

Academic Advising as a Multisystem, Collaborative Enterprise

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An institution's system of academic advising is characterized not only by formal organizational structures and delegated responsibilities, but also by a diverse set of dynamic influences. These influences comprise different systems operating at the various levels of a) the individual student, b) the advisor, c) the advising center or department, and d) the institution. A systems approach—both stressing functional relationships among persons and units, and examining transactions and processes—provides a useful foundation for understanding, assessing, and improving academic advising. Implications of this approach are described.

The literature on the organization of academic advising commonly refers to seven organizational types charted by Wes Habley (1983, 1988). This typology has been useful for discussing such issues as the prevalence of different organizational models, the effectiveness of advising, and the costs of advising services (Habley, 1988, 1992; Habley & McCauley, 1987). In essence, the types describe the formal delivery system and the delegated responsibilities for advising (see Crockett, 1985; Frank, 1988; King, 1988; Kozloff, 1985). However, structure is not the same as function. In the case of academic advising, organizational structures alone do not describe how the system is operating. A great deal of what happens in academic advising cannot be placed on an organizational chart.

A more accurate picture of academic advising derives from a systems view focusing upon the processes and functional relationships that influence students, advisors, departments, advising units, and administrators. We will be in a better position to assess and improve advising if we examine the various transactions in the advising system that both a) influence the quality of advising for students and b) enhance the advising by staff and faculty.

Advisees know that much advising is informal and is conducted by individuals who have no delegated advising responsibilities. Advising professionals know that these various transactions have great impact upon students. Faculty and staff also know that advising is influenced by many transactions within the institution. Yet we may be so close to these transactions in practice that they are tacit, taken-for-granted aspects of our efforts rather than explicit topics for our attention. In order to improve advising, however, we must make explicit what is

tacit. Viewing academic advising as a *multisystem, collaborative enterprise* facilitates this effort.

This paper explores the importance of the systems view for the administration and improvement of academic advising. The description of the systems approach will be followed by descriptions of the various systems involved in academic advising.

The Systems Approach

A brief description of the philosophy underlying the systems approach provides a foundation for our discussion.

Systems philosophy, following the work of such systems theorists as Bertalanffy (1968) and Laszlo (1972/1973), emphasizes that very few systems are "closed," uninfluenced by a surrounding environment or context. In general, systems are "open," characterized by numerous influences. A systems view of a phenomenon examines both intra-systemic (within a system) and inter-systemic (among systems) dynamics, events, roles and functions. In order to understand these processes, one's approach must be integrative rather than analytic: a consideration of how the system functions as a whole rather than a separate inspection of constituent parts.

The systems framework has been applied to such areas as cybernetics, the mind, physical nature, and ethics. A familiar, contemporary application to organizational behavior is "total quality management" (TQM), sometimes referred to as "continuous quality improvement" (CQI). As viewed in TQM and CQI, "... every process takes place within a network of other processes. This network is called a system. Elements of a system are interconnected, so each process affects other processes within the system" (Bonstingl, 1992, p. 26). Quality, or lack thereof, is an attribute of the system, not a given product or service.

A Systems Approach to Student Services

The systems approach is important for the management of student affairs divisions, as Miller and Prince (1976, p. 151) note:

The system concept is central. When the organization is seen as a living whole whose parts are interlocked in complex patterns, then it can no longer be only a group of functions or a hierarchy of people in boxes. If we want to alter or develop a particular unit, all its actual

and possible ties to the other parts have to be considered—certainly not an easy task. The field of systems analysis has grown in response to this need.

Smith, Lippitt, and Sprandel (1985, p. 368) adopt a systems viewpoint in advocating a campus-wide retention program:

Briefly, the key interdependent parts of our higher education system are

1. A vertical set of relations between system levels: trustees, administrators, faculty, support personnel, and students
2. A horizontal set of relations between departments, peer managers/administrators, peer teachers, student leaders, student organizations, and so on
3. Relations between elements of the past (traditions, mission statement, reputation), the present (morale, standards, procedures), and the future (goals, perspectives, and so on)
4. Relations between the system and its environment (economic, political, physical factors, and others)

Borgard (1981, p. 4) draws some of the implications for advising:

The academic advising administrator must attune himself [herself] to institutional services such as registration and scheduling, admissions, and student life in addition to the academic components, since their operations affect the quality of the student's educational experience.

