of the program, the LAAP staff will design and execute regular messaging via social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook to disseminate information and reminders to current LAAP students, and also to disseminate advertisements about the program to prospective Sunnyside students. LAAP advisors will be present at open houses and accepted students' days to inform prospective students and families about what LAAP can offer to students.

**Intentional Activity #2: Developing A Training Program for Advisors**

The second activity will be the design and implementation of a training program for advisors. These will be led by the director of LAAP. The director will decide on the optimal outcomes, curriculum, and logistics of the training based on the needs of the advisors in the program. The director will also conduct assessments after each training session via an anonymous survey that will ask participants what they learned, what they believe should be improved, and what information they believe should have been covered. Materials from the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) will guide the lessons of each workshop. Each workshop will touch on the three components of academic advising practice: informational, relational, and conceptual. These training workshops will also act as professional development for advisors, similar to the Advising Practice Program at The University of California Berkeley (UC Regents, 2020), which was found by benchmarking.

In order to include faculty in LAAP, faculty will be invited to attend advisor training workshops. Currently, faculty in the School of Liberal Arts act as advisors with little to no proper advising training. All advisors, whether they are a professional advisor or faculty, should be trained in advising approaches and techniques in order to make the biggest impact on students (Habley Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). While LAAP will be staffed with only professional advisors, advising training programs are beneficial for faculty (Wessel & Smith, 2011). The trainings will prepare all participants to help students grow holistically, and also teach them about LAAP and advising processes. When it comes time for students to register for courses for the following semester, students will be required to first meet with their LAAP advisor, then they will be cleared to see their faculty advisor in their academic department. The faculty advisor will be the one to clear students to register for courses. This system of requiring students to meet with two

advisors ensures that they are receiving holistic advising from their LAAP advisor and following the correct sequencing of courses in their major according to their faculty advisor. It will also encourage collaboration between advisors and faculty, and this collaboration will create optimal opportunities for students to achieve success (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). This collaboration may also encourage faculty to promote LAAP to students in their classes.

Training workshops will occur once each month, adding up to four workshops each semester. Developmental advising will be covered in all four workshops because this advising approach is not one that can be learned through one workshop; it takes practice to master, and advisors must keep their knowledge of developmental advising fresh. Liberal learning concepts will also be covered in each workshop to ensure that advisors also stay fresh with these techniques. Exposure to liberal learning is important for liberal arts students because their academic majors cover broad concepts, and liberal learning will build their ability to apply those concepts to different contexts (Laff, 2006). Because advisors will be trained to teach their students about liberal learning, this feature of the training workshops aligns with the program's outcome that students will understand and appreciate liberal learning.

Three student case studies will be presented at each workshop. These case studies will show participants how the lessons in the workshop may apply to real-life advising situations. To further apply the lessons to real-life, participants will then pair together and role-play scenarios between an advisor and a student. This way, participants will practice applying the learning gained in each workshop to their own work. The director of LAAP will conduct assessments to determine the efficacy of the workshops by sending surveys to participants that they will complete anonymously. The workshops may change depending on feedback. New training topics

may emerge for future workshops if all advisors are trained, or if survey feedback suggests that teachings need to change.

While each workshop will cover developmental advising and liberal learning techniques, each one will address different topics as well, in order to keep advisors up-to-date on college processes and happenings. The first workshop will be titled “Advising at Sunnyside.” It will cover information about majors in the School of Liberal Arts, including degree requirements, courses, what careers each major may lead to, and faculty chairs of each department. There will be an overview of Sunnyside resources for students so that advisors have knowledge of where to find information for students or where to refer them. This information will already be known by returning advisors, so this first workshop will only be mandatory for advisors who are new to LAAP. Also, the developmental advising approach and liberal learning will be introduced so participants can become refamiliarized with their tenets.

The second workshop will be titled “Advising with Technology.” This workshop will teach advisors about the technological resources at their disposal, such as Slate, LinkedIn Learning, and Burning Glass (there will be more to come on these resources in the last intentional activity). By learning about these tools, advisors will be able to teach their own students how to use them. There will be more lessons on developmental advising and liberal learning. The third workshop will be titled “Career Advising.” It will include strategies specifically for career advising, as having advisors who are trained in both career and academic advising will add to the comprehensive nature of the advising center (Habley, et. al, 2012). The developmental advising lesson in this workshop will relate to career advising. The fourth workshop will be titled “Advising for Registration.” This workshop will occur right before registration, so advisors will learn about registration procedures in LAAP and across the college.

