

# Graduate Perceptions of Academic Advising in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Idaho

*A. Touchstone<sup>1</sup>*  
*University of Idaho*  
*Moscow, ID*



## Abstract

Information from graduates from the University of Idaho College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) was gathered to make informed decisions regarding coursework, recruitment, enrollment, employment assistance and academic advising. CALs chose to attend the university based on recommendations from their parents and from visiting the campus for activities such as 4H and FFA activities. CALs graduates endorsed their decision to enroll at the University and the initial major they selected. College academic advisors were rated between average and good, but no significant differences were identified across departments within the college. Advisors were described as professional, approachable, friendly and available to advisees. Agricultural education graduates indicated significantly the most positive perceptions regarding job placement advising, career advising, student teaching/internship advising and employment opportunities after graduation when compared to graduates from other CALs departments. Maintaining quality advising in all aspects of the university education will assist in retaining students as well as recruiting additional students into the college and university.

## Introduction

The Morrill Act defined the role of land grant institutions and has been consistent in its mission since its adoption in the 1800s (Gordon, 2008). Historically, stakeholders have become separated from the land grant mission (Silag et al., 1998). This disengagement fostered the inclusion of required stakeholder input regarding research, Extension and education in the 1998 Farm Bill. The change in the Farm Bill also prompted landgrant institutions and researchers to expand and develop new models for gathering stakeholder input (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Kelsey and Mariger, 2003; Kelsey and Pense, 2001). A variety of studies have been conducted to collect input and perceptions from students, alumni and supporters regarding land grant performance and agendas (Abrams et al., 2010; Kelsey

and Mariger, 2003; Kelsey and Pense, 2001). It has been imperative to include stakeholders, such as alumni, in the decision making processes within land grant institutions and CALs. However, information dissemination from Colleges of Agricultural and Life Sciences to their stakeholder groups can be problematic (Kelsey and Mariger, 2003). Although many studies have been conducted regarding graduate perceptions on specific majors within Colleges of Agriculture (Birkenholz, 1986; Hemp, 1974), others have been inclusive of the entire college (Mosman, 1987; Osmond et al., 1998).

Undergraduate follow up studies have been conducted at a variety of institutions nationwide to assess the perceptions of alumni toward educational preparation, quality of instruction, academic advising and extracurricular activities (Osmond et al., 1998; Suvedi and Heyboer, 2004). The perceived effectiveness of academic advising was also a key assessment in graduate followup studies. The majority of respondents provided positive responses to the academic advising they received from Michigan State University, but over 60% of the graduates indicated their academic advisors were of little or no assistance in finding their first job (Suvedi and Heyboer, 2004). University of Florida graduates indicated that their lower division advising was average to poor (71%). However, advising within and specific to their academic majors was rated good to excellent by 65% of graduate respondents (Osmond et al., 1998). At the University of Idaho, academic advising was rated poor to fair, but varied by department, with agricultural mechanization and plant science graduates rated highest, and agricultural economics rated lowest (Mosman, 1987).

Advising is a key component of undergraduate success at the university level, and focusing on the student in advising and learning allows advisors to better serve their advisees. Conceptually, the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and the University of Idaho as a whole were learner centered and focused on knowledge, collaboration, diversity and creativity

<sup>1</sup>Senior Instructor, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, Department of Agricultural Education and 4H Youth Development, 322 East Front Street, Suite 440, Boise, Idaho 83702; Email: atouchstone@uidaho.edu, (208) 3644543 office, (208) 2834748 cell

from the faculty, students and staff (CALs, 2013). By defining learner centered teaching as “optimizing the opportunities for our students to learn”, the student focus could be extended into advising, curriculum planning and career placement to help optimize student success (Doyle, 2011). Doyle (2011) reiterated that education was a shared experience, all parties were active participants in an active, collaborative learning environment (Kuh et al., 2010). The strong connection in positive professional relationships among students and faculty fosters a sense of shared learning and leadership (Danielson, 2007) and helped students to develop confidence and work toward making learning more interesting, relevant and socially rewarding (Kuh et al., 2010).