In short, the systems view is important for understanding and managing functions in higher education—advising included. Emphases of the systems approach are reflected in the above passages by such

phrases as “living whole,” “parts . . . interlocked in complex patterns,” “vertical . . . [and] horizontal set[s] of relations,” and “attune.” The following sections apply these emphases to advising.

Advising as a System

A systems analysis of academic advising must go beyond a delineation of the “components of the planned system,” even when planning arises from “collaboration and shared responsibility” (Frost, 1991, p. v). It also must go beyond an “advisee focus” (Higginson, Trainor & Youtz, 1994, p. 136) since important transactions do not involve students directly. What must be examined are the various transactions and influences—planned or otherwise, involving students or not—that constitute advising as a living, dynamic, evolving system. Many of these transactions may be informal; many which are formal may be subtle in their effects. However, in a systems view, formality or subtlety is not the issue—*influence* is the key. Table 1 summarizes how the systems approach to advising contrasts with the normal, organizational approach.

How might a systems analysis of an advising system be conducted? Consider the various perspectives of the advising system on a given campus: the student, the advisor/unit, and the institution (see Hines, 1981, p. 27). Each of these focal points serves to identify divergent sets of influences within the larger system. To some extent, these divergent influences form a hierarchy of ecological systems. The “NACADA Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising” (National Academic Advising Association [NACADA] 1995, p. 5) implicitly adopts a systems approach by noting advisors' responsibilities to various constituencies: students,

Table 1

Contrasting the Emphases	
Organization View	Systems View
How advising is organized	What transactions occur
To whom responsibility for advising is delegated	Who influences whom
How the advisor assists the student	What functional relationships exist within the institution
How advisors are trained	How work teams/quality circles are cross-trained
What information students have available (top-down)	How information flows within the institution (feedback-feedforward)
Advisor–advisee focused	Participant focused

colleagues, institutions, communities, professions, and more generally, higher education.

From the perspective of the *student*, the advising system includes any source of information that influences an academic decision. Students obtain information from a variety of sources, including admissions materials, orientation presentations, academic advisors, department chairpersons, university administrators, financial aid staff, registrar's staff, residence life staff, tutorial program staff, faculty members, full- and part-time clerical staff, other students, and even parents. The settings for advising transactions run the gamut from publications and bulk mailings to group presentations, individual appointments, and contacts with support staff. Transactions may provide information and help students evaluate choices and alternatives (see Shane, 1981). Many transactions occur within the institu-

tion's "academic referral system" (see, e.g., Kapraun & Coldren, 1982) while others do not. Chronologically, the transactions begin with the public's perceptions of the institution, and continue through student recruitment, admission, orientation, enrollment, and graduation. Table 2 lists typical events that impact the advising system as experienced by individual students. It should be noted that a given simple, generic category often represents a set of highly diverse activities.

From the perspective of the *advisor*, the advising system includes sources of information and policy making that affect how the advisor advises students. Advisors receive, and must be aware of, a great deal of printed material as well as computerized student information. Advisors need up-to-date information on course offerings, programs of study, academic policies and procedures, as well as pertinent student

Table 2

Transactions Within the Student's Advising System

Recruitment activities

Application process

Readmission process

Post-admissions, pre-enrollment activities

Orientation programs

Continuing orientation programs and courses

Departmental mailings and circulars

Individual appointments and group information sessions with academic advisors or departmental representatives

Workshops by and contacts with, for example, residential life, counseling center, career planning office, learning resource center, internship office, and student organizations

Registration and pre-registration activities

Regular Drop/Add

Late Drop/Add

Declaring/changing major(s)/minor(s)

Transferring to another school

Withdrawing from the institution

Mid-semester grades and accompanying letters or notices

Final grade reports

Academic difficulty notifications, decisions and appeals

Graduation audits and progress reports

affairs matters. Kelly (1988, p. 84) once estimated that an advisor's "tool kit" at a major, public institution had "1,000 pieces of discrete information" just to advise freshmen appropriately. Training sessions and in-service workshops for advisors are often held. Advisors may also receive explicit direction and feedback from supervisors, colleagues, and students.

