

An Assessment of Centralized Versus Faculty Advising in a College of Engineering

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The authors studied use of and satisfaction with advising provided at a centralized advising location compared to faculty advising in individual departments. They hoped to determine whether students' advising needs were being met by these two systems. Although they found no significant differences between departmental and centralized services on advisor availability and concern, they did find that more students used faculty advisors. Further, they discovered many of the advising services offered to be vastly underused. The authors examine this underuse and propose coordination between departmental and central advising systems to better serve students.

Academic advising involves "the provision of educationally-related information and guidance to students confronted with choices and alternative paths in their education" (Trombley & Holmes, 1981, p. 2). Key components of this process include (a) continued contact between advisor and advisee; (b) goal-related activity concerning academic, vocational, and personal issues; and (c) integration of academic and student professional knowledge and skills (Ender, 1983). Essentially, the provision of information within the context of a sensitive and supportive advising relationship can allow a student to adapt more successfully to the university by providing a critical human link (Groth, 1990).

In light of decreasing enrollment and budgetary limitations, university administrators and student affairs professionals are focusing on effective academic advising in their efforts to retain students and maintain the university's positive image (Koerin, 1991). Despite this new emphasis, advising continues to be perceived as having low status and, thus, low priority, particularly for faculty whose efforts in this area are not generally rewarded (Koerin, 1991; Trombley & Holmes, 1981). Other barriers to effective advising are the lack of a shared understanding by students, administrators, and faculty as to what advising does and should entail (Koerin, 1991) and the lack of a comprehensive model for the provision of advising (Sedlacek, 1991). Further, a lack of systems for evaluating advising within institutions leaves advisors and administrators with little feed-

back as to their effectiveness or improvement needs (Kramer, Arrington, & Chynoweth, 1985).

Some studies have assessed various advising services as well as the types of people providing these services. Groth (1990), for example, assessed the walk-in delivery component of a central departmental advising center. She found that, for the institution studied, walk-in services were frequently used and aided the process of advising within the context of a warm, supportive environment. Kramer et al. (1985) evaluated academic advising as provided by a central office within each college and by faculty advisors. They noted that central office was perceived by students, faculty, and administrators as providing information about institutional requirements and information. The primary function of faculty, on the other hand, was perceived as the association of career plans with academic goals. Students and faculty differed, however, in their perceptions of how well faculty fulfilled this function, with students being more negative.

Of particular importance is that these studies demonstrate differences that can exist across and within institutions in terms of services provided; such studies also point to evaluative differences among groups involved, especially between providers and users. As Kramer et al. (1985) discovered, these differences demonstrate that, despite administrative satisfaction with advising, students may indeed hold a different view. Because students are the users of these services, assessing their perceptions is critical. It is important to know, for example, whether students rate services provided by one office differently from similar services provided by another office and, if so, whether they subsequently use the higher-rated services more.

The current study assessed use of and satisfaction with advising services provided to undergraduates in a college of engineering. The assessment focused on (a) how student needs were differently served by a central advising office versus faculty advisors and (b) whether students were well served by this division of services. Advising services were assessed by quality ratings and frequency of use.

Method

Participants

Two student samples participated in the study: (a) students currently using services at the central advising office of an engineering college at a large Eastern university and (b) a random sample of the overall student population in the engineering college at the same university. The first sample provided information about who used central office advising services and what specific services they used. The second sample indicated what proportion of the student population was using the central office and how these students compared with students who used departmental advisors.

Instrument

To assess student use of and satisfaction with advising services, we identified various services provided by advisors. Counselors from the central office drew up a mission statement describing services provided, including advising for educational planning, interpreting institutional policies and requirements, advising for course selection, providing referrals, and teaching time management skills.

Based upon this mission statement, we created a survey instrument containing a series of demographic items (e.g., gender, race, and major) designed to assess who used the advising services. The instrument measured frequency of use (1 = Never, 2 = Once, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often) and rated the quality of services (1 = Poor, 5 = Excellent) at both the central office and the individual departments.

