

## **CASE STUDY**

# **Students' Feelings Toward Advisors**

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### **Abstract**

*A survey of students in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Mississippi State University indicates that the quality of advising provided them appears to be quite satisfactory but some improvements are possible. Students felt that advisors need to do a better job in informing them about university counseling, job placement services, and careers associated with their major. Additionally, students were concerned with the availability of their advisors when needed, stimulation of them to reason through their own problems, and advisors' attitudes toward those who wanted to explore other fields of study. "Listens to my ideas," "friendly," and "acts like I am welcome" were the statements most favorably responded to by students in the survey.*

### **Introduction**

One of the potentially serious problems faced by universities is the limited availability of quality academic advising services. If quality academic advising services are not readily available, then students must find alternative ways to solve the problems which they encounter. Many problems relating to personal adjustment, career development, and faculty-student relationships are often haphazardly solved by students with decisions being made without a well-thought-out plan. The purpose of this article is to present an evaluation of students' feelings toward the quality of advising services provided them by faculty advisors in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Mississippi State University.

Faculty advisors, in many cases, have a greater opportunity to assist students than do other individuals on campus. Students must see their advisors periodically if for nothing more than to get assistance with their class schedules. Some retention studies indicate that lack of career direction, personal adjustment consultations, and faculty-student relationships are major contributing factors to many students dropping out of school. Thus, it is not only desirable but also necessary that a faculty advisor be a counselor in these areas (1).

Academic advising has been receiving its share of scrutiny during the last few years. By now, the elements

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of the issues have been reasonably well defined. Most of the arguments assert that advising is much more than just assisting students in choosing classes so that they may progress efficiently and effectively through their required and elective academic programs. Student advising includes some personal adjustment assistance, some career development assistance, and the development of a positive faculty-student relationship (1).

### **Method of Investigation**

In evaluating the department's academic facilities and services, the Academic Self-Study Committee recognized the need for better information on the quality of academic advising received by students. This paper presents part of the overall findings of the more detailed academic self-study (2) and may be helpful to those concerned with advising students.

In a survey conducted to evaluate the quality of the department's academic advising services, students (undergraduate and graduate) were asked to rate the advising services which they were receiving from their advisors. The survey consisted of three parts: (1) an introductory letter; (2) request for general-type information; and (3) seventeen attitudinal statements. Copies of the survey may be obtained from the co-authors.

The introductory letter explained the purpose of the survey, who was conducting it, and whom to contact for assistance.

The section of the survey asking for general information was needed primarily to identify the grade level of each respondent. In many cases, a freshman or sophomore might have a completely different relationship with an advisor than a junior or senior, who usually has more maturity and has had time to develop a working relationship with his advisor. A parallel argument could be developed for the graduate level student. Each student was asked to list his major, sex, class, and other information, not including his name.

The main section of the survey contained 17 attitudinal statements regarding the students' perceptions of their advisors. The respondents were asked to respond to each statement by circling one of the five choices: "Always," "Sometimes," "Seldom," "Never," and "No Opinion."

Questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate majors in selected departmental classes and to graduate students (both Masters and Ph.D.) by intra-departmental mail. The undergraduate survey yielded an almost 50 percent response rate from a total of 160 students. A 52-percent response rate was obtained from the survey distributed to 50 graduate students. Results may not be completely representative of the total student population since no effort was made to develop a scientific sample and no follow-up of non-respondents was conducted. In addition, no attempt was made to distinguish a Masters student's response from that of a doctoral student. Therefore, the survey results obtain-

ed from the graduate students do not provide a separate distribution of responses from Masters and Ph.D. students. Even with this inherent limitation, the results provide an indication of the perceived quality of academic advising services rendered by faculty advisors in the department.

### Results

Since possible differences of opinion about an advisor might exist between students of different class levels, the results of this study are discussed in terms of class levels.

**Table 1. Class levels of Agricultural Economics majors and respondents to student opinion survey, Department of Agricultural Economics, Mississippi State University, January 1982**

Class Levels	No. of Ag. Econ. Majors	% of Total	No. of Respondents	% of Total	Response Rate <sup>2</sup> %
Graduate <sup>3</sup>	50	23.8	26	25.0	52.0
Senior	37	17.6	27	26.0	73.0
Junior	51	24.3	35	33.7	68.6
Sophomore <sup>4</sup>	44	21.0	15	14.4	34.1
Freshmen	28	13.3	1	1.0	3.6
Total	210	100.0	104	100.1	49.5

- <sup>1</sup> Percentages do not add exactly to 100 due to rounding.
- <sup>2</sup> Response rate percentages are calculated by dividing the number of students responding to the survey in each class level by the number of Agricultural Economics majors in each respective class level.
- <sup>3</sup> Includes both Masters and Ph.D. students.
- <sup>4</sup> Since only one freshman responded to the survey, that student's responses are included in the sophomore responses.

Results are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 presents the number of agricultural economics majors, response rates, and the number of students, by class level, responding to the questionnaire statements. The data reveal that juniors comprised almost 34 percent; seniors, 26 percent; graduate students, 25 percent; sophomores, 14 percent; and freshmen, 1 percent of the total number of students responding. The data further reveal, on a class level basis, that seniors were the most responsive group of students, while freshmen were the least responsive group.

