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Fixing Advising: A Model for Faculty Advising

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses mandates to fix the advising process with a focus on faculty advising systems. Measures of student success and satisfaction, administrative issues, and faculty concerns are among the many factors discussed. Regression analysis is used to explore long-voiced faculty complaints that students do not follow advice. A case study is used to illustrate changes in one department's advising process and measures of student satisfaction are reported. A model of advising components is offered to illustrate practices suggested to realize the full potential of the advising process.

Keywords: advising, faculty advising, advising model, retention
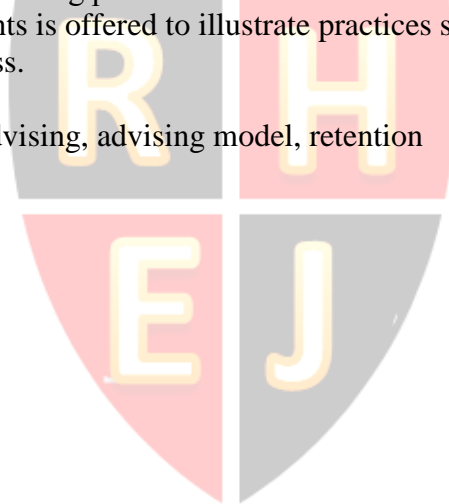
INTRODUCTION

In its simplest form academic advising is a prescriptive process whereby college students are informed of the proper sequence of classes to take to meet the requirements necessary to earn a degree. As a nobler endeavor, academic advising provides an occasion for advisors to counsel students in career interest and other personal areas that may or may not be related to academics. Occasionally, academic advising is an intrusive intervention, prompted by a structured occurrence and requiring the student's participation. It is commonly held that academic advising is both necessary and influential to student success. Furthermore, as political and economic pressures demand higher retention rates, higher graduation rates, and greater fiscal accountability; faculty and administrators will be challenged to improve the advising process and to maximize returns on limited financial and personnel resources.

But what effect does academic advising have on student retention and success? While numerous studies support the notion that academic advising influences student retention rates (Backhus, 1989; Creamer, 1980; Fuller, 1983; Habley, 1981; King, 1993; Pace, 2001, Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, 1984) many published studies suggest that retention is a complicated construct and prediction of retention is tenuous (DeBerard, 2004; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Milem & Berger, 1997; Tross, Harper, Osher, & Kneidinger, 2000). Other studies suggest that retention and success are influenced by a multitude of factors. In a study of freshmen, Metzner (1989) found that the higher perceived quality of advising was correlated with lower attrition and proposed that high quality advising be one of a multi-faceted approach for reducing attrition. In a study of academically deficient students, Fowler and Boylan (2010) concluded that intrusive academic advising, along with other rigorous interventions, might have a positive influence of cumulative GPA and other measures of student success. Regardless of the measurable impact of advising on retention or student success, conventional wisdom suggests that appropriate advising will enhance the retention process and positively contribute to student academic success. For these reasons, it is imperative that higher education examine, refine, and continuously seek improvement in the advising process.

Three types of advising situations drive the advising process: (1) the prescriptive function of advising, a secondary task for most faculty and often necessitates knowledge of degree requirements that extend beyond the faculty member's area of expertise; (2) the developmental function of advising is dependent on a relationship in which the adviser is familiar with the student's life interest; and, (3) the intrusive function of advising is a systematic application of institutional policy and procedure. The following section describes how advising in one department in a college of business in a mid-sized southern university incorporates prescriptive, developmental, and intrusive advising.

ADVISING IN MOTION

The goal of prescriptive advising should be to lead the student toward graduation as efficiently as possible. While university bulletins and degree plans are effective means for publishing the degree requirements, students often find these documents to be confusing. This department's approach views a business student's college career in three parts: university core classes, college of business foundation classes, and classes within the major.

The university core presents limited opportunities for students to select from a short list of classes in some content areas, for example, to meet the science requirement a student may

choose from any lab science taught in the university. In other areas, such as History or Government, there are few if any choices. Advising at this level consist of helping students get in the appropriate entry level classes and making them aware of any prerequisites. This area often requires annual training to update faculty on changes that occur at the university level.

The college of business foundation classes consists of twelve courses representing all the business disciplines and all courses that must be taken for degree completion. Advising in the foundation includes making students aware of course prerequisites and encouraging them to complete these courses in a timely manner. Each major typically has a number of required classes and an assortment of elective classes that cater to the students' interest. Advisers working with a student at this level address planned course rotations so that a student can get the classes they want and still graduate on time.

