

Advising Needs as Perceived by Students, Advisors, and Administrators

Lucille H. Leonhardy and Ronald M. Jimmerson

Abstract

Students, faculty advisors, and administrators in a college of agriculture and home economics were surveyed to determine their perceptions of academic advising in the college. Each respondent group rated what advisors are doing and what they think advisors should be doing related to 35 advising functions. The results of the study showed that advisors have a much more positive view of how well they fulfill advising functions than do their advisees or their administrators. Recommendations for improvement of academic advising within the college included: (1) narrow the discrepancy in perceptions of how well advising functions are being met by improving the advisor/advisee relationship and (2) help advisors by developing programs that would increase their ability to help students improve study habits, assist students with academic difficulties, and help students identify their personal strengths and abilities.

Introduction

Good academic advising promotes several desired outcomes for students including: adjustment to college life, selection of appropriate courses and majors, development of career possibilities, and placement in appropriate jobs. In addition, it promotes other college goals such as providing a base to develop and maintain contact with alumni and to recruit and retain students (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). Currently, there are several approaches to advising, one approach being what could be termed the traditional method and another approach being termed the developmental approach (Bostaph & Moore, 1980). Academic advising is an integral part of the undergraduate's educational experience is found in the academic advising that is or is not received. Crockett (1986) has said that academic advising, on many campuses, is changing from a traditional simplistic, perfunctory course-scheduling activity that has been performed primarily by teaching faculty to a more integrated and complex process that is designed to facilitate both student growth and development opportunity (developmental approach). Although this article will not discuss the pros and cons of these two approaches to advising, it is important to remember that they exist and do affect attitudes found in advising.

Leonhardy is editor, Wood Materials and Engineering Laboratory, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-1806 and Jimmerson is an associate professor, Adult and Youth Education, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-6236.

The Washington State University (WSU) College of Agriculture and Home Economics Improvement of Instruction Committee (IIC) initiated, during fall semester 1987, a comprehensive study of academic advising within the College. The committee was made up of faculty representatives from each academic department within the College. Its goal was to promote improvement of teaching and advising within the College. Several factors led to the committee's decision to study advising within the College: (1) the alumni of the WSU College of Agriculture and Home Economics felt strongly enough about advising within the College to set up an annual award for the best undergraduate student advising faculty member. The committee, therefore, saw the need to develop criteria for the newly established annual advising award sponsored by the alumni association; (2) a recognition of the importance of good academic advising for recruiting and retaining students; (3) an ongoing concern for understanding and improving the academic advising within the College; and (4) a lack of agreed-upon criteria by which faculty advisors in the College were evaluated.

In consultation with the College Director of Resident Instruction, three respondent groups (students, academic advisors, and College administrators) were surveyed to determine their perceptions of advising in the College. Three graduate students in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) conducted the surveys as part of their masters thesis work (Fernandes, 1987; Dillsi, 1989; and Leonhardy, 1989). Fernandes (1987) surveyed students, Dillsi (1989) surveyed faculty advisors, and Leonhardy (1989) surveyed administrators and compared the three groups. The studies were designed and carried out under the supervision of a faculty member in ACE who also chaired the IIC. IIC members acted as "expert" consultants in designing the overall study and developing the questionnaires. The study assumed that recommendations for improving advising must be based on input from all primary stakeholders, i.e., students, faculty advisors, and College administrators. This would ensure understanding of all perspectives as well as promote commitment to improving advising by involving those who could impact it.

By comparing the perceptions of students, advisors, and administrators, it was possible to: (1) determine which advising functions were considered most important by all three groups, (2) see where differences in perceptions occurred, (3) determine where serious gaps existed between

what was currently being done and what should be done, (4) set up criteria to determine how to evaluate undergraduate academic advisors, and (5) develop a system to support and direct advising within the College.

Objectives

The broad goal of the study was to determine how advising in the college might be improved based on students', academic advisors', and administrators' perceptions of what advisors are doing compared to what they think advisors should be doing. More specifically, the objectives were to:

1. Identify important academic advising functions (responsibilities of academic advisors) as reported in the literature.
2. Determine students', advisors', and administrators' assessments of advising needs within the College by comparing their perceptions of how well academic advising functions were being fulfilled with the extent to which they felt these functions should be fulfilled.
3. Compare the academic advising needs identified by each group, and the rankings of those needs, to determine: (a) where differences in perceptions occurred, (b) needs that all three groups believed were being met, and (c) areas where advising could be improved.
4. Make recommendations for improving academic advising.

