Using Professional Industry Partnerships for Advising Students at a Two-Year Technical College

David A. Willoughby[1]
Department of Horticultural Industries
The Ohio State University
Wooster, OH 44691-4000

Abstract

In an effort to strengthen relationships between higher education and industry, and support student success, an industry partnership program for advising Turfgrass Management students at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute was introduced four years ago. Golf course superintendents from a regional chapter of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America were recruited to form advising teams to complement and support college faculty in providing quality student advising services. This paper will focus on the implementation and early assessment of this program. Preliminary results have indicated that student participants have established a closer relationship with industry personnel resulting in quality employment opportunities. Students have also gained a stronger sense of appreciation for the career path they have selected.

Introduction

Effective student advising helps students make critical decisions ranging from course selections to choosing a career path. College advisors must possess in-depth knowledge of complex curriculum paths, along with a thorough understanding of present and future trends in industry and employer expectations. College student success if often measured as a result of gaining employment in their major field of study soon after graduation. For many years colleges and universities have successfully required students to participate in industry internships to gain valuable on-the-job experience. Providing industry-related advising opportunities for students is another means of using these same valuable resources to enhance student success.

Quality academic advising has often been identified as an important facet in the retention and enrichment of college students, and when conducted effectively, both the student and the learning institution benefit (Bedker & Young 1994; Chernin & Goldsmith 1986; Crockett 1985; Habley 1982; Miller 1985; Morehead & Johnson 1964; Trombley 1984). Declining enrollment at colleges of horticulture and agriculture has resulted in these institutions seeking and developing new, more effective ways to recruit and retain students (Fernandes & Jimmerson 1988). Therefore, an increased emphasis has been placed on college faculty to provide more personalized, top quality academic advising in order to enhance student success, and provide a smooth transition throughout the entire educational/learning experience. The most important key to good quality advising is the academic advisor (Dillsi & Jimmerson, 1992).

Recent trends have led administrators to view the college educational/learning experience as a marketing /product concept. (Baldwin 1994; Shupe 1999) In addition, academic consumerism at institutions of higher learning has evolved to the point where students can demand more personalized attention, a quality education, and individualized guidance towards satisfying individual career goals (Bedker & Young 1994). Therefore, college advisors must possess in-depth knowledge of complex curriculum paths, along with a thorough understanding of present and future trends in industry and employer expectations. Academic advising has a direct relationship with a student's progress through college. Seeking and acquiring quality advising is crucial from the first few days of course selection and scheduling, through adjustment to the college experience, on into career planning and placement, and future goal setting. Strong relationships established between a student and his/her advisor can be a union, which makes the college experience meaningful and worthwhile (Houpt 1985).

Participation in industry internships has also been found to be an important link to student success and retention (Bekkum 1993; Horner 1994; Zimmerman 1990, 1995, 1996). Active participation in cooperative industry internships can help students select satisfying career paths and gain valuable career-focused advising from their industry mentors (Demetry 1997). Active involvement by faculty advisors in the internship process also helps contribute to student success and retention.

Formally combining the advising efforts of faculty and industry professionals should be even more effective in helping students succeed and select rewarding career opportunities. Therefore, four years ago I developed and introduced a pilot program called Turfgrass Educational Advisors and Mentors (TEAM) at the Ohio State University Agricultural

[1]1328 Dover Road; Phone: 330-264-3911; Email: Willoughby.18@osu.edu

Technical Institute. This program, which involves the participation of golf course superintendents as industry advisors, is the focus of this article.

The Turfgrass Educational Advisors and Mentors Program (TEAM)

Program Background

In 1999, as a part of an ongoing effort to improve advising services, I circulated an advising perception survey among turfgrass management students in an introductory and second-year level course. The purpose of the survey was for students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their college experience, with an emphasis on advising. Survey results (Table 1) revealed that first-year students were highly concerned about making the transition from a high school-home life environment to the college away-from-home environment. These same students were also concerned about the availability and accessibility of quality academic advising and counseling. Second-year students indicated a continued interest in receiving more career-focused information along with developing further ties with industry professionals beyond the internship experience. Based on survey results and discussions I held with members of the industry advisory committee, I conceived and developed the TEAM advising program.

