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Chapter Three



Current Practices in Academic Advising

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Academic advising has been a fixture on the higher education scene since colleges were first established in colonial America. Advising in those colleges was a function fulfilled by faculty who assumed responsibility for the intellectual, ethical, and moral development of students in a mentoring capacity. Although this mentoring role remained essentially intact for nearly two centuries, several significant events and movements have gradually reshaped the nature and purpose of American higher education. Among these have been the enactment of the Morrill Act, which established land grant colleges; the broadening of the curriculum; the appointment of individuals from among the faculty to serve as chief advisors; the rapid influx of students following World War II; and the burgeoning growth of community colleges (Habley, 1995). These changes have in turn led not only to an evolving definition of the nature and purpose of a college education, but also to an examination of the role and function of academic advising on the college campus.

Although several alternative and successful approaches to academic advising existed prior to 1970, three critical events took place during the 1970s that increased the focus on the role and function of academic advising. First, the publication of two articles created the framework for an expanded definition of academic advising. Crookston (1972) and O'Banion (1972) suggested that advising was far too critical to be defined as a perfunctory, clerical function that involved only the prescriptive selection and scheduling of courses. In addition, significant declines in the enormous increase in the number of college students that had been fed by the baby boomer generation loomed on the horizon. This decline began in the late 1970s, and colleges faced with the prospect of a dwindling number of matriculating students were forced to look seriously at ways in which they could better serve, satisfy, and retain the students who enrolled.

Finally, by the second half of the decade, what had been a loosely coupled network of individuals with an interest in academic advising became a national organization known as the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). Following two national meetings on academic advising, NACADA was chartered in the spring of 1979 and the first NACADA national conference was convened in Omaha in the fall of 1979.

Although ACT (formerly known as American College Testing) had delivered a series of advising workshops and was informally involved with academic advising as early as 1970, growing interest in the field of advising led to ACT's first national survey of campus practices in academic advising (Carstensen and Silberhorn, 1979). Since that time, ACT has conducted additional surveys (Crockett and Levitz, 1983; Habley, 1988; Habley, 1993; and Habley and Morales, 1998). This chapter provides an overview of these five ACT surveys by reviewing change (or the lack thereof) in campus practices over the span of nearly two decades.

Clearly the surveys have undergone modifications over time. Many items have been deleted, new items have been added, and new concepts have been explored. Regardless of these modifications, there are two major reasons that it is possible to comment on changes in academic advising during the last two decades. First, all of the surveys studied a set of core topics including coordination, policy, training, evaluation, recognition, and reward. Second, all of the surveys are consistent in methodology in terms of sample size, sampling techniques, and survey administration and follow up. In the case of the most recent survey, a stratified random sample of two-year, four-year, public, and private institutions was drawn from a population of 2,710 accredited institutions offering an associate's or bachelor's degree. Based on the response rates from the previous four surveys, as well as the fact that national response rates have generally diminished over time, the largest sample ever drawn for the advising survey (1,395 colleges) constituted the group to which the fifth national survey was mailed. Responses were received from 754 colleges, a 54.1 percent response rate. The return rate and the distribution of the actual set of responding institutions very closely corresponded with that of the sampling frame. As a result the findings of the survey could be generalized to the national population of colleges.

This chapter provides an overview of national trends for all institutional types, although because of the length restrictions of the chapter, these trends are discussed without including a myriad of descriptive tables from the surveys. Readers interested in a breakdown of tabular data by public and private and two-year and four-year institutions are encouraged to refer to the final reports of each of these five surveys. Following are some observations on the surveys.

Campus Advising Policy

One of the essential elements of a quality academic advising program is the articulation of the program's basic purpose, function, and components in a campus advising policy.

When campuses were queried on this topic in the 1979 survey, only about one-quarter of the institutions indicated that they had a published statement on advising (Carstensen and Silberhorn, 1979). By 1983, this figure had increased to 63 percent (Crockett and Levitz, 1983). Since then, however, there have been no appreciable changes in this percentage, with the most recent survey indicating that 61 percent of campuses had a published statement of advising policy (Habley and Morales, 1998).