Procedures

The study was carried out in three parts during a twelve month period covering two academic semesters (Fernandes, 1987; Dillsi, 1989; and Leonhardy, 1989). Parallel questionnaires were developed and administered to each of the three groups (students, advisors, and administrators). Basically, the questionnaires were the same except for wording changes appropriate to each group and differences in demographic and supplemental questions. The questionnaires were developed from a literature search and studying other survey instruments designed to assess advising in colleges or universities. Thirty-five academic advising functions were determined to be the most important and frequently mentioned advising functions. These advising functions were grouped into seven categories: (1) academic needs, (2) rules and regulations, (3) course selection and information on majors, (4) career development, (5) counseling, (6) advising climate, and (7) general. Students, advisors, and administrators rated each of the 35 functions for: (1) the extent to which it "should be fulfilled" by an advisor and (2) the extent to which it "is now being fulfilled" by my advisor (students), by me as an advisor (advisors), and by advisors I supervise (administrators). Ratings were based on a four-point scale where 0 = not at all, 1 = to a very limited extent, 2 = to some extent, and 3 = to a great extent.

The questionnaire given to the students was designed and developed in consultation with the IIC. Initial drafts of the questionnaire were developed by the graduate student researcher based on a thorough literature search and review of several instruments designed to assess advising (Ferman-

des, 1987). Because the goal was to establish not only what advising functions should be carried out in the College, but also the extent to which they are being fulfilled, it was necessary to develop an appropriate questionnaire. Initially, a list of 50 items was developed. These items were discussed and refined by committee members and reduced to 35 items deemed appropriate. After this refinement, the questionnaire was pretested with a random sample of 25 WSU students who were not advised in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics. Students were asked to complete the questionnaire and note any ambiguous questions or other problems. The pretest resulted in only minor wording and format changes. The final version of the questionnaire was reviewed by a survey expert at the WSU Social Research Center. This process established the basis for content and face validity of the questionnaire items used for all three survey groups. Since it was impractical to conduct a test/retest in the administration of the questionnaire, no statistical procedure was run as a measure of reliability of the questionnaire. The 35 survey items were stated simply, reviewed by numerous "experts," and subjected to pretesting for each group. Because of these factors, it would appear that responses to the items would be stable if retesting were performed.

To obtain the student perceptions, 250 questionnaires were distributed to students in ten selected courses taught in the college. Courses were selected to obtain a representative sample of students in the College by grade level, major, and GPA. Questionnaires were either completed in class or returned at the next class session. The researcher distributed the questionnaires to each class with the same set of written instructions. This approach ensured a good return rate in a short period of time while avoiding biasing students which was a potential if questionnaires had been distributed through advisors to their advisees. Out of the 250 questionnaires distributed, 221 (88 percent) questionnaires were usable. This represented about 18 percent of the 1227 undergraduate students advised in the college at the time of the study. This sample size was deemed adequate considering that the grade level, major, and average GPA of those questioned varied no more than 10 percent from that of the actual population.

All of the academic faculty advisors in the College were mailed their questionnaires with the exception of those serving on the IIC who did not participate in the survey because of their role as an advisory committee. Basically, the same questionnaire as was used in the student assessment was used to obtain faculty advisor perceptions (Dillsi, 1989). Faculty advisors were divided into those who advised undergraduate College students with declared majors and those faculty advisors within the College who advised undeclared undergraduate students (these were freshmen and sophomores who had not yet declared a major field of study). Sixty (about 77 percent) returned usable questionnaires. As with the student survey, the questionnaire was designed to determine the advisors' perceptions of the extent to which they felt advisors in the College should be performing each of the 35 advising functions as well as how

they perceived they currently fulfilled each function. The advisor version of the questionnaire was pretested by administering the survey to ten WSU faculty outside the College of Agriculture and Home Economics. Only minor changes were made in wording in sections specific to advisors. No changes were made in the section related to the 35 advisory functions.

Fourteen college administrators (Dean, Associate Dean, and Department chairs), all of whom supervised advisors at the time of the study, were surveyed (Leonhardy, 1989). The questionnaire, again, consisted of the same questions as the ones used in both the student and faculty academic advisor surveys. The questionnaire was pretested through a selected group of ten faculty and ex-faculty members who had held administrative posts previously in the College of Agri-

culture and Home Economics and/or WSU. Those who were in the pretest approved the questionnaire, and, although some felt the questionnaire was too long, no changes were made. The pretested questionnaire was then mailed to the fourteen College administrators. All completed and returned usable questionnaires.

