

Academic Advising In Agricultural And Extension Education: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This study examined student perception of academic advising and advisor effectiveness. The population. Specific objectives of the study were to: 1) determine the effectiveness of advisors as perceived by students advised by agricultural and extension education faculty; 2) determine the perceptions of students relative to academic advising; and 3) identify characteristics that would enhance advisor-advisee relationships.

Methods and Procedures

The population for this study consisted of all students advised by agricultural and extension education faculty in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Penn State. The list of students advised were obtained from the Department's office and Office of Resident Education. Both the lists were checked to arrive at an accurate frame. As a result of this procedure, a total of 137 students were identified as the population for the study.

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers based on a review of related literature (Bedker and Young, 1994; Leonhardy and Jimmerson, 1992). The questionnaire had three sections. Section one contained statements relative to effectiveness of advising. The statements were measured on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent). A response option "NA" (not applicable) was also included. Section two gathered data relative to the students' perceptions about academic advising. Section three included open-ended questions relative to advisor-advisee relationships. Section four requested information such as student's age, gender, semester standing, race, and student status. The questionnaire was assessed for face and content validity by a panel of six experts, consisting of three faculty and one graduate student in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education and two faculty from the Division of Undergraduate Studies.

Data were collected through a mail survey. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, the questionnaire, and a prepaid return address envelope were

mailed to the population. Strict confidentiality was assured. After the initial mailing and two follow-ups, a total of 65 students had responded (47%). However, only responses from 55 students were usable (40%). Early and late respondents were compared (Miller and Smith, 1983) on variables identified in section one of the questionnaire and were found not to differ significantly. The researchers concluded that students who did not respond would have responded similarly had they chosen to participate. A post hoc reliability analysis indicated that section one of the questionnaire had acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha=.97). Data were analyzed using frequencies, means, and percentages.

Findings

Demographic Profile of Students

The mean age of students was 21 years. Sixty percent of the responding students were female. Almost all students with the exception of one were white non-Hispanic. Regarding class standing, 40% were seniors, 25% juniors, 25% sophomore and 10% freshman. Thirty-nine percent of the students identified their major as agricultural science, followed by agricultural education (30%), horticulture (11%), environmental science (6%) and others (14%).

Objective 1--Advisor Behaviors

Students were asked to indicate on a scale, 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent) the extent to which their advisors exhibited behaviors relative to 26 advising functions and activities. Results are shown in Table 1. The statements with the highest mean scores were: the advisor shows a friendly attitude towards advisees (3.21), followed by advisor understands curricular requirements of the major (3.18), allows adequate time to discuss academic program (3.28), understands university core curriculum (3.14), listens to the problems student's encounter (3.02), and provides information when asked about employment (3.00). Overall, students held positive perceptions about their advisors.

Objective 2 --Perceptions on Advising

A series of questions relative to academic advising were asked. A majority of the students identified their advisor as a faculty member of a department (75%), or

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as staff from the Division of Undergraduate Studies (10%). Ten percent of the respondents could not identify who their advisor was. Ninety-eight percent knew their advisors by name.

Students were asked how easy it was to make an appointment with their advisors. Seventy-seven percent said it was either “easy” or “very easy,” while 21% said it was either “difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to make an appointment. A little over a third (37%) of the students indicated that they met with their advisors three times a year, while 27% met twice a semester and 23% once a semester. However, 12% never met with their advisors. Regarding the amount of time spent with their advisors, 45% spent about 15 minutes, followed by 30 minutes (37%), and more than 30 minutes (11%). However, 12% did not spend any time with their advisors.

Students were asked about the extent to which they were aware that they could select a new advisor. A majority (54%) did not know that they could select a new advisor. An overwhelming majority felt that students should be assigned an academic advisor from the very first day of classes. For 49% of the students, advising was critical throughout the undergraduate program, while for 22%, it was the freshman year, followed by sophomore (14%), junior (12%) and senior years (3%).

