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Academic advising : description and analysis of types and delivery systems

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Academic advising : description and analysis of types and delivery systems

Abstract

Research indicates that academic advising can provide valuable interaction among students, faculty, and student affairs professionals. Academic advisors are among the first people seen by students on college campuses. The relationship between an academic advisor and a student can provide a first step in what the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) (1998) recommend: "Good practice in student affairs forges educational partnerships that advance student learning" (p. 3).

ACADEMIC ADVISING:
DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF TYPES
AND
DELIVERY SYSTEMS

A Research Paper

Presented to

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by

Janet A. Wood

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Research indicates that academic advising can provide valuable interaction among students, faculty, and student affairs professionals. Academic advisors are among the first people seen by students on college campuses. The relationship between an academic advisor and a student can provide a first step in what the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) (1998) recommend: "Good practice in student affairs forges educational partnerships that advance student learning" (p. 3).

Students are confronted with many choices and alternative paths in their educations (Milville & Sedlacek, 1995). Gordon (1992) states, "Most students are concerned about adjusting to a new environment, making friends, and doing well academically" (p. 54). The dissemination and interpretation of information between a sensitive and supportive advisor can be an element in a relationship which contributes to the student's success in college life. According to Groth, "Underlying the advising function are information and counseling roles" (1990, p. 295).

The two principal types of advising are developmental and prescriptive. Koerin (1991) describes developmental advising as "a developmental process which assists students in the clarification of their goals and in the development of education for realization of these goals. This is an ongoing process of clarification, evaluation, re-clarification, and reevaluation" (p. 324). Academic advising can also be prescriptive, where the function is "advising students on a multitude of tasks including: providing information about the university and the community, informing students about program requirements, and monitoring student progress" (Groth, p. 293).

The first purpose of this paper is to compare developmental and prescriptive advising and to analyze the contexts in which each may be employed successfully in meeting students' needs. Faculty advising and professional advising are the two principal delivery systems of academic advising. The second purpose of the paper will be to compare the contexts in which each is appropriate and effective. Finally, conclusions and recommendations will be made on how colleges and universities may better provide academic advising services.

Developmental advising suggests a relationship between advisor and the advisee. It is a relationship that develops over time and is respectful of the student's cognitive development and other variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and life circumstances. The advisor and advisee mutually engage in a process of shared learning involving identifying goals, choosing options, and clarifying over a period time. McCollum (1998) states, "The overall challenge to the advisor is to meet the advisee's developmental needs whether they are emotional, academic, or career oriented" (p. 15).

Developmental advising can be a complex process because the advisor must work with the student in a variety of ways. "These include fostering self-discovery and strong problem-solving skills transferable to all aspects of the student's experiences" (Burton & Wellington, 1984, p. 14). Because developmental advising is an out-of-classroom experience, advisors can extend the relationship to include encouraging the student to explore other factors leading to student success.

Developmental advisors can get to know the student personally and display an interest in the student's total college experience. The advisor might address the following topics: time management, study skills, planning techniques, shared advising

responsibilities, and problem solving. Mutually agreeing on roles each will assume is the basis for this relationship. Frost (1993) describes how advisors might encourage students in their development in and out of the classroom:

Advisors display interest in students when they inquire about past performance, academic success, career plans, and outside interests....advisors do not make decisions for students, preferring instead to engage students in the decision-making process and to encourage them to take responsibility for their educational futures. (p. 19)

In this way advisors are encouraging students in their academic and personal growth while they are in the educational setting. For instance, when a student is undecided about choosing an academic major, the advisor could encourage that student to talk to faculty in different fields of study, visit and observe professionals in the work setting, or do volunteer or community service in an area of interest. A shared responsibility between the advisor and student enables the student to make decisions based on personal perceptions. The student takes responsibility for any decisions made even if the outcome is successful or unsuccessful. The advisor remains supportive of the student by suggesting alternatives or by using information the student gained to clarify and reevaluate. A feature of this model suggests an ongoing relationship where advisee and advisor may return to earlier tasks if decisions and actions taken in accomplishing a later task are not supported by the student's actual experiences.

Prescriptive advising suggests an authoritarian relationship between advisor and student. Crookston (1994) describes the relationship using a doctor/patient analogy where the doctor prescribes and the patient complies. In the prescriptive relationship, the

student goes to the advisor with a problem and receives advice. The student-advisor relationship differs from developmental advising markedly in the *responsibility* each assumes. Crookston further explains:

While the advisor believes that carrying out the advice is clearly the student's responsibility, the student views himself as going to an authority figure with a problem and getting the answer. The decision (prescription) is the advisors, so if the advice turns out badly, the student doesn't feel responsible, the blame can be placed on the advisor. (p. 6)

When that occurs, the relationship can become strained because it may not be clear who is responsible for actions.

