
Advising in the 90s: Assessing the Quality of the Advisor/Advisee Relationship

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Abstract

The literature on advising and retention of students has overwhelmingly identified academic advising as an important factor in the retention and enrichment of college students. Recent research has indicated a need for information in the area of identifying essential characteristics which would assist in establishing a "quality" advising relationship. An open-ended question format has been proposed to determine what type of relationship the student prefers with a faculty advisor. The objective of this study was to identify specific advising characteristics that are perceived as important to students.

Introduction

Rising student consumerism in institutions of higher education has led to a situation where students can demand personal attention, a quality education, and individual guidance towards goal achievement. An integral component in meeting those needs is a faculty advisor. Grites (1984) stated that quality advising programs result in better attitudes, enhanced self-concept, and both intellectual and interpersonal development on the part of the student. Houpt (1985) concluded that "academic advising is crucial in the students progress through college, from the first few days of course selection and scheduling, through adjustment to the college experience, into career planning and future goal setting. The relationship between a student and his/her advisor can be a link which makes the college experience meaningful."

The literature on advising and retention of students has overwhelmingly identified quality academic advising as an important factor in the retention and enrichment of college students and, when done well, both the student and the university benefit (Chernin & Goldsmith 1986; Crocket, 1978; Habley, 1982; Miller, 1985; Morehead & Johnson, 1964; Trombley, 1984). Research has found that quality advising assists students in life and career goal clarification as well as the short term goals of course selection and problem solving (Baer & Carr, 1985). Advising also positively influences a student's academic and personal growth and satisfaction with his/her overall college experience (Ender, Winston & Miller,

1984). Wilder (1981) found that the quality of advising at an educational institution was related to student morale. Thus it is apparent that advising significantly influences economic changes in higher education (Abel, 1980).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) found that both formal and informal non-teaching interaction with faculty were important in finalizing their decision whether to remain or withdraw from an institution; more than student - peer relationships. Beal and Noel (1980) identified inadequate academic advising as the number one negative factor in student retention. They also found that caring attitudes of faculty and staff were listed as the number one positive factor in student retention; ranking higher than quality teaching or adequate financial support.

Students identify successful academic advisors as those who: 1) are accessible, 2) have and disseminate specific and accurate academic information, 3) provide advice and counsel, and 4) have a personal and caring relationship with the student (Crocket, 1978; Spencer, Peterson, and Neilson, 1982).

Polson and Cashin (1985) surveyed National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) members to determine the current status of advising issues encountered on college campuses. Aspects of advising that were found to be ineffective and needing improvement were: lack of faculty training, availability of quality advisors and lack of reward system for quality advising.

In spite of the fact that lack of training on how to advise is listed as needing improvement, few faculty members have ever received any training to prepare them for this role. Advising undergraduate students is lightly regarded in the faculty reward system. Each student comes into the advisor/advisee relationship with different needs. Students differ academically, developmentally, and personally; therefore requiring different approaches for both informational and counseling functions of an advisor. The primary expertise of academic advisors lies within the respective borders of their academic teaching and research interests. Although faculty advisors may be capable of dealing with course related problems and departmental requirements, they seldom are taught to assist students to integrate their course work with life goals. Faculty advisors' inability to do so is one of the students' major criticisms, and faculty are not likely to become proficient in these areas unless the academic system changes dramatically to give them the time, training and appropriate rewards so badly needed (Laff, Schein, & Allen, 1987).

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The concern over student advising appears to be no different than 35 years ago according to a 1954 quote by Esther Lloyd-Jones: "Because some faculty are either unskilled or have little interest in the student outside the classroom, advising becomes a mere clerical routine of program planning." Fieldstein (1987) stated that more active research was needed in this area to identify what essential characteristics assist in establishing a "quality" relationship. She proposed that one way of attempting to answer this question would be to ask students, by implementing an open-ended question format: what type of relationship they prefer with a faculty advisor? Such knowledge could assist in developing a "satisfying" advisor/advisee relationship.

The objectives of this study were to use an open-ended question format to identify characteristics or qualities possessed by good advisors, and to identify ways to improve the quality of the advisor-advisee relationship, as perceived by students.

