



**Idaho State
University**

Momentum Pathways

**Think 30 and Proactive Advising
Project Plan**

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Table of Contents

Problem Statement.....	2
Introduction	2
Goals and Recommendations	3
Goal #1	3
Goal #2	7
Goal #3	10
Project Summary.....	11
References	12

Momentum Pathways

The Think 30/Proactive Advising Project group has been charged with two primary tasks:

- 1) Recommend a system that ensures proactive advising for every ISU student.
- 2) Recommend ways to educate and encourage students to earn 30 credits in their first academic year.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

ISU has failed to proactively advise students. This has led to students that self-advise and self-register, and these realities have contributed to low retention and graduation rates.

INTRODUCTION

There is a very close relationship between student interaction with academic advising and institutional satisfaction. In an article from NACADA (National Academic Advising Association), Executive Director Charlie Nutt (2003) explains, "Academic Advising is the only structured activity on the campus in which all students have the opportunity for one-to-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution" (p. 1).

The challenge for many institutions has been to transition from a traditional approach, to an advising model that is more effective in the current higher education setting. Richard Sluder, Vice-Provost for Student Success at Middle Tennessee State University, explained: "Old-school advising works by expecting students to come to advisors, but often, the students who take advantage of advisor availability are those who probably don't need intensive services" (Rowh, 2018). The ability of an institution to utilize advisors to reach out and engage the student population is often referred to as intrusive, or proactive advising (Rowh, 2018).

Numerous studies have shown that creating a proactive advising environment is a critical component to improving student retention (Glennon, Baxley & Ferren, 1985; VanderSchee, 2007; Swecker, Fifolt & Swearby, 2013; Rodgers, Blunt, & Tribble, 2014).

Simply stated, ISU has failed to transition away from a traditional advising approach. We still require the student to identify the correct office and to seek out their own advising assistance. In most cases, students are not provided with an assigned academic advisor, so they resort to self-advising. Furthermore, since advising is not mandatory at ISU, many students who fail to progress in a satisfactory manner never meet with an academic advisor prior to withdrawal. Less frequently, a student may interact with multiple individuals in advising roles. They may have sought out an

advisor in Central Academic Advising, been assigned an athletics advisor, and met with a faculty advisor within their chosen field. Since there is no comprehensive advisor oversight or shared communication system, students often experience mixed messages and contradictory advisement.

When this type of unstructured advising approach is paired with an essentially open admissions policy, retention becomes very difficult to effectively manage. Research suggests institutions should strive to align their student support strategy with their admissions strategy (Leonard, & de Pillis, 2008; Cortes, 2013; Swail, 2014). Institutions that often admit underprepared students, yet fail to offer proactive student advising, typically experience lower retention rates. Recent institutional retention data shows this impact as retention rates have not improved since 2010. Note that the temporary bump in retention rate between 2012-2015 coincided with the increase in the international student population, as these students were retained at over 80%. However, once the international population decreased, retention rates returned to a similar level.

Table 1. *Idaho State University Retention Rates for new students from 2010-2018.*

ISU Retention	Fall 2018	Fall 2017	Fall 2016	Fall 2015	Fall 2014	Fall 2013	Fall 2012	Fall 2011	Fall 2010
Retention Rate									
New Students	64.3%	63.8%	64.8%	69.3%	71.5%	71.4%	67.4%	63.0%	63.9%

Furthermore, when ISU is compared to our peers, or other 4-year public institutions with 90% - 100% acceptance rates, the average retention rate is 72.5% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This statistic indicates that our low retention rates are not due to our admissions standards, but more likely our failure to move towards a proactive approach with student support and advising.

GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This committee has provided three institutional goals, identified the necessary resources, provided the impacts of these recommendations, and produced a timeline to most effectively accomplish these goals. This is a summary of the recommendations made by the Think 30/Proactive Advising Project Group. We have chosen to approach this project by first addressing the goal of creating a proactive advising environment, as we view this change as the cornerstone to our improvement with our subsequent goals, as well as overall improvements with student success.

The Think 30/Proactive Advising subcommittee has proposed the following institutional goals to most effectively accomplish our tasks:

GOAL #1

Ensure that every ISU student receives proactive and personalized advising support starting on the day they are admitted.

