

The Contribution of the Faculty Advisor To Quality Agricultural Education

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Abstract

A faculty member with responsibility for advising undergraduate students can make a significant contribution to the quality of education that those students receive. The effective advisor goes beyond the necessary form-signing and assistance in course selection, and becomes a source of career information and an aid to problem identification, analysis, and solution. It is in these less traditional roles that the effective advisor often makes the greatest contribution to quality education.

Faculty advisors generally provide guidance concerning course selection and work load. Appropriate advice on these matters is highly valuable to the student, particularly in light of the large number of electives in today's agricultural programs and the diverse careers for which students are preparing. However, the effective advisor can make even more significant contributions to the quality of a student's education in a number of less traditional ways.

Rapport with the Student

None of the services that the advisor can provide will be effective without good advisor-student rapport. A comfortable relationship must be established and there must be a free flow of information. The advisor plays a key role here and can improve the relationship substantially with a small amount of well-directed effort. This can include: 1) learning the student's name, 2) treating the student's arrival at his office as a pleasant and welcomed experience rather than an intrusion, 3) having a student's files readily available and up to date, 4) taking time to discuss problems fully rather than "jumping to a conclusion" or a hasty solution, 5) helping the student obtain assistance from others. In many cases, a phone call by an advisor can save the student several days of searching and waiting for the appropriate person.

Highly-valuable guidance for the advisor is available. Excellent advice on establishing rapport with students is provided by Campbell (1), Weigers (4), and Gordon (3); and Frey (2) presents a very efficient procedure for collecting and organizing information for successful advising. The critical ingredient is faculty motivation to do a quality job of helping the student obtain a quality education. Subsequent discussion indicates areas where a motivated faculty member can direct efforts that will be highly useful to the student.

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Career Information

The advisor often serves as an important source of career information for students entering the program. Many students in agriculture have not previously had a significant amount of personal contact with an individual in their chosen career area, or a university faculty member. In these cases the advisor initially represents a career and the academic community. That impression may persist for a long time. The advisor may continue to be an important contact with the career area during the student's first two years because many programs concentrate the specialized courses in the last two years. During the early part of his program, the student may need guidance on the relevance of basic courses in terms of his or her program of study and career plans. For example, the importance of basic soil science or zoology to a particular program may be obvious to the advisor, but this fact may escape the notice of a new student with an interest in crop physiology. Understanding the relevance of these courses is likely to improve a student's performance in them and his ultimate success in the program. The student is also likely to "catch" some of the advisor's enthusiasm for the field of study during these early contacts.

Program Changes

Students within agricultural programs often express interest in other programs that they are exposed to in their course of study. Likewise, students in other programs are often interested in an agricultural program. The advisor can play a helpful role in decisions concerning program changes. While it is not possible to be familiar with all programs, the advisor can explain the particular agricultural program and associated employment opportunities and can also help the students focus on the appropriate questions that they should consider in deciding on a program of study. With the dynamic job market in agriculture it is particularly difficult, yet highly important, to convey a clear picture of career opportunities. Careers of tomorrow are likely to be quite different from those of today. Most universities have career counselors and special testing procedures available to help students identify their interests and aptitudes, and it may be desirable to refer some students to these services. Guidelines for referral procedures will be discussed subsequently.

Personal Problems

The advisor can often play an important role in helping the student solve personal problems. While this is not generally within the role of an academic advisor and is perhaps outside his expertise, he is often brought into the situation at a critical stage. A particular problem may emerge in a discussion of career plans or academic

performance. In other cases the student may come directly to the advisor when a personal problem becomes critical. As the academic advisor is often the university staff member with whom the student is most familiar and feels most comfortable, this can happen quite often. Presuming that a solution is outside the immediate control of the advisor, he can listen attentively, help the student analyze the problem, and identify alternative solutions and their likely outcomes.

Facilitate Advice

If the problem requires additional expertise, the advisor should facilitate acquisition of the appropriate advice. This is a difficult area in that the advisor can not and should not require that the student seek counseling. At the same time, it is also inappropriate to tell the student to "go see someone in student services." The key to such a situation is to ensure that the student knows to whom he should turn for help, and how to make contact with that person. The advisor should have a current list of key persons to contact as well as their telephone numbers and locations. This will facilitate in arranging meetings and convince the student that the advisor knows who can help.

The likelihood of a student getting in touch with the appropriate person can be increased by a phone call to the contact outlining the problem and identifying the student. In many cases this call should be made with the student present. This helps convince the student of the importance that the advisor places on the contact. At that time perhaps the student can go directly to see the individual or make a firm appointment. Under some circumstances it may be desirable for the advisor to accompany the student on such a visit. In any case, unless some arrangements are made, it is unlikely that the student will follow up with the needed counseling.

Study Methods

Discussions of student progress in academic programs often raise questions about academic performance. These problems can often be pinpointed with a series of questions concerning: 1) the amount of time the student spends studying, 2) the place where the studying is done, 3) the extent of interruptions, 4) the amount of time spent preparing for class versus studying for examinations, and 5) the extent to which help is sought from the instructor, teaching assistant, or others. In many cases, simple suggestions for resolving problems in one or more of these areas will result in substantial improvement. More stubborn or complex problems can be referred to appropriate counselors using the procedures suggested above.

Coordination

It is likely that many of the major issues that an individual advisor faces will require some input by individuals at other levels of the university administration. This may range from approval of a petition or special program at the departmental or college level to special advice by personnel at the college or university level. Thus, to be effective, an advisor must have a good under-

standing of the functioning of all these levels. Breakdowns in communication between levels usually work to the student's disadvantage.

Coordination among the various levels of administration concerned with student advisement in the College of Agriculture at the University of Illinois was improved by a seminar for faculty advisors organized by the College's Office of Resident Instruction during the Spring of 1977. Discussion was generated by a panel of advisors from various departments plus representatives of the College Office of Resident Instruction and the University Psychology and Counseling Center. Much of the discussion centered around the appropriate methods of coordinating student advising efforts at each level, with particular emphasis on the appropriate way to refer a student and his or her problem to another level.

There is also much need for coordination among the faculty in a particular department or program. A student interested in a particular career should, in many cases, be referred to a faculty member with those same interests. This may call for a change of advisor or perhaps a brief discussion, but the contact with a particular faculty member may be critical to the student's program. Students should know that it is appropriate and highly desirable to seek advice from a number of faculty members and not just the assigned advisor.

Summary

A faculty member with responsibility for advising undergraduate students can make a significant contribution to the quality of education that those students receive. The effective advisor goes beyond the necessary form-signing and course selection to help the student in a number of important ways. The advisor may serve as a source of career information; a guide to program changes; an aid to problem identification, analysis and solution; and a gateway to student services available at the college and university. The key to effective advising in these areas is good rapport with the student, knowledge of the services available to the student, and the ability to get the student to make use of those services.

References

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