Beginning with the 1983 survey, the contents of the advising policy statements were also studied. Across the last four surveys, several topics were included in the majority of campus policy statements: philosophy of advising, goals for advising, responsibilities of advisors, responsibilities of advisees, and delivery strategies. There are also several topics that were not generally included (defined as less than 30 percent of institutions reporting) in advising policies: selection of advisors, training of advisors, evaluation of advising, and recognition and reward for advisors.

Coordination of Advising Services

A second critical element in the development of a quality academic advising program is the need for coordination of effort among many service delivery units. Although the collection of survey data has not been consistent across the five surveys, three trends stand out. First, the assignment of coordination of services to a director or coordinator of academic advising has nearly doubled since the first survey. Currently, 31 percent of college campuses report having a director or coordinator of advising. In addition, the coordination of advising services remains (with the exception of two-year colleges) primarily an academic affairs function. In the 1997 survey, 69 percent of the campuses reported that a vice president or assistant vice president for academic affairs either served as or had administrative responsibility for the coordinator of advising (Habley and Morales, 1998). Finally, it is clear that the coordination of advising is not the main task of the individual to whom it is assigned. Although the percentage of time devoted to the coordination of advising has gradually increased across all of the surveys, the 1997 survey indicated that on 71 percent of college campuses, the individual responsible for the coordination of advising devoted 50 percent or less of his or her time to that function.

Organization of Advising Services

The first two ACT surveys focused in only a limited fashion on the ways in which campuses organized for the delivery of academic advising. In 1987, however, the survey collected information on the prevalence of seven organizational models first proposed by Habley (1993). Although these models are described in detail in Chapter Thirteen of this book, it is important to note that there have been some obvious shifts in the utilization of the models since data were first

collected in 1987. Most noteworthy among these shifts is that the tendency to rely solely on faculty to deliver advising has declined to fewer than half of the campuses included in the 1997 survey. Data from the most recent survey also indicate that campuses are more likely to provide specialized advising services for a variety of student subpopulations, such as exploratory, at-risk, or nontraditional students. Finally, it is becoming apparent that more campuses are viewing academic advising as a system of shared responsibility involving faculty, academic administrators, and advising offices or centers, as well as a variety of related support services.

Advising Offices and Centers

Of all the trends that characterized advising practices between 1979 and 1997, increases in the development of advising offices are most obvious. In 1979, 205 of the 820 institutions surveyed (25 percent) indicated that an advising office was in place on their campus. By 1997, that percentage had nearly tripled to 73 percent.

Further understanding of the scope of advising center practices and responsibilities was facilitated through a major change in survey design in 1987. In that survey, and in those that followed, practices in advising offices were separated from practices in faculty advising. Section 2 of the survey focused on practices in faculty advising delivered in academic subunits while section 3 studied practices in advising centers and offices.

As a result of this change in survey design, and as a result of the data derived from the surveys, Habley (1993, 1998) has suggested that advising centers are in a state of crisis created by increasing expectations and responsibilities without allocating necessary human and fiscal resources. In comparison to previous surveys, the 1997 survey indicated that advising offices and centers

- Were less likely to provide staff training
- Were less likely to provide group interventions
- Had fewer student contacts per term than faculty advisors
- Had inordinately high student-advisor ratios
- Were much less intrusive
- Did not always evaluate staff
- Provided fewer information sources to advisors.

Additional evidence of this crisis is that the 1997 survey shows that advising centers are far less likely to intervene when students make important educational decisions. Of the six occasions when students were required to contact the advising center, all six showed a steady decline between the 1987 and the 1997 surveys. Additional declines were noted in the number of support materials (handbooks, articulation worksheets, campus referral directories, and so on)

and student information sources (high school transcripts, assessment results, grade reports, and so on) provided to advising center staff.

As a result of these findings, Habley concluded, "If steps are not taken to deal with these critical issues, it is virtually certain that the advantages once attributed to advising centers will all but disappear" (Habley and Morales, 1998, p. 64).

Faculty Advising

Data that provide a better understanding of faculty advising are taken from two sources. The first source includes an overview of practices that support faculty advising and is taken from the five ACT surveys of national practices that provide the foundation for this chapter. The second data source includes information on student opinions about faculty advising and is taken from a 1999 normative report on ACT's (1999) Survey of Academic Advising. This survey collected information from students on their satisfaction with academic advising.

