By Adam Kulaas, Mary Ryerse and Tom Vander Ark

The goal of an advisory is to help students figure out who they are, where they’re headed and how they’re going to get there. Through an advisory system, each student has an adult who knows them and helps them navigate high school so that they leave with a meaningful, personalized plan and are prepared for post-secondary options.

An advisory is a key component of a distributed student guidance strategy that includes regular meetings at regular intervals between an advisor and a group of students, has a clear focus and is something in which all students and staff participate. Student ownership is key to an advisory process, and there is typically a “gradual release” of responsibility from advisor to advisee. With the support of the advisor, students craft and own outcomes as they pursue postsecondary learning opportunities.

In the paper [Core and More: Guiding and Personalizing College and Career Readiness](http://gettingsmart.com/2014/05/core-guiding-personalizing-college-career-readiness/), we assert that the best student guidance systems are blended (leveraging technology and in-person instruction and services), distributed (leveraging staff in addition to school counselors) and scheduled (utilizing an advisory period).

This advisory period is really the glue that holds it all together. The structure of the advisory should reflect the school’s mission, vision and philosophy of learning and should provide additional opportunities for students and staff to personalize their experiences.

High school can be a confusing time with increasing options for students due to the rapid expansion of digital learning. Advisory has to be the spine of the next generation high school. Sustained adult relationships can help students navigate this new digital landscape and maximize tools and systems to enhance their personal learning plan and map their trajectory beyond high school graduation.

 [Chris Lehmann](https://www.teachingchannel.org/blog/2013/06/18/high-school-advisory-programs/), Science Leadership Academy (SLA), believes that student-teacher relationships radiate from the advisory period. “Think of advisory as the soul of your school. And in everything you do, remember that you teach students before you teach subjects. Advisory is the place in the schedule where that idea has its core and then it spreads into everything else we do,” [Lehmann said](http://gettingsmart.com/2015/04/students-ask-big-questions-at-science-leadership-academy/).

Beth Brodie of[Partnership for Change](http://partnershipvt.org/) notes that a key function of the advisor is to ensure that every student has someone, “who knows them well and supports them at school meetings and conferences.”

**Five Core Elements**

We see five core elements that should be part of every secondary advisory system:

1. **Progress monitoring:** Weekly academic and social emotional (character development) goal setting and monitoring, connections to academic and social support services.
2. **Supports:**Connection to youth and family services for academic and life support outside of the school day/environment.
3. **Culture:** Support and opportunity for student led initiatives that develop and grow a positive school culture.
4. **Careers:**Support for career awareness and learning experiences that would support deeper exploration (including writing an essay on [how AI will impact life and livelihood](http://www.gettingsmart.com/2017/03/the-technologies-reshaping-life-and-livelihood/)).
5. **College:** Support for post-secondary education awareness and decision making.

The American School Counselor Association ([ASCA](https://www.schoolcounselor.org/)) National Model emphasizes a distributed approach to implementing these elements. [Norm Gysbers](http://gettingsmart.com/2014/06/conversation-norm-gysbers-student-guidance/) encourages schools to move from “position to program” when thinking about guidance. Accordingly, core elements of a quality advisory program are supported with expectations, outcomes, role clarity and measurements.

10 Optional Elements

There are 10 optional elements that can be added to the advisory mission:

1. **SEL:** Support social and emotional development with learning experiences and feedback.
2. **Mindset:**Develop[innovation mindset,](http://gettingsmart.com/2014/06/building-innovation-mindset-growth-maker-team-experiences/) including growth, team and maker elements through open-ended challenges.
3. **Work:** Support identification of and preparation for work-, travel- and service-based learning.
4. **Applications:** Provide support for college applications and dual enrollment options.
5. **Peer mentoring:** Foster peer learning and team building experiences. (Like [Acton Academy](http://www.gettingsmart.com/2017/04/getting-smart-podcast-acton-academy-building-a-student-centered-school-and-global-network/), this could include high school students supporting goal setting for middle school students.)
6. **Health:** Support health and wellness learning experiences.
7. **Life skills:** Teach financial literacy, digital citizenship, study skills and project management.
8. **Conferences:** Prepare for student-led conferences to build student ownership and encourage quality work.
9. **Integration:**Facilitate cross-curricular [project-based](http://www.gettingsmart.com/categories/series/place-based-education/) work.
10. **Place:** Involve community partners as guest speakers and local experts. Facilitate [place-based learning](http://www.gettingsmart.com/categories/series/place-based-education/) experiences.

**Delivery Options**

**Size**. Advisory groups are typically 18-22 students. To achieve smaller groups, administrators often take on advisory roles. Staffing advisory can also serve as an opportunity to involve every adult stakeholder within the building and provide a relationship platform for students, while creating a desirable advisor-to-advisee ratio.