The ideal goal of a quality university experience for students encourages the university to assess all components of the college environment for its enrollees. High quality academic advising has been identified as one of the key quality indicators in the university setting that impacts student perception of the institution and education (CALs, 2013) (Figure 1). Quality education and positive perception from alumni are also impacted by instruction, individual demographics, pre-college influencers, college major, career placement, experiential learning and internship experiences, as well as course content. Overall, these components combine to determine student perception of the university experience. Due to the nature of this framework, CALs can focus on components within the control of faculty and administration in order to create positive recruitment and retention rates in majors throughout CALs and the university.

This study was designed to gather information from alumni to provide departments within the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences with data to make informed decisions regarding courses, recruitment, enrollment, employment assistance and academic advising.

The purpose of this study was to assess graduate perceptions (1985-2010) of the academic advising provided by faculty in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. This purpose directly aligned with the National Research Agenda from the American Association for Agricultural Education Priority Area 5 – Efficient and Effective Programs (Doerfert, 2011). Specifically, the study objectives were to:

1. Develop a profile of CALs graduates (1985-2010);
2. Determine graduate perceptions of the advising quality from CALs faculty; and
3. Compare the perceived quality of advising among graduates based on major, gender and assistance in securing first job after graduation.

### Materials and Methods

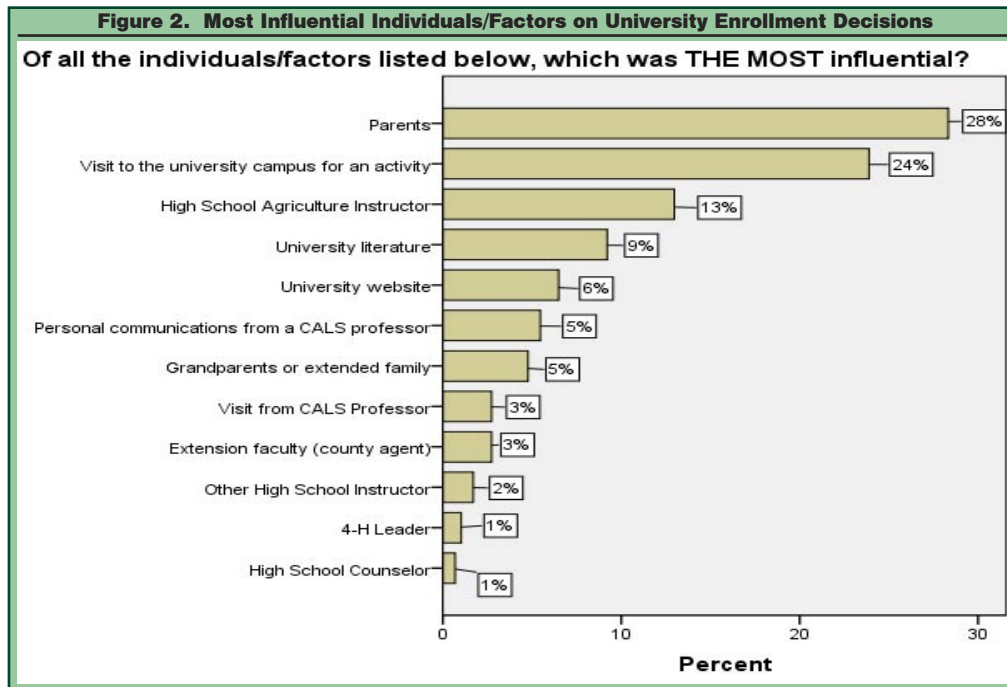
A web-based survey was sent to all graduates from the University of Idaho College of Agricultural and Life Sciences from 1984-2010. The list of alumni was provided by the university Registrar’s office while contact and basic demographic information was provided by the University Alumni office. The study was a continuation of one which gathered similar information from CALs graduates from 1973 – 1985 (Mosman, 1987) and was requested to provide additional information to the faculty and administration in the University of Idaho College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. From 1984-2010, over 1,200 alumni were identified from the college, but the Alumni office only provided 817 email addresses. After three contacts, 495 potential respondents did not respond to the invitation to participate, which may have been attributed to inaccurate email addresses or lack of interest in the study. The final convenience sample size was 322 while 312 responded for a 97% response rate.