From the perspective of the advising *unit* or academic department, the advising system involves how students are processed at the institution, transactions are conducted, referrals are made, and information is made available (such as through advising folders, computerized records, or results of institutional research). Units are affected by such factors as institutional commitment to advising, advising evaluations and rewards, strategic planning priorities, allocations of fiscal and human resources, and implementation of decisions concerning space management and technological systems.

Lastly, from the perspective of the *institution*, academic advising impacts the institutional mission and the ability of the institution to reach goals and objectives (see Young, 1985). College administrators must be aware of accreditation standards, both of regional accreditation agencies and specialized professional programs. Public institutions must also follow state mandated policies, such as state-wide entrance requirements for students, must often foster inter-institution cooperation concerning transfer students, and must also function as part of a state-wide system of higher education (see Glennen, Farren, Vowell & Black, 1989). These sources of influence are also part of the advising system.

Fostering System Quality

A staff member or committee given the responsibility for improving the institution's system of academic advising may face a daunting task. How can such a wide-ranging, distributed, decentralized system be managed? Because students consult with a diverse range of individuals, how can the dissemination of contradictory, as well as misleading, information be avoided? If academic advising is a series of decentralized events, how can quality in the advising system be assured? The answer is as diverse as the system itself.

Students are not passive recipients of information and influence. Students need to be empowered to seek out and sift through information pertinent to their needs. Part of this empowerment would entail students' giving feedback to parts of the system that influence them. When feedback occurs, students are neither products of the system nor merely customers—they become participants.

At the level of the academic advisor and other frontline personnel, appropriate training is important (see, e.g., Frank, 1988; Kapraun & Coldren, 1982). If the persons who influence students' academic decisions are well prepared and handle students' questions and situations in an accurate, uniform manner, the decentralized system can function effectively. Availability of accurate, up-to-date student and institutional information is important for effective personnel function.

It is at the levels of the advising unit and institution that the full implications of advising as a multi-system, collaborative enterprise can be recognized. These levels will be examined at length.

The Ecology of Advising Units

It is not surprising that the quality of advising depends in many ways upon information the advisor and advising unit receives from other units of an "information support system" (see, e.g., Kapraun & Coldren, 1982). As the TQM and CQI literature says, "customers" are those persons and organizations impacted by the unit's products and/or services, whether these customers are co-employees or not. "Everyone inside every organization is a supplier as well as a customer, and therefore chains and networks of partnership and mutual support (externally as well as internally) must be built to optimize the effectiveness of the organizational system" (Bonstingl, 1992, p. 34).

Consider the kinds of information advisors should have available when advising students. Most of the information about the student comes from student records, whether on a computer or in a hard copy. Who supplies this information to the advisor? How accurate is it? How up-to-date? Do multiple sources provide conflicting information? In terms of computerized student records, does the information entered by one unit prevail over or conflict with that entered by other units? Similar concerns pertain to information about academic programs, policies, and procedures.

The direction of influences on advising is typically one-way, that is, the advisor is affected by, but does not directly affect, information support units. The advisor often feels at the mercy of these units: unit decisions and unit procedures. These non-collaborative relations ultimately cause " 'system pain,' which occurs when any part is experiencing discomfort with the functioning of the total system or over its role in influencing the total system" (Smith, et al., 1985, p. 371).

Glennen, et al. (1989) note that effective communication to and from an advising center is essential.

Unfortunately, the following characterization is all too typical: "People within the organization do not treat one another as essential suppliers and customers, so the synergy that might 'make things click' never even begins" (Bonstingl, 1992, p. 27).

One mechanism for making things click and reducing system pain involves holding meetings with representatives from different offices. Recent years have seen a proliferation of advising networks and "NACADA locals" that cross unit boundaries on college campuses. These formalized contacts among staff members from