Advising First-Generation and Non-Traditional Students

“First-generation college students” may be identified slightly differently in various contexts, but the general idea is that they and their families have had limited exposure to college culture and students may have limited family support navigating college. “Non-traditional” also has several definitions, but tends to refer to someone who has not taken a path directly from high school to college. Perhaps they dropped out of high school and got a GED/Hi-SET, worked or served in the military, came from another country, raised children. Given the diversity of our students’ experiences, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing their needs, but here are some strategies that would probably be useful to keep in mind with all students—especially since you may not always know the details of their backgrounds right away.

Don’t assume knowledge of college culture

Think about the last time you walked into an unfamiliar community (a hospital? a gym? a Star Trek convention?). You probably noticed some elements that made you feel like an outsider, like words you didn’t understand, or expectations of behavior that everyone else seemed to know about without being told. Thinking about your students’ experience of college this way can help you anticipate and mitigate some of their barriers. Ask if they understand specific words or terms like “pre-requisite” and “GPA”, or work in a definition as you speak. Also, remember that students who are unfamiliar with college, have been out of school a long time, or never even went to high school, may have no basis for understanding how GCC functions. Don’t assume they have retained the massive amounts of information they heard or read in their first weeks here—check that they understand what to do in specific circumstances as they arise. Let them know you will non-judgmentally welcome any question.

Emphasize belonging and identify strengths

For a variety of reasons, students may harbor suspicions that college is not “for them.” That underlying mindset could make it easier for challenges to derail them, so advisors should emphasize early on that everyone encounters setbacks, and help them develop a plan for that inevitability (see resources below!). Remind them that extra-curricular activities exist for them as much for any other student, and share with them that students who take part in such activities are more likely to succeed academically. Help them identify the strengths they possess: first-generation students are trailblazers, and older students bring life skills and experiences that greatly enrich the GCC community.

Connect to resources

First-generation and non-traditional students may think of classes as the main function of school, and thus may not even be aware of all the different kinds of support GCC can offer. They also may hesitate to reach out for help for fear that doing so confirms that they don’t belong here and aren’t cut out for college. Make sure your students know about the Office of Disability Services, Peer Tutoring, the Veteran’s Center (even if they don’t use GI Bill benefits, they can find community and support), the GCC Food Pantry, the Women’s Resource Center, the Community Resources Studio, and all the resources offered by the Compass program, including Peer Mentoring and classes that support students in developing academic strategies and exploring majors and careers. Point out that all the most successful people across history and today know and make use of their resources!