

Factors Students Use When Evaluating Advisors

Karl N. Kelley and Mary Jean Lynch, North Central College

The current research examined student perceptions of advisors in an effort to more fully understand the dimensions that students use when evaluating advisors. Factor analysis of a 63-item structured questionnaire from a sample of 224 traditional-age college students revealed four primary factors and three secondary factors. The primary factors consisted of Socio-emotional Orientation, Meeting Dynamics, Knowledge, and global Problem dimensions. A secondary factor analysis of the Socio-emotional factor yielded three subfactors: Academic Caring, Personal Caring, and Good Person. Advisors and students who are aware of this structure can discuss these dimensions and emphasize behaviors that are closely related to advising performance. Finally, the authors suggest that this schematic structure be taken into account when developing advising assessment instruments.

Recently there has been increased interest in the evaluation of the effectiveness of academic advisors in postsecondary education. One reason for this interest is that strong advising programs have been identified as important factors in student retention at the college level (e.g., Habley, 1982). In addition, a survey of 947 two-year and four-year public and private institutions conducted by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and the American College Testing (ACT) Program found that inadequate advising was the most important negative factor in attrition. At the 337 4-year private institutions included in the survey, inadequate advising ranked second (behind inadequate financial aid) in determining attrition.

A second reason for the increased interest in the evaluation of advising is that advising is an important criterion used to evaluate college service. According to Seldin (1984), 76.8% of 616 liberal arts deans surveyed used advising in evaluating college service. This measure was the second most important criterion of college service (only service on college-wide committees was used by more deans). For private liberal arts institutions, this figure increased slightly to 80.2% ($n = 515$); only 1.2% of the deans did not consider advising to be a factor in evaluating college service.

Advising Evaluation and Student Perceptions

Although evaluation of advising is not widespread (76% of 754 institutions surveyed by the ACT had no instrument for evaluating their advising programs and only half evaluated individual advisors), approximately half of those institutions that do evaluate advising generally rely on student evaluation of individual faculty advisors (Crockett & Levitz, 1984). It is assumed that the ratings students give their advisors on several factors or behaviors accurately reflect the effectiveness of the advisor. Still, it is becoming increasingly clear that evaluation of performance depends, in part, on the expectations students bring to the situation. Here, students' expectations of what advisors should be can enter into the evaluation of what advisors do and how effectively they do it.

The relationship between perceptions, expectations, and evaluation has been described in cognitive process theories. These theories suggest that people organize their perceptions into schemata: mental prototypes that organize and guide the intake and processing of information. Neisser (1976) argues that these schemata help us understand the world. They help us reduce a complex environment into a manageable set of meaningful categories. Cohen (1981) and Higgins, Rholes, and Jones (1977) suggest that these categories help us focus on specific parts of the environment. We tend to see what our schemata tell us to expect. Taylor and Crocker (1981) argue that personal schemata drive our impressions to fit our expectations. For example, Nye (1988) suggests that people rely on schemata when judging the effectiveness of leaders. This effectiveness rating is often based on the extent to which the individual leader matches the mental prototype (schema) of the ideal leader rather than on an impartially based impression of performance. Therefore, when evaluating the effectiveness of an advisor, students may be basing their ratings on a mental schema (the advisor prototype) and not solely on the advisor's actual performance.

In summary, schemata guide how we perceive the environment. how we remember our

experiences, and how we form our judgments. Student schemata of effective advisors may influence ratings more than actual advisor behaviors do. In addition, divergent advisor-student schematic structures may account for differences of opinion among advisors and students. Determining students' expectations for the advising relationship is critical for effective advising and for a more complete understanding of evaluation data.

