

Student Evaluation of Advisers

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Student evaluation of advisers and the advising program is an important and useful process. The evaluation process provides a channel for student feedback concerning the quality of advising and the advising program. An evaluation of advising and the advising program at Oklahoma State University provided feedback to all departments and colleges within the university. A one and one half day advising workshop was held off campus to discuss survey results. One direct and tangible result of the survey and workshop was the establishment of a \$1,500 award to recognize an outstanding undergraduate academic adviser.

Advising students is an important and challenging responsibility for faculty. The purposes of the academic adviser and the advising program are twofold. The first is a student oriented purpose. It is to help, encourage, direct and motivate the student in achieving "academic excellence" and to assist the student to identify, develop, and achieve academic, professional and personal goals (Williams). Hartung characterizes advising as "human capital management" (Hartung). The second purpose is institutionally oriented. It is to recruit and retain students and to project a positive image for the institution (Bostaph, Fernandez, Winston). The objective of this paper is to describe a procedure for evaluating academic advising and advising programs for undergraduate students. Results of a student survey of academic advising at Oklahoma State University are presented.

Historically, advising undergraduate students has ranked very low as a professional priority to most tenure-track faculty. The advising program, likewise, has not received much attention from most college administrators. Due to a decrease in student numbers at many colleges and universities and in the general student population we see greater emphasis placed on undergraduate advising, advising programs and student retention.

Quality advising of individual students is generally the responsibility of individual advisers. Development of advising programs is the responsibility of the advising coordinator, department heads, deans of resident instruction, vice presidents of academic affairs and other college and university administrators. It is through the advising program that the adviser receives training, motivation, direction, rewards and information necessary to do quality advising.

Evaluation of the academic adviser and advising program is essential if we are interested in upgrading the quality of this activity and program. Just as we use student evaluations as one source of information to evaluate teaching and course content we also ought to evaluate advising and advising programs using student evaluations. The evaluation potentially serves two purposes. First, student evaluations provide

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a channel for feedback from students through which they can communicate their perceptions, evaluations and suggestions for improving advising and advising programs. Student feedback is one source of information concerning strengths and weakness of individual advisers. Student feedback can be obtained through survey forms or exit interviews. Based on aggregate adviser evaluations, strengths and weakness of the advising program can be identified. Other sources of information useful in evaluating academic advisers and advising programs might include colleagues and alumni.

The second use of the evaluation is to identify and document who is doing a good job and who is not doing a good job in the advising process. This assumes that there is an incentive or reward associated with quality advising service. Care must be taken when evaluating an adviser solely on the basis of student feedback and evaluations. The perception of what a good advising program might differ as a function of grade point average, class (freshman, senior, or graduate) and major (agriculture, education, or engineer) (Allen).

Student evaluation of adviser and advising programs should occur at regular intervals. Student population, the advisers and the institutions are not static; thus the adviser delivery system must be flexible, dynamic and responsive. Constant evaluation and assessment of advisers and advising programs is critical in monitoring who is being served, how well, how frequently, in what ways, by whom, etc. (Winston, p. 375). Student evaluations provide one mechanism for signaling the need for change.

In theory, evaluation of the adviser and advising program is desirable. However, few schools have a formal program to evaluate advisers and advising programs. Many institutions do little more than provide lip service commitment to their academic advising program (Brown, P. 57). Carstensen and Silberhorn (p. 15) report that there are few effective systems in place for evaluating academic advising and little reward or recognition attached to its successful delivery. This might be partly explained by the perceived low professional priority for advising undergraduate students. Advising undergraduate students is generally not weighted very heavily in the faculty reward system. From a time standpoint, some faculty may not be assigned any FTE (Full Time Equivalent) for advising, others may receive as little as .03 to .10 FTE for advising. Department heads should emphasize during evaluations the importance and necessity of good advising even though advising might be a small part of the faculty member's job responsibility.

In 1982 the American College Testing Program (ACT) conducted its second National Survey of Academic Advising (Winston, p. 35). The first survey was conducted in 1979. In 1982, 198 of the 754 institutions responding were four year public institutions. Of this group, 15% utilized student evaluations as a method of evaluating academic advisers.

Eighty percent of the four year public institutions did not do a systematic evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the advising program (Winston, p. 57).

There are few published articles or references documenting adviser evaluations in agricultural colleges. Since 1983 three articles were published in the NACTA Journal which focused on adviser evaluations. Saxowsky and Leitch reported the results of a case study which assessed students' perceptions of academic advising in the Department of Agricultural Economics at North Dakota State University. Respondents were asked to rank characteristics considered desirable for academic advisers. The characteristics were divided into four general categories: 1.) Approachability, 2.) General Information, 3.) Information Specific to Major, and 4.) Counseling (Saxowsky and Leitch). Allen and Jones surveyed students in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Mississippi State University to determine the quality of academic advising provided to students. The authors concluded that the quality of advising provided students appears quite satisfactory, however, some improvements are possible. Students felt advisors needed to do a better job in informing them about university counseling services, job placement services, and careers associated with their major. Students likewise expressed concern about advisers' attitudes towards those who wanted to explore other fields of study.

