

Ask & Connect in Practice:

Malachi, a Queer Black Student in IT



Activity 2a: Identifying Opportunities for Engaging Individual Students

Instructions: Please read the first two vignettes below. The first vignette describes an experience from the student's perspective, and the second describes the same experience from the college's perspective. Afterward, discuss the prompts and take inventory of your questions, ideas, and concerns. The student vignette is based on the experience of an actual student and was adapted from qualitative research described by Xueli Wang in her book *On My Own*.¹

Student Experience

Malachi is a queer Black student who recently graduated from high school with little parental support. He enrolls in the IT program at the community college with the goal of getting a short-term credential to get a job in the field so that he can earn money while he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in computer science at a four-year university. As a high school student, Malachi was always interested in computers and social media. Unfortunately, his high school did not offer computer science classes, so Malachi had to develop his computer skills on his own (through trial and error). He's very proud of the social media page he recently published for LGBTQ high school students interested in pursuing IT/tech and feels he's ready to work in the tech field. Malachi is highly motivated but receives little guidance about courses that may help him achieve these goals. Because of some bad experiences with advising in high school, he feels uncomfortable going to the advising center at the community college and asking for help. Malachi misses orientation and selects his courses to the best of his ability. Because he is one of the only students of color in this program and the only queer student of color he knows on campus, Malachi feels pretty isolated, but after a year of course taking, he meets with an advisor about transferring to a four-year university. In the meeting, his advisor seems uncertain about which courses will transfer and asks Malachi why he was in a certificate program if he wanted to transfer. Malachi didn't realize that the IT program was not preparing him to transfer to computer science. His advisor tells him that it's likely that very few credits from the certificate program will transfer. Devastated that much of his time in the past year has been wasted and he wasn't in the right program to pursue a four-year degree, Malachi decides to stop out and take a break from school to focus on working.

¹ Wang, X. (2021). *On my own: The challenge and promise of building equitable STEM transfer pathways*. Harvard Education Press.



Advisor Perspective

Malachi's advisor was frustrated, as she had never seen Malachi before and felt that she would have been able to make a difference with Malachi had they met a little earlier in the student's academic career. When the advisor asked why he didn't attend orientation or talk to anyone in advising, Malachi said that he didn't know orientation was important and that he didn't talk to an advisor because there was always a line and he often had to go to work. The advisor is disappointed that he is stopping out, as it appears he is very close to getting his IT credential, but Malachi is unable to see the value in the certificate anymore. The advisor feels discouraged in her position, as she had no idea of Malachi's plan or intentions and she typically doesn't meet with new students unless the student seeks out advising. The high student-to-advisor ratio also makes it hard to get to know and stay in touch with students. Malachi's advisor often feels like she is telling students bad news. She feels that she needs more support to do her job well.

Discussion Questions

1. What missed opportunities or areas of disconnect did you observe in the vignettes?
2. Thinking about your own college, why do many students struggle to navigate and/or not use various student support services?

Activity 1b: Turning Individual Engagement into Universal Support

Instructions: Please read the "Alternative Experience" vignette to imagine how the principles of Ask-Connect could have been used to better support the student. Afterward, discuss the prompts and take inventory of your questions, ideas, and concerns.

Alternative Experience

Recently, the college changed its orientation. Now, all entering students are required to watch a short (20-minute) video introduction to the different programs of study at the college. At the end of the video, Malachi is asked to answer a few questions about his current thinking about programs that he is interested in, and also about his life, and support systems, including how many hours a week he is working and what days and times are the best for taking classes. After answering the questions, Malachi can schedule an appointment in person or on Zoom with his assigned advisor for a 30-minute meeting to ensure that he is in a program aligned with his interests and that he has a first-term schedule. Ahead of this meeting, the advisor receives a copy of Malachi's top three programs, a rating of how confident he feels about these choices, and the details about his work schedule and when he can take classes.

Last year, the college also changed how advising is organized, and now all advisors

have a caseload of students within a broad field of study. The faculty and advisors in the Information Technology and Computer Science career community (meta-major) meet regularly to discuss the students they have in common and to share what the students have said about their goals and their perceived level of engagement in courses and the college. The advisors also help train faculty on basic advising information in return so that they are better able to respond to students' questions should they come up. In the first semester, the instructor of the introductory IT course makes meeting with an advisor to develop an educational plan a mandatory assignment and makes it their responsibility to have a one-on-one meeting with every student about the course and their lives and goals before the semester ends. Finally, the instructor dedicates a day in the course to talking about peer supports, tutoring, and resources available to each student.

Malachi is introduced to the support structure from the get-go and is introduced to multiple people who can help address his needs and answer questions. The meeting with the advisor helps him plan for transfer from the beginning and presents accurate transfer information to him on the programs at the local university. Malachi is also connected to a LGBT student group, where LGBT students can share their experiences, and set up study and social meetups. Through this, Malachi is connected to the institution and stays through to transfer with his associate to the local four-year institution.

Discussion Questions

1. How could Ask-Connect practices be used to create a different experience for the student? What questions would you ask the student?
2. Thinking about your college, in what ways might you be able to integrate Ask and Connect practices to provide a coordinated support network, rather than sending students to a variety of isolated/stand-alone services?
3. How would you know students are accessing the new Ask and Connect practices and that they're having a positive impact on new students?