

Residence Hall Coordinators: Academic Advising for "Undecided" Students

JANICE ABEL, *is director of academic advising services, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa.*

Many students entering colleges and universities need assistance in selecting and planning their academic programs. College and academic advising administrators have become more aware of students unsure of their academic major or career plans and the need to focus services to meet these needs. One of several responses is a development center for students undecided about their majors.

At the University of Northern Iowa, (UNI) an advising center has been established staffed by residence hall coordinators. The University selected residence hall staff in light of their potential in facilitating the goals of the student service division and their ability to implement an educational-based program to meet specific needs. We view residence hall coordinators as the bridge between the academic and the student services world; they could become Hardee's "Coordinators of learning experiences of students."

Advantages. We perceived the following advantages of involving residence hall coordinators in academic advising:

1. They possess educational training and experience in working with individual students (all have master's degrees and previous student service experience).
2. They manifest a high interest in students and understand student development.
3. They already enjoy daily contacts with students in a relative broad range of student concerns.

Disadvantages. We found that major problems focused on coordinators' perceptions of their roles. Students lacked academic credibility with faculty and students, and although receptive to being an academic advisor, these students defined their role as primarily referral to faculty. Thus, during their first year of advising, they functioned more as a clearing house and did not function much differently from faculty advisors with specialized interests.

¹M. D. Hardee, *Faculty Advising in Colleges and Universities*. Student Personnel Series, 9, (Washington, D.C.: American College Personnel Association, 1970).

Major Factors For Success. Three major factors appear important in establishing the advising role of residence hall coordinators.

First, awareness of traditional perceptions that will either facilitate or inhibit establishment of advisory roles. At the University of Northern Iowa, faculty traditionally had been viewed as the persons responsible for student advising. Faculty believed that all faculty should advise and they were qualified to do so. Equally important, faculty perceived advising as a scheduling registration function rather than as one element in student development.

Some positive environmental support, however, existed at the University. The philosophy of student services at UNI recognizes the importance of student personnel involvement in the students' entire college experience. More recently we reorganized student services to include many academic oriented services such as the Registrar's Office, Learning Skills Center, and Academic Advising. For a long time in the University, student services personnel have held membership on faculty and curriculum committees. Thus, support existed to involve more student services personnel in students' academic lives and subsequently to develop a broader definition of advising.

Second, definition of a substantive role within the context of the advising goals of the institution. To avoid the clearing house role, and at the same time to help residence hall advisors gain confidence in working with curriculum requirements, we had to define their responsibilities specifically in skills and activities. For example, one major goal of these advisors involved helping students select majors. This advising would help students relate their interests and abilities to curriculum opportunities and requirements. We defined skill areas. For example, we employed a locally developed inventory to relate student's interest to UNI major fields. And we specifically identified the essential knowledge of curriculum requirements. UNI not only expected advisors to know curriculum requirements as outlined in the catalog, but also expected them to become knowledgeable about gateway courses in majors, important sequences, and the kinds of background students must possess to succeed in various majors. Thus, these advisors are able to suggest specifics in helping students plan their semester schedules as well as to help them understand overall requirements for completing their degree. Providing this kind of information facilitated the credibility of residence hall coordinators with both students and faculty.

Third, define how advisors relate to other resources. While advisors need to know what kind of content they will provide students, they also need to know precisely the way in which they relate to other services. For example, in helping students select a major, UNI decided that career exploration and selection would become an area involving primarily Career Services personnel. Academic advisors carry responsibilities in introducing students to career exploration in a way that would motivate them to participate in career services activities. We designed a questionnaire to show students how their interests tie directly into career services information and programs. This procedure has served as an important vehicle in effective referrals to Career Services. As we observe the referral process, it becomes evident that effectiveness of referrals relate directly to the extent to which we have defined interfaces.

After three years in the program and the establishment of an effective in-service education program, the advising role of the hall coordinators is solidifying. We have introduced a semester-long group advising program in Fall 1980 for freshmen interested in selecting a major and we foresee that this program will reinforce further the advising responsibilities of these advisors and more effectively use their time. Utilizing hall coordinators in this fashion implements Student Services' articulated philosophy for the 80's: bring Student Services into the academic as well as social development of students. Academic advising becomes a major educational component in the university, serving as a "unifying force" in transmitting student development concepts to the academic community.'

¹J. Abel, "Student Personnel as a Unifying Force," *National Association of Women Deans and Counselors* (Winter 1971), 72.