Helping students write their story: the narrative approach to advising first year students towards retention

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Literature Review
Transitioning into college is a complex process. To aid students during this change academic advisors often serve as instructors in the First Year Seminar. This role provides advisors with additional opportunities to connect with students and build relationships that lead to retention and persistence (Drake, 2011, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The use of narrative is a basic human approach to coming to terms with life experiences such as change. "People make sense of their lives by creating stories. They give order, unity, and purpose to what may otherwise seem like an incoherent onrush of unrelated experiences" (Hagen, 2018, p.7).

Method
In the fall of 2018, in the College of Education, Health and Aviation, narrative was used in all sections of the First Year Seminar. Specifically, students were asked to reflect on the events of the week – about things that went well and challenges they faced. In return, advisors/instructors provided acknowledgement and feedback. This process resulted in several benefits, including:

Initial Observations
- Students were able to reflect on and process what they had learned
- Students were able to ask questions and seek assistance with challenges they faced
- Advisors/instructors were able to see how students transitioned into college and how they were managing social and academic pursuits
- Advisors/instructors were able to assist students who were struggling socially (ex. referral to Students of Concern committee) or academically
- Students and advisors/instructors developed relationships through the sharing of stories

End of Semester Observations:
- Weekly writings provided an opportunity for First-Year Seminar instructors to develop a relationship with the students.
- Instructors must respond, acknowledge and/or provide feedback to students in order for the relationship to develop.
- Towards the end of the semester, the students will become more comfortable sharing their narrative.

Suggestions for Best Practice:
- Encourage the student to tell their story, i.e. who they are “now”, where did they come from, where they would like to go
- Assist the student in finding new meaning to their identity from their life experiences of the past and the present in order to learn for their future.
- Students need structure to better develop autonomy
- Allow the student to share the story, no matter how long the narrative.
- Instructors are encouraged to share personal stories to capture the student’s attention.

References