To compare the central office and departmental advising, similar items were created for each of two forms, with one given to students who walked into the central office for advising and the second mailed to a random sample of students. The forms differed only slightly, with the walk-in form asking if the respondent had an appointment and the mail-out form asking if the respondent used services at the central office and, if not, why. An open-ended question was included on both forms asking students to identify what further activities they might want initiated by the central office; general comments on advising were also solicited.

Procedure

We administered walk-in surveys over a six-week period (one week on, one off) during fall regis-

tration when advising needs were high. Our goal was to collect 100 surveys. Mail-out surveys were sent to 50 randomly selected students at each level (freshman through senior), for a total of 200. We followed up within a month with nonrespondents. Once all surveys were collected, we analyzed the data descriptively and through Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and chi-square procedures at the .05 level.

Results

Demographic Information

Fifty-seven students returned the walk-in form and 103 returned the mail-out form ($N = 160$), with 127 male (79%) and 33 female (21%) respondents. They identified themselves as Black or African American (4%), White (73%), Hispanic or Latino (1%), Asian American (21%), and Other (1%), and as freshmen (36%), sophomores (18%), juniors (24%), and seniors (2%). Because there were so few seniors, they were excluded from the analyses, reducing the N to 157.

Percentages obtained for gender, race, and major department were quite similar to the larger population of the college, the major difference being that Whites were overrepresented in the sample. Class levels in the survey were not proportional to those in the overall population; freshmen and sophomores were overrepresented and seniors were underrepresented.

Advising Use and Ratings

In response to, "Where do you go most often to seek advising," 36% of all respondents identified the central office, 59% a departmental advisor, and 5% other. The mail-out form asked if students used services at the central office; 49% did, and 51% did not. Reasons offered for not using the central office were that departmental faculty advising was adequate (54%), that the respondent was not aware of the central office's existence or location (19%), and other (27%). With respect to the walk-in survey, 98% of all respondents had appointments.

Table 1 summarizes the means and standard deviations of use of departmental and central office advising services. Services most frequently sought through departmental advising were registration stamp and signature, assistance with course selection, and information about requirements. Services least sought were advising for personal issues, referrals to other services, and advis-

ing for academic difficulties. At the central office the most-used services were identical, and the least-used were similar—personal issues and academic difficulties—but included attending workshops.

Students were asked to rate availability, concern, knowledge, and adequacy, and Table 2 shows mean ratings for departmental and central office services. Ratings for both types of services were moderate, with the majority of students rating all qualities 3 or above on a 5-point scale (1 = Poor, 5 = Excellent).

Differences by Type of Advising

A repeated measures MANOVA determined that there was a main effect for type of advising (departmental vs. central office; Wilks's $\Lambda = .75$; $F = 2.27$). Paired t tests were then used to discover which pairs of items were actually different (see Table 1). Four "Frequency of Use" items were found to be significantly different: course selection, information about university and major requirements, planning educational programs, and information about career and job opportuni-

Table 1
Frequency of Use of Departmental and Central Office Advising

Item	Departmental		Central Office	
	M	SD	M	SD
1. Assistance with course selection	2.35	1.00	2.00	.84
2. Information about requirements	2.40	.86	2.13	.89
3. Assistance with career goals	1.72	.89	1.66	.83
4. Plan educational program	2.08	.93	1.69	.82
5. Information about job & career opportunities	1.50	.83	1.50	.85
6. Registration stamps & signatures	2.89	1.00	2.18	.97
7. Referrals to other office	1.44	.68	1.49	.70
8. Referrals to other support services	1.33	.66	1.31	.64
9. Academic difficulties	1.26	.63	1.28	.60
10. Personal issues	1.15	.49	1.11	.46
11. Attend workshops	N/A	1.16	.45	
12. Individual meetings	N/A	1.94	.91	

Note: 1 = Never, 2 = Once, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often

Table 2
Student Ratings of Departmental and Central Office Advisors

Item	Departmental		Central Office	
	M	SD	M	SD
1. Availability	3.50	1.10	3.68	1.10
2. Concern	3.36	1.34	3.36	1.34
3. Knowledge	3.75	1.24	3.81	1.10
4. Adequacy	3.60	1.16	3.56	1.08

Notes: Means were not significantly different.

