MODELS OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

The Necessity for a Comprehensive Advising System

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The success of higher education increasingly depends on effective academic advising. Inauguration of the ***NACADA Journal*** and organization of the National Conference on Academic Advising three years ago offer salient proof that developing a comprehensive advising system has become a major priority for many institutions. Such a development has occurred for several reasons.

First, there is growing recognition that advising — dialogue between student and mentor — is critical to the journey of self-discovery, to helping the student define and realize personal and professional goals from an undergraduate perspective. Second, if the institution is to remain faithful to the pursuit of its mission — indeed, to promote its own survival and stability — it must remain alert to the frustrations of students, their anxieties over the job market, and their need to believe that formal learning is worth the high price.

Responsible for this new awareness about academic advising are certain specific changes during recent years in higher education: alteration and expansion of curricula, often in dramatic ways; increased diversity of student populations in terms of age and academic preparation; the contracted employment market of the 1970's and 1980's which causes students to question the value of a liberal arts degree; tendency of students to abandon a less than satisfactory educational experience and seek another institution, if not abandon the idea of advanced degree altogether.

As director of advisement at Marymount Manhattan College, a small, urban, liberal arts college traditionally dedicated to the education of women, I have witnessed first-hand all these changes and have learned how an organized advising system can alleviate the problems they bring. The history of change at Marymount Manhattan College led us to our present advising model. I review this history briefly as an introduction to our solutions in structuring a comprehensive advising program.

Before 1979, Marymount Manhattan had an upper-and lower-division structure with fairly traditional curriculum requirements. After that, we elected an open-choice curriculum with major requirements only. Students, unfortunately, interpreted this change to mean an open curriculum. In many cases, students chose one-sided programs without consideration for the breadth a degree in the liberal arts

demands. Also in the 1970's, adding many courses to enhance students' professional preparation increased the responsibility of advisors. Marymount Manhattan's mission is to the liberal arts and to placing pre-professional development firmly within the essential context of the liberal arts. Because of these changes recognizing student need for more individualized programs and pre-professional exposure, academic advising had to counter the trend toward unbalanced and illiberal courses of study.

In 1973, the College instituted a program of continuing education, offering classes in the evening and on weekends which attracted large numbers of older and, for the most part, part-time students in need of special guidance. The College also introduced a Life Experience program to grant credit for carefully documented life experience illustrating accomplishment of specific course objectives. The influx of students of non-traditional age and circumstance again offered a major impetus to design our present advising system.

The heart of advising is the faculty. Faculty have long participated in guiding students in course selections and major and general requirements. Faculty care about students — are interested in seeing them realize their fullest potential. All too often, however, for faculty members advising is peripheral to teaching. In and of themselves, faculty cannot be held accountable for achieving institutional objectives, objectives which require an integrated and personalized educational program for each student. Faculty must receive assistance to provide them with tools to advise successfully and competently — tools such as up-to-date academic records on advisees, information about the referral services for non-academic problems, advising handbooks, forms and procedures, and advising skills learned in special workshops. Realizing the necessity for giving faculty direct and unifying support, Marymount Manhattan established a specific administrative office to coordinate and expedite advising. Advising is centralized in that one administrative office and it controls and facilitates the process, yet the attention given each student remains individualized and flexible. Today the College's Office of Advisement consists of a director of advisement; an assistant director of advisement, responsible for advising evening and weekend students; and a special sessions advisor, who also participates in advising evening and weekend students; and an Outreach Advisor who works with undecided majors, and students in academic difficulty. All assist the director in instructing and training faculty and peer advisors, and other tasks of supervision within her jurisdiction.

Turning to the problem of the undecided major, we solved it by staging an Idea Fair for those students. Student invitations included a preliminary questionnaire which focuses attention on academic preferences. Each major field sponsored a table, with faculty on hand to answer questions and distribute a one-page flyer listing the advantages of that major. Brightly colored signs and informal spacing created an atmosphere where students felt free to explore and compare without the pressure of a pending decision. As a result, many students subsequently made that decision more aware of alternatives and more comfortable with the rightness of their choice. An Idea Fair also works well for evening and weekend students.

Experience reaffirms that the critical moments in a student's college career occur the first day (true for both freshmen and transfers), mid-term, sophomore slump, or, in some cases, second-semester-freshman slump. Since students are more affective

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than cognitive, they look for a human being to whom they can relate. They make their decisions subconsciously about persisting or withdrawing within the first six to eight weeks of college. A sensitive faculty advisor will be aware of this subtle form of advanced notification.

