

Academic Advising: More than a Placebo?

EDWARD R. HINES is assistant professor, *Educational Administration-Higher Education, State University of New York, Albany, New York.*

A new academiic revolution is upon us. In the 1960s, the revolution consisted of many institutions trying to become research universities and mostly failing. In the 1980s it will take more and more the form of following the long-time exaniple of the community colleges in adjusting to the market. . .(Carnegie Council, 1980, p. 1).'

These words in the final report of the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education suggest many possibilities. On one hand, the sense of institutional purpose and relationship with a local community characteristic of the community college may become the bellwether for all of higher education. Optimistic future scenarios might include a new sense of outreach by colleges, delivery of educational services oriented to solving real-world problems, and institutions becoming cultural hubs of communities. On the other hand are pessimistic scenarios. A need of survival places urges colleges toward "headhunting" for dwindling numbers of students, open competition between institutions for their market share, and a heightened internecine warfare, particularly, in state legislatures to capture what little fiscal support is available for higher education.

Clearly, the 1980s will be the decade of the student as consumer. Colleges will seek new ways to attract the student and to keep him enrolled. An important factor in retention is effective academic advising. In this article I report on recent research about academic advising and suggest specific ways to implement an academic advising system.

Advising as Part of Academic Integration

Academic advising is time-honored work in higher education. Essentially, advising aims to help students make rational decisions about their academic lives such as scheduling required courses, choosing electives, and deciding on academic majors. Some writers ascribe a larger role to academic advising: to help secure a positive fit between the individual student and the college. Thus, the advisor becomes more than merely a facilitator of course selection, but less than in-depth psychological and personal counselor — the advisor becomes an academic counselor.

¹Carnegie Council on Policy Studies. *Three Thousand Futures: The Next Twenty Years for Higher Education*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980). Quoted in G. Scully, "Carnegie Panel Says Enrollment Declines Will Create a 'New Academic Revolution,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 (January 28, 1980), 1

Academic Advising: More than a Placebo?

In this academic counseling, academic advising may be a placebo, an imitation medicine, given more to placate a patient than to meet a clearly diagnosed organic need (Cousins, 1979).² Academic advising is a placebo when used merely to placate students about their academic situation, their choice of major, or their career and vocational plans. We only placate students when we goad them into believing an IRM registration card defines their academic careers for the coming semester; obviously, in order to complete registration, a student must secure the signature of his academic advisor. The advisor, however, must do more than sign for registration: the advisor is a necessary **link** between student and institution, between institutional goals and academic programs, and between the classroom and the world outside. Therefore, we must seek ways for academic advising to become more than a placebo.

Although literature on academic advising grows and frequently includes empirical studies, much advising literature is idiosyncratic to individual institutions; some remains unpublished and, thus, difficult to find; and some contain excessive exhortations about what **should** work and not necessarily what **has** worked. Three exceptions are (1) materials published by the American College Testing Service (ACT); (2) proceedings of a new organization, the National Academic Advising Association; and (3) findings research on retention and attrition. The ACT has sponsored regional workshops about ways to begin and improve an academic advising system. In 1979, ACT completed a national survey on academic advising subdivided into responses from two-year colleges, four-year public, and four-year private colleges (N = 820).³ The National Academic Advising Association is a new professional organization providing leadership through sponsoring annual conferences, beginning in 1977 at the University of Vermont.⁴ Published proceedings of the annual conferences contain many suggestions about organizing, administering, and evaluating academic advising systems.

Although literature directly about academic advising has been of limited usefulness until recently, literature on student retention and attrition is of real interest.⁵ This literature on retention and attrition, of course, relates to academic advising and attempts to show what characteristics cause students either to stay in or drop out of college. These characteristics involve individual attributes such as personality, extra-curricular or social activities during college, and academic integration.

Academic integration belongs to the academic subsystem of an institution. Generally, the term means such things as student grade-point average, intellectual development, and extent of informal interaction with faculty. Research in this area

²N. Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979)

³D. J. Carlensen and C. Silberhorn, *A National Survey of Academic Advising*. (Iowa City: American College Testing Program, October, 1979).

⁴G. Rayfield, A. D. Roberts, and T. Trombley, Eds., *National Conference on Academic Advising*, (Burlington, Vermont: Advising Center, University of Vermont, 1978).

⁵V. Tinto, "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," *Review of Educational Research*, 45, (1975), 89-125. T. J. Pantages and C. F. Creedon, "Studies of College Attrition: 1950-1975," *Review of Educational Research*, 48 (1978), 49-101.

proves enlightening. For instance, one study found that what happens to students after enrolling may be more important than students' pre-college attributes, that efforts to reduce student attrition should focus on what happens to students after they arrive on campus, and that what happens in students' academic lives may be more important than their social experiences in deciding whether or not to stay in school.⁶ Thus, student involvement with faculty outside the formality of the classroom, the quality of interactions **between** them, and the institution's impact through faculty on students may be of critical importance. Academic advising, then, offers an ideal opportunity to stimulate this faculty-student interaction.