1 = Poor, 5 = Excellent

ties. On all of these items, students used departmental advisors more often. However, no significant differences were found between these two types of advising in student ratings of service quality (i.e., availability, concern, knowledge, and adequacy of service).

The instrument was also designed to determine whether persons using the central office differed from the overall student population. Using MANOVA (Wilks's $\Lambda = .81$; $F = 2.35$), a main effect for form (walk-in versus mail-out) was found on several items. Walk-ins tended to use departmental advising for registrations and signatures less than mail-outs ($M = 2.44$, $M = 3.08$ for central office and departmental advising, respectively). Walk-ins were also significantly more likely to have used the central office for assistance with course selection ($M = 2.26$, $M = 1.81$), assistance in clarifying educational and career goals ($M = 1.88$, $M = 1.46$), assistance in planning an educational program ($M = 1.94$, $M = 1.58$), registration stamps and signatures ($M = 2.44$, $M = 1.98$), and individual meetings with an advisor ($M = 2.10$, $M = 1.78$). These results indicate that walk-in students were more likely than the general population of engineering students to be using services at the central office.

Differences by Student Level

Using MANOVA (Wilks's $\Lambda = .75$; $F = 2.21$), a main effect for student level (e.g., freshman, sophomore) was found for several items. Least significance difference post hoc tests were then conducted to determine how groups differed from one another. For example, freshmen used departmental advisors less frequently than sophomores for a variety of services: assistance with course selection (freshman $M = 2.00$, sophomore $M = 2.16$; on a 4-point scale where 1 = Never, 2 = Once, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often), information about career and job opportunities (freshman $M = 2.10$, sophomore $M = 2.56$), referrals to the central office (freshman $M = 1.23$, sophomore $M = 1.69$), and registration stamps and signatures (freshman $M = 2.32$, sophomore $M = 2.89$).

With respect to differences in seeking advising from the central office, we found that sophomores were more likely than freshmen to attend workshops (freshman $M = 1.00$, sophomore $M = 1.33$), and juniors were more likely than freshmen to have individual meetings with an advisor in the central office (freshman $M = 1.76$, junior $M = 2.15$).

Chi-square tests also showed differences by student level. Freshmen tended to go more often to the central office for overall advising ($\chi^2 = 24.35$, $p < .05$), whereas sophomores and juniors did not differ significantly in their preferences. Chi-square also revealed that freshmen tended to be categorized as Undecided ($\chi^2 = 33.57$, $p < .05$).

General Comments

Over half of all respondents offered comments about advising in general. With respect to departmental advising, some students focused on their concern about the unavailability of their assigned faculty advisor. Others commented specifically on an advisor and the help they had or had not received.

Similar reactions were noted for the central office; many of these responses were positive, students indicating that they felt well advised. One concern among students seemed to be differing levels of quality among the advisors. This seemed to stem from whether advising had been received at the central office from a professional or at an orientation program from a peer. Another concern indicated the central office's need to advertise its services more often, particularly to incoming students.

Discussion

A major finding of this study was that more students went to faculty advisors than to the central office for advising, with only freshmen tending to use the central office more often. Yet students used the same services provided by each advising system, such as assistance with course selection, and ratings of services provided by the central office and faculty members were similarly favorable. Use of departmental services to meet needs traditionally thought to be met by faculty advisors, such as provision of career information (Kramer et al., 1985), did not differ significantly from central office use. The same was true for traditional central office services, such as providing registration stamps; students did not differ significantly in use of either faculty or the central office for these services.

