

Evaluation of a Pilot Program of Faculty Advising at an Urban Commuter University

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To evaluate a pilot program of faculty advising at a large, public, urban, commuter university, 448 pairs of entering students, both freshmen and transfer students, were matched on various demographic and academic variables. One student from each pair was assigned to a faculty advisor. Outcome variables included satisfaction with the university, perception of faculty, grade point average, and retention through the first year. The research design was compromised because of a low rate of participation by students assigned to an advisor. Results suggest that students who felt comfortable and respected during the advising session left with more favorable attitudes toward the university and the faculty.

Most researchers and educators maintain that high quality faculty advising is associated with increased retention among college students (Baer & Carr, 1985; Habley, 1981; Migden, 1989). In a thorough review of the literature, Pascarella (1980) concludes that the extent and quality of informal student-faculty interactions are associated with a variety of positive outcomes for students, including more favorable attitudes about college, greater academic achievement, and increased persistence. Satisfactory and relatively frequent interactions with faculty may lead to improved academic performance and increased satisfaction with one's college or university, which in turn increase the likelihood that a student will continue to enroll.

Although there is a wealth of data to document an association of high quality faculty advising or informal student-faculty interactions with increased retention, none of the existing studies allows one to make causal inferences. Many of the existing studies administer a questionnaire to students and find a correlation between contact with faculty or satisfaction with faculty advising and persistence or other, more global measures of satisfaction with college life. These studies do not tell us much about whether good advising *causes* students to stay in school.

Authors of even the most sophisticated longitudinal studies (e.g., Metzner, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979) recognize that their data do not permit causal inference. Characteristics of individual students may lead them both to inter-

act with faculty and to stay in school. For example, a student who is enthusiastic about learning and academic topics would be likely to seek out faculty contacts and to remain in school. Depression or low self-esteem might inhibit a student from interacting informally with faculty and might also increase the likelihood of the student's leaving the university. Such possibilities would lead to an association between faculty-student contact and retention, even though the contact would not have influenced retention directly.

To look rigorously at the influence of faculty contact or advising on retention and on intervening variables such as satisfaction with the college or academic achievement, we need to vary contact with faculty systematically. The study reported here attempted to manipulate informal contact with faculty by assigning some students to a faculty advisor as part of a pilot project on faculty advising. These students had been matched with other students who were not assigned to an advisor. We hoped to evaluate the impact of contact with a faculty advisor, as well as to provide a general model for evaluating new programs for students.

Background

The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) is a large, public, urban, **Ph.D.-granting** institution. Most of our approximately 16,500 undergraduate and 8,000 graduate students commute. In 1988 the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) passed a series of reforms designed to strengthen education for the 9,000 undergraduates in the College. One of these reforms required assigning a faculty advisor to each student in LAS. Previously, LAS had had no formal system of faculty advising for undergraduates. In the fall quarter of 1989 we conducted a pilot program of faculty advising by assigning about 450 incoming students to faculty advisors.

Nature of Faculty Advising

Providing informal contact with faculty is a particular problem for universities like ours

where most students commute (Pascarella, Duby, Miller, & Rasher, 1981; Rice, 1989). The overall objective of our faculty advising program, therefore, is to promote informal contact. We hope to ensure that every student has some personal contact with a faculty member. When all goes well, that contact will influence students' educational experiences by helping them articulate and plan for educational and life goals, by stimulating personal and intellectual growth, and by providing support.

Faculty advising tries to help students become aware of and analyze options. A successful faculty advisor is viewed as a mentor, someone with whom students can discuss problems or issues related to their education. Our concept of faculty advising does not include technical advising about transfer credits, graduation requirements, etc. Full-time professional advisors provide such technical advice.¹ Our concept of faculty advising is also that it is not personal counseling, although there is overlap and the distinction is not always clear.

Our concept of what is important in faculty advising is supported by Hornbuckle, Mahoney, and Borgard (1979), who found that perceptions of quality of faculty advising are driven by vague, undifferentiated, interpersonal qualities rather than by technical competence. We also knew that many faculty at most large universities, including ours, are not knowledgeable enough about college and university requirements to provide reliable, accurate technical advice.