Practices in Faculty Advising

With the development of separate sections on faculty advising and advising centers that have characterized the ACT national surveys since 1987, it became possible to identify trends and articulate critical issues confronting faculty advising.

Among these trends, as Habley and Morales (1998) have observed, virtually all faculty are expected to advise as a result of their faculty status. In addition, typical faculty advisors have four advising contacts per term, have a typical load of twenty-six advisees, and spend approximately 11 percent of their time advising students. Finally, on a positive note, 1997 survey data indicated that faculty advisors are more likely than they had been in previous surveys to intervene on occasions when students make important educational decisions.

Observing some of the critical issues in faculty advising, Habley and Morales (1998) report that across the last three surveys there have been only incremental and situational gains in the practices that support faculty advising. They further suggest that many important aspects of support for quality faculty advising are nonexistent on some campuses and unsystematic on many others. In support of these contentions, Habley and Morales offer the following evidence:

- Only about one-third of campuses provide training for faculty advisors while less than one-quarter of the campuses require faculty training in advising.
- The vast majority of training programs focus solely on the communication of factual information, with little time devoted to concepts and relationship skills.
- Less than one-third of campuses include advising in the evaluation of faculty performance.
- Less than one-third of campuses include academic advising in the reward structure for faculty members.

- The most common form of advisor recognition is minor consideration in promotion and tenure; yet that form of recognition is utilized in all departments at only 8 percent of the campuses surveyed.

It is clear from these data that many of the essential practices (training, evaluation, and recognition and reward) that support faculty advising are far from exemplary.

Student Opinions of Faculty Advising

Although the national surveys on advising provide quantitative data on practices in faculty advising, ACT's (1999) Survey of Academic Advising, a student evaluation of advising, provides qualitative insights into faculty advising. In a ten-year period ending December 31, 1998, more than 100,000 students at 250 colleges from thirty-eight states completed this survey of opinions and attitudes. The survey collected data on both students' needs and their impressions of their faculty advisors. In reporting on these data, Habley (2000) concluded that although there were areas of concern, faculty advisors were satisfactorily meeting students' needs, and students in general had favorable impressions of the traits and characteristics of their faculty advisors.

Goals for Academic Advising

Four national surveys of advising practices have collected data on the achievement of eight goals for academic advising. The goals were developed by a NACADA task force that was charged with providing input to the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in 1980. These goals formed the basis for the development of the CAS Standards for Academic Advising and the CAS Self-Assessment Guide for Academic Advising:

1. Assisting students in self-understanding and self-acceptance (values clarification; understanding abilities, interests, and limitations)
2. Assisting students in considering their life goals by relating their interests, skills, abilities, and values to careers, the world of work, and the nature and purpose of higher education
3. Assisting students in developing an educational plan consistent with their life goals and objectives
4. Assisting students in developing decision-making skills
5. Providing accurate information about institutional policies, procedures, resources, and programs
6. Referring students to other institutional or community support services
7. Assisting students in evaluating or reevaluating progress toward established goals and educational plans

8. Providing information about students to the institution, college, academic departments, or some combination thereof.

Respondents were asked to use a five-point scale (5 = very satisfactory, 1 = very unsatisfactory) to rate their level of satisfaction with the achievement of each goal. In 1983, the mean responses ranged from 2.55 (decision-making skills) to 4.01 (providing accurate information), and the overall mean for all goals was 3.19. In addition to the goal on decision-making skills (goal 4), the goals of consideration of life goals (goal 2) and self-understanding (goal 1) fell at or below the midpoint of the five-point scale. Overall goal achievement means improved only slightly on the 1987 and 1992 surveys to 3.22 and 3.31, respectively, while the lowest ratings remained the same as they were in the 1983 survey. The 1997 survey suggested that strides have been made as the overall mean reached 3.64. In spite of the gains in goal achievement, it is important to note that the only goal for which an overall rating of satisfactory (4.0) was obtained was goal 5, providing accurate information. The means for the remaining goals all fell between neutral (3.0) and satisfactory (4.0), with the most developmental goals (1, 2, and 4) recording the lowest mean ratings.