This is not to say that developmental advising is always preferred over prescriptive. Research in academic advising indicates that the individualized approach is strongly supported when advisors work with students. The personality of the student can influence the type of relationship that is most useful and appropriate for that student. Crocket and Crawford (1989) concluded, "More 'intuitive' students had a stronger interest in the 'wide scope' of activities in the advising process; they were more interested in future potentialities and less interested in mundane details of educational program requirements" (p. 159). Fielstein (1994) further notes, "These intuitive students appeared to endorse the developmental approach to advising. On the other hand, the more 'thinking' students did not value a collaborative relationship and seemed more content with the criteria associated with prescriptive advising" (p. 77). Fielstein adds that an individualized approach should aid advisors in realizing differences also exist between groups and subgroups.

Providing information and support are important roles in advising, but it is inaccurate to assume that all students want a personal relationship with an advisor. As Fielstein (1994) explains:

Perhaps in our enthusiasm for developmental advising, we overlooked the obvious, the value of certain traditional prescriptive activities as prerequisites to developmental advising. It could be that some of the so-called prescriptive activities have been given a bum rap and are actually critical building blocks that enable developmental advising to evolve. I surmise that without accurate and timely information about course requirements and changes, a student might lose faith in an advisor's ability to advise. (p. 77)

There may be many situations where the advisor role must be prescriptive. For instance, Gordon (1992) suggests the advising role includes providing relevant and current information about curriculum, course selection, academic major, and degree requirements. Providing rationale for these curricular requirements is also crucial. Students sometimes question course requirements that don't clearly relate to their fields of study. In addition, students may be faced with understanding bureaucratic rules for the first time. "Advisors may also have to interpret a faculty rule for students so they may negotiate successfully the policies set forth by the institution. Knowledge of institutional procedures is an important tool since it can often be used to help a student resolve a particular problem" (Gordon, 1992, p. 28).

Advisors have complex challenges whether practicing developmental or prescriptive advising. They must have a broad knowledge of services, on campus and in the community, in order to make appropriate referrals. Even though advisors may be

strongly grounded in student development theory, they may find themselves underprepared for the counseling role in which they sometimes find themselves. A suicidal student, or substance abuser, could be referred to the counseling center or a mental health agency. Gordon states, “No student problem should be taken lightly. An adviser is in a position to help a student secure immediately the type of help that the problem warrants” (p. 28).

Faculty advising is a decentralized approach to advising. Until the advent of the advising center, academic advising was provided mostly by faculty. Faculty have a long-standing history as academic advisors. The first formal faculty advising system was developed at Johns Hopkins University in 1877; Harvard appointed freshman advisers in 1899 (Rudolph, 1962). This was the first acknowledgement that freshman needed assistance in the selection of courses for increasingly complex academic programs (Gordon, 1992).

Within a decentralized system, students travel around campus to meet with their advisors. This model purports to be non-intrusive, i.e., the student seeks out the advisor when there is a question. As students continue to seek answers to their questions, a relationship develops. Chickering and Gamson (1987) state, “Good practice in undergraduate education encourages contacts between students and faculty” (p. 255). The importance of this relationship is also espoused by Hardee (cited in Gordon, 1992) where faculty advising is described as “an activity with many dimensions and views the faculty as the coordinator of the student’s learning experiences. As coordinators, faculty can assist students with long-range occupational and professional goals within the context of their program choice” (p. 98). Faculty can also have a

positive effect on the intellectual growth of students because of the similarities between advising and teaching.

The second most prevalent delivery system for advising is the centralized advising office. Its staff is generally non-faculty made up of advisors with varying academic backgrounds. Some hold degrees in academic fields while others have some specialized training in student personnel services. Gordon (1984) suggests several benefits that may be derived from the centralized office, “A centralized advising service is physically and administratively organized to serve all students at one location on campus. All students are served in a consistent manner, and duplication of services is eliminated” (p. 34).

Professional advisors may be most helpful to undecided students. These are students who have not yet made decisions on their choice of majors and, therefore, choice of careers. Gordon (1992) states, “Advisors who specialize in working with undecided students find that being a generalist in the academic offering of their institutions is required if students are to be exposed to all the alternatives open to them” (p. 82). She views these students as, perhaps, needing more time to mature and understand the self. Although Gordon portrays these students positively, not all theorists have done so.

Research has indicated that these students may be unable to make commitments or suffer from a lack of motivation. Gordon states, “The research on indecision may be classified as studies on antecedents of indecision, characteristics that make undecided students different from decided ones, and treatments that have been initiated to facilitate becoming ‘decided’” (Gordon 1992, p. 3).

Inability to make timely commitments, lack of motivation, and personality problems are just a few of the negative implications that undecided students have been assigned. For instance, Osipow (cited in Gordon 1984) suggests “four reasons for ‘misdirected’ career development: (1) vocational choices that are inconsistent with the individual’s self-information; (2) students not keeping pace developmentally with their peers; (3) emotional instability; and, (4) frozen behavior between two desirable choices” (p. 3).