The original instrument was developed in 1987 as the result of the efforts of faculty and a graduate student in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education. The original instrument was reviewed by faculty in the departments of agricultural education, animal science and agricultural economics. The original instrument was field tested by 15 seniors majoring in agricultural education at the time (Mosman, 1987). The current instrument was updated to match majors and activities currently operating within the college. Additionally, dichotomous pairs of statements were presented to the respondents regarding the characteristics of their academic advisors on a Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree). The updated instrument was then reviewed by faculty in agricultural education, agricultural economics and the academic programs office within the college for content and face validity as well as assuring current terminology. The final survey can be viewed online at: <http://www.uidaho.edu/cals/ae4hyd/faculty/atouchstone/research>.

The University of Idaho Institutional Review Board approved this study protocol and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation in the study. Control for non-response was addressed by comparing



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early and late responders. The total respondent pool (n=312) was sorted by response date and time and the first half of the responders (n=156) were identified as early responders and the second half (n=156) were identified as late responders (Lindner et al., 2001). No significant differences were found between the two groups ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). Additionally, the demographics of the respondents (age, graduation date, gender) were similar to the entire population as described by the registrar and alumni offices.

## Results and Discussion

The majority of the graduates from CALS attended the University of Idaho as their first choice (74.5%, n=225) and were still absolutely sure of their decision to enroll at the University (88.6%, n=265) and in CALS (78.9%, n=236). Graduates were still absolutely sure of their choice of major (61.9%, n=185) and their initial career goal (56.4%, n=168). When asked if they would choose the same major today, 85.3% (n=255) responded affirmatively.

Graduates were asked to indicate the most influential person, item or activity in their decision to attend the University of Idaho (Figure 2). Parents were selected as the most influential person(s) regarding university enrollment decisions by 28% of the respondents, followed closely by a visit to the University of Idaho campus for an activity such as Idaho State FFA Career Development Events, Ag Days, or Idaho State 4-H Teen Conference (24%). Aside from parents, the most influential person identified by graduates was their high school agricultural education instructor (13%). This information may provide recruiters, faculty and academic advisors with tools to not only recruit, but also maintain students in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

Perceptions regarding academic advising and the characteristics of academic advisors in the College of

Agricultural and Life Sciences were also assessed. Overall, CALS graduates gave academic advising a rating between average and good. There were no significant differences among departments in overall academic advising (above average rating). Respondents rated their academic advisors based on dichotomous pairs of descriptors. In all pairs, the responses were consistent (positive statements were agreed with, negative statements were disagreed with). No significant variance among responses was identified among departments within the College (Table 1).

Graduate perception of career placement advice and employment opportunities were assessed on a Likert-type scale (1 = excellent, 2 = good, 3 = average, 4 = fair, 5 = poor). The most respondents were initial majors in the Department of Agricultural Education and 4-H Youth Development (n=105) and had good to excellent (n=55, 52.4%) opinions of the job placement advising provided by the department. Animal and Veterinary Sciences had the next most graduates respond (n=85) but only 29 (34.1%) rated the job placement advising good to excellent. Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology graduates (n=77) showed a 35% good to excellent rating (n=27) in the same category. Microbiology, Molecular Biology and Biochemistry graduates overwhelmingly rated this category good to excellent (n=5, 83.3%). Conclusions regarding Agricultural Systems Management; Plant, Soil and Entomological Sciences; and Microbiol-