Resources: Two resources are recommended by this committee that will facilitate a proactive advising environment. These resources include:

- a. The evaluation of institutional advising resources and the addition of full-time academic advisors.
 - b. A contract with a student success firm to implement advising communication software that includes an early alert system.
1. The average caseload for advisees per full-time academic advisor at all higher education institutions is 296, and the average advising caseload for public 4-year doctorate offering institutions is 285 (Robbins, 2013). ISU currently has 6,733 FTE undergraduate students (FTE minus all dual-credit students) and 16 full-time professional academic advisors, therefore, the current advisor workload at ISU is 420. This type of advising environment has existed for many years and, in addition to aggravating problems with student retention, has led to high advisor turnover and burnout.

Thus, the most critical resource required to effectively create a proactive advising environment is additional full-time academic advisors. The committee recommends that we add a minimum of six full-time academic advisors to reach a total of 22, bringing the average caseload down to 306, and closer to the ideal caseload of 285. We also strongly recommend that the institution evaluates our current advising resources and considers repurposing existing positions as a means of expediting the hiring process, and making these changes as financially feasible as possible. Additionally, we cannot ensure that we effectively move towards a proactive advising environment, unless current advising structure and oversight is also evaluated to ensure that necessary oversight is in place to effectively manage this transition.

Once the advising structure is addressed and the full team of advisors are in place and trained, the recommended goal is to assign every student, both existing and incoming, to an academic advisor. The pairing of advisor and student will be based on the advisor's expertise and the students chosen major or area of interest. This assigned advisor will remain the student's primary point of advising assistance until they graduate from ISU. Once a student declares their major, a faculty advisor will also be assigned. These faculty advising sessions are essential as they will provide discipline specific insight into course selection and career paths. However, there is no longer a "hand-off" between academic advisor and faculty advisor. This new model provides the student with an academic advisor who is assigned to provide constant support and guidance throughout the entire academic journey, from the day of admission through

graduation. Our project group began to refer to these re-defined academic advisors as Sherpa's that will offer personalized guidance for each ISU student as they progress towards successful degree completion. This also reduces confusion and promotes a primary point of contact as our students may change majors, or take time away from school.

Additionally, our group strongly recommends that once the advisor pool has been established, we implement mandatory advising for all new first-year and transfer students. This will be the first fully-scaled initiative towards intentionally building a relationship between the student and the institution. Over time, the addition of trained and re-deployed advisors will have a significant impact on ISU retention rates.

2. Once the advisors are in place, a second resource recommended by the committee includes a partnership with a proven student success firm such as EAB. <https://eab.com/products/navigate-for-four-year-institutions/> This company must be able to provide tools designed to improve student engagement and retention. This is a critical step as most institutions simply lack the technical resources to build and implement this type of communication software. This software is essential to offering a coordinated and individualized network of support to each student. While many firms exist, the committee recommends a partnership with one that has an established and proven track record in the area of communication management and improved student success.

The first and primary deliverable is a tool designed specifically for tracking student communication, and to coordinate student support personnel across campus to improve the student experience. Currently ISU has no software designated to track student support and this is essential to fully implement a proactive advising culture. Software such as this is important as it allows us to break down silo's and coordinate advising communication, especially as students move into majors. This allows all advisors and support staff to be aware of what each student has been told and what assistance they have received. Without a communication tracking software, students will continue to receive conflicting advisement or potentially fall through the cracks with no institutional assistance.

An additional component of this communication platform is an early alert system. The purpose of this tool is to direct front-line staff to know exactly where to place their efforts to drive student success and retention. An early alert system allows faculty and staff to identify students that are struggling, and advisors are then able to respond immediately, providing personalized assistance and connections with campus

services. These services already exist on our campus and have been designed to get our students back on track, we simply lack the tool to consistently make this connection, or to make the connection in a timely manner. It is essential that the institution have sufficient staff in all student support areas such as disability services, counseling and testing, and tutoring, as once the early alert system goes online, student referrals will increase.