Although many reasons for making faculty the keystone of advising apply to the institution's goals in retention, one in particular needs reiteration. The student must feel comfortable in the intellectual atmosphere of the classroom. If the student feels the intellectual atmosphere is higher or lower than his, the student is likely to withdraw — hence, the importance of the faculty advisor in guiding the student into an academic program congruent with his intellect. The faculty's alertness to curriculum restrictions and punitive academic policies which cause withdrawal motivates them to work for changes that more realistically relate to student goals. Alertness to non-academic problems, prompt and appropriate referral, careful monitoring of graduation requirements, all help in retention. The involved and satisfied student persists.

Essentially, the office of advising supplies and coordinates all of the materials and activities necessary for effective advising. The development of a faculty and peer advisors' handbook provides the routines and regulations of advising. The office, in conjunction with the registrar, provides advisors with up-to-date student records and trouble shoots more problematic ones. It schedules and conducts regular workshops, often employing individuals from the faculty and administration with special expertise in psychology and counseling relevant to the advising process.

The office of advising thus offers centralized support: it oversees the selection of faculty advisors, produces materials, schedules and runs workshops. The model works at Marymount Manhattan College. No one model can succeed at all institutions. Yet, each institution can develop a workable plan, given its mission and its resources. Each institution may adapt and extrapolate from those which best serve the needs of its student population. Our needs, however, are best served with faculty advisors.

There are many reasons to place faculty at the heart of advising. Faculty are the key to academic programs since they design major requirements and course content. Thus, they are better qualified to communicate the rationale for various courses of study, required courses; and prerequisites; to assist students in seeing alternatives in courses of study; and to provide them with options not otherwise considered. Already in tune with students' learning processes and problems, familiar with their colleagues and other academic departments, faculty can suggest programs beneficial to an advisee, guiding the bright, more capable student into challenging courses, the less capable into suitable but not too difficult areas.

Because of daily classroom contact between faculty and students, the personal individual attention of a faculty member brings the two into a closer and less formal relationship, lets the student know that someone — a sympathetic professional — really cares. Furthermore, the relationship may satisfy the student's need to identify with a positive role model.

Benefits also accrue to faculty from advising students. With the opportunity to hear students reactions to programs design and philosophy, faculty become more attuned to students perspectives, have a more realistic insight into their objectives, and

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are better able to plan for changes in departmental and divisional offerings. In addition, as advisors, faculty can become familiar with disciplines and programs other than their own, thus increasing their effectiveness not only as advisors but as educational planners with an overview of the institution's strengths and weaknesses.

Recognizing the importance of faculty as advisors and their need for a supportive management service, the institution must next decide how to provide it. How should the office of advising relate to faculty advisors? Without presuming to train them in their profession (advising is a form of teaching), how does one give faculty the information and tools essential for effective advising? Marymount Manhattan found that workshops provide a perfect forum for understanding and discussing the advising process. Here, the tools are reviewed: the catalogue, with its statement of general policies, curriculum philosophy and content; the advising handbook and forms; the characteristics of certain types of students; the referral process. From this initial review come other rewards. By sharing experiences, faculty gain new insights, acquire new techniques, explore little known areas of academic offerings; in sum, they learn how to be more effective advisors. The enthusiastic response of faculty who participated in these forums speaks to their success.

Marymount Manhattan's peer advisors program proved another innovative and effective component in advising. Peer advisors are specially selected students chosen for their interest in helping other students and for their ability to listen, understand, and be available to others. Recommended by faculty advisors, peer advisors must receive the approval of the division chairperson in their major area. Peer advisors supplement: they assist a faculty advisor, but lack final authority to approve a student's choice of courses for a given semester. Although workshops for peer advisors serve the same purpose as faculty workshops in disseminating knowledge about the curriculum and policies, these workshops also train advisors in the skills of listening, guiding, and encouraging others to identify values and reach sound decisions.

One such workshop involves a two-day retreat in which peer advisors receive intensive experience in conducting positive, productive interviews. Through role-playing in triads (advisor, advisee and observer), they learn listening skills such as steady eye contact, attentive posture and non-verbal communication, proper verbal response, and vocal tone. Role-playing also develops questioning skills; peer advisors learn to encourage students to express their own concerns through open rather than closed questions, to help them recognize and deal with their real and underlying problems, and to help students reach decisions on their own rather than imposing judgmental and arbitrary solutions. We video-tape role-playing sessions for later group discussions.

Last, we come to the issue of student retention. The advising system, of course, is not solely responsible for retention; keeping students requires the effort of all segments of the college community. Studies show the most serious attrition comes after the freshman and sophomore years, especially among undeclared majors. Since undecided students are neither identified with a department nor committed to a goal by way of major and career, college is more difficult for them. Having an advisor to help them determine a major early or, at least, to work with them in the process of clarification is crucial.

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