Survey Population and Procedures

Undergraduate students at the University of New Hampshire, who were enrolled in a large general education course and a biology course intended for majors during the spring of 1992, were used in this study. The instrument was distributed to 538 students and surveys were completed, during class time, approximately one week after pre-registration: a time when advising is still fresh in the students mind. Of the 538 surveys distributed, 497 (84%) were used. The survey population consisted of 282 women and 215 males. Class standing consisted of 355 freshmen or sophomores and the remaining 142 were juniors, seniors, and Division of Continuing Education students. Six individual colleges at the university were represented in the survey.

Of the 497 who responded, their college and major areas of study were: 44 undeclared majors, 179 College of Liberal Arts, 111 Whittemore School of Business and Economics, 67 College of Life Science and Agriculture, 51 College of Engineering and Physical Science, and 45 identified the School of Health and Human Services as their college.

The survey contained several open-ended questions and required selection of an appropriate response to given categories. The questionnaire consisted of five parts: (a) student profile; (b) information pertaining to students' advisor; (c) evaluation of advisors' effectiveness (d) identification of characteristics or values which the student felt was important for the advisor to possess; and (e) ideas through which the present advising system can be improved.

The questionnaire was first validated by a twelve member board of jurors which included associate deans of students, professional advisors from the university advising system, faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates. This selected jury established content validity of the instrument. The instrument also was pre-tested by 35 students enrolled in a general education biology class at the university one week after fall pre-registration fall of 1991. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's) for all questions had an alpha of 0.97.

Results

The University of New Hampshire implements several formats for delivering academic advice. The highest percentage (59%) identified their advisor as being a faculty member from within an academic department. 11% recognized their advisor as being from the University Advising Center, 9% used a professional staff, 9% used upper class peer advisors, and 8% could not identify any individual as their advisor. The remaining respondents (4%) identified their advisor as professional staff of the Continuing Education Program.

Fifty-eight percent of the students indicated that they preferred a faculty member from within his/her academic department. Nineteen percent preferred trained professional staff advisors, while 12 percent identified peer advising as their preference.

When students were asked how easy it was to arrange an appointment with their advisor to discuss their academic program, 67% of the students said that arranging an appointment with their advisor was "very easy" or "some what easy". However, it is interesting to see that 10% of the students made no effort on their part to make an appointment. We need to be concerned about this population of students. Many questions can be raised: Are they freshman who are unaware of the pre-registration system; or do they not know who their advisor is? Under our present system we may lose these students unintentionally.

In general, students meet infrequently, for very short time periods, with their advisor. Fifty-two percent of the participants met with their advisor twice a year, 27 percent met two-three times a year, 12% of the respondents had met only once, and 9 percent had never met with their advisor. The greatest percentage (49%) of the participants spent approximately 15 minutes with their advisor, while 31% of the student spent less than 5 minutes per visit. Interestingly, 6% met only with secretaries. From this information it could be assumed that the only reason 31 percent of the students meet with their advisor was to have their pre-registration form signed or complete clerical responsibilities.

Seventy-four percent of the students reported that they acknowledged the importance of academic advising in relation to fulfilling their educational objectives as very important to moderately important. Ninety-five percent of the respondents identified that from the "First Day" of a student's academic career at the university a student should be assigned an advisor. It is apparent that students are aware of the importance of having an advisor and would benefit from having this support when they first arrive at the university.

Forty-one percent reported that when seeking advice on selecting courses for the next semester they accepted the advice of their college peers more seriously than seeking out their advisor for this information. Twenty-nine percent of the students sought out advice of their academic faculty advisor. Eleven percent sought out information on selecting courses from their parents. This response may suggest that parents are more involved in their children's education than witnessed in previous years.

When the students were asked to rate their advisor in respect to overall resourcefulness only 16 percent believed that their advisors should receive an excellent, 34 percent identified good, 28 percent fair, 17 percent poor, and 5% were unable to comment. This question suggests that our present advising system might need to be improved.

Student evaluation of their advisors effectiveness (data not shown) suggest the following areas of concern: advisors are not providing an adequate opportunity to meet with student, advisors need to become informed regarding academic requirements, understanding student goals and concerns, communication skills including listening, providing individualized attention and meeting special needs of student, and ability to show a warm and friendly attitude toward the student.