In addition to calling attention to important prerequisite classes and informing students of the timing for course offerings, the faculty advisor may engage in developmental advising. In this role, an advisor gives guidance on topics that are of special interest to a particular student, such as sharing how a particular science course can be beneficial, discussing career opportunities for a particular field of study, making recommendations for internship opportunities, or suggesting that the student join a professional organization. Developmental advising is not limited to academic and career endeavors, but often delves into random bits of wisdom and insight that address every sort of life interest.

Intrusive advising creates opportunities for faculty in this department to begin building relationships with students from day one despite the fact that most faculty seldom see a student in the classroom before the student's junior year. Faculty participate in Freshman orientation and provide one-on-one prescriptive advising for the students' first experience of college. Advising is mandatory prior to registration each semester and registration "advising holds" are generated electronically to prevent a student from registering for classes until this hold is removed. The department chair or administrative assistant will remove the student's advising hold when proof of advising is received.

Since all undergraduate advising in the department is conducted by faculty, students are assigned a faculty adviser who teaches in their major. This faculty member advises the student throughout his or her college career unless they change majors. Ideally, when a faculty member advises the same student each semester, a relationship develops in which the faculty takes a genuine interest in the student and the student trusts and heeds the advice that is given. This relationship is the basis for developmental advising and provides an opportunity for the adviser to hold a student accountable for actions taken after advising.

THE ADVISING PROCESS

A decade ago, most students came into the college of business as Pre-Business and were advised in large group settings. Students stayed in Pre-Business advising until the end of their sophomore year or until they declared a major. Anecdotally, most students loathed this type of advising so most quickly selected a major and moved into departmental advising. Each department provided faculty resources dedicated to Pre-Business advising. Often these advisors had relatively light time-commitments and responsibility while heavy faculty advising loads were being experienced in some departments. Subsequently and eventually, incoming students were encouraged to declare a major and the few undecided business majors were advised through the Dean's office.

When a student declares a major housed in this department, a file is created that contains the student's transcript and test scores. The student is assigned a faculty advisor within the major. The advising load is evenly dispersed among the faculty. Student requests for a specific faculty advisor, which rarely occurs, are honored. The files are stored alphabetically by advisor until the advising period begins, then the files are delivered to each faculty member in secured file boxes. As students come for advising, the faculty advisor reviews the student's latest transcript online and checks off the student's accomplishments on either a department major worksheet or on an official degree plan. Students are required to file a degree plan after completing 45 hours of college credit. Both documents become part of the student's active folder. After reviewing the student's progress, the faculty advisor gives a written recommendation to the student. The carbon copy form is signed by both advisor and student and one copy is kept in the student's file and the other copy is given to the student as a reference for registration. Faculty can review previous semester advice and compare it to student's registration afterwards. An electronic advising system is under construction that would eliminate the paper files and make the student file electronically available to anyone with proper authority.

When a student has been advised, he/she takes his/her folder to the front desk where a student worker receives it and administers an advising satisfaction survey. The student's advising holds are forwarded to a date prior to next semester's registration and the student will be able to register for classes. If a student goes on probation or suspension, an advising hold is automatically administered by the Registrar's office and prevents a student from adding or dropping classes. Students must be advised to have the hold electronically removed by the department.

In one of the most recent advising periods, the faculty advising surveys demonstrated very high levels of student satisfaction with both the faculty advisors and the advising process. In the most recent survey, the department average rating was 4.8 on a 5-point scale (with a 5 being the highest rated score) with nearly 400 students completing the survey. Individual faculty ratings ranged from 4.54 to 4.94, which indicated that even the lowest rated faculty advisor is receiving very favorable marks.

DEFINING PROBLEMS

Faculty are often reminded of the value and importance of advising and attend training routinely to stay abreast of changes in curriculum, policy, and procedure. However, faculty indicate a major flaw in the advising process: There is no mechanism to insure that a student takes the classes that they are advised to take. This observation by numerous faculty led to the research question "Does following faculty advice impact student achievement as measured by GPA?"