Fernandez and Jimmerson surveyed students in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at Washington State University to determine student perceptions of academic advising. The authors conclude that advisers could improve their efforts related to helping students select appropriate careers and obtain jobs upon graduation. Career development concerns were especially high for women in the college.

A common characteristic of both the Allen and Jones and the Saxowsky and Leitch reports are that the advising evaluations were limited to one department. The surveys perhaps would have greater usefulness and impact on advisers and the advising program if they had been collected and analyzed using a college and/or university sample. The Fernandez and Jimmerson survey involved students from all departments within a single college. One advantage of a university wide survey is that it is more likely to have the attention and support of higher level administrators. This is needed to focus more attention to both faculty advisers and advising programs.

A survey to evaluate academic advising at Oklahoma State University was completed during the fall semester of 1987. Five thousand copies of the survey form were distributed to all classes of students during pre-enrollment for the spring 1988 semester. A total of 3,504 questionnaires were completed (70% response).

The questionnaires were compiled at the university level. Results for each college within the university were distributed to the respective Associate Deans for Resident Instruction. The deans in turn distributed results to each of the respective department heads.

There were several positive outcomes from the Oklahoma

State University survey. The university administration sponsored a one and one half day advising workshop at Oklahoma City. A site away from the Stillwater campus was selected to minimize interruptions to participants. Transportation, meals and lodging were provided for forty academic advisers. The advisers attending the workshop had been nominated to attend by their respective deans. Results of the survey were one of the topics discussed during the workshop. An additional result of the workshop was the establishment of an Outstanding Adviser Award at the University level. The adviser selected will be recognized and receive \$1,500 during a general faculty meeting prior to the start of the fall semester. The Outstanding Adviser Award is to be awarded annually. An adviser from the College of Agriculture received the award two out of the first three years given (1988 and 1990).

Based on the survey, student perceptions of advising and the advising programs within the Agricultural Economics Department was very good (Table 1). The department had higher scores (lower numerical mean values) than the College of Agriculture or Oklahoma State University averages. Likewise, advisers in the College of Agriculture received more favorable rankings on all but two of the questions when compared to other advisers in the university. The lower scores (higher numerical values) are associated with questions 7 and 10. Many advisers do not take the time or really make an effort to discuss career planning and job placement with advisees. These results are consistent with the findings of Jones and Fernandez. Additional adviser training needs to be devoted to identify the types and availability of university services and programs. This is not an area that attracts a lot of interest for most advisers.

The fact that a university committee was instrumental in developing a procedure to evaluate academic advising at Oklahoma State University indicates that some faculty and administrators are willing to provide more than "lip service" to quality advising and the advising program. In order to maximize the effectiveness of the survey, a procedure should have been developed and implemented to insure that the results once tabulated are not merely shelved but acted on. Where necessary and possible, changes in academic advising and the advising program may need to be implemented at the university, college and departmental levels. A shortcoming of the survey is that the student's adviser is not identified. Identifying individual advisers would provide information necessary to reward advisers who are doing a good job and help educate advisers who aren't.

Conclusions

Student evaluation of advisers is an important and useful process. The evaluation process has potential to serve two purposes. First, to provide a channel for feedback from students through which they can communicate their perceptions, evaluations, and suggestions for improving advising and advising programs. The second use is to design programs to help advisers do a better job and in the process identify advisers who are doing an acceptable or unacceptable advising job.

Table 1. Mean Scores for the Oklahoma State University Student Advisement Survey (1987)

Question	Oklahoma State Univ.		College of Agriculture		
	Total	Excluding College of Agriculture	Total	Excluding Ag Econ	Agricultural Economics Department
1. Does your adviser have regular office hours or allow you to make appointments?	1.36	1.35	1.46	1.54	1.23
2. Do you feel he/she is interested in you?	1.64	1.65	1.57	1.62	1.42
3. Do you feel free to consult your adviser if you have a problem?	1.61	1.61	1.54	1.61	1.35
<i>When asked, has your adviser seemed willing to:</i>					
4. Assist in selecting courses appropriate to your interests and abilities?	1.54	1.54	1.48	1.56	1.28
5. Help you plan several semesters or your total academic program?	1.81	1.82	1.72	1.78	1.55
6. Clarify a decision (drop/add, etc.) on total progress towards graduation or personal goals?	1.70	1.70	1.64	1.71	1.45
7. Discuss career or refer you to appropriate sources?	1.90	1.91	1.81	1.86	1.66
<i>Is your adviser informed about:</i>					
8. Requirements and programs in your declared or prospective major?	1.49	1.49	1.51	1.54	1.42
9. University policies and procedures?	1.54	1.54	1.62	1.68	1.46
10. Other university services such as counseling and placement, and where to find information about graduate programs, scholarships, etc.?	1.77	1.77	1.76	1.83	1.57
11. How do you rate this advisor? (1) excellent, (2) good, (3) average (4) poor	1.71	1.71	1.66	1.73	1.47

All questions were answered 1 (definitely yes or excellent) through 4 (definitely no or poor).

Greater benefits are possible from the evaluation process if administrators and faculty at the university, college and department levels are involved in developing, administering, tabulating and critiquing the student adviser evaluation survey. It is necessary to provide feedback to undergraduate advisers based on the survey and implement or modify adviser training programs.

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