Measures of Advising Effectiveness

Researchers at Kansas State University have developed an instrument for the evaluation of advising by employing a factor analysis to identify important dimensions of advising (Cashin, 1979). This research suggests that advisor behaviors can be grouped into three broad categories. The first category consists of interpersonal skills and good counseling techniques such as inquiry, discussion, and involvement. The second category consists of limiting behaviors, such as rushing through appointments and refusing to discuss certain topics. The third category consists of information-related characteristics, such as the advisor's knowledge of graduation requirements. The counseling and informing categories positively correlate with overall advisor effectiveness ratings (Cashin, 1979).

The current research extends the Kansas State University research by employing inductive methods to examine the structure of students' perceptions of effective advising. These exploratory techniques yield important information about student schematic structures regarding advisors.

Methods

Subjects

Participants for this study were drawn from the student population at a small private Midwestern college. This college is somewhat atypical in that advising has long been given an important role in the college program. Advising participation and evaluation count for 20% of a faculty member's yearly evaluation. The institution has established an Advising Center to help students, particularly nontraditional and transfer students, with their academic decisions. The college has also instituted a freshman seminar

program to foster a close relationship between advisor and advisee during the critical first year.

Three hundred and thirty-eight students participated in at least one part of this research: 114 returned open-ended advisor descriptions, and 224 completed a structured questionnaire. Students participating in the open-ended descriptions were recruited primarily from 200- and 300-level courses in biology, English, physics, and religion. For the structured questionnaire, students were recruited across all divisions of the college curriculum; all undergraduate levels were represented. Of the 224 structured-questionnaire participants reporting gender, 91 were male and 132 were female. These 224 students represented a wide spectrum of the college classes (21% freshmen, 14% sophomores, 34% juniors, 29% seniors) and majors (30% humanities, 44% business, and 12% sciences). Overall, approximately 18.8% of the undergraduate population participated in this research.

Procedure

Questionnaire Development The first phase of the current research inductively assessed student perceptions of advisors. During the first week of class for the fall term, 114 students in upper-level courses in a variety of disciplines were asked to describe the characteristics of an excellent advisor. They were asked to list things that an excellent advisor should do and things that the advisor should not do. The primary strength of this free response method is that it does not bias students or impose the researchers' structure upon the data (Weiner, 1984). Participants generated over 150 different items describing advisors. After eliminating overlapping items, 63 items were retained for the structured questionnaire.

Structured Questionnaire The structured questionnaire was then distributed to 224 students. This form presented participants with the 63 advisor-descriptor items and asked them to rate their current advisor on each item using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicated the item did not describe the advisor and 5 indicated that the item described the advisor very well. In addition to these questions, participants were also asked to rate their advisor on overall effectiveness and how much they respected their advisor. Demographics about the students and their advisors were also collected.

Results

To identify the dimensions or factors that students use when evaluating an advisor, a factor analysis was employed to extract the underlying dimensions from the 63 independent measures of academic advising. Kerlinger (1973) argues that this statistical technique is an efficient method to reduce the number of individual items by identifying the fundamental properties underlying the unitary measurements.

A principal component factor analysis with an orthogonal varimax rotation of the 63 advisor-descriptor items yielded four factors. Thirteen items were dropped because they did not load on any of the four primary factors, 50% of the participants did not respond to that item, or the item overlapped on multiple factors (see Table 1). A second principal component factor analysis of the remaining 50 items again yielded four factors that accounted for 54.5% of the total variance. The eigenvalues for these four factors were 14.99, 2.43, 1.76, and 1.53, and they accounted for 39.5%, 6.4%, 4.6%, and 4.0% of the total variance, respectively. This analysis indicated that the largest factor included 25 items that related to the advisor's socio-emotional skills such as "Sincere," "Open-minded," and "Understanding of my needs." The second factor contained 13 items (1 item

also loaded on the first factor) focusing on meeting dynamics, such as "Organized," "Prepared," and "On time." The third factor was labeled the Advisor Problems factor and consisted of 5 items such as "Not friendly," "Does not listen," and "Misses meetings." The final factor was the Knowledge factor, including 9 items (1 item also loaded on the second factor) such as "Knows the system," "Knows graduation requirements," and "Knows about various areas of study."