During a fall semester, data was collected from the folders of students who were advised for classes in next Spring semester to record classes advised to take, classes actually taken, the student's grade point average for the semester of record (not cumulative GPA), probation status, transfer status, and math status. Based on earned hours, the class standing for the sample was 42.3% Freshmen, 35.0% Sophomore, 19% Junior, and 3.7% Senior. Additionally, 30% were transfer students, 18% were on probation, 21.3% did not deviate from the adviser's recommendations, and 27% deviated from the adviser's recommendation by 9 or more credit hours (3 or more classes).

A stepwise regression analysis (Criteria: Probability of F to enter <= 0.05, Probability of F to remove >= 0.10) using SPSS 11.5 yielded a statistically significant model that included the variables: Transfer status, Hours taken less Withdrawals, and Deviation from Advising. Deviation from Advising was calculated by counting the number of credit hours of courses taken during the semester that were not on the student's advising form. The model accounted for 10.9% of the variation in semester GPA and the standardized coefficient for Deviation from Advising was (- 0.146). These finding suggest that following faculty advice is good advice.

A MODEL FOR ADVISING

The advising process is much more than pointing out the course to take in the proper sequence. However, it may be as simple as writing a university policy to implement both intrusive and prescriptive advising, but developmental advising is dependent on the faculty/student relationship and the best that any policy can do is to create a situation where the two will interact. Experience tells us that some faculty will be more likely to engage with students and others will be less likely. Given that budgets rarely allow for professional advising staff, faculty advising has been and is likely to continue as a mainstay for many institutions. In "Academic Advising: Views of the givers and takers," (Lowe & Toney, 2001) it is suggested that there is no one model of academic advisement process. Perhaps it is time to work on developing this model. The following list provides our beginning recommendations toward a model for an effective advising system:

This model is loosely based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in that every advising system must employ certain practices to meet some minimum standard of efficiency and effectiveness, ala Maslow's lower order needs, and to satisfy increasing demands on advising, higher level advising needs must be met. When advising systems utilize specialized programs and foster relationships between advisees and advisers, this model suggests that the advising system is going above and beyond basic expectations, therefore fulfilling higher level advising needs. Once a level is attained, i.e., Basic Advising Systems, it becomes the foundation for the next level, i.e., Advanced Advising Systems. As the student continues following direction from Advanced Advising Systems, then the next level of advising can be attained, Ultimate Advising Systems (See Figure 1 in the Appendix for a visual illustration of this model). The next portion of the paper will be used to describe and explain the three forms of advising systems: basic, advanced and ultimate.

Basic Advising Systems

A bare bones advising system must do the following four things well:
1. Advisor Training**:** Every faculty member should be proficient in the degree requirements for the major in which they teach. It would be preferable if the faculty member could advise for all majors within the department, although if a department has many majors this may not be feasible. To fully understand the requirements for a major, faculty must also be proficient in both university and college requirements. Faculty need an understanding of how each course a student completes relates to success in another course. One faculty member reflected, "When I talk about the relationship between Statistics from the Math Department and Statistics from the Economics Department, it takes a little longer in the advising session. Time is valuable, but initial time spent will mean less time needed in subsequent advising

sessions." Faculty must be able to use computing technology and university information systems for accessing student data in order to prepare for an advising session by looking at the student's grades, previous performance, and standardized test scores.

2. Expert Support: There should always be an expert available for the faculty member to consult when they encounter a problem. Advising a student with a double major or interpreting transfer credit are two advising scenarios that often require expert consultation.

3. Enabling Technology: University computing systems should be user friendly, secure, updated regularly, and integrated with the student's information. The faculty adviser should be able to access necessary data. Online advising should be accommodated and well documented. (Although not discussed in this paper, the movement toward online advising creates significant barriers to building relationships which impedes developmental advising.)

4. Prescriptive Advising: A well-trained faculty adviser should be able to:
   a. Guide a student toward degree completion in an effective and efficient manner.
   b. Understand course rotations and potential non availability of courses, even though they may be in the rotation.
   c. Suggest the student to complete prerequisite courses as soon as possible.
   d. Understand how courses in field of study differ from courses in other fields of study, so that when an elective is needed the adviser has a few ideas of relevant courses to the future career path or other interests.
   e. Be a "Trouble Shooter" when advising students who seem content to continue repeating courses.

Advanced Advising Systems

While a basic advising system will guide a student efficiently through the academic process, an advanced advising system offers insurances that the process is achieving the desired results over time.