In Table 2 each value is the number or percentage of respondents, by class level, who answered the items as "Always," "Sometimes," "Seldom," "Never," or "No Opinion."

The distribution of responses to the statement "listens to my ideas" reveals that the vast majority, almost 82 percent, of the students responding felt that their advisors would always listen to their ideas, while less than 6 percent indicated that advisors seldom or never listen. Among the juniors and graduate students, almost 89 percent of the respondents saw no major problem in getting advisors to listen to their ideas. The response rate decreased to 75 percent among sophomores and to about 70 percent among seniors. At the senior level, 19 percent of the respondents felt that their advisors would listen to their ideas sometimes while 7 percent answered, "Seldom."

On the statement "Friendly," about 87 percent of the respondents indicated that their faculty advisors were always friendly. Differences, by class level, in the

**Table 2. Undergraduate and graduate students' opinions about their present advisors, Department of Agricultural Economics, Mississippi State University, January 1982.**

Questions Asked <sup>1/</sup>	Undergraduate <sup>2/</sup>					Graduate <sup>3/</sup>				
	Type of Responses					Type of Responses				
	Always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	No Opinion	Always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	No Opinion
	percent					percent				
1. Listens to my Ideas	79	13	4	2	1	88	4	0	4	4
2. Friendly	86	7	1	4	2	88	4	0	4	4
3. Available when needed	51	33	12	3	1	50	42	0	4	4
4. Stimulates me to reason through my own problems	50	31	10	4	5	58	31	0	4	7
5. Acts like I am welcome	83	6	4	3	4	88	4	0	0	8
6. Talks and explains at my level	74	17	1	4	4	77	15	0	0	8
7. Gives the impression of really caring about how I feel	64	23	5	6	2	77	12	0	4	7
8. Encourages me	74	13	5	6	2	81	8	4	0	7
9. Democratic	58	26	4	5	7	69	15	0	4	12
10. Seems irritated or uninterested when I want to explore other fields of study	8	9	19	46	18	12	4	19	38	27
11. Takes time to help me when I really need it	71	13	2	7	7	81	8	4	4	3
12. Goes out of his way to help when he thinks I am heading for trouble	50	28	5	6	11	50	31	0	4	15
13. Knowledgeable about courses and curriculum	71	15	5	4	5	73	12	0	4	11
14. Understands my problems	62	23	6	5	4	65	27	0	0	8
15. Lacks information about jobs	12	22	23	21	22	12	15	19	19	35
16. Helps in planning course schedule	76	14	4	4	2	65	19	0	8	8
17. Helps you to be aware of university counseling and job placement services	32	29	14	6	19	23	27	15	0	35

<sup>1/</sup> Some of the survey questions were adapted from "Characteristics of An Advisor," a handout distributed to participants of College of Agriculture and Home Economics Teaching Symposium, 1981.

<sup>2/</sup> 78 out of 160 students responded to the survey

<sup>3/</sup> 26 out of 50 graduate students responded to the survey

Source: (2)

proportion of respondents who ranked their advisors most favorably in this regard were only minor. The high rating received by advisors on the statement indicate that advisors are doing a creditable job on faculty-student relationships. In many cases, friendly advisors have the tendency to put students at ease and make them feel more comfortable and relaxed in their presence. In an environment of this type, many problems relating to grades, class attendance, family, and faculty-student relationships can be more easily solved.

Responses to the statement "Available when needed" indicate that only 51 percent of the respondents gave advisors top marks on that point. A surprising element here is that, overall, undergraduates were slightly less critical of advisors' availability than were graduate students, who normally have more contact with faculty members than do undergraduates. But that approximately half the of the respondents were to some extent critical of this component of the department's counseling efforts signifies need for investigating grounds for such criticism.

On the statement "Stimulates me to reason through my own problems," almost 52 percent of respondents indicated that their advisors always stimulate them to reason through their own problems, while thirty-two percent felt that advisors sometimes did so. A higher proportion of graduate student respondents than of undergraduates rated advisors highly on this attribute. The overall implication of the 32-percent "Sometimes" rating is that advisees want their advisors to encourage them more to solve their own problems. The effect that this encouragement would have on students would largely depend on the nature of the problem encountered by the student and the advisor's confidence in the student's ability to solve the problem once it is encountered.

Responses to the statement "Acts like I am welcome" reveal that almost 85 percent of the students felt that their advisors always acted like they were welcome. Although the results vary somewhat among the different class levels, the overall indication is that students are largely satisfied with the way which their advisors receive or greet them.

The attitudinal statement reading "Talks and explains at my level" had a favorable response rate of 75 percent, indicating that the majority of the respondents felt that their advisors always talked and explained at their levels. That sophomores gave advisors a somewhat higher score on this point than did other respondents suggests that advisors are especially careful to strive for student understanding in their discussions with younger, lower-level advisees — a mark of a good counselor.