Due to the relative size of the first factor, a secondary factor analysis was conducted. This secondary principal component factor analysis with an orthogonal varimax rotation of the 26-item socio-emotional scale yielded three subfactors that accounted for 66.4% of the total variance within the Socio-emotional factor. The eigenvalues for these three factors were 7.69, 1.21, and 1.07, and they accounted for 51.3%, 8.0%, and 7.1% of the total variance, respectively. The first subfactor included items related to the advisor's concern about the academic life of the student such as "Concerned with my academic life" and "Concerned with my goals." The second subfactor consisted of items pertaining to a more personal concern for the student such as "Has the ability to encourage my self-reflection" and "Really listens to me." The final subfactor was a general description of a good person. This factor contained items such as "Has a good sense of humor," "Is sincere," and "Is enthusiastic." See Table 2 for the content of individual factors and their loadings.

Analysis of the intercorrelations among the factors suggested that the factors were related but independent. Correlations between the primary Socio-emotional factor and the secondary Socio-emotional factors were high, ranging from .9104 to .8204. Intercorrelations among the secondary factors were themselves more moderate, ranging from .7417 to .6711. This correlation pattern suggests that the secondary factors are related to the more global primary factor but that they are measuring different components of the global construct. Correlations among primary factors ranged from .8515 to .7468, suggesting that, although these factors are related, there are enough differences to indicate that they represent separate dimensions. All primary and secondary factors were negatively correlated with the Advisor Problems factor (see Table 3).

Internal reliability analysis using Chronbach's alpha indicated that scales were empirically con-

TABLE 1
The 13 items dropped from the analysis

My advisor is available.
My advisor knows where to obtain information about graduation requirements.
My advisor knows the college's policies and procedures not directly related to graduation requirements.
My advisor often confuses me.
My advisor is honest with me.
My advisor is an intelligent person.
My advisor is thorough in his/her work.
My advisor wants to cooperate with me.
My advisor knows other professors here.
My advisor keeps me aware of relevant academic information.
My advisor is confident.
My advisor is willing to respond to a crisis if the need arises.
My advisor will rearrange his/her schedule to meet with me.

TABLE 2
Factor loadings for the 50 retained items from the structured questionnaire

Item	Socio-emotional	Academic Care	Personal Care	Good Person	Meeting dynamics	Knowledge	Problems
takes time talking with me	.4708	.7515					
supports my goals	.5642	.7098					
approachable	.4898	.6087					
friendly	.4536	.6557					
concerned about my academic life	.5253	.5786	.4614				
cooperates with me	.4176	.5726					
open with me	.5314	.5702					
understands my needs	.4855	.5516					
enthusiastic	.4631	.5476		.4155			
listens to me	.5696	.4994	.4205		.5202		
offers encouragement	.6308	.4974					
helps me with my long term goals	.6212	.4623	.5896				
encourages self-reflection	.6422		.7032				
cares about my life outside the classroom	.7720		.6445				
concerned with my overall development	.6196		.6416				
challenges me to think	.5772		.5948				
understands my situation	.5626		.5514				
good role model	.5258		.5354				
tries to improve as an advisor	.4087		.5336				
informed about extracurricular activities	.4468		.4226				
sincere	.4027			.6054			
open-minded	.5282			.6039	.4582		
sense of humor	.5486			.4709			
nonjudgemental	.4526			.4522			
knows me on a semi-personal level	.5321						

