

COULD FIXING ACADEMIC ADVISING FIX HIGHER EDUCATION

Not completely, but as the authors suggest, advising may be a very good place to start. While advising by itself certainly can't change the curriculum and co-curriculum, it can create a vital connection between students and their education—helping them to become more reflective and strategic about the choices they are making and the learning they are engaged in

I WAS THE FIRST REALLY WARM day that spring, and I could hear more than the normal amount of student chatter outside my office window. As I turned to finish plowing through my e-mail messages, a soft knock came at my door. There stood a student I didn't recognize, looking as if he had lost his best friend. He asked if he could

come in to talk. Recounting his troubles, he became more and more despondent. The summer school schedule had been published earlier that week, and the one course he needed if he were to graduate in August was not slated to be taught during the summer session. He realized he would not meet the graduation requirements, delaying his graduation until December

BY MARY STUART HUNTER AND ERIC R. WHITE

His week had been spent fretting over telling his family about his predicament, and calculating the additional cost of earning his degree and his lost earnings due to the delay. He lamented the missed opportunities of his educational experience and said he was barely managing to stay awake during long days following sleepless nights. He was sheepishly coming to see me late this Friday afternoon after boldly and successfully circumventing the advising system since declaring his major as a sophomore.

This student is not alone. Every year thousands manage to dodge advising systems. What is regrettable is not just that they may not graduate on time (an enormous burden) but also that they have missed an opportunity to shape a meaningful learning experience for themselves. Academic advising, well developed and appropriately accessed, is perhaps the only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult who can help them shape such an experience. Fifty combined years of academic advising experience have convinced us that advising can serve as the hub of the undergraduate experience, with linkages to curricular and co-curricular programs on campus. Under the guidance of an academic adviser, students can clarify the purposes of their college attendance, achieve vital personal connections with mentors, plan for the future, determine their role and responsibilities in a democratic society, and come to understand how they can achieve their potential.

Our belief is that effective academic advising is now more important and relevant than ever. After a half-century of unprecedented growth and a massive outpouring of funding, resources from states and the federal government as well as private granting agencies are drying up. The outlook for students is equally worrisome. Some states are pulling scholarships from students who take longer than four years to graduate. The job market is not as good for graduates as in the past, and tuition costs are climbing for students and their families. As the cost of higher education increases, so do the expecta-

tions of students and families. Parents are more intrusive than they once were, and many students expect and demand more from institutions in return for the increased costs. In terms of maximized resources, building a sound academic advising system is an investment in effective goal clarification by students and more efficient progress to program or degree completion. Heightened service expectations are met when students receive the high-quality, sustained attention of an institutional representative who can guide and mentor them.

The challenge is to create an academic advising system that students, faculty, staff, and administrators view as essential, not peripheral, to the educational experience. To create such a system means understanding exemplary practices as a new program is developed or an existing one is improved. The payoffs, as the institutions described here and many others have discovered, can be substantial.

CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY ADVISING PROGRAMS

WHAT FOLLOWS are the characteristics that we believe are essential to an effective academic advising system. Taken together, they offer the greatest opportunity for advising to be seen by staff, administrators, faculty, and most importantly students as central to the academic enterprise.

Mission Statements. The most obvious, though often-neglected, place to start is an institutional academic advising mission statement. A mission statement is a vital foundation for the goals and objectives of an advising program. Without such a statement, advising can be misunderstood as a function of the registration process alone: signing forms, filling out curriculum check sheets, setting registration appointments, and hoping that students follow the appropriate course sequences toward their intended degrees.

Crafting a mission statement requires thoughtful deliberation and input from a variety of constituents. A mission statement should be an organic, evolving doc-

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ument, revisited periodically as students, resources, and perhaps even philosophies of advising change. A well-crafted statement is a clear declaration to the entire academic community that advising is important and valued. As a delineation of the parameters of advising, it fosters mutually satisfying expectations between advisers and advisees and lays the foundation for assessment efforts.

Hamilton College's advising mission statement leaves little doubt what the activity means at this institution:

Academic advising at Hamilton College is one of the many ways in which students engage with faculty on an individual basis. Advisers and advisees work together to craft a unique, individual academic plan based upon each student's strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Hamilton College views the advising relationship as an on-going conversation that transcends mere course selection and attempts to assist students as they explore the breadth of the liberal arts curriculum, experience college life, focus on a major concentration and prepare for life after Hamilton.