We gave faculty some guidance on how to conduct the advising session and what topics they might cover. We emphasized the importance of being interested in the student's academic life and of making the student feel comfortable. Although we realized that not all topics would be covered in each advising session, we suggested such topics as (a) adjusting to college; (b) academic history, including high school courses and grades and any previous college attendance; (c) extracurricular interests and hobbies; (d) past or current jobs; (e) career options;

¹The college's full-time professional advisors provide counsel on course selection, choice of major, and degree requirements. These advisors also assist in the orientation of new students. There are no data on how many students use this advising system, but estimates are that about 60% of new students attend an orientation session and that 35-50% of undergraduates in LAS see an advisor each year.

(f) reasons for choosing UIC and LAS; and (g) progress in current courses.

Method

Assigning Students to Advising

Our pilot program involved identifying 224 pairs of beginning freshmen and 224 pairs of new transfer students. Freshmen were matched for sex, ethnic origin (oversampling minorities yielded 62 Black, 62 Hispanic, and 100 Caucasian pairs), high school class rank, ACT composite score, and declared major. Transfer students were matched on sex, ethnic origin (distribution identical to freshman sample), college code (an index of the type and quality of the institution from which they were transferring), grade point average at their previous institution, year in school, and declared major.

For both the freshmen and transfer students, one student from each pair was chosen randomly to be assigned to a faculty advisor; the other was assigned to the control group. Students who had declared a major were assigned to a faculty advisor in their major department; students without a declared major were assigned to faculty advisors throughout the college. Students in preprofessional programs were assigned to faculty advisors in departments that were logically related to their interests (e.g., pre-med students were assigned to either biological sciences or chemistry).

We assigned students to a department, and the department assigned each student to an individual faculty member and notified the student of that assignment. Students who were assigned a faculty advisor received a letter from the department telling them who their advisor was and how to contact their advisor to make an appointment. Letters were mailed in the fourth or fifth week of the quarter. Each department decided on the exact wording of the letters they sent, but all followed closely an example we provided. The letters were worded to encourage the student to make an appointment ("You must make an appointment" or "We strongly encourage you to make an appointment"), but there were no negative consequences for not making an appointment for advising.

Evaluating the Pilot Program

Faculty Evaluation of Process We asked each department to keep a record of students who met with their advisors, and we asked each fac-

ulty member to complete a short questionnaire at the end of each advising session. This questionnaire asked how long the session had lasted and required the faculty member to check which of several topics had been covered during the advising session. We also asked faculty to indicate how comfortable they had felt talking with each student and how helpful they thought the session had been. The end points and midpoints of the 5-point scales were labelled "not at all comfortable/helpful," "somewhat comfortable/helpful," and "extremely comfortable/helpful."

Student Evaluation of Process In the 10th week of the quarter we mailed a questionnaire and a stamped, self-addressed return envelope to each student who was assigned an advisor and to each student in the control group. We asked students who were assigned an advisor whether they had made an appointment for advising. If they had not made an appointment, we asked why they had not and gave them several reasons to choose from. If they had met with a faculty advisor, they were asked three questions about the advising session itself ("How comfortable were you?" "How helpful was the session?" and "How interested in you was your advisor?"). Students answered on a 5-point scale with the ends and midpoints labelled "not at all comfortable/helpful/interested," "somewhat comfortable/helpful/interested," and "extremely comfortable/helpful/interested."

Outcome Evaluation Variables The questionnaire sent to students in both the advising and the control group contained seven statements to which respondents indicated their degree of agreement with on 5-point scales ("disagree strongly" to "agree strongly"). The seven items defined two variables: (a) satisfaction with life at the university ("I really like my academic program and classes at UIC," "Life at UIC is not satisfying to me," "I am likely to register next fall at UIC," and "I am satisfied so far with my personal and social experiences at UIC") and (b) perception of faculty ("Faculty at UIC are not very interested in students," "It is very hard at UIC to meet and interact informally with faculty," and "Faculty at UIC are willing to spend time outside of class with students"). These two measures showed reasonable internal consistency in our data, with coefficient alphas of .80 and .68, respectively. We predicted that students in the advising group would be more satisfied with

life at the university and would have a more favorable view of faculty than would students in the control group.