Thus, it is not apparent that different needs were served by dichotomizing services for students, at least with respect to needs addressed in this study. That is, students tended to use similar services provided by both systems of advisors and feel equally satisfied. It is possible that dichotomization within the institution under

study may have resulted as much from an institutional need to efficiently provide advising services to a large number of students as from a developmental model of providing different services at different times in a student's life. Given the lack of a mission statement for both the central advising office and faculty advisors at the beginning of the assessment project, this conclusion is quite likely true; the roles of both the central office and faculty advisors were not clearly delineated at the start. The college is using results from this study to clarify the functions of the two systems. Such definitional confusion has been observed elsewhere in other advising systems (Kramer et al., 1985).

Another major finding is that students seem to be underusing services that are offered. For example, students rarely or never sought advising from either the central office or the individual departments for academic difficulties, personal issues, assistance with career goals, or information about job and career opportunities. Why are students not using these particular services more often? The simplest, most obvious possibility is that students simply do not need these services. But the general comments suggest that underuse may result instead from not being aware that these services are available. If this is so, publicity may resolve student underuse. Advertising might be tried, say, at different times of the year or at different points in a student's career, through a variety of avenues (e.g., handouts, announcements in required courses, and bulletin boards). Another possibility is that students are turning to other sources, such as peers or faculty members with whom they are acquainted, for these services. Knapp and Karabenick (1988) have noted that students tend to turn to informal rather than formal sources of help. The authors cited embarrassment as a possible reason for this phenomenon. A related issue may be that the majority of these students were not oriented toward seeking counseling. Publicity may then need to center on motivating students (e.g., by highlighting how effective course and career planning may help a student obtain a higher paying job).

Another interesting finding was the lack of referrals from one advising system to another or to outside service systems. Thus, a second question is: How might the advising systems better coordinate with each other and other on-campus services? This is an issue the central office may be better equipped to resolve, as it employs full-time advisors who could provide an effective and con-

sistent pathway of communication. Also some activities identified in the questionnaire may be more appropriately located at the central office, which employs professional counselors. A pathway of communication, then, might be designed to join the two systems, identifying critical personnel links. Kishler (1985) provides an example of how this might be done, using a coordinating committee made up of advisors and administrators to help define pathways of communication and describe scenarios where such communication might be beneficial.

Several limitations in this study should be noted. First, the sampling procedures varied for each advising system and may have contributed to the results. A random sample of all students was compared with an incidental sample of students using centralized advising services. A random sample of each population would have been preferable.

Also, only a small amount of information (from the open-ended questions asking for suggestions) pointed to what needs might *not* be currently being met. This may be an important avenue to explore, especially because the data indicate that many students have never or only once used many advising services offered by both systems. Interviews may reveal why such services have not been used more frequently.

The study was conducted during the fall semester; results might have differed had it been conducted in the spring when students would have had more experience with advising systems.

Another important limitation deals with items measuring departmental services. Our instrument compared generalized services offered by the central office to departmental advising. Departmental advisors may thus not be prepared to provide such services (e.g., personal counseling). Also services provided by individual departments not commensurate with central office services were not included.

Future research might focus on what services are offered by individual departments and how often these services are used, particularly in further assessing the extent to which differing needs are met by faculty advisors and central office advisors. Additional research could also be done to see if the findings in the study might be applicable to other colleges at the same or another university. However, it should be clear that there is a need to continue to evaluate advising services to students.

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A Myth of Higher Education?—You Be the Judge

Our two senior chemistry majors had worked hard all semester. Finals had begun, but each figured that she'd be able to get an A in their final chemistry course with a minimum of studying. They decided to take a road trip the day before the final, figuring that they'd review the material in the car during their drive. Anticipating an excellent time ahead, they drove to a neighboring university to party with some friends.

Drunk on their butts, they slept in at the party site and missed their final. The following day they approached their chemistry professor, explaining that they had had to make their road trip to console a long-time buddy whose mother had just died. They further explained that, on their way back, they had had a flat tire and that the spare had also been flat, thus hindering their homeward progress to the tune of missing the final.

The professor agreed to let them make up the exam that afternoon. He placed the budding chemists in adjoining classrooms and gave them the exam. Each proceeded to whip through the 100-point exam, independently, but silently, rejoicing at the ease with which they were whizzing through the material...until they reached the final question, posed for 50 points, "Which tire?"