Clearly, the expectation at Hamilton is that student contact with advisers will be on an individual basis. Advisers and advisers together work on examining the nature of each student's unique educational experience within the context of individual abilities and interests. The fact that Hamilton College recognizes that advising goes beyond course selection into the realm of an ongoing relationship sets expectations for both the adviser and the advisee. Finally, the significance of a liberal arts education, the role of a major and the co-curriculum, and the acknowledgment that students are being prepared for a life beyond their baccalaureate degree, are clearly stated. Such a well-articulated statement, although not the sole factor necessary for good advising, offers the appropriate starting place.

Standards and Values. The work of achieving and maintaining quality in academic advising need not be approached in an ad hoc fashion; nor does the quality wheel need to be reinvented. Many professions, both well-established and emerging ones, have a set of standards and guidelines by which to operate. Academic advisers can turn to the Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising as promulgated by the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and endorsed by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), available at http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Research_Related/CAS.htm. These standards and guidelines, first published in 1986 and subsequently revised, can serve as the basis for establishing institutional advising programs and for ongoing program assessment.

These CAS standards call for implementation of principles for ethical practice. NACADA, through its Statement of Core Values (see http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Research_Related/corevalues.htm), provides such a guide for ethical practice. Academic advisers frequently confront ethical situations and are faced with tension between advocating for students and adhering to the policies and regulations of the institution. Adherence to the NACADA values enables advisers to make decisions on the basis of established codes of conduct and can increase the likelihood of all students receiving equal treatment.

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Advising Structures. The general character of an institution should guide the structure of academic advising. An institution with a large population of students identified as exploratory or academically undecided should employ advisers who are comfortable with the needs of exploratory students, who believe academic exploration is a positive attribute, and who do not allow students to declare majors or make academic decisions in haste. Conversely, at colleges where students are admitted with the understanding that they know what they want to study and have little room to explore alternatives, the advising program should make available to matriculating students advisers possessing specific disciplinary expertise. At institutions where academically underprepared students are admitted, the advising system should allow time for remediation and give students the opportunity to change academic direction as easily as possible.

Leadership. An advising program viewed as essential has a leader with authority over the resources and personnel necessary to achieve the mission of the advising program. Too often, an institution appoints a director of academic advising to oversee faculty advising systems and yet gives the director no input into promotion and tenure decisions. Motivating faculty advisers is difficult, if not impossible, in a setting where advising is not rewarded, where faculty bristle at the notion of having their work assessed, and where the authority to mandate attendance at advising workshops does not exist. Directors without formal authority are often put in the difficult position of advocating for the very best advising but having to persuade on the basis of their own charisma.

At a large, decentralized institution, there may be no single person in charge of all advising. In such a case, advising is frequently delivered unit by unit, in academic departments or in combination with specialized centers for student subpopulations (for instance, exploratory students or student athletes). Bringing together advising leaders in a decentralized culture from across campus to coordinate advising efforts may prove to be a workable solution.

Staffing. Faculty are generally hired with the assumption that they will teach in the classroom, engage in research, publish in their field, and secure grants to support their work. The rare hiring process gives specific weight to individuals who demonstrate the characteristics of good advisers: patience and a willingness to listen to students in a one-on-one setting. Indeed, some faculty members may not even realize when they accept a teaching position that they will be expected to advise students. Under these far-from-ideal circumstances, giving junior faculty members advising responsibilities immediately may not be in their best interest if tenure and promotion decisions are based on research productivity. At a later point in a faculty member's professional life, advising responsibilities may be more welcome. Indeed, some institutions have found that faculty near the end of their career make exceptional advisers who mentor students and receive satisfaction by sharing their accumulated wisdom. Working around current systems may be the best option when advising is not privileged at levels equal to other faculty duties.

A second, viable option is to employ professional advisers. For professional staff advisers, advising is their primary, and in some cases their only, responsibility. Many campuses have created specialized positions for advisers working with student subpopulations such as premed and prelaw students, first-year students, at-risk students, and high-ability or honors students. At some campuses, the physical setting for advising is designed for a specific population—as is the case at Miami University of Ohio, where first-year students are advised by a professional academic adviser who is also the director of their residence hall.

Technology. Networked advising technologies have freed advisers from routine, bureaucratic tasks such as completing curriculum check sheets. They allow advisers to engage in the teaching and mentoring that is at the core of academic advising. Electronic degree audit systems eliminate the need for advisers to complete routine forms, and institutional databases afford advisers access to aggregate student characteristics and demo-

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graphics. With this information, interactive advising modules tailored to student characteristics can be created to allow students to complete advising-related tasks under the guidance of a program written by advisers. Students are now able, by way of interactive computer advising systems, to drop courses by communicating with a virtual adviser. In the computer-assisted advising environment, students with particular issues (veterans, athletes, financial aid recipients, students heading toward a particular major) can also be identified and information particular to their situation can be built into the system. The ever-expanding menu of networked advising technologies includes interactive systems such as Pennsylvania State University's "eLion," which permits student access to common information and allows them to obtain answers to typical questions. The face-to-face adviser-advisee relationship is freed for mentoring and long-term educational planning.

