



# Quiet Counsel: The Academic Advising Department at Vanier College

If you have ever heard a talk by our DG, John McMahon, you will have heard the phrase “what’s right about Vanier.” I may have found an example of just that in my new department.

As a Clinical Psychotherapist transitioning into the Academic Advising Department, I was astonished to realize the scope and depth of our offerings to students. For a 7-person team, the sheer scale and variety of the student-centred workload is truly remarkable. A survey we conducted validated my inclination about the extent of our contact with and relevance to the student body. I would like to share with you who we are, what we do, and why we matter and then discuss opportunities for further development.

## Who we are and how we function

*Professionals:* The Academic Advising Department has a flat hierarchical structure wherein teamwork and mentorship is highly regarded. The department is lucky to boast 5 Academic Advisors, each with an accumulated average of close to 20 years of work experience at Vanier College, as well as a highly skilled secretary, and myself. In addition to individual work, regular and ongoing collaboration between advisors helps to manage tasks, share information, support each other, and keep the team relevant.

*Front Desk:* Our well-trained and highly respected secretary is able to deliver immediate answers to common student concerns; she provides “triage,” schedules appointments, and takes care of all administrative aspects from the front desk. During busy times or when she needs to step away, there is an “all hands-on deck” approach, with all advisors competent to tend the front desk. In particular, the coordinator of the department consistently replaces the secretary whenever needed.

*Scrum:* The Academic Advising team has regular, brief department meetings called Scrum. These meetings are between 5 and 15 minutes, with members standing to encourage succinct and on-point participation. Scrums were borne as a response to the loss of the conference room and, although this limits important meeting activities, the department has resourcefully managed an adequate solution. This demonstrates a certain resilience and flexibility. However, as Scrums are held in the narrow department hallway or crammed into the office of the coordinator, it does not permit for meeting requirements with external stakeholders.

*Technology:* Academic Advising uses technology and social media effectively to promote services and disseminate information. In addition, advisors work with helpline staff during registration to ensure that students are well informed and registered in the right programs

and courses from the start. This has been a successful, proactive strategy in curbing the need for later individual appointments to correct mistakes.

## Our remit

The box below outlines some of the core competencies of academic advisors; below this, it is further expanded upon, to illustrate the extent of the task in hand:

### *Academic Advisor Core Competencies*

#### *Knowledge of:*

- *Institution specific history, mission, vision, values and culture*
- *Curriculum, degree programs, and other academic requirements and options*
- *Institutional specific policies, procedures, rules, and regulations*
- *The characteristics, needs, and experiences of major and emerging student populations*
- *Campus and community resources that support student success*
- *Information technology applicable to relevant advising roles*

#### *Interdepartmental work at Vanier*

- Communication and recommendations regarding course and program changes.
- Working with departments to facilitate intersessions and summer courses to help students graduate.
- Regular, tailored in-class presentations to help students progress smoothly through their programs.

#### *High School and University information*

- High school visits to present and promote Vanier College.
- Detailed knowledge of university programs (including admission requirements, deadlines and program changes).
- Robust links to Quebec universities and their representatives (including hosting university events at Vanier).

#### *Individual student contact*

- Immediate assistance by front desk to answer quick questions.
- Drop-in hours - accessible daily student counsel (including drop-ping, taking, inquiring, and changing classes and programs).
- Timely, tailored, individual appointments to help students manage their programs, workloads, and academic expectations. Advisors will see up to 10 students per day.

- A proportion of contacts with students result in follow-up appointments or other forms of communication.
- Regular large-scale review of all student charts (“Sample”) to ensure academic compliance and avoid obstacles to graduation.