Objective 3--Advisor-Advisee Relationships

Students were asked to indicate five characteristics or values which they feel are important for an academic advisor to possess in order to have a quality advisee-advisor relationship. The five most frequently mentioned characteristics were: honesty, friendliness, knowledge and

Table 1. Advisee Perceptions of Advisor Effectiveness (N=55)

STATEMENT	Mean ^a	SD	Rank
My Advisor:			
Shows a friendly attitude towards me	3.21	0.91	1
Understands curricular requirements of the major	3.18	0.90	2
Allows adequate time to discuss my academic program when we meet	3.18	0.77	2
Understands university core curriculum	3.14	0.90	4
Is knowledgeable about academic requirements	3.04	0.88	5
Listens to problems I encounter	3.02	0.90	6
Provides information when asked about employment	3.00	0.92	7
Provides an adequate opportunity for us to meet	2.92	0.91	8
Communicates in an effective manner	2.92	0.87	8
Tries to understand my educational goals and concerns	2.90	0.91	10
Provides individualized attention and meets special needs	2.89	0.94	11
Generally does a good job in meeting my advising needs	2.81	1.00	12
Takes an interest in me as an individual	2.80	1.04	13
Understands requirement for internships	2.79	1.01	14
Is knowledgeable about university support services	2.75	0.98	15
Is well organized	2.75	0.88	15
Is willing and feels comfortable about discussing personal concerns	2.74	0.93	17
Is knowledgeable about university policies	2.74	0.90	17
Is there for me when I am having a problem	2.70	1.01	19
Assists me in planning my educational program	2.69	1.05	20
Does a good job of explaining major requirements	2.65	0.92	21
Understands requirements for scholarships	2.64	1.03	22
Helps me in adjusting my course load for each semester	2.63	1.02	23
Is well-prepared for each meeting	2.62	0.87	24
Gives valid information on course selection	2.55	1.03	25
Gives valid information on financial support	2.41	1.05	26

^aMean computed on a scale: 1= poor; 2= fair; 3= good; and 4= excellent.

guidelines, and communication skills. Specific responses from students included: 1) *advisors should be open minded--if you wish to change majors they should help you make the decision that is right and not discourage the student*; 2) *be patient--students are generally confused on what they want, someone (advisors) whom will listen and give effective feedback*; and 3) *give necessary information for advancement of my career*.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, students perceive that faculty in agricultural and extension education at Penn State are effective advisors. A caring, responsible and knowledgeable faculty are helping students in their academic programs, educational objectives, and to a certain extent in their career development. However, there are some areas where faculty could do a better job. These include explaining requirements for majors, course selection, helping students adjust their course loads each semester, and preparation for meeting students.

A majority of students knew who their advisor was and had contacted him or her on a regular basis. However, there are some students who should be in touch with their advisors if they need help in their academic programs. Again, a majority of students consider advising an important component to meet their educational objectives and suggest that advising should be started from the very first day of classes, and continued throughout the program.

Honesty, friendliness, caring, knowledge about various advising functions and activities, and excellent communication skills are some of the characteristics that students believe that faculty should possess in order to build a strong advisor-advisee relationships. Faculty development activities designed to enhance these characteristics should be provided to all advising faculty. In addition, providing faculty development activities relative to academic functions could be helpful to faculty in improving their advising efforts.

Many researchers have indicated that academic advising is and will continue to influence student attrition and retention efforts. Consequently, advising systems must be continually examined and evaluated. Every five to ten years, students, faculty and administrators should be surveyed to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the advising systems. Such assessments becomes even more critical as the demographics of the student body changes, in addition to changes in faculty and administrator expectations.

Another question which needs to be addressed is that what makes a successful advisor. In other words, what qualities should an advisor possess in order to be

successful. Programs designed to enhance success factors should be identified and developed. Finally, faculty, department chairs and administrators should not only support such programs but also must demonstrate commitment to provide quality advising.

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