The questionnaire also contained an item that asked students "If you had a personal concern, like trying to decide what to major in or what courses to take, who would you talk to about it?" Students could indicate that they would talk to family, friends at UIC, friends not at UIC, faculty at UIC, or they could indicate that they would not talk to anyone about it. We predicted that students in the advising groups would be more likely to talk to faculty about such problems.

Other outcome measures we used were grade point average (GPA) and retention through the end of the school year. We used GPA for the fall quarter, as well as GPA for the first year.

Results

Based on the reports we received from the faculty, only about 13.5% ($n = 60$) of the students who were assigned a faculty advisor actually met with their advisor. There may have been some faculty members who met with a student but failed to turn in a report about the advising session, but we do not think that happened often, if at all. About 40% of both the group who were assigned an advisor and the control group returned the questionnaire we mailed to them.

Of those students who got a letter but did not make an appointment for advising, 92 indicated a reason. Of these 92, 43% said they were too busy to make an appointment, 9% said they were not interested in having a faculty advisor, 25% said they assumed an advisor would not be helpful to them, and 23% called for an appointment and either received no answer or failed to have their call returned.

Those students who met with their advisor were generally positive, with a mean rating of 3.8 on a 5-point scale in response to the question "How comfortable were you?", a mean of 3.5 to "How helpful was the session?", and a mean of 3.5 to "How interested was the faculty advisor in you?" Faculty, too, were positive about the experience, indicating that they were quite comfortable talking with the students ($M = 4.5$) and that they thought the sessions were fairly helpful to the student ($M = 3.6$).

The questionnaire we sent to students contained several dependent measures we thought might be affected by the advising session: satis-

faction with the university, perceptions of faculty, fall quarter GPA, first year GPA, and retention. The low rate of making an appointment to see an advisor complicates interpretation of the data. Those 13.5% of the students who made an appointment might well be more motivated, mature, or responsible in general, and they may have had more favorable attitudes toward faculty *before* they saw an advisor.

We compared our original control group with several comparison groups: (a) students who got a letter inviting them to see a faculty advisor (i.e., the original advising group), (b) students who actually saw a faculty advisor, and (c) students who saw their faculty advisor and rated the advising session at least 3 on each of the 5-point scales asking about comfort, helpfulness, and perceived faculty interest. Comparing the control group with the first two comparison groups showed no significant differences on any of the outcome measures. Comparing the control group with students who saw an advisor and rated the session positively showed significant differences favoring the advised group on satisfaction with the university [$t(229) = 2.93, p < .005$, advising mean = 16.70, control mean = 14.741 and perceptions of faculty [$t(229) = 2.35, p < .02$, advising mean 10.89, control mean = 9.87].

The more rigorous analysis involves comparing the responses of students who saw an advisor with their matched control subjects. (And even here the impact of self-selection cannot be eliminated.) Using this matched-pair design, no differences were found on any of the dependent measures between the advising and control groups. The number of subjects in these analyses is small ($n = 20$) because we are limited for most outcome variables to pairs where both students returned the mail questionnaire.

In responding to the item that asked "If you had a personal concern, like trying to decide what to major in or what courses to take, who would you talk to about it?", students were asked to check all groups they would probably talk to. Of the control subjects 62% indicated they would talk to faculty at UIC. Of the students who actually met with a faculty advisor during the pilot program, 76% indicated that they would talk to faculty about a personal concern. Self-selection could well be operating here, for one would expect that students who were motivated to make and keep an appointment with a faculty advisor would also seek faculty advice with a personal concern.