*Did you know that the Academic Advising Department reviews **every** enrolled student’s progression chart **twice a semester** to ensure that students meet all requirements to move smoothly through their programs? Recommendations and changes are then communicated to individual students by the advisors.*

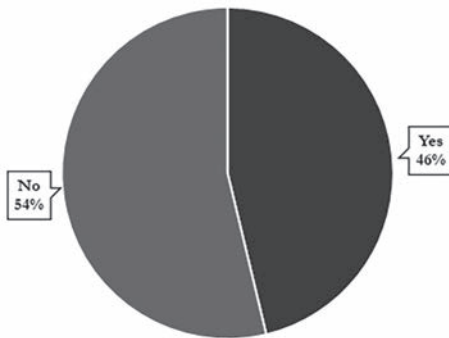
**Why it matters what we do**

Academic Advising is a bit of a misnomer, in that it reaches far beyond scheduling and dropping classes. In fact, it touches on every aspect of a student’s experience- past, present and future. To validate that assertion, we conducted a survey.

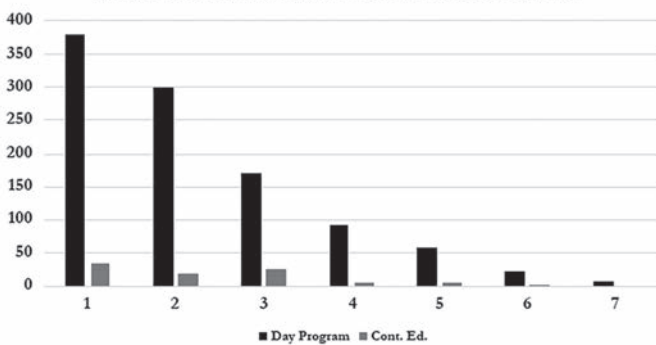
*Survey:* We conducted a short quantitative survey to assess students’ use of Academic Advising

services. The survey was sent to all 7404 enrolled Day Program and Continuing Education Program students. It was conducted between September 26<sup>th</sup> and October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. We received an impressive response of 2471 (33.4%). We found that almost half of respondents had used our services in person, and, more often than not on multiple occasions. In addition to this, electronic and phone communications are common. Further breakdown of the data can be found in the charts below.

Have you ever seen an Academic Advisor?



Number of Individual, In-Person Student Contacts



Academic Advisors help to ameliorate many student struggles, such as career concerns, parental expectations, and general future angst, aiming to facilitate an attainable academic path. Advisors are closely monitoring, guiding, advising, supporting, comforting, and helping students to academically succeed. They help students set realistic goals, adjust unrealistic expectations, and ultimately find their own path for their future. The department is not simply fulfilling the mechanical aspect of their work – their commitment to student success demands a holistic approach that they embrace wholeheartedly.

**Observations**

This article has demonstrated that the Academic Advising Department is a brilliant example of “what’s right about Vanier.”

The Academic Advisors are building rapport and creating an inclusive and respectful atmosphere wherein students are encouraged to problem solve, develop decision-making strategies, and learn to plan and set their own academic goals. In addition, Academic Advisors are advancing the Vanier community through interdepartmental and intercollegiate collaboration.

Academic Advising is unconditionally committed to student success and with a staff of 7 is able to track the academic needs of the entire student body. Furthermore, Academic Advisors see almost half of all enrolled students at least once, at their behest. The department is able to perform at this level, at least in part, due to its experience, its flat hierarchical structure, and its emphasis on collaboration, respect and flexibility.

In envisioning an even better and more efficient service at Vanier, consideration of the creation of a service center may be interesting. There is a natural symbiosis with other services such as Career Counselling, Student Success, and Early Alert Services. Creation of an Academic Service Centre, housing all of these elements in close proximity would undoubtedly improve services for students, facilities for staff, enhance collaboration and quality assurance, avoid duplication, and best use professional expertise.



A special thank you to Rita Tomasetta for helping with the data collection. Survey data available upon request.



*Kiraz Johanssen*  
is an Academic Advisor.

**Reference**

NACADA: *The Global Community for Academic Advising*. (2017). NACADA academic advising core competencies model. Retrieved from <https://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Pillars/CoreCompetencies.aspx>