5. Student Accountability: An advising system that utilizes permanent relationships between a faculty advisor and a student also creates a built-in accountability system whereby the faculty advisor can follow-up on the students' activities after being advised. A common complaint among faculty is that once advised, students often deviate from the suggested courses. Preliminary evidence indicates that students who deviate from advice are more likely to have lower GPAs. Faculty should encourage the student to follow through on contacting them about internships or other courses that the student finds interesting as they complete their degree. Each student should know the best way to contact their faculty advisor if they have questions outside the normal advising periods.

6. Intrusive Advising: Advising is matching people who know the academic system (advisers) with people who are novices to the system (students). Advising should be mandatory for incoming freshmen and transfer students. Periodic advising is highly recommended for juniors and seniors in good academic standing and should be required by university policy. While advising periods may be promoted prior to registration, faculty should be available for advising outside the normal advising period. Faculty, like all other employees, are more likely to go above and beyond when advising if those actions are rewarded and recognized.

7. Assessment: Student evaluations of the advising process should be conducted periodically to assure that desired outcomes are being achieved. If the relationship is valued, then the students' appraisal of the faculty's concern and civility may be appropriate measures.

8. Recognition & Reward: The faculty member will ultimately determine the quality of the advising process. While rewards strictly for advising prowess may be impossible, there are creative ways to recognize superior faculty performance in this area. A designated faculty award based on student evaluations could be part of the department, college, and university awards program. Student organizations can be encouraged to recognize excellent faculty advisors. Departments may be able to have a lunch or dinner as a reward at the end of an advising period. Performance evaluations could also have a section dedicated to advising activities.

Ultimate Advising Systems

Opportunities to advise students on career choices, life choices, and other non-academic endeavors are dependent on building a trust-based relationship in which the student engages in advice seeking behaviors with a faculty confidant.

9. Trust Relationships: To develop a relationship with an adviser, it helps if the student sees the same adviser throughout his/her college career. Students often fear faculty, so the faculty will often need to take the lead in building this relationship and making themselves appear approachable. Ask about the student's time allocations, i.e., fraternities/sororities, classes, work, study groups, sports, other. Asking what the student likes or aspires to be is a good idea as well. Advising students should be part of Customer Relationship Management or Marketing (CRM) process at the university. In the end it should be remember that advising is a longitudinal process, not a one point event.

10. Developmental Advising: Students often want and need advising for career decisions as well as other facets of life. Reviewing a transcript may help an attentive faculty to determine a student's strengths and weakness. A good adviser establishes a rapport with the student and develops a relationship that encourages and facilitates the developmental advising process. For a struggling student an advisor should ask about their time management skills to let the student understand that s/he may need to attend class and study outside of class if the student plans include loftier career aspirations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Advising starts with basic prescriptive advising. Every student needs to know how to navigate the course requirements to their degree and the advisers are the university agents responsible for delivering this service. Many advising relationships remain at the Basic Advising System level as presented in the model. In these systems the advising meeting takes place only when the student realizes that s/he needs advice.

Mandated advising is a systemic and regular scheduled advising meeting. It is intrusive to the student's schedule and the faculty's schedule, yet it is believed to be a key component to student success. When mandated, prescriptive advising occurs at regular intervals, some accountability may be established if a student returns to the same adviser each time, and fewer students take unnecessary courses or courses out of sequence. These intrusive advising meetings also create situations in which faculty may build trust relationships with students, more so when permanent faculty adviser assignments are utilized.

The ultimate advising system includes the prescriptive and intrusive components but has moved to a point where the faculty adviser is doing more than just "making" that student take

math, s/he is talking about what the student wants in a career, where s/he wants to be after college. Ideally, somewhere after being advised for few times, the adviser and student will recognize each other on campus, the adviser understands the student's progress and potential, and the student will begin to trust the advice given by this faculty member. Their conversations begin to include such things as internships, campus professional organizations, and career interests. The capacity of the faculty adviser and/or the student to pursue the Ultimate level of advising is driven by each participant's willingness to learn more about the career paths and influences on those paths that the student wants to pursue. The better advise that is given to students and, if that advised is followed, leads to less wasted time by the student and a faster path to graduation.

If developmental advising is the ultimate goal of an advising system, then the advising system must be structured to create opportunities for relationships to flourish. Even with these opportunities some students will not seek developmental advice nor will all faculty build relationships in which they may be able to offer developmental advice. In short, developmental advising is a desired state, but the best the college can do is create these opportunities because as the old saying goes: "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink."

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: A Model of Academic Advising