A tool that can provide student success communication software is essential in order to effectively identify students and coordinate campus efforts. The outcome of a successful partnership with a firm will prove essential in our efforts to steadily increase retention and graduation rates.

Impact: The impact of creating an institutional-level proactive advising environment is significant for ISU.

1. The requested resources above will lay the necessary foundation to achieve the quickest possible improvement for ISU student success. Furthermore, it will provide a platform where campus faculty and staff can offer support to every student, allowing advisors to preemptively address concerns. The goal is to intervene before students are experiencing a significant problem, and certainly before they make the decision to withdraw.
2. Beyond the student interventions already mentioned, many other projects will become possible by creating a proactive and cohesive campus community. We foresee initiatives that promote large-scale registration events for all ISU students the week that registration opens, personalized and proactive advising for students on academic warning or academic probation, specific sections of taught by our best faculty creating academic engagement in the very first semester, and many others. Our committee believes there are numerous ways to truly transform our student retention, once the leadership, advisors, and the support software are in place to deliver a proactive advising environment.
3. Additionally, the committee recommends that the institution takes some time to examine highly effective advising and student support models currently in use at peer institutions. One example worth consideration is the “One-Stop Shop” being utilized at the Office of Student Services at Dixie State University. In this model, the students are able to take care of numerous issues such as financial aid, course registration, advising, testing, counseling, and many others at a single location, and with a single person. The creation of a centrally located office of this nature, or other

creative models, may be a key factor in creating a new culture of student success at ISU. Many of our peers have identified and implemented highly effective ways to increase retention rates and it makes sense to take a closer look at these options.

Timeline: Since progress towards developing a campus environment of proactive advising is imperative to reaching our goals associated with retention, and retention is a paramount concern for the institution, the committee recommends the following timeline:

1. Additional advisors should be transitioned and/or hired by July 2020. These individuals will need to be trained and fully prepared to implement mandatory advising and to proactively engage with our students by the start of the fall 2020 semester in order to make a positive impact on the retention for fall 2021.
2. Student success firms should be brought onto campus for initial discussions in the summer of 2020. A company should be chosen by December 2020, and a partnership would then begin with the goal of having the first phase of implementation in place by July 2021. During these eight months, staff and faculty would need to be trained on the software with the goal of going live prior to the fall 2021 semester. Even with this aggressive timeline, a significant impact on retention data would not be felt until fall 2022. While the additional advisors and mandatory advising starting in fall 2020 would have a positive impact on fall 2021 data, the partnership with a company and the addition of communication and student support software will provide the leverage needed to completely overhaul our student experience and significantly improve retention moving forward.

GOAL #2

Increase the percentage of students that attempt 30 or more credits in their first academic year (Think 30).

While our current advising environment creates many challenges, including low retention, there are other negative impacts such as a high percentage of students that fail to take 30 or more credits each academic year.

Since 2012, ISU has been able to increase the percentage of freshman students that register for 30 or more credits in their first academic year (Table 2). These data may also be tied to the reality that ISU has also decreased the percent of non-traditional students across these same year (Table 3). This number has been dropping steadily, but still, nearly 4 in 10 students identifies as non-traditional and these data appear to be leveling off.

Table 2 *Idaho State University Student Full-Time Credit Load from 2012-2018.*

Description	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
Did not earned 30 or more credits in first academic year	887	847	930	1,196	1,085	1,159	1,316
Earned 30 or more credits in first academic year	810	804	804	807	685	672	729
Grand Total	1,691	1,651	1,651	1,731	1,770	1,831	2,045
% over 30 credits in first academic year	48%	49%	46%	40%	39%	37%	36%

Table 3 Idaho State University Students Traditional vs. Non-Traditional from 2012-2018.

Description	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
Non-traditional	2,903	3,066	3,351	3,632	4,061	4,591	5,235
Traditional	4,696	4,861	4,963	5,345	5,333	4,786	4,780
Grand Total	7,599	7,927	8,314	8,977	9,394	9,377	10,015
% Non-traditional	38.2%	38.7%	40.3%	40.5%	43.2%	49.0%	52.3%

We are confident that there is still a significant percent of traditional, full-time students that do not take 30 credits each year. The committee recommendations with regard to credit accumulation is to focus primarily on these traditional students to improve this measure. We have established a goal of increasing the rate of full-time students completing 30 credits per academic year by 5%, or to 52.5%, by the fall of 2021. For students that are unable to complete 30 credits within each academic year, we must focus on awareness so they understand the impact of choosing part-time credits on time-to-degree. We must also support and affirm these students as many of our students have very specific reasons that they are unable attend full-time.