It will also include an overview of developmental advising and liberal learning approaches during registration and as students complete their mid-term exams.

Trained advisors will create a comprehensive, productive advising environment for students (Astin & Antonio, 2012). These training workshops in particular will help create this environment because they will teach advisors how to utilize developmental advising and liberal learning techniques in order to further students' personal, academic, and professional development. Advisors will also be able to analyze a students' inputs to determine the support that they need to succeed after they complete these training workshops. Reviewing case studies and practicing role-playing in workshops will help with this because it teaches advisors to understand the student scenarios they may come across. Overall, advisors who are trained to guide students in their development will increase the likelihood that students will achieve the program's desired outputs: being successful and persisting to graduation (Astin & Antonio, 2012).

### **Intentional Activity #3: Constructing Comprehensive Resources**

The third intentional activity of LAAP is to develop and distribute comprehensive resources for both advisors and students. These comprehensive resources include technological tools which will allow advisors and students to access information from anywhere at any time. One resource that will be available for advisors is called Slate. Slate is an instrument that was created for higher education, in particular for admissions divisions to monitor student applicants (Technolutions, 2020). However, it can be tailored to be useful for advisors because of its various features. Some Slate features that can be adapted for advisors include the ability to access students' materials and personal information; the ability to contact students and track who is communicating to them from across the college; the ability to examine a students' major, their

degree audit, and class schedule; record notes on students and view notes that other advisors and faculty have recorded about them; and create advisor caseloads (Technolutions, 2020). While Slate is already in use at Sunnyside in admissions and in some student success capacities in various divisions around the college, it will be adopted for use by the entire college beginning in Summer of 2020. Adopting it for use as an advising tool will therefore become a seamless part of LAAP's offerings shortly thereafter.

Implementing Slate for advisors will allow them to understand their students' inputs that they bring with them to college because the tool will record this information. They can use this information to create the LAAP environment by making sure the environment is supportive and attentive to students' needs (Astin & Antonio, 2012). For example, an advisor may note that many students who come to Sunnyside are Caucasian and decide to put resources on service learning, community service, and internships in the LAAP Lounge to entice students to expand their knowledge of diversity. Advisors can also use students' information to tailor their advising approaches and techniques to each student in order to build solid rapport and guide each student down a personalized path to their success. This will further the idea of creating an optimal environment for students because personalized attention from advisors has proven to lead to positive student outcomes (Steingass & Sykes, 2008). While students' personal information will be shared on Slate, there is a feature that disables access to particular information that should only be available to certain individuals on campus, such as gender or immigrant documentation status (Technolutions, 2020).

The other comprehensive resources that will be implemented in LAAP are Burning Glass and LinkedIn Learning. These resources will be implemented specifically for students to utilize. Burning Glass provides data, statistics, and related information on careers, such as average

salary, education level, required skills, and job availability (Burning Glass Technologies, 2020).

LinkedIn Learning is a tool offered on the LinkedIn platform where students can watch a plethora of videos on how to acquire different skills and what certain careers entail (LinkedIn Corporation, 2020). For example, students can search for videos on careers in the engineering field or learn how to strengthen communication skills. Streamlined technological resources for students will impact students' decision making by allowing them to learn more about majors and careers that they are considering (Capaldi, et. al, 2006). Therefore, they help create an environment where students' needs are met and where they are able to develop holistically (Astin & Antonio, 2012). In particular, these resources promote career and self-exploration for students, which are important in major and career satisfaction (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015).

Advisors will be trained in the use of these tools during their training workshops. After they learn about the student resources, they can teach their own students about LinkedIn Learning and Burning Glass. LAAP advisors will offer workshops for students on how to use these tools and the benefits of using them. These student workshops will be led by advisors instead of the director of LAAP in order to allow students to get more face time with their advisors, therefore deepening personal connections. Advisors can show these tools to students in their meetings as well; for example, if there is a certain career that a student is considering, an advisor can go to Burning Glass to show the student the skills one needs in that field, then go to LinkedIn Learning to show the student how to acquire those skills. Incorporating Slate, LinkedIn Learning, and Burning Glass will grow the number of resources in LAAP, adding to a wide variety of information that will be available to advisors and students and creating a comprehensive environment (Astin & Antonio, 2012). These tools also make the program timely

and relevant to students who are technological natives, therefore accommodating the modern needs of today's students (Astin & Antonio, 2012).