(Continued)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Item	Socio-emotional	Academic Care	Personal Care	Good Person	Meeting dynamics	Knowledge	Problems
prepared					.7687		
organized					.6701		
on time for meetings					.5411		
understandable					.5334		
helpful					.5095		
knows system					.5028	.5364	
dependable					.4812		
doesn't rush					.4716		
effective communicator					.4435		
patient					.4258		
lets me make decisions					.4248		
unprepared					-.5970		
demanding						.4712	
knows about graduate schools						.4424	
knows requirements for graduation						.4381	
knowledge about various areas of study						.4255	
I can trust my advisor						.4131	
knows about job opportunities						.4127	
experienced						.4091	
makes most of my course decisions						.4051	
does not seem friendly							-.5669
does not support my needs							-.5575
not interested in my goals							-.4510
does not listen							-.4450
misses meetings							-.4336

sistent for both the primary and secondary factors. In addition, each scale differentially correlated with the rating of overall effectiveness (see Table 4). These correlations suggest that students are not only using these dimensions to evaluate advisor effectiveness but also weighing the relative importance for each. For example, the Meeting Dynamics factor is more strongly correlated with overall effectiveness ($r = .6513$) than the Knowledge factor ($r = .5517$). Following the arguments of Bagozzi (1980), if we assume that students are basing their evaluations on information they have collected, it is possible to interpret this relationship to mean that students weigh meeting dynamics as more important than knowledge of the system (graduation requirements, courses, curriculum changes). However, because these correlations are relatively high, students ascribe importance to all factors.

Discussion

Based on these data, we can describe the student's schema of an advisor (see Figure 1). The advisor is concerned with the student's life both

inside and outside the classroom, is concerned with the student's overall development, and is willing to help with the student's long-term goals. When the advisor and student meet, the advisor is on time and prepared for the meeting. The student does not feel rushed through the appointment and understands what the advisor says. Note that some of these attributes are necessary for effective advising (such as having information or at least being able to get it), while some of these attributes are stylistic and should have little impact on the advisor's overall effectiveness.

The data suggest that, when a student is asked to rate the advisor's overall effectiveness, the student relies on this schema. Interestingly, the scale that correlates the strongest with overall effectiveness is Meeting Dynamics. The scale with the lowest correlation with overall effectiveness is Knowledge. The Socio-emotional scale correlation is between these two. Thus, advisors who are organized, on time, and prepared for meeting with the student are perceived as more effective. Also, the advisor who is a warm, caring individual will fare better in the evaluative process than one who is more distant, even

TABLE 3
Correlation matrix among primary and secondary factors

	S e	A c	P c	G p	M d	K	P
Socio-emotional	1.0000						
Academic care	.8755	1.0000					
Personal care	.9104	.7417	1.0000				
Good person	.8204	.7297	.6711	1.0000			
Meeting dynamics	.8515	.7765	.7887	.6333	1.0000		
Knowledge	.7468	.6905	.7228	.5894	.8422	1.0000	
Problems	-.4829	-.5217	-.4285	-.4059	-.5258	-.4141	1.0000

TABLE 4
Mean, alpha, and correlation with the overall effectiveness item
for primary and secondary scales

Scale	Mean	Alpha	r with overall effectiveness
Socio-emotional	4.12	.9374	.5787
Academic care	4.46	.8829	.5455
Personal care	3.99	.8695	.5567
Good person	4.34	.7244	.4524
Meeting dynamics	4.38	.8753	.6513
Problems	1.64	.7688	-.4319
Knowledge	4.33	.8097	.5517

