

The Academic Liaison: ‘There to help me succeed’

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Abstract

‘I believe the AL is there to help me succeed in my degree, to get me through and support me in whatever I need, and point me in the right direction, for resources that are available, and to make my academic career successful’. - Student

Introduction

In 2020, the Academic Student Success Advising (ASSA) collaborative research project between the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) and the University of Southern Queensland was launched. The approach provides integrated support combining academic and pastoral dimensions. The launch of the ASSA project proved timely as the Covid-19 pandemic began impacting students’ lives. The project used McIntosh’s (2019) six pillars approach to achieve a whole-of-university student success strategy. This includes a clearly defined advising model, understanding student characteristics, strategic advising principles, an Advising Curriculum (Picton, Jaquet & Bell, 2021), staff training and the use of student data.

This paper describes a pivotal component of USC’s ASSA approach, the Academic Liaison (AL). Established in the discipline of Nursing, the AL provides integrated and contextualised support for students and liaises between students, academic and professional staff, and clinical placement facilitators. The AL requires extensive teaching and clinical experience to directly work with students, and an ability to build relationships with other staff members across the university to be able to effectively triage and refer students to specialised support. As such, the AL was operating within the third space, working across traditional professional and academic boundaries (Veles & Carter, 2016). Over eighteen months, data was collected from first-year nursing students, and academic and professional about the AL approach, indicating a positive influence of the AL on students’ progression, academic achievement, and student experience.

Student Perspectives

Students reported complex and compounding challenges that impacted their studies and lives, and support through the AL was welcomed. As a single referral point, students appreciated the trauma-informed approach, needing to disclose their circumstances just once. This created a holistic approach between the AL, academics, and centralised support. Students also appreciated discipline specific support; a finding supported by Gibbons’ (2010) study with Nursing students reporting discipline-specific advising as effective holistic support. The AL’s extensive experience in clinical and academic settings enabled a contextual understanding of students’ circumstances and the ability to provide specific academic support.

Professional staff perspectives

Professional staff who were interviewed for this project were members of centralised support teams, including Academic Advisers, Student Success Advisers and Student Wellbeing

Advisers and Counsellors. The design of existing services was profoundly student-centred, responding to regional students' academic and pastoral needs. Professional staff welcomed collaborations within the third space to enhance networks of support (Veles & Carter, 2016). Professional staff reported interest in the AL's role of normalising help-seeking and promoting its intrinsic value to address frequently reported first-year student perceptions that support is remedial (Clegg et al., 2006). An area of development as the project is expanded is clearly defining staff roles to facilitate an interconnected ecosystem of support.

Academic Staff perspectives

The AL role was well received by academic staff who recognised the value of the extensive discipline and professional expertise of the AL in supporting students. This was particularly valuable during clinical placement, a widely recognised stressor for students (Farrington et al., 2019). Staff reported the benefit of having the AL as a single touchpoint for student referrals, to facilitate direct support or triage students to additional support. Developing skills in group advising, continued staff training, and using student data were identified key areas of development to scale the project further and are now being implemented in 2022. The role has now evolved to include all enrolled nursing students. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, the AL pilot demonstrated success in supporting students to remain engaged with their studies and highlighted the value of discipline-specific advising.

Discussion

1. Does your institution have similar roles?
2. What might be the benefits/challenges to implementing a similar approach?
3. What roles at your institution specifically support students' pastoral development?

References

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