### **Outreach and Engagement Plan**

In order to fully implement LAAP and its intentional activities, there must be intentional efforts directed towards the program's constituencies in order to encourage support and engagement. The first target audience for LAAP is students, because they are participants in the program. An important component of LAAP will be meeting students' needs. If students' needs are met based on the inputs that they bring with them to Sunnyside, they will be more likely to have positive outcomes (Astin & Antonio, 2012). To make sure students are engaged in LAAP, they will receive a monthly emailed newsletter about resources in the office available to them and reminders to meet with their advisor during registration or at any time to ask questions. Students will also receive similar reminders via text message so that they receive communication in a way that is most familiar and comfortable to them.

LAAP's second target audience is families of students in the program. Families may influence their students to participate in LAAP if they understand what LAAP does and what the program can offer their students. In this way, families are a participant of LAAP. To engage families, LAAP advisors will be present at Sunnyside's Open Houses and Accepted Students' Days to advertise the program. Families of students in LAAP can opt to receive the monthly emailed newsletters as well, so that they are aware of LAAP happenings and can encourage their students to utilize LAAP resources.

LAAP's third target audience is faculty in the School of Liberal Arts. Faculty are a stakeholder in the program because in order to implement LAAP, faculty must understand the necessity for it and buy-in to it. Faculty and LAAP advisors need to have mutual respect so they

can support one another; more importantly, students are more likely to be supported if advisors and faculty collaborate (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). To encourage collaboration with liberal arts faculty, they will be invited to LAAP's advisor training workshops. Their participation will train them in advising practices so that they are more likely to have an impact on students (Wessel & Smith, 2011). Attending training workshops will also increase faculty awareness of what LAAP offers to students, and they may be more likely to recommend LAAP's advisors and resources to their students if they have this knowledge. In turn, faculty can make advisors aware of new courses, and changes to curriculum and degree programs. Advisors can use this information to advise their students accurately.

In order to generate awareness for LAAP, advisors will also monitor and contribute to LAAP Twitter and Facebook accounts. These social media accounts will allow those inside and outside the Sunnyside community to know what LAAP is doing to support students. There will also be reminders to current LAAP students about accessing resources or meeting with their advisor. These platforms will keep LAAP's communication with students constant and relevant to today's technologically savvy student population.

### **Conclusion**

In order to make the connection between academic advising and student success, one must ask how advising can be optimized in order to achieve this outcome. Advising is an area of higher education that evidence suggests is positively influential to students, so institutions should work on enhancing advising models and practices. While advising overall increases student success and persistence, a centralized advising model lends itself best to these outcomes because of its comprehensive nature (Kot, 2014). In order to create ideal advising services, the inputs that

students bring with them to college must be taken into account so that the advising environment accommodates all student needs (Astin & Antonio, 2012).

LAAP is a centralized advising model because all advisors are located in one space. It also includes a training program for advisors that allows them to advance their practice through professional development and includes comprehensive technological instruments like Slate for advisors and LinkedIn Learning and Burning Glass for students. This program is comprehensive because of these intentional activities. This comprehensiveness allows students to understand and appreciate liberal learning; it also allows advising to be streamlined and facilitated, and students will understand where to go for advising services and who their advisor is.

LAAP will offer a comprehensive and holistic environment for students where they will get personalized attention and feel support throughout their college journey. These aspects will further the small community feeling that is a hallmark of Sunnyside College. It will also allow Sunnyside to stand out among similar institutions because there are not many small, private, catholic colleges that utilize advising centers (Wessel & Smith, 2011). With nineteen liberal arts majors at Sunnyside that offer different curriculum and have their own degree requirements, an advising center can alleviate confusion about these majors and help guide students towards graduation.

When institutions recognize academic advising as a tool to boost student success and persistence rates, more institutions will put attention towards optimizing their advising services. Advising services that are well-developed are an excellent way to meet students' needs because it has opportunities to guide students academically, personally, and professionally. Therefore, there are many ways that advising practices can guide students toward success. In particular, if advising services are centralized and include a variety of resources, students will benefit greatly;

the resources they need are all localized, which alleviates anxiety and uncertainty students may feel around issues they face.

Most of all, advising should be optimized in order to offer students the opportunity to develop a relationship with their advisor over their college career. This means that in higher education at large, advising is a way to personalize the college experience for students. Students will feel that there is someone on campus who can not only answer questions they have, but also act as a supporter and advocate for them throughout their college journey. Centralized advising is the best advising model to offer support and advocacy to students because everything in a students' support system is located in one place. Support and advocacy are important for all students, but it could be especially important for students with minoritized identities who may not otherwise have a support system on campus. Overall, centralized advising is beneficial for students and institutions because it improves students' experiences and leads them to success, which will ultimately guide them towards graduation.

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