In an attempt to reduce the influence of self-selection, we divided the respondents who had seen an advisor into two groups according to how positively they rated the advising session. Of students who rated the session 3 or higher on each of the scales tapping comfort, helpfulness, and advisor interest, 87% indicated that they would seek faculty advice with a personal concern. Of students who rated their session less positively, only 27% indicated that they would seek advice from faculty on a personal matter. It seems that a session with a faculty advisor that is not viewed positively by the student can affect the student's intent to seek advice from faculty in general. Those students who rated the advising session positively ($n = 38$) were also more satisfied with the university [$t(53) = 2.73, p < .01$] and had more positive views of faculty [$t(53) = 3.03, p < .005$] than students who rated the advising session less than 3 on at least one of the dimensions ($n = 17$).

Conclusions

Despite a research design that had the potential to give us clear information about the effect of faculty advising, the low rate of participation by students makes drawing firm conclusions difficult. Clearly we should have exerted more effort in getting students into the advising sessions. Students' reasons for not participating are informative. The most common reason reported was that students were too busy. In fact the vast majority of the students in our sample (70% of the freshmen and 76% of the transfer students) worked for pay while going to school. The average number of hours worked per week was 18 for the freshmen and 20 for the transfer students. Further, because UIC is a largely a commuter school, the students are typically on campus only when they have classes. The lack of a cohesive campus community is an obstacle to implementing faculty advising; it is also an indication that faculty advising is greatly needed.

Other students indicated that they assumed a faculty advisor would not be helpful to them. Although some mature, self-directed students may have been accurately assessing their situation, their assumption that faculty will not be helpful probably reflects the kind of alienation that the faculty advising program is trying to overcome. Most discouraging of all is the experience of almost one quarter of the students who returned our questionnaire: They called to make an appointment and either got no answer

or did not have their calls returned. In some cases faculty probably tried to return students' calls and were unsuccessful; busy students really are hard to reach. Also, 23% may overestimate the number of students in the whole sample with this experience because students who were frustrated by inefficiencies of the system were probably motivated to return the questionnaire asking about their experiences. Nonetheless, we must do a better job of being available to students who try to make an appointment for advising.

Comparing the original advising and control groups on various outcome measures revealed no differences. This result is not surprising, given that only 13.5% of the advising group actually saw an advisor. The other 86.5% merely got a letter inviting them to make an appointment with a faculty advisor. Receiving such a letter might produce some good will, but it is not a very significant intervention. In fact, merely seeing an advisor for a single session may not be a significant event in a student's education, unless it is the beginning of an ongoing relationship.

Comparing students who did see an advisor with the control group also revealed no significant differences on outcome measures. Perhaps this single session simply is not enough to impact the variables we measured. The lack of a difference may also be due to the fact that some students had negative experiences in the advising session; they were not **comfortable**, did not find the session helpful, and/or did not think their advisor was interested in them. These students showed negative attitudes toward the university and the faculty, and few reported that they would seek faculty advice in the future. Faculty advising where the student does not feel welcome is worse than no advising at all. Overall, however, faculty and students who participated in advising sessions were generally positive about the process, and there is some indication that students who had a positive experience have improved attitudes about the university and are more likely to seek faculty advice in the future.

Faculty who participated in this pilot program were generally those with the most interest in advising students. As we expand the advising to include all undergraduates, we will likely enlist faculty advisors who are less able or less motivated to do a good job. There is potential for faculty advising in some cases to do more harm than good.

We continue to be convinced of the need for and usefulness of faculty advising. We need to put more effort into getting students to advising appointments and to seeing that faculty place a priority on being interested in and helpful to students they advise. Perhaps more aggressive outreach (e.g., telephone calls to students) would produce more advising appointments. We could also **require** students to meet with faculty advisors before allowing them to register. Such a requirement, however, is inconsistent with the goal of fostering cordial, informal interaction. We hope that over time we can increase informal interaction between faculty and students, thereby creating a more cohesive campus community and a more hospitable learning environment.

We continue also to believe that researchers should try to demonstrate clearly the effect of faculty advising or other types of informal student-faculty interactions. The most rigorous way to evaluate the effect of student-faculty interactions is to manipulate experimentally the amount of contact students have. Perhaps other researchers will find our evaluation design useful in preparing to evaluate programs they implement, and perhaps they will get a higher level of student participation.

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