Multiple Approaches to Advising

When we consult the literature and attempt to answer questions about who should advise, usually we think of academic advising as within the province of either faculty or counselors. Indeed, a national survey of two-year colleges predicted the 1979's would see a move away from advising systems consisting only of faculty, that mixed advising systems using both faculty and counselors would begin to assume a greater role in academic advising.⁷ But, in fact, in the 1970s faculty became even more predominant in academic advising. Counselors served as advisors in public community colleges more than in private two-year colleges, with freshmen more than with upperclassmen, and with undecided students more than with decided majors.⁸

Furthermore, a recent study showed that among two-year college respondents well-informed about academic advising, there were five distinct groups of respondents, each with different orientation to literature-based statements about academic advising (Hines, 1980).⁹ First were **institutional critics** whose position about academic advising was decidedly critical of the institution and its existing leadership. That is, these persons thought academic advising would improve and become more effective if the college showed more leadership, if there were coordination between academic administrators and counselors about advising, and if there were clear rewards for advisors. Second were **professional faculty advisors** who advocated that not all faculty be involved in advising, but that those involved receive clear rewards. Third and fourth were **trainers** and **evaluators**, respectively. That is, some believed in training academic advisors in both pre-service and in-service training; others emphasized evaluating advisors and the advising system. The two groups, however, were only slightly interrelated. Fifth were those who thought counselors and other non-teaching staff should supplement faculty advisors. Results of this study were congruent with conclusions of a recent monograph calling for institutions

⁶P. T. Terenzini and E. T. Pascarella, "The Relation of Students' Precollege Characteristics and Freshmen Year Experience to Voluntary Attrition," *Research in Higher Education*, 9, 347-366.

⁷T. O'Banion, J. W. Fordyce, and G. Goodwin, "Academic Advising in the Two-Year College: a National Survey," *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 13 (1972), 411-419.

⁸E. R. Hines, P. Krause, and F. J. Endieveri, "Academic Advising in Two-Year Colleges," *Community/Junior College Research Quarterly*, 4 (1980), 151-167.

⁹E. R. Hines, "Policy Making for More Effective Academic Advisement in Two-Year Colleges," *Research in Higher Education*. Forthcoming.

Academic Advising: More than a Placebo?

simply to decide on an appropriate approach to advising because there is no single formula for success.¹¹

Formulating Policy for Advising

Although we cannot identify a single approach for effective academic advising, we can suggest several basics for institutional officials to consider as they develop an advising system.

Basic Variables: Students, Faculty, Setting. No one group, such as faculty or counselors, possesses exclusive rights to academic advising. There are, however, three basic variables: students, faculty, and institutional setting. Each demands careful study before implementing an academic advising system. Students differ in background and demographic characteristics at every institution. To identify particular characteristics, we should ask these questions: How many students live locally and how many commute from farther distances? What jobs do students secure? With what courses do they typically have greater problems? Then, in considering faculty, we must ask similar questions to identify background and demographic characteristics pertinent to them. Last comes the institution, including a particular configuration of academic programs. Then, in designing an effective academic advising system, we must identify and study these three basic variables — students, faculty, and institution.

Academic Advising: A Full-Time Function. The shape of the academic advising system depends on the nature of students, faculty, and setting. The visibility and importance of academic advising will depend on leadership. Two variables seem especially important. First, the position of coordinator for academic advising should be a full-time responsibility. When the person responsible for academic advising works only part-time at the job, advising automatically becomes a lower priority. Second, we must consider who will coordinate advising. Several studies show the academic advising coordinator may come from academic affairs, counseling staff, or student personnel staff. Most important, the coordinator must have college-wide legitimacy and must consider advising a responsibility. In some colleges, the academic dean serves; in others, a director of counseling; in still others, a respected faculty member.

Rewards. Whatever the advising system and whoever coordinates it, one of the most important features is rewards. Indeed, we may recognize that not everyone should advise students. Not all faculty are suited to this kind of interaction with students, and not all counselors should be academic advisors. Nonetheless, faculty will take academic advising seriously only if it receives legitimacy in the institution's rewards structure. Rewards for academic advising may include salary increases as well as counting advising in promotion and tenure recommendations. Why not include academic advising as one of many criteria for personnel review, promotion, and tenure? Moreover, nearly all faculty engage in committee work and service activities, both internal and external. Why not exempt excellent academic advisors from committee assignments for a set term as reward for their work?

¹¹T. J. Grites. *Academic Advising: Gelling Us Through the Eighties*, Washington: American Association for Higher Education, Research Report No. 7, (1979).

Training and Evaluation. Once an institution adopts an academic advising system, it must train advisors, evaluate both advisors and advising system, and conduct research on advising. The National Academic Advising Association, for example, offers considerable literature on training and evaluation. To learn which advising system works and to identify the most effective academic advisors, we must conduct both descriptive and analytic research about advising. These studies should delve into student and faculty satisfaction with advising, and a correlation between advising and such data should enable us to make more informed decisions about advising.