**Table 1. Graduate Ratings of Characteristics of CALS Academic Advisors**

Characteristic Pairs	N	Mean	Rating
Available	296	1.64	Agree
Unavailable	296	3.29	Disagree
Knowledgable	296	1.71	Agree
Unknowledgable	296	3.33	Disagree
Straightforward	296	1.84	Agree
Ambiguous	296	2.97	Disagree
Reliable	296	1.79	Agree
Unreliable	296	3.35	Disagree
Professional	296	1.63	Agree
Unprofessional	296	3.41	Disagree
Authoritative	296	2.26	Agree
Permissive	296	2.51	Disagree
Approachable	296	1.68	Agree
Unapproachable	296	3.10	Disagree
Organized	296	1.88	Agree
Disorganized	296	3.21	Disagree
Tolerant	296	1.88	Agree
Intolerant	296	3.29	Disagree
Friendly	296	1.63	Agree
Unfriendly	296	3.43	Disagree
Concerned	296	1.78	Agree
Unconcerned	296	3.31	Disagree



ogy, Molecular Biology and Biochemistry departments were difficult to draw due to the small number of respondents (2, 2 and 6, respectively). The scale and raw data shown in Table 2 demonstrate the overall department comparison within CALS.

Graduates perceived that student teaching and internship advising (Table 3) provided by CALS departments were good to excellent (n = 149, 50.7%,  $\bar{x}$  = 2.52), employment opportunities after graduation were good to excellent (n = 195, 65.4%,  $\bar{x}$  = 2.23) and career advising was average to excellent (n = 245, 83.1%,  $\bar{x}$  = 2.65). When comparing by department, no significant differences were identified among graduate departments for academic advising or career advising ratings. However, significant differences ( $\alpha$  = 0.05) were noted among departments regarding job placement advising ( $X^2$  = 0.005), internship/student teaching placement ( $X^2$  = 0.000) and employment opportunities after graduation ( $X^2$  = 0.025). Graduates in Agricultural Education and 4-H Youth Development (n=106) overwhelmingly rated student teaching and internship placement as good to excellent (n=77, 72.6%). While on the opposite end of the spectrum, Agricultural Systems Management majors rated internship placement as average (n=2). Conclusions regarding Agricultural Systems Management; Plant, Soil and Entomological Sciences; and Microbiology, Molecular Biology and Biochemistry departments were difficult to draw due to the small number of respondents (2, 2 and 6, respectively). The scale and raw data shown in Table 3 demonstrate the overall department comparison within CALS.

**Table 2. Job Placement Advising Ratings by First Major Department**

	AERS	AE4HYD	ASM	AVS	MMBB	PSES
Poor (1)	10	8	0	10	0	0
Fair(2)	13	16	0	19	0	0
Average (3)	27	26	0	27	1	1
Good (4)	22	27	2	19	4	1
Excellent (5)	5	28	0	10	1	0
<b>Total (n)</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>2.99</b>	<b>3.46</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3.5</b>

**Table 3. Student Teaching and Internship Advising Rating by First Major Department**

	AERS	AE4HYD	ASM	AVS	MMBB	PSES
Poor	10	5	0	9	0	0
Fair	6	11	0	18	1	0
Average	27	13	2	33	2	0
Good	25	36	0	18	2	1
Excellent	9	41	0	15	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>

visit to campus for an activity such as State FFA Career Development Events or 4-H Teen Conference and agriculture teachers, students' likelihood of attending the University of Idaho increased.

Recruitment of students into land grant universities, colleges of agriculture and specific agricultural majors is consistently a concern for agricultural colleges and universities. Noting the importance of influencers on college decisions provides colleges and universities with pertinent information to be utilized in their recruitment and advising efforts. Communicating key information to parents (greatest college decision influencer at 28%), physically bringing student to campus for an activity, especially one related to agriculture (24%) and providing information to agriculture teachers reaches a vast majority of the primary influencers that might encourage students to enroll in the University of Idaho CALS, and specific majors within each department.