Resources: This goal will be accomplished in two primary ways:

- a. Advisors and faculty will begin to communicate directly to all students and ensure they are aware that 15 credits are a full-time semester load, and necessary to graduate in four years. Therefore, the primary resources needed for this goal are the same as Goal #1, additional full-time academic advisors and student success communication software. The creation of a proactive advising environment will also result in students that have mandatory advising appointments, providing additional opportunities to consistently convey the Think 30 message.
- b. The Marketing and Communications (MARCOMM) department will be involved to ensure this message is delivered to our student body in a coordinated manner.

Impact: The impact of additional students taking a full academic load will be noticed on several levels:

- a. There will be a decrease in average time to degree.
- b. The institution will increase graduation rates.
- c. Students will graduate from the institution will less debt.
- d. The institution will experience increases in retention and graduation rates as less students drop out due to excessive and costly time to completion.
- e. Increased levels of student satisfaction.

Timeline: This project may begin in the very near future.

- a. Student communication from MARCOMM can launch as students begin to register for spring 2020 courses during the fall 2019 semester. This messaging will increase significantly mid-semester, in the weeks leading up to, and during, registration week.
- b. In addition, advising staff and faculty will need to be informed of this initiative to consistently encourage our full-time students to take 30 or more credits each academic year, when possible.

GOAL #3

Reduce the median number of credits attempted to earn a bachelor's degree.

An additional measure that indicates students are not receiving adequate levels of academic advising is that since 2017, ISU bachelor's degree graduates have averaged 142.5 credit hours. Credit hour totals typically reach these high levels for a handful of reasons, including:

- a. a student takes multiple courses that are not required for their degree.
- b. a student takes on multiple majors.
- c. a student changes majors late, or to an unrelated field.

The committee agrees this number can be reduced; however, a goal that measures a four or six-year graduation rate will not be reached like the others within a two-year period. This measure will take more time to show marked improvement as it revolves around a significantly longer process, degree completion.

Resources: As previously mentioned, due to the lack of advising resources and a poor advising structure, many ISU students self-advise. This practice has led to unnecessary attempted credits and high credit totals. We expect a decrease in total credit accumulation with the addition of full-time advisors, proactive advising strategies, and increased levels of meaningful student communication. Therefore, the resources needed to achieve this goal are the same as the resources listed for Goal #1, and primarily include additional full-time academic advisors and important student communication software.

Impact: The impact of students graduating from the institution with fewer credits will be observed on a few levels:

- a. There will be a decrease in average time to degree.
- b. The institution will increase graduation rates.
- c. Students will graduate from the institution with less student debt.



- d. Students will attain their academic goals at significantly higher rates.

Timeline: With additional academic advisors in place by the fall of 2020, and helpful advising tools implemented by the fall of 2021, we will begin to make significant progress toward reducing unnecessary credit accumulation in that time frame. Again, the full impact of these changes will not be realized for several years, as graduating students must have the opportunity to be positively impacted by our updated advising practices.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The primary goal of the Momentum Pathways Project as described in the Project Management Plan is to increase student retention. ISU has struggled with low retention for many years. Throughout this document, the Think 30/Proactive Advising project group has provided insight as to why we believe that ISU continues to struggle with poor retention and low graduation rates.

It is evident that a strong connection exists between three elements; a) the quality of proactive advising and coordinated student support, b) the student experience, and, c) student retention. The structural support and advising oversight are lacking at ISU, and addressing this problem is critically important to improve retention. For this reason, we have recommended an aggressive timeline to create a proactive advising environment.

This project group is grateful for the opportunity to serve ISU in this capacity. We hope these recommendations will be implemented and that the institution and students we serve will experience increased levels of success.

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