The factorial structure of student perceptions of advisors

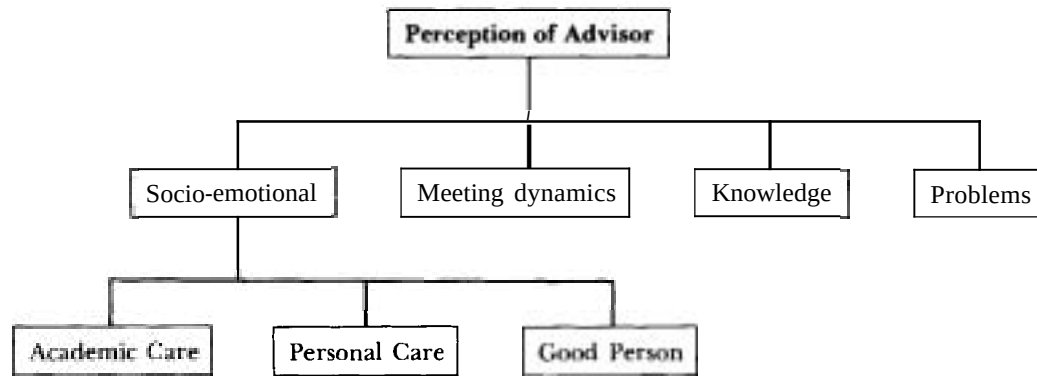


Figure 1

though both may have equal knowledge about the system and conduct equally effective meetings.

The data do not suggest that to be considered an effective advisor the individual must adopt a highly warm, interpersonal style. Still, the data do suggest that low socio-emotional advisors should address student perceptions early in the advising process. For example, these advisors might outline to the student how they perceive the advising role and discuss how their perceptions may not match the student's perception. As a result of such a discussion, the student may place more emphasis on other dimensions of the schema such as Knowledge or Meeting Dynamics.

The advisor may have to examine how his or her behaviors are being interpreted by the student with this type of advisor schema. For example, if the evaluation suggests that the advisor is rushing the student through an appointment, is it because the advisor's style is quick or intense? In terms of effectiveness (i.e., the appropriate amount of information being passed on to the student in a given period of time), rushing per se may not be a problem. Is it because the advisor does not schedule enough time for each advising appointment? In this case, rushing may hurt effectiveness because enough ground is not covered during the limited appointment. Or is it because, as a warm and caring individual, the advisor has encouraged students to just drop by when they need to talk, and this policy results in hasty meetings filled with interruptions? In this case, rushing

indicates ineffective advising; the student is not being asked to take responsibility for arranging appointments in advance, thus not allowing either party time to prepare for the meetings.

This research has profound implications for developing instruments used to evaluate effective advising and for interpreting advising evaluation results. Although perception of overall effectiveness is important in differentiating among advisors, students are basing their perceptions on four criteria (factors). In interpreting overall effectiveness, it becomes important to understand these contributing factors. In order to improve the overall effectiveness score, advisors should focus on those particular dimensions that students rated relatively low. Also, this structure suggests specific advisor behaviors upon which students base their impressions. By including these measurable behaviors in an evaluation instrument, advisors will have the option of changing their behavior patterns or addressing how they currently work with the student.

Although we argue that we can generalize these findings to a wide variety of advising situations, there are several limitations to the current study. First, research participants for this study were taken from a population that was located at a small comprehensive college that emphasizes advising both for its role in student development and its role in faculty evaluation. This orientation should be considered when applying the results to other locations. Second, the sample consisted of traditional-age college students (18-24). It is possible that nontraditional stu-

dents have a slightly different schematic structure or weigh the factors within this structure differently.

In summary, students use four primary and three secondary factors when evaluating their advisors. Of these factors, Meeting Dynamics and Socio-emotional dimensions are more highly correlated with overall effectiveness than Knowledge. Advisors should be aware of this schematic structure to understand what students are thinking during the evaluation process. Also, we suggest that any evaluation instrument take into account all these factors when assessing advisor performance. In addition, by being aware of this structure, advisors and students can discuss these dimensions and emphasize behaviors that are closely related to advising performance.

Although this research sheds some light on the schematic structure students use when evaluating advisors, it does not attempt to operationally define effective advising. This research focused on how students perceive and organize information concerning advisor behaviors. Additional research is needed to examine the relative contribution of each of these factors in overall effectiveness and to clearly identify those behaviors that lead to effective advising.

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Karl N. Kelley is Assistant Professor of Psychology and **Mary Jean Lynch** is also Assistant Professor of Psychology. Address correspondence concerning this article to Karl N. Kelley, North Central College, Thirty North Brainard Street, PO Box 3063, Naperville, IL 60566-7063.