**Frequency**. Advisory periods are typically integral to the school schedule and can be anywhere from one to five times weekly for a period shorter than a class, such as 20 or 30 minutes long. Some schools elect to offer long, less frequent advisory periods.

**Focus**. Some advisory groups focus on college and career preparation, others on academic support, social and emotional learning or character development. [Beth Brodie](http://partnershipvt.org/2014/03/3098/) suggests the development of a vision statement and clear objectives prior to implementation. “Establishing a multistakeholder group to include teachers, students, parents, administrators and special educators to develop a vision statement and define objectives will lend itself to a lasting organizational change,” said Brodie.

A holistic approach to advisee development will reap the greatest results and build an internal system for student-to-student mentor program within PreK-12 multi age schools. With intentional design, the skills and development provided within the advisory program will support an organic, yet intentional mentoring program that will accelerate student success and navigation as they transition through the continuum of the site.

**Curriculum**. Regardless of focus, advisory ought be supported by curriculum. Some choose to use an existing curriculum, others choose to write their own. The curriculum can help connect academic preparation, thought patterns, interests and learning to students’ college and career aspirations. You don’t have to do everything in advisory, but you do need to be clear about what you do.

One implementation example is SLA, where advisory is treated as a course, and the advisor serves as the advocate for the student and point-person for the family within the school. Advisors follow the same group from ninth to twelfth grade and spend two 40-minute periods with them each week.

**Benefits**

**Increased readiness.**Consistent implementation of advisory programs has been shown to positively impact metrics such as course taking patterns, transcript readiness, and college enrollment. For example, schools that were part of a six-year college readiness initiative that emphasized advisory showed significant growth in college readiness. At the beginning of the grant, only 37% of students met four-year college entrance requirements; however, six years later, 56% of students meeting those requirements. Through this [College Spark Washington](http://collegespark.org/)funded initiative, grants were provided to 39 low-income schools in an effort to prepare more students for college and career through the implementation of advisory. As indicated in this [impact study](http://www.gettingsmart.com/2017/04/an-integrated-approach-to-college-career-life-readiness/), the results were promising and informative.

**Connection to peers.**A strong advisory program helps students get connected to one another in meaningful ways. Through class discussions, democratic classroom decision-making, Socratic seminars and other activities, students can form bonds with one another and also learn more about themselves in relation to others. This is something we know is important for [21st-century skill building](http://route21.p21.org/?option=com_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=2), and the advisory can be a time to do this without the need to teach specific course content.

**Connection to adults.**A strong advisory system provides students meaningful relationships with adults. There is research to suggest that strong adult mentorship while in high school increases the likelihood of graduation and post-secondary success (see William Sedlacek’s work with [GMSP](https://www.gmsp.org/)).

**Advocacy.**A strong advisor/advisee relationship means that the student has an advocate in the school building. This means the student can feel supported, and if or when that student faces some personal or academic difficulty, rather than mentally or physically “checking out,” the student has someone to go to for help, feedback and assistance.

**Personal Growth.**Because of the student’s personal connections to an adult, the student can learn more about their academic and personal strengths and areas for improvement. A student’s own self-awareness is critical for success in college and beyond, and a good advisory program can help students become more self-aware through 1:1 discussions with their advisor and also time for those discussions as a peer group during the advisory time.

**Lessons Learned**

**Patience**. When imposed on a high school, some faculty will argue that they hadn’t signed up for the advisor role. It is important for leaders to recognize this can be a scary change that requires both professional growth and a lot of persistence. Leaders ought not to underestimate how substantial a role change being an advisor is for many high school teachers.

**Ask and listen.**Ask students what their unique contribution will be and what their vision is for life after high school–and listen to their responses without judgment. Keep asking the questions and helping students translate their vision into next steps.

**Draw connections and use data.** Emphasize the importance of helping students draw connections between current school activities and future goals. Students aren’t the only ones who benefit from connections–staff members do as well. For some, the appeal is the opportunity to connect with students. For others, it is knowing that advisory can move student outcomes in a big way. For example, schools participating in a six-year [College Spark Washington](http://www.collegespark.org/) initiative that includes advisory have demonstrated graduation rates 20 percent higher than comparison schools.

**Preparing for Life.**A strong advisory program has adults who ask students lots of questions, show a genuine interest in listening to students’ responses, help them create a vision for their futures and then help them enact strong goals to help them succeed in college, career and life.

An advisor’s job is to help students plan for that life through visioning, goal setting, asking questions, being an advocate and simply being there for students.