As indicated earlier, the three surveys were conducted over a 12 month time period that consisted of two academic semesters. The student survey was conducted first during spring 1987. It was followed by the advisor and administrator surveys conducted during the fall semester of 1988 (the theses [Dillsi and Leonhardy], based on the latter two surveys were not completed until 1989). While differences in the timing of the surveys could raise questions about comparing responses from the three surveys, this should not be a

Table 1. Comparison of Academic Need, Significance of Need, and Ranking of Need as Shown by Student, Advisor, and Administrator Perceptions*

Advising Functions	Students (n=221)			Advisors (n=60)			Administrators (n=14)		
	Need	Sig**	Rank***	Need	Sig**	Rank***	Need	Sig**	Rank***
Academic Needs									
Suggest ways to improve study habits	0.82	a	6	0.15	b	14	0.71	a	5
Assist with academic difficulties	0.86	a	9	0.27	b	4	0.64	ab	9
Help identify student strengths/abilities	0.86	a	10	0.27	b	4	0.71	ab	5
Rules and Regulations									
Assist with scheduling/registration	0.32	a	33	-0.07	b	35	0.29	ab	31
Give info/advice on academic regulations	.66	a	15	0.05	b	22	0.50	a	18
Give information on appeals procedures	1.18	a	1	0.34	b	2	0.57	b	21
Course Selection, Information on Majors									
Assist with selection/changing majors	0.85	a	11	0.07	b	21	0.50	ab	24
Encourage students to plan own program	0.51	a	27	0.00	b	30	1.00	a	8
Discuss content of courses	0.62	a	17	0.03	b	27	0.29	b	30
Help select electives/required courses	0.40	ab	31	0.02	b	28	0.50	a	12
Help students w/program requirements	0.55	a	19	-0.03	b	33	0.36	ab	22
Career Development									
Help clarify career/life goals	0.82	a	8	0.08	b	20	0.64	a	1
Help identify career areas to fit student	1.06	a	5	0.12	b	17	0.50	b	18
Discuss job and job search strategies	1.20	a	4	0.17	b	16	0.57	b	15
Discuss options for educ. after graduation	1.20	a	2	0.27	b	4	0.31	b	28
Counseling									
Be a good listener	0.44	b	25	0.20	b	12	0.86	a	1
Accept feedback as an advisor	0.73	a	16	0.22	b	7	0.79	a	7
Friendly, approachable, sense of humor	0.41	ab	29	0.03	b	25	0.50	a	18
Encourage independent decision making	.58	a	21	0.05	b	19	0.64	a	9
Willing to discuss personal concerns	0.57	a	24	0.03	b	25	0.29	ab	34
Advising Climate									
Allow time to discuss issues/problems	0.45	a	26	0.24	a	11	0.64	a	9
Define advisor/advisee relationship	0.77	a	7	0.33	b	1	1.07	a	1
Initiate meetings with student	0.74	a	18	0.13	b	18	0.36	ab	33
Arrive on time for appointments	0.44	a	30	0.10	a	15	0.36	a	27
Respect student's right to make decisions	0.30	ab	34	0.00	b	30	0.50	a	12
Ensure advisor/advisee understanding	0.60	a	13	0.24	a	3	0.46	a	17
Provide caring, open atmosphere	0.44	a	28	0.03	b	23	0.50	a	12
Provide students full advising attention	0.33	ab	32	0.1	b	10	0.62	a	4
Enjoy advising	0.49	a	23	0.02	b	29	0.36	ab	29
General									
Keep personal information confidential	0.21	a	35	0.00	a	30	0.29	a	25
Available when needed by student	0.55	a	20	0.23	a	9	0.64	a	16
Give information on scholarships	1.25	a	3	0.25	b	8	0.00	b	35
Refer students for help as needed	0.80	a	4	0.20	b	12	0.36	ab	26
Promote joining student clubs	0.83	a	12	0.05	b	24	0.43	ab	23
Willing to give student a recommendation	0.59	a	22	-0.05	b	34	0.14	ab	32

*Need as determined by the difference between the means of each group's "should be" and "is being" scores

**Means in each row are not significantly different ($P \geq 0.05$ level) if letters are the same (based on the lsd [least significant difference] test)

***Ranking is based on a t test

major problem because all administrators and faculty advisors who were surveyed held their positions at the time the students had been surveyed. The sampling procedures and response rate provides a sound basis for generalizing findings of the study to the entire College. Transferability of findings to other colleges or settings should be based on similarities with the conditions of this study.

Results And Discussion

Academic advising need was determined by examining the difference between each group's "should be fulfilled" scores and their "is being fulfilled" scores; therefore, the larger the difference, the greater the need. A t test was done within each group to determine whether the "mean need" for each advising function was significant ($P \geq 0.05$). Then, the t test scores were ranked within the three groups to determine a "need rank." Individual group data were then combined and mean need scores for each group were tested with an analysis of variance procedure and a least significant difference test (LSD test) to determine if these mean need scores were significantly different ($P \geq 0.05$) between groups. The Statistical Analysis System (SAS) was used to perform all statistical tests (SAS Institute, Inc., 1985).