Program Objectives

Table 1. Advising Perception Survey Results. (n = 121)

	% Significant	% Not-Significant	%*DNR
My advisor is interested in me as a person.	90	02	08
My advisor listens and responds to personal issues and concerns.	78	10	12
My advisor is conveniently available and approachable.	90	02	08
My advisor provides ample career opportunity information.	87	04	09
My advisor has a well-established industry-networking base.	83	09	08
My advisor is knowledgeable about industry needs and expectations.	86	09	05
My advisor is knowledgeable about university policies and procedures.	83	12	05
My advisor is knowledgeable about academic programs and requirements.	88	08	04
Additional Information gathered based on the following statements.			
Please list three major concerns that you have regarding your current and future educational/learning experiences.			
Please list three expectations that you have regarding advising services provided by your academic advisor.			

* DNR - Did not respond.

The following objectives were formulated for TEAM.

1. Provide a more complete academic advising experience for students through positive utilization of industry partnerships.
2. Increase student retention in the Turfgrass Management technology program by providing a variety of advising alternatives for students to be successful.
3. Provide greater diversity in advising opportunities for students to succeed in the educational/learning experience of college.
4. Develop, maintain and expand industry relations and partnerships to help students accomplish their educational and career objectives.
5. To help students achieve what they perceive as educational, employment and career-opportunity success.

Program Methodology

Nine golf course superintendents from a regional chapter of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America were selected form a group of over twenty-five volunteers. These superintendents provided balanced representation of the three major categories of golf course management organizations-private clubs, public daily-fee, and municipal/government. Industry mentor selection was based on a three-step set of personal interviews (Table 2) conducted among the mentors, the prospective advisees, and the technology coordinator/advisor.

Upon completion of the interview process all three parties had to approve the establishment of each individual advising team. Industry mentors then received instruction on curriculum and academic issues dealing with course sequencing, internship qualifications, and graduation requirements.

Each year, over a four-year period, 45 students were recruited as potential candidates for the pilot program. From this group, 18 students were randomly selected to formally participate in TEAM. Another group of 18 students was randomly selected as the control group.

Each quarter a technology informational meeting was held during a designated campus meeting hour where all students were strongly encouraged to meet with their academic advisor at least one time during each quarter. TEAM students were required to make contact with their industry mentor and faculty advisor at least one time during each academic quarter. This could be accomplished by a telephone conversation, through an Internet instant messenger contact, by conventional e-mail or by a

Table 2. TEAM Formation Interview Sequence:		
Step 1. Technology Coordinator/Advisor	interview's	Industry Mentor
Step 2. Technology Coordinator/Advisor	interview's	Student
Step 3. Industry Mentor and Student	interview each other	

personal visit. In certain instances students met with their industry mentors while playing a round of golf.

At the end of each quarter the advising team would meet to discuss future student strategies both academic and personal. The academic advisor and industry mentor would also meet at a separate time for a follow-up discussion to access student progress and formulate new advising strategies with an emphasis on the student's success and retention.

Program Results and Discussion

Several benefits have been observed as a result of initiating TEAM. Students have gained a stronger sense of appreciation for the career path they have selected and are more confident in pursuing and completing their college education. Students, who have participated in this advising program, have established a closer relationship with industry professionals resulting in quality internships and employment opportunities. Many students view post-secondary educational success as completion of their college degree and acquiring a solid professional employment position with an attractive compensation package in their specific field of concentration.

Student retention was tracked with both the TEAM group and the control group. Results from the first two cycles of potential graduating students revealed that 83.3% of the TEAM group completed their degree program and graduated. All students in the TEAM group were placed or employed in their major field of study prior to graduation. Students tracked in the control group revealed that 55.6% completed their degree and all students were placed or employed in their major field of study at time of graduation.

Industry mentors have gained a better understanding of educational goals and objectives along with establishing a stronger bond with college advisors and faculty. More open lines of communication have been established to better serve student needs. Industry also benefits through pre-screening and recruiting top quality student interns and graduates to fill key professional employment positions.

As faculty advisor, I have been able to establish a closer working relationship with students and help them adjust to the college experience. I have also been able to establish a more effective industry networking system thus benefiting students, industry and the educational institution.

Along with the benefits of TEAM certain shortcomings were also observed and identified during formal meetings with students and their industry mentor. The lack of time available for meeting to discuss advising issues was the major concern identified by all parties involved. Also, industry mentors with limited experience and knowledge (less than 5 years of industry supervisory experience) felt less effective in helping students make positive educational and career decisions.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher learning that provide programs in agricultural and horticulture must provide unique quality advising programs that will promote student retention and success. Advisors must develop interpersonal skills and possess certain sensitivity characteristics deemed necessary for facilitating a broad range of individual student advising needs. Acquiring the breadth and depth of knowledge concerning specific career paths is essential for helping with student success. Providing industry-related advising opportunities could help to promote student success and retention.