Program Effectiveness

Effectiveness criteria were introduced in the 1987 survey. Although minor revisions were made in some of the effectiveness variables, it is possible to make comparisons across the surveys. The effectiveness variables that respondents rated on a scale from 1 (very ineffective) to 5 (very effective) are as follows:

1. Providing for the overall academic advising needs of your students
2. Identifying and selecting high-quality advisors
3. Implementing training programs for advisors
4. Providing advisors with timely and accurate information about their advisees
5. Providing appropriate levels of coordination, direction, and supervision
6. Systematically evaluating the advising program
7. Systematically evaluating the effectiveness of academic advisors
8. Rewarding good advising performance
9. Providing communication among advisor, deans, department heads, and the coordinator of advising, if such a position exists
10. Meeting students' advising needs within the limits of human and fiscal resources
11. Providing advisor accountability, both to a higher level of authority and to advisees

Among the more revealing findings of the study of effectiveness variables is that there has been little change in the overall mean from 1987 to 1997 (from 2.9 to 3.1). Equally compelling, however, is that the ratings of four variables—accountability, training, evaluation, and recognition and reward—fell below the midpoint of the effectiveness scale on the 1987 survey and remained below the midpoint in the 1997 survey. These areas are fundamental components of quality, yet they continue to be stumbling blocks in the development of quality academic advising programs.

Conclusion

In many respects, summarizing the results of five ACT surveys on academic advising provides the reader with a twenty-year retrospective on the field of advising. As this chapter has noted, there has been tremendous growth in the field of advising. Stimulated by a dramatic decline in the number of traditional-age students, the development of theoretical frameworks, and the establishment of a national organization, the field of academic advising has moved from a peripheral support function into a position of increasing prominence in higher education. There have been increases in the percentage of campuses with advising centers, in the appointment of individuals to coordinate advising on campus, and in the establishment of advising policy statements, as well as in the membership of and services provided by the NACADA.

There have also been increases in diversity in the organization, focus, and delivery of advising services on college and university campuses, not only in the diversity of institutional missions in American higher education but also in the diversity of students being served by that system. This diversity is a healthy sign that campus advising programs are also characterized by diversity. New organizational patterns have emerged, personnel engaged in advising or advising-related functions are more variable, and indeed, definitions of advising are more likely to be tailored to reflect diversity.

Finally, and perhaps most telling, it is abundantly clear that the cornerstones in the delivery of quality services are developing the skill levels of individuals who deliver the services (training), measuring the effectiveness of services (evaluation), and providing recognition and reward to individuals whose performance is exemplary. A recurrent theme, however, found in all five ACT surveys, is that training, evaluation, and recognition and reward have been, and continue to be, the weakest links in academic advising throughout the nation. These important institutional practices in support of quality advising are at best unsystematic and at worst nonexistent. They are unsystematic because on many campuses even the exemplary practices in these areas exist in only a few of the departments or offices delivering academic advising. On other campuses, training, evaluation, and recognition and reward efforts are minimal, perfunctory, and unsatisfactory. When respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of training, evaluation, and recognition and reward on the fifth survey, the over-

all means for all three functions fell below the midpoint (3.0) of the scale: training fell to 2.9, evaluation to 2.7, and recognition and reward to 2.2.

For the most part, however, these practices do not exist at all. Only 18 percent of campuses have a policy statement that includes training, 11 percent have a policy statement that includes evaluation, and only 4 percent include recognition and reward. In addition, respondents to the fifth survey indicated that only 23 percent of campuses require training for faculty advisors, 29 percent evaluate faculty advising, and 31 percent recognize and reward faculty advising, usually as a minor consideration in promotion, tenure, and salary decisions.

In conclusion, one must marvel at the dynamic growth and diversity of advising programs that have taken place over the last two decades of the twentieth century. Yet academic advising will not arrive as a fully functional contributor to institutional well-being or reach its full potential until decision makers and resource allocators recognize the importance of training, evaluation, and recognition and reward. The future status of academic advising rests in these functions.

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