Academic Advising Ain't What It Used To Be: Strangers in the University

Marquita L. Byrd, San Jose State University

"Academic Advising Ain't What It Used To Be" was the keynote address at the 1994 NACADA convention in Las Vegas, Nevada. Byrd discusses the way undergraduate education is changing in terms of student diversity, financing, and time required for graduation and considers how these changes affect academic advisors. In response to calls from college administrators to adapt to the new face of undergraduate education, Byrd suggests equipping faculty for the task of advising by providing specific training and by making advising an official and evaluated aspect of faculty responsibility.

I chose this subject because over the past 24 years as a member of the academy—in both student and faculty roles—I have seen many changes take place on college campuses. When college student populations were fairly homogeneous—predominantly male, predominantly Black or White due to segregation, predominantly young (ages 18 to 22), predominantly housed in residence halls, and predominantly focused on academics with limited work responsibilities—the academic advisor had a tough job but worked with a somewhat predictable number of variables. In the 1990s student demographics have changed, the issues facing students have changed, and the advising process has changed to meet these new challenges; hence my title, "Academic Advising Ain't What It Used To Be."

My notions about academic advising come from my many and varied academic advising experiences over the last 24 years. I began functioning as an advisor as a junior in college in my role as a residence assistant (R.A.) at Central Missouri State University. At that time there was no training for the R.A. beyond an orientation to acquaint us with what was still called the "dormitory" and to warn us about what to watch for. Basically, the R.A. was the long arm of the university placed in residences to enforce the rules, arbitrate disputes, aid in record keeping, and report to the housemother. It was in this capacity that I began to teach other students how to calculate grade point averages (GPAs) and to manage their time to balance classes, homework, and social life. Of course there was a great deal of personal counseling involved as well.

I continued my role as an advisor through my M.A. and Ph.D. programs as a teaching assistant for those six years. In the role of teaching assistant I primarily advised students about the classes I taught, but other academic and personal topics always came up, increasing my advising experience.

There are two other advising experiences in my past that helped shape my notion of what advising is all about. At the University of Houston-Downtown in the early 1980s, the faculty handled class enrollment without the aid of on-line registration. The campus had an open-admissions policy with at least 50% of the students requiring remediation in basic skills. Perhaps 2-5% were children of migrant workers, and a third of the students fell in the international category. Imagine this: I'm sitting in a large room with rows of class cards on tables and computer printouts taped to the walls showing classes and sections that are open. In walks an international student who had arrived in the United States just two days before. The student has a transcript that, although it is in English, is still uninterpretable because it has not been assessed in terms of the value or meaning of the course titles and units at our university. Furthermore, the student has no Test of English as a Foreign Language scores. In the space of 20 minutes I have to assess the student's English proficiency, roughly determine her classification, find available courses that will actually fit her program, and convince her that it would be unwise to enroll in 21 units for her first semester at the university. Here I experienced my baptism of fire into the world of academic advising.

I was trained to advise incoming freshmen in Southeast Missouri State's summer orientation program. The program consisted of two and a half days spent with groups of 12-15 students, teaching them everything from how to read the class schedule to the importance of actually attending class on a regular basis. My student assistant and I were with these students from the initial on-campus testing for basic skills in English, math, and writing until the end of the session when we actually enrolled them for their first

semester using SAT scores, high school class ranks, the basic skills test results, and information gleaned from conversations with them. I was with this program for two summers.

Presently I am a departmental advisor at San Jose State University in Communication Studies. So you see my advising experiences have both breadth and depth.

Definition

Now, let's take a look at the two most important concepts in my title, *advising* and *strangers.* An advisor is one who guides, imparts knowledge, leads, and ultimately helps others become self-sufficient and independent. An advisor can introduce one to new experiences and help one become acclimated to new situations. In addition to these general advising functions, specifically academic advising will, of necessity:

> include schedule planning, appropriate choice of major, and explanation of the curriculum requirements for that major. It will involve teaching students the proper clerical functions to effect their favorable progress through the institution. It will touch on, but not primarily or exclusively, personal adjustment and career choice issues. Finally, good academic advising will teach the student how to locate appropriate specialized services, such as financial aid, career development, and personal counseling, when these services are deemed necessary. (Wall, 1988, p. 70)

As you can see from this definition, academic advising is a highly complex task designed to meet a multiplicity of goals.