Based on the positive feedback from students and industry mentors, I will continue TEAM. I do plan to obtain empirical data to validate the antidotal evidence to date that TEAM has been successful in meeting the stated objectives and to identify specific ways to improve this program.

Literature Cited

Baldwin, G. 1994. The student as customer: the discourse of "quality" in higher education. Jour. of Tertiary Educational Administration. 16: 125-133.

Bedker, P.D. and A.J. Young. 1994. Advising in the 90's: assessing the quality of the advisor/advisee relationship. NACTA Jour. 38(1): 33-36.

Bekkum, V. 1993. Experience needs of college of agriculture graduates as perceived by business and industry. NACTA Jour. 37(2): 49-51.

Chernin, M. and R.Goldsmith. 1986. Family day: An event to improve student retention. Jour. of College Student Personnel. 27: 364-365.

Crockett, D.S. 1985. Academic Advising. In: L. Noel, R. Levitz, and D. Saluri (Eds.), Increasing student retention: Effective programs and practices for reducing the drop out rate. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Demetry, C. 1997. A university-industry partnership in u.s. undergraduate education. Jour. of Industry and Higher Education. 11(4): 218-223.

Dillsi, M.M. and R.M. Jimmerson. 1992. Support for academic advising: faculty advisors' views. NACTA Jour. 36(2): 47-51.

Fernandes, D.L. and R.M. Jimmerson. 1988. Students' perception of academic advising. NACTA Jour. 32(4): 20-22.

Habley, W.R. 1982. Academic advisement: The critical link in student retention. NASPA Jour. 18(14): 45-50.

Hoerner, J. 1994. Work-based learning: The key to school-to-work transition. ATEA Jour. 21(3): 6-10.

Houpt, A. 1985. Academic advising in the community college. Princeton, NJ: Mid-Careers Fellowship Program. 1985. 16 p (ED 265 904).

Miller, M. 1985. A positive approach to student retention: The academic advising intervention and monitoring system. NACACA Jour, 5(2): 19-24.

Morehead, C.G. and J.C. Johnson. 1964. Some effect of a faculty advising program. Personnel and Guidance Jour. 43: 139-143.

Shupe, D.A. 1999. Productivity, quality and accountability in higher education. Jour. of Continuing Higher Education. 47(1): 2-13.

Trombley, T.B. 1984. An analysis of the complexity of academic advising tasks. Jour. of College Student Personnel. 25: 234-239.

Zimmerman, A. 1990. A required technical internship course: key link in the two-year college/industry partnership. ATEA Jour. 18(2): 12-13

Zimmerman, A. 1995. A required technical internship course as an integral part of the curriculum. american society of agricultural engineers. Northeast Agricultural/Biological Engineering Conference. Bar Harbor, Maine, 9502.

Zimmerman, A. 1996. recommendations for a successful internship program. NACTA Jour. 40(2): 4-7.

Call for Abstracts

NACTA members are encouraged to submit papers for oral and poster presentation as early as possible for the annual conference being held at The Ohio State University ATI, Wooster, June 15 -17. The theme for this year's conference is "Experiential and Student-Centered Learning." For more details visit the conference website at: http://www.shislercenter.ohio-state.edu/nacta/ .

An abstract for submission should consist of original and completed work. The purpose of an abstract is to communicate to readers in restricted length significant contributions of a study for evaluation purposes. Since an abstract becomes a part of the permanent scientific literature, clearly stated, simple sentences with exact wording must be used to ensure clarity and brevity (maximum of 2,500 keystrokes). The quality of an abstract for presentation is a direct reflection on the image of the author(s), and the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA). The author submitting the abstract is responsible for its quality and content.

An abstract should include the following:

1. Objectives of the study concisely stated at the beginning of the abstract
2. Pertinent experimental conditions (if applicable) included to give an indication of the scope of the study
3. Results compiled, condensed, and presented with great care
4. Summary clearly stated

Authors are asked to submit their abstracts electronically, via e-mail as an attachment using MS Word or Word Perfect programs to Dr. Shah Rahnema (330) 264-3911, ext. 1262 (rahnema.1@osu.edu). Also, Dr. Rahnema can provide typing instructions for abstracts. The deadline for submission of abstracts is March 31, 2005. The author submitting the abstract will be notified of its receipt within 48hours of its submission.