When asked to respond to the statement "Gives the impression of really caring about how I feel," only about 67 percent of the respondents indicated that their advisors always gave them the impression of really

caring about how they feel. From senior advisees the favorable response rate was only 48 percent. Such responses to the statement strongly indicate that advisors should increase their efforts to provide some indication to their advisees that they really care about how they feel.

The distribution of responses to the statement "Encourages me" reveals that the majority, 76 percent, of the respondents felt that their advisors always encourage them. Graduate and sophomore students each had a favorable response rate of 81 percent. The favorable response rate decreased to 77 percent for juniors and to 67 percent for seniors, thus showing a steady decline as the class level of the undergraduate respondents increased.

The most favorable response to the statement "Seems irritated or uninterested when I want to explore other fields of study" would, of course, be "Never." Thus it reflects on the department's counseling activities that this statement received only a 44-percent "Never" response rate overall, and a much lower (25 percent) rate from sophomores, who normally request more counseling on this point than do more advanced students. It is the advisor's responsibility to help the student advance, whether in his (the advisor's) field or another. The low rate of favorable response to the statement points up the need for vigorous activity carried out by advisors in this area since young, beginning undergraduates often have no idea as to the area where they want to spend their professional careers.

The responses to the statement reading "Takes time to help me when I really need it" reveal that 73 percent of the respondents felt that their advisors always took time to help them when they really needed it. About 12 percent of the respondents answered, "Sometimes." On a class level basis, graduate students were the most satisfied group of respondents, while juniors were the least satisfied group.

The statement reading "Goes out of his way when he thinks I am heading for trouble" received relatively low ratings. The data reveal that only about half of the respondents felt that advisors were doing a satisfactory job in that respect. Analyses by class level show the following favorable response rates: graduate students, 50 percent; seniors 52 percent; juniors, 49 percent; and sophomores, 50 percent.

On the statement "Knowledgeable about courses and curriculum," 71 percent of the respondents felt that advisors were always knowledgeable about courses and curriculum. The students providing the lowest rating for the statement (less than 63 percent favorable) were sophomores. Since one of the principal functions of the advisor is to counsel with students on course selections, these low ratings indicate advisors need to become more knowledgeable about all the courses and

curricula in the department to improve the working relationship with advisees and provide an environment for a better education.

The distribution of responses to the statement "Understands my problems" reveals that almost 63 percent of the respondents felt that their advisors always understood their problems. Graduate students (63 percent), seniors (52 percent), juniors (71 percent), and sophomores (56 percent) left favorably toward their advisors in this area.

On the statement "Lacks information about jobs," only 20 percent of the respondents indicated that their advisors never lacked information about jobs. Generally, it is assumed that in choosing a major, the student knows something about the career opportunities associated with that major. Nevertheless, he looks to his advisor for more specific information about job opportunities. That only one in five respondents perceives advisors as well informed in that area suggests that substantial efforts need to be made by departmental faculty advisors to better inform their advisees of specific jobs available or potential job opportunities in their chosen major. An increased effort in this area should result in students becoming better informed of the career opportunities associated with their major and assist them in developing a program of study which will more adequately prepare them for the future. In many cases, students get so involved in campus activities, classroom requirements, and social activities that they lose focus on the ultimate reason for their education. An increased effort in career counseling by advisors might make career concerns a more important issue.

The distribution of responses to the statement "Helps in planning course schedule" reveals that only 73 percent of the advisees reported that their advisors always helped them in planning course schedules. Percentages of favorable responses ("Always") declined steadily, from 81 to 65 percent, as class levels of respondents advanced. The relatively low favorable response rate of this statement suggests either that advisors were often negligent in helping students to plan course schedules or that a significant number of respondents did not seek advisors' help in schedule planning.

On the statement "Helps you to be aware of university counseling and job placement services," only about 30 percent of the respondents rated this favorably. That low response rate suggests that faculty advisors need to do more to inform their advisees of the services provided by the university's counseling and job placement centers.

### Summary

Several broad statements were posed to the students in this survey. Their responses indicate that the quality of advising provided them in the department appears to be quite satisfactory but some improve-

ments are possible. Advisors need to do a better job in informing students about university counseling, job placement services, and careers associated with their major.

The responses to statements concerning the availability of advisors when needed, stimulation of students to reason through their own problems, advisors' attitudes toward students who want to explore other fields of study, lack of knowledge about courses and curriculum, and the lack of advisors' help in planning course schedules indicate that advisors need to develop a better rapport and working relationship with their advisees. An improvement in these areas could improve advisors' working relationships with their advisees and, in turn, should enable advisors to provide their advisees with an environment for a better education.

### References

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## Training In Agribusiness For Occupational Choice

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### Introduction

Agribusiness includes the three sectors of the United States' Food and Fiber System — the input supply industries; agricultural production firms; and firms involved in the processing, manufacturing, and distributing of food products. Corporations such as John Deere, Dekalb, Elanco, and Standard Oil manufacture and sell input products to farmers and ranchers. Farms and ranches have become larger and more specialized even though they remain almost totally under the ownership of individuals rather than large corporations. The third sector of agribusiness includes firms such as Cargill, Central Soya, Sunkist Growers, Kellogg's, Anheuser-Busch, Safeway, Southland (7-11), and McDonald's.

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