In examining the results, it is important to note that the need scores do not indicate what the respondents considered to be the most important advising functions, but rather, which functions were being met least effectively, given their importance, and also, the degree to which the functions were being carried out. In fact, in many cases the functions that were rated highest for "should be" were also rated high on the "is being fulfilled" scale. Many of the functions appear low in the needs ranking because respondents believed advisors were doing a good job in carrying out those functions.

Table 1 shows: (1) the need (difference between the means of "what should be" and the means of "what is"), (2) an indication of whether these mean need scores were different, significantly, between the three groups (students, advisors, and administrators) based on an analysis of variance test (LSD test), and (3) the hierarchical ranking of each function by each group based on t test scores that were de-

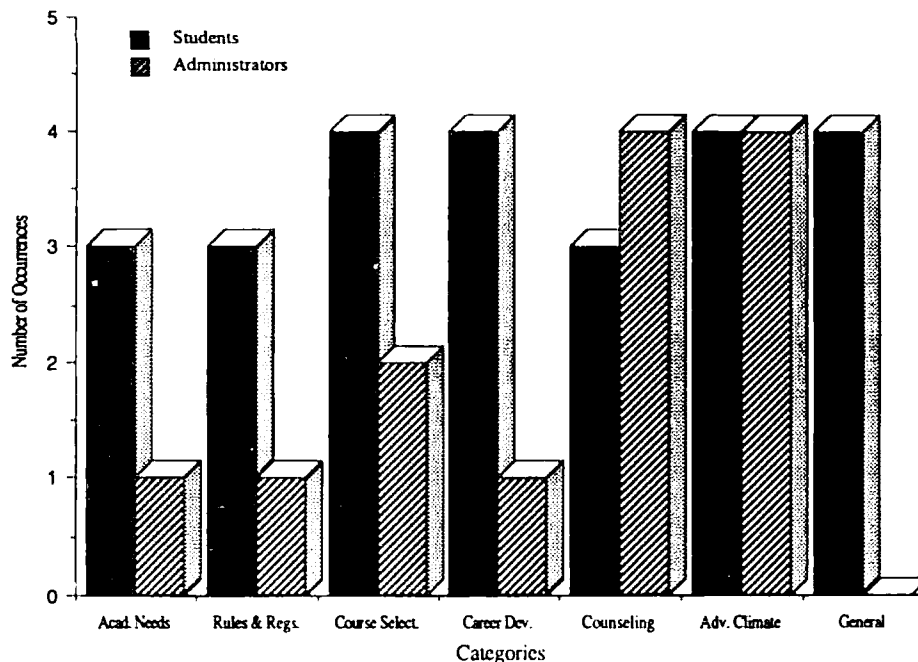


Figure 1. Number of occurrences in the seven different categories where students' and administrators' perceptions were shown to be significantly different from advisors' perceptions.

rived from the LSD test (the t test scores are not shown). Where t test scores were the same, functions received the same ranking. For example, under administrators, three functions are ranked number one and none are ranked numbers two or three because the t test scores were the same for all three, even though the need scores are seen to be different. The significance results of the LSD test are shown in

Table 1 under the column designated as "Sig." The means in each row are not significantly different ($P \geq 0.05$ level) if the letters (a and b) are the same.

An examination of need scores shows that advisors believed there was a much lower need on all functions as compared to students and administrators (note the low need scores for advisors). Because advisors' need scores were so low, it was found that out of the thirty-five functions, there were twenty occasions where their need scores were significantly different from students' need scores. In addition, there were thirteen occasions where advisors' need scores were significantly different from administrators' scores. Figure 1 graphically illustrates the number of functions, by category, where advisors' need scores were significantly different from the need scores of students and administrators. Students' and administrators' scores were significantly different for only six functions. It is clear that advisors felt they were doing a better job of carrying out advising functions than did their advisees or their administrators.

The rankings, based on t test scores, gave a somewhat different picture. Even though advisors had lower need scores, their ranking of needs were similar to students' and administrators' rankings for many functions. For example, students and advisors had six functions in common among their top ten. This compared to five for students and administrators and five for advisors and administrators.

All three groups seemed to agree that the Academic Needs category should receive more attention. In all but one instance, all three respondent groups ranked these three functions in their top ten. The category with the biggest discrepancies between students, advisors, and administrators was Career Development. Students ranked all four of these functions in their top eight while advisors and admin-