Advising Councils. A recent, and especially positive, trend in academic advising is the establishment of advising councils to provide structured oversight. Such councils are typically campuswide in scope and often include students in their membership. They serve as a venue for recommendations for change in policies and procedures, and in some cases they have the authority to conduct evaluations on service delivery. Institutions with successful advising programs also have advisers serving on myriad campuswide committees where they advocate for advising in curriculum and policy decisions.

Program Evaluation. Evaluation makes program improvement, commitment to continuous quality gains, and thorough examination of what is and isn't working possible. Quantitative measures can be employed to document the efficiency and productivity of advising. Surveys of student satisfaction with advising and measures of the advising load and log of appointments can gauge productivity. A benchmarking study can yield valuable information on program effectiveness as it measures against models elsewhere. Advising systems central to an institution are regularly developing better measurement instruments and evaluation strategies.

Wheaton College in Massachusetts has instituted a comprehensive assessment program taking into account,

among other variables, the outcomes expected from quality advising. In work that is highly interactive and relationship-dependent, qualitative measures are essential. Focus groups with various constituents, individual interviews, and telephone surveys can produce rich information not attainable by other means. Student reflections are particularly powerful for conveying the impact of advising.

As the academy shifts its emphasis to learning outcomes, advising must be part of the equation. It is important to know what students are learning through the advising process and how what they are learning affects their educational experience. Understanding the consequences of advising on student learning can enhance the central role of this activity in the academy.

Assessment of Adviser Effectiveness. Among the many approaches to assessment of individual adviser performance are directly observing adviser-advisee interactions, reviewing written statements of advising philosophy, counting the number of students seen and total number of advising interviews conducted, and reviewing advisee satisfaction. Whatever the methods, assessments should arise directly from the goals of the program. For faculty advisers, assessment often resembles the assessments of teaching effectiveness and should be folded into the prevailing reward system. Specific assessment instruments should be tailored to the unique activities of professional advisers. A comprehensive assessment effort calls for self-reflection on the part of both adviser and advisee.

Rewards and Recognition. Assessing adviser effectiveness and evaluating programs should lead to recognition and rewards, yet this is one of the most vexing components of any advising program. For faculty who serve as academic advisers, pressing issues include accounting for the time spent advising, assessing the quality of their advising, and being rewarded for advising. To situate advising among important faculty duties, some institutions have begun to define it as a teaching activity and to recognize it in faculty tenure and promotion decisions. Difficulties also exist for reward and recognition of the staff adviser. Although in the professional advising field this activity is considered teaching, most professional advisers are classified as staff and are

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not in the tenure-and-promotion system. An argument can be made for moving professional staff advisers into this system, as with librarians on many campuses. This structure for staff advisers currently exists at the University of Hawaii, where staff advisers are expected to conduct research, publish, and seek grants, in addition to fulfilling their advising duties. A shift of this kind necessitates a change in the educational and professional qualifications of applicants for academic advising positions.

For both faculty and staff advisers, rewards and recognition often come in the form of an annual adviser award, support for professional travel, and other professional development activities. One might argue that on some campuses even a better parking space might serve as a sufficient reward for an outstanding adviser.

Adviser Development. Thorough initial training and preparation and a continuing education component are fundamental to producing effective advisers. Topics in an effective program include current student development theory, campus-specific student demographics, institutional policies and procedures, legal and ethical dimensions of advising, effective and appropriate referral strategies, and an understanding of student expectations of the advising relationship. Periodic in-service training opportunities contribute to continuous development of advisers and to maintenance of a high-

quality advising program. Professional development activities for advisers are also desirable. Making periodicals, journals, and newsletters related to academic advising available and supporting conference attendance for advisers can contribute to their continued professional development. The Master Adviser Program at Southwest Missouri State University is an award-winning effort to systematically provide faculty and staff advisers with high-quality training, evaluation, and recognition.

IN THE EARLIEST American colleges and universities, students studied under the tutelage of a teacher, mentor, and adviser. The mentor-protégé relationship was central to the educational process, and advising and teaching were inseparable. Over the centuries, as higher education expanded, institutions became more complex and the single-tutor model was replaced by a network of specialized instructional and support structures. Through these changes, the academic adviser has continued to serve in the role of mentor and guide. Thankfully, many institutions consider academic advising central to education; they embody the critical elements we have described here. Advising—the stalwart soldier of American higher education—is a powerful strategy for managing in an era of shrinking resources and rising expectations that has actually been available, in various guises, for centuries.

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