Gordon (1984) points out that the issue exists because of the definition and understanding of the word *indecision*. Gordon refers to indecision as a natural outcome of the time students need to develop intellectually and emotionally during the college years. Explaining further, she states:

A developmental approach recognizes life stages and tasks and behaviors accomplished at each of these states. A lifelong career decision-making approach recognizes that an individual’s personality in tandem with the environmental pressures he or she faces at a given time influences not only the choice itself but also the mechanics of the decision. (p. 17)

Gordon considers a developmental perspective to be the most reliable approach when working with undecided students.

Most professional advisors who staff the centralized advising office are trained in student development theory and, therefore, are much more likely to practice developmental advising than faculty. Due to diversity of college students, advisors must now be prepared to assist non-traditional, returning students, and students with disabilities as well as undecided students. An advisor with a master’s degree in Student

Personnel Services is likely to be considered qualified to advise a heterogeneous population of students. Study skills are often offered in centralized advising centers for students needing assistance with such issues as time management and reading improvement.

Some additional advantages of centralized advising for students are listed by Crocket (1982): “easy accessibility, continuity of contact, accuracy of information, and focus on the student rather than department” (Gordon, 1992, p. 34). In addition, special needs students such as the undecided or non-traditional may receive services developed especially for them. Centralized advising may also serve freshmen by providing orientation and/or peer advisor training (Gordon, 1992).

However comprehensive centralized advising appears, unintended consequences regarding what is for best for students may emerge. Centralized advising may be most appropriate for freshmen and sophomores who are undecided about their majors. Students who have made their choice of major should probably be linked with faculty to develop an ongoing relationship. Other problems relate to the cost to the institution in maintaining such a center through staffing, office expenditures, and space requirements. Centralized advising must also guard against becoming too isolated in centers on large campuses. Gordon (1984) recommends the center make continuous efforts to include faculty in decision-making, training, and institutional changes that impact faculty and students.

The academic advising relationship can be viewed as a mechanism for providing schedule planning, course registration, and maneuvering through the bureaucracy inherent in higher education. It can also be viewed as a means for encouraging students

to build relationships that may greatly enhance their chances for success as they move through college and plan their futures. It is not so much who provides these services but that an individualized approach is taken by the advisor, be it faculty or professional staff.

Academic advising is clearly linked to several institutional concerns that seem fairly universal. These include things such as institutional reputation, student recruitment, and retention. "Institutional image and reputation influence recruitment in the competitive academic market. Student retention is considered important to maintain current funding levels and expansion in the future" (Koerin, 1991, p. 326). These are issues that affect universities and colleges during students' academic careers and long after they graduate. Poor quality advising may tarnish the institution's reputation and make recruiting efforts difficult.

In order to improve academic advising, institutions must make a sustained effort to gather and evaluate data pertaining to services being provided. The evaluation phase includes the administration's definition of what advising is and its potential for the future. It opens a dialogue between faculty, students, advisors, and administrators that includes review of institution's policies and publications. It makes recommendations for changes based on the findings that may include budgetary requests (e.g., investment in advisor training programs or a computerized degree audit package). Additionally, recommendations concerning faculty and professional advisor workload may be addressed (Koerin, 1991).

In an effort to improve advising services Koerin (1991) makes recommendations in the collection and evaluation of data that serve two purposes:

The obvious being the collection of necessary data to determine the extent to

which advising is or is not meeting the needs of students and the institution. The second, but no less important, is that administering an evaluation serves as a public announcement to the campus community that advising is a function deemed important enough to assess and to enhance in whatever ways are indicated by analysis of the collected data. (p. 326)

In an endeavor to make ongoing improvements at colleges and universities, we might think anew about the words of Chickering and Gamson (1987), “As faculty members, academic administrators, and student personnel staff, we have spent most of our working lives trying to understand our students, our colleagues, our institutions, and ourselves.”

Not only must we try to understand, we must also consider the responsibility we have to students, in particular, our responsibility in the production of meaningful student learning. In what Barr and Tagg (1995) refer to as a new paradigm in undergraduate education, colleges can no longer be content with providing teaching. Rather, we are responsible for the degree to which students learn (p. 15).

As in the case of assigned responsibility in developmental advising where the advisee and advisor share in the continuous shaping of outcomes, this new shift makes explicit a shared responsibility between student and institution. The institution and student are partners in producing the desired outcome of learning. Barr and Tagg (1995) refer to this responsibility as “win-win.” The student is able to think critically and solve problems, while the institution continuously challenges itself to produce better learners and even higher learning standards. We must continue to try to understand and to provide meaningful student learning that changes student lives for the better.

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