Advising was also a key consideration in this study. The largest number of students rated internship advising and job placement after graduation good to excellent, especially within the Department of Agricultural Education and 4-H Youth Development. Additionally, large percentages of respondents indicated good to excellent job opportunities after graduation, especially from the Department of Agricultural Education and 4-H Youth Development which supported previous findings (Mosman, 1987). Additional research is needed to further investigate the differences among departmental responses as this study did not investigate variations across departments within the college.

In addition to considering specific areas of advising, the characteristics of academic advisors within CALS were also assessed. The general consensus of respondents was that academic advising within the college as a whole was average to good consistent with Osmond, et. al (1998) who also found positive perceptions of advising and in contradiction to Suvedi and Heyboer (2004) who found a negative perception of advising. Within the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Idaho, academic advisors were almost exclusively academic faculty. CALS did not employ individuals exclusively as academic advisors. Instead, academic advisors also served as academic and research faculty and had responsibilities in all areas of the university experience. This breadth of faculty responsibility may have contributed to the average to good rating of academic advising. Additional training

**Summary**

Graduates from the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences attended the University of Idaho as their first choice of higher education institution and the largest number of respondents initially majored in the Department of Agricultural Education and 4-H Youth Development. At this time, graduates were still confident of their pre-college enrollment decisions such as university choice, choice of major and initial career goal. A majority of graduates (85.3%) stated that they would still choose the same major if they started college today.

As recruitment continues to be on the forefront for higher education institutions, factors influencing enrollment decisions of potential students have become a key issue in recruitment and subsequent advising. Parents were the greatest influence on student enrollment decisions. Outside of family, the largest impact on enrollment decisions was a visit to the campus for any activity. Third highest influencing factor in college enrollment decisions was high school agriculture teachers. When combining the influences of parents, a

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of faculty serving as student academic advisors might provide additional satisfaction of students in regard to academic advising, and the addition of staff whose sole responsibility is student advising might also increase student advising satisfaction. The rating of above average for overall advising indicated that university advisors provided better overall career, internship and academic advising combined than they provided academic advising alone.

CALS graduates found their academic advisors to be available, knowledgeable, straightforward, reliable, professional, approachable, organized and concerned. Graduates most strongly agreed that their academic advisors were friendly, professional and available. The college should consider providing training for academic advisors to increase their knowledge of university, graduation, internship and certification requirements. A better informed advisor might be able to increase graduate perception of knowledge, reliability and organization in the academic advising arena and further the university strategic plan goals related to teaching and learning (CALS, 2013) as well as potentially increasing overall university, college and department retention rates. Future research should assess any changes over time as faculty, university and college goals and degree delivery methods (on-campus, off-campus, live, video conference, asynchronous) have changed.

The largest number of graduates who responded to this study initially majored in the Department of Agricultural Education and 4-H Youth Development, and AE4HYD was the second smallest department in the college. The smallest number of respondents was from the Plant, Soil and Entomological Sciences Department, the second largest department in the college. These response rates should be investigated. Valid emails were provided from the University of Idaho Alumni and Registrar's officers for a small number of the total graduates over the 20 year time span. Internally, it is recommended that the alumni office or the departments within the college work to ascertain current contact information for alumni which could be used by the university, alumni office, college and department for recruitment of potential students, solicitation of sponsorship for scholarships and university publicity. It is also recommended that a follow up study be conducted on a more regular basis to provide the most consistent and current graduate information to department and advisors. Externally, it is recommended to conduct similar research at peer institutions and within other colleges of study within the University of Idaho to provide an expanded base of comparison for departments, colleges and institutions.

Identifying strengths and weaknesses within academic and career advising within the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences would provide areas of professional development for preparing new faculty to serve as academic advisors within the college. Additionally, providing quality advising to students assists in educational satisfaction of graduates. Alumni who are satisfied with their college experience tend to

provide influence to potential students to attend their alma mater. Finally, the long term impact of well-prepared academic advisors could help to increase recruitment and financial support to the University of Idaho, the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and individual departments.

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