Two areas that need to be addressed are: advisee's are not seeking out information associated with employment opportunities, revealed by 55 percent responding with an "unable to comment" response; and advisors being willing and feeling comfortable about discussing personal concerns, identified by 57 percent responded with an "unable to comment" response. These responses suggest that student's must be acquiring employment information and counselling through another means.

Figure 1 Students Were Asked To Identify Characteristics Or Values Which Were Important For An Advisor To Posses and Which Would Allow For A "Quality Advisee/Advisor Relationship". Responses from open-ended questions were assigned to the following four general areas. Summation of all four areas equals 100%.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ADVISOR (32%)	
13%	— Cares for me as an individual
10%	— Friendly and personable
3%	— Suitable personality and mannerisms suited for advising
3%	— Advisor shows enthusiasm
2%	— Trustworthy and sincere
1%	— Maintains positive attitude
PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS (26%)	
23%	— Knowledge of academic requirement and process involved
3%	— Professional/competent in his/her area of study
COMMUNICATION SKILLS (21%)	
11%	— Listens and is attentive to student
8%	— Understanding of and respect toward students
2%	— Social Skills
ADVISING STRENGTHS (21%)	
8%	— Accessible and available
4%	— Willingness to take time required to meet student needs
4%	— Well prepared and organized
3%	— Knowledge of students goals and interests
1%	— Provides comfortable atmosphere
1%	— Advises as opposed to telling

Figure 2 Students Were Asked To Identify Improvements Which They Felt Could Be Implemented To Improve Our Present Advising System. Responses from open-ended questions were assigned to the following two general areas. Summation of both areas equals 100%.

ADVISOR (60%)	
28%	— More personable towards student
20%	— Advisor needs to spend more individualized time with advisee (per session and per year).
10%	— Advisor should take advising role seriously and make a serious commitment.
2%	— Focusing on students concerns and future goals
INSTITUTION (40%)	
16%	— Educate faculty on how to advise students more effectively
9%	— Money to acquire trained advisors
6%	— Students need an effective and informed advisor beginning with their first day at UNH
5%	— Selection of qualified advisors with better communication skills
3%	— The acquisition of trained advisors: (Faculty don't have time to do all: teach, research, service, and advise)
1%	— Working more closely with undeclared students to assist them in selecting a major

In Figures 1 and 2, students were asked open-ended questions to identify characteristics or values which were identified as important for an advisor to possess and which would allow for a "quality advisee/advisor relationship". In Figure 1, the responses were grouped into four general categories: personal characteristics of advisor, professional characteristics, communication skills, and advising strengths. The greatest percentage of the respondents (23%) identified that an advisor should have a "knowledge of academic requirements". Thirteen percent of the students identified "cares for me as an individual". Eleven percent reported that their advisors should "listen and be attentive" to the student. And 10 percent indicated that their advisor should be "friendly and personable".

In Figure 2, students were asked to identify areas of improvement in the present advising system. Their responses were grouped into two categories: advisor and institution. The greatest percentage, 28 percent identified that the advisor needed to be more personable. Twenty percent felt that advisors needed to spend more individualized time with advisees and take their role more seriously (10%). Sixteen percent reported that the faculty needed to be educated on how to advise students more effectively.

Conclusions

Academic advising is and will continue to influence student retention and attrition efforts. The step we must take is

to determine which factors have the greatest impact on our students and then ask, "what are we going to do about the situation?"

The needs of a faculty advisor which were identified in this paper could be addressed through professional development programs designed to assist advisors develop and improve their skills. Begin with an overview of the advising process and its importance to students as they progress through college. Identify areas such as: academic requirements, university regulations, university resources, career opportunities, and communication and listening skills. And continue to provide faculty development activities related to improving advising.

Academic advising systems should continually be evaluated. Periodically, students, faculty and administration should be surveyed as to their perceptions of the present advising system. The needs of the student should be considered. This means that monitoring students' perceptions of academic advising should be an on-going process in order to ensure a positive and meaningful advising experience.

Lastly, department heads, deans, and administrators need to emphasize and promote the importance and necessity of quality advising. The institution needs to implement incentives or rewards into the system to motivate faculty members to become better advisors. Advising needs to be recognized as a high priority by administrators and an integral part of the mission of each university.

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