



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MAINE
College of Education and
Human Development

Adult Education Program Alumni Career Stories

Beth Higgins

As soon as you meet Beth Higgins, you can tell how much she enjoys her work as the Executive Director of Advising and Academic Resources at the University of Southern Maine. Beth's work is much more than helping students select classes or choose a major or career path. It offers her many opportunities to touch the lives of individuals in personal and meaningful ways. According to Beth, "My work is about helping students identify and achieve their educational, career and life goals. It is also about helping some students develop self-efficacy and sharing that you believe in them, and then watching them succeed. Sometimes, I am the first person who gets to say to a student, 'Do you know that you're smart and you can do this?'"

Beth was encouraged to apply to the adult education program by the mentoring of three special women who saw something in her work in the student activities office. They encouraged her to further develop her skills and abilities in the area of student affairs work by completing a master's degree. Beth offered this perspective: "I am grateful for their encouragement. I was the youngest person in the program and at first, it was lonely. However, the faculty is sensitive to promoting a community of learners. I realized the other students and faculty didn't see me as young, instead they noticed my ideas and contributions to the learning conversation."



The adult education program developed Beth's educational confidence and critical thinking skills and gave her a big picture perspective of the field of adult education. Beth shared, "The masters program has allowed me to be more visionary about my work. I still value and enjoy the process of reflection that is a part of the adult education curriculum." Courses that are foundational to her work include Program Development, Training and Development, Life Span Development and Counseling Skills. For example, Beth uses the counseling skills of listening and asking probing questions to help others expand their thinking in her advising work today.

Beth shared that three key areas of responsibility comprise her work. First, she regularly meets with students throughout each semester. She sees her time with them as a gift. She enjoys helping them look at themselves, create a plan, and guide their decision making and meaning making as they find their way in higher education at the University of Southern Maine.

Secondly, Beth manages the advising office responsible for undeclared students at the university. In that capacity, she oversees a staff whose

duties include academic advising, Orientation, Early Study – Aspirations, Peer Advising, Degree Audit, Registration Services and Veteran Services. The biggest challenges in this arena are supervising a large staff and budgeting in times of financial constraints. To Beth, “The key is to keep the students in the center of the circle of work – at the focal point by asking, what would be best for the students? If we make all of our decisions for the students, we will make decisions for the right reasons.” She created a five person assessment team that focuses on helping the department assess their work around these questions: What do we want students to learn through their academic advising experience? How well are we meeting the learning objectives we have set forth? The advising program is outcomes based. Beth shared, “We look at our work at several key times: before the first semester starts, at the start of the semester, at the end of the first year, and at the time the student transitions into their major. “

The third part of Beth’s practice is her responsibility to give back to the institution and the profession. All the academic advisors in Beth’s area participate in NACADA – National Academic Advising Association. Membership in this organization helps the department stay up on current research and gives advisors opportunities to give back to the profession. Beth along with others in the advising center has offered many educational programs at regional and national NACADA conferences. Here are just a few of the titles of recent presentations: “Assessment: What is it?”, “How to Write [advising] Notes: To Note or Not!”, “Ethical Issues in Advising : Help or Harm”, and “How to Create an Orientation Program for Undeclared Students”.

Participation in the adult education program established Beth’s interest in professional development, something she continues today and encourages her staff to do as well. A serious proponent of lifelong learning and giving back to the profession, Beth shared, “One of our departmental policies is that no one goes to a conference unless they are presenting! This allows us to share our knowledge with others while developing professionally.”

Under Beth’s leadership, USM’s Advising Services focus is “Advising is Teaching”. “We teach students a curriculum, with a pedagogy that is outcomes based. Academic advisors get to teach individuals and groups. That’s pretty cool!” One approach to advising is to wait for students to come in when they have problems. Advisors then become problem solvers. Beth favors a different approach. “If instead we guide students through the learning outcomes, they become self directed independent learners who can identify resources and solve problems. Being engaged in the advising process contributes to student’s overall success.

For more information about the USM Adult Education program please contact Graduate Admission at (207) 780-4386 or visit www.usm.maine.edu/cehd/adult-education/