The second important concept in the title is *strangers.* The *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* defines a *stranger* as "a person with whom one has had no personal acquaintance . . . a newcomer in a place . . . a person who does not belong to the family, group, or community; an outsider . . . a person unacquainted with or unaccustomed to something." These definitions have inherent in them the notions of disconnectedness, unfamiliarity, and being out of place.

The Problem

Diversification of the Student Body

How are the concepts of *advisor* and *stranger* related? It is the job of the advisor to lead and guide, and the stranger is in need of these services. The problem that we are facing today in higher education is that we have an increasing number of students in the university who qualify as strangers and not enough resources available to provide effective advising. Although all incoming students are initially strangers to the new environment of the university, there are students who feel more out of place than others. In class discussions, advising sessions, and personal conversations, many nontraditional students report feeling out of place long after the initial culture shock of entering college, sometimes into the senior year.

As the student population continues to diversify, every campus finds itself with more people that the original system was not designed to accommodate. According to Arthur Levine, only 20% of the college student population continues to fit the traditional category, namely the full-time student living in a residence hall who is 18-22 years old (Newman, 1994). The overwhelming majority of students—80%—is nontraditional, a classification that has come to encompass numerous groups of people: students returning to school after years in the work force, working women, international students, first generation college attenders, students of color, gay and lesbian students, and disabled students.

As professional and faculty advisors attempt to prepare all of these students for successful matriculation, our jobs have expanded and the information we need has increased. For example, we need to understand the cultures students come from, changing job markets, and even issues concerning housing. I now know that it might be best not to advise a female from a traditional Middle Eastern family to take a night class. I have learned that the competition for grades is spiraling higher because the job market is tighter. And over the past six years I have had to contemplate more than once the impact of homelessness on an advisee.

Student Loans

Not only has the student body changed, but the way students finance higher education has also changed. A recent article in the San Jose Mercury News reported that students today are having to borrow more money than they have in the past to complete a four-year degree (Ostrom, 1994). In California alone $1.7 billion was loaned to students in 1993, a half billion more than in the previous year. The number of students receiving federally guaranteed loans has doubled in the past

five years, with the average student owing $15,000 with a payback of $200 per month over a 10-year period (Ostrom).

Extended Matriculation

Besides borrowing more money, students are taking longer to graduate. The problem with this is that enrollment is on the upswing at a time when sharp cuts in tax dollars have reduced the number of available seats in the academy (Newman, 1994). According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, the number of high school graduates nationwide will increase to 3.3 million in the year 2008, up from 2.5 million in 1993 (Kennedy, 1994). The expected "Tidal Wave II" is in the 10th grade now, the offspring of the baby boomers (Kennedy). This trend toward longer matriculations is stimulated by several developments in higher education, including fewer classes being offered and more students working. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, less than one third of those who began college in 1990 earned an undergraduate degree in four years (Newman). This represents a 45% drop since 1977 in students earning an undergraduate degree in four years. Only 26% of those who began college in 1990 will graduate in five years, 11% in six, and a full 32% will take more than six years to graduate (Newman).

These changes in the manner in which college educations are financed and in the length of time it takes to complete them will have several consequences. One consequence might be that students will choose majors and occupations that will enable them to pay off loans. This would mean steering away from teaching, social work, and graduate school–postbachelor options that may not pay enough to retire the debt from student loans in a reasonable amount of time. According to Richard Carlson, an economist for the State of California, huge student loans after college will reduce credit lines for housing and automobiles, two industries that stimulate the economy (Ostrom, 1994).

Greater student debt becomes an issue in advising because students tend to have an unrealistic picture of their financial prospects after college. They tend to overestimate the amount of money they will make and underestimate the amount of money they will need to live. Students create large postgraduation debt without a clear understanding of how this will affect the quality of their lives. I have often found it necessary to have serious talks with students who are meandering through school, borrowing large amounts of money, and majoring in areas where job prospects and salaries are depressed. On several occasions I have had to advise students about the realities of living with student loan debt. There are times when these students change their matriculation tactics after confronting this reality.

Academic Advisors: How Are We Affected?

What does all this have to do with the academic advisor? Plenty. With these issues at the fore, college and university administrators are asking academic advisors to implement such measures as helping students choose majors earlier and discouraging them from dropping classes as a method of GPA manipulation. Three other measures have been suggested by faculty senates and governing boards that, although not under the jurisdiction of advisors, would change their work schedules and bring added pressures from students: (a) not allowing students to repeat elective courses for better grades, (b) charging tuition by the semester rather than course load, and (c) extending the academic year (Newman, 1994).

Statistical trends indicate an increase in the student population, which will probably mean that each advisor will have more students to work with. A push by administrators for less matriculation time will result in increased job stress for the advisor. Decreases in funding, course offerings, and staff will create more anxiety among students, and this will take its toll on student-advisor interactions. And lastly, greater student diversity will require that advisors know how a student's demographic characteristics might affect the classroom experience and the matriculation path through the university.

These trends and the measures college administrators are suggesting will mean a tougher job for academic advisors in the 21st century. Academic advisors will be asked to move more students through the system faster with fewer resources. How can we be motivated to achieve these goals and execute them effectively?

Academic Departments: What They Can Do

First, faculty advisors need more training. I've taught at five universities, with student bodies

ranging from 10,000 to 20,000, each of which identified teaching as the institution's primary mission. Not one of these schools provided systematic training in academic advising for the faculty. In other words, as students move to upper-division courses and prepare for graduation, they get advising from the least-trained advisors on campus: faculty. Two of the chief complaints in a survey of student satisfaction with advising services were (a) uncaring and inattentive faculty advisors and (b) bad advice from people who were supposed to know better (Hanson & Raney, 1993). These problems can be mitigated with in-service training.

A second method of preparing and motivating advisors for the difficult days ahead is to develop instruments and procedures that allow easy, quick, and reliable assessment of advising effectiveness (Ramos, 1993). Although there are some advising offices that use objective methods of assessing effectiveness, I have yet to see any academic department assess the effectiveness of faculty advising. For the most part, faculty have no interest in documenting time spent in advising, nor do they have methods for verifying effectiveness or gathering data that would be useful in improving advising skills. At most state institutions, 20% of the teaching load is devoted to academic advising. However, without reliable methods of documenting and assessing advising for promotion and tenure, faculty essentially provide a service to students and the university for which they are not compensated. Furthermore, there is no way to reward excellence in advising beyond such popularity contests as outstanding teacher awards. This does not encourage the faculty to strive for excellence in advising.

Conclusion

Training faculty advisors and developing methods of assessing and rewarding excellence in advising are but two steps to be taken to improve the profession. There are other steps that can be taken to improve the lot of the academic advisor, and NACADA is the vanguard in that area. NACADA has been at the forefront of promoting the professional status of academic advising, setting guidelines for better training, and underscoring the vital role that academic advising plays in the life of the academy. With NACADA providing leadership in academic advising into the 21st century, we will see fewer strangers on our campuses and more students that are fully integrated into the academic community.

No, academic advising ain't what it used to be, but with NACADA's help it can evolve into what it should be. Members of NACADA, I salute your work.

References

Hanson, G. R., & Raney, M. W. (1993). Evaluating academic advising in a multiversity setting. *NACADA Journal, 13*(1), 34-42.

Kennedy, M. (1994, November 1). Colleges brace for tidal wave II. *San Jose Mercury News: P.M.*, pp. A1, A13.

Newman, M. (1994, September 26). Dawn of the perennial college student. *San Jose Mercury News*, p. F1.

Ostrom, A. (1994, September 26). College students amassing huge debts. *San Jose Mercury News*, pp. A1, F1.

Ramos, B. (1993). Evaluation, recognition, and reward of academic advising. In M. C. King (Ed.), *Academic advising: Organizing and delivering services for student success* (New Directions for Community Colleges, No. 82, pp. 63-73). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wall, H. (1988). Personal perspectives on the history of academic advising. *NACADA Journal, 8*(2), 66-76.

Marquita L. Byrd is Associate Professor of Communication Studies and serves as a departmental advisor. She is also editor of the California Speech Communication Journal. Address correspondence concerning this article to her at One Washington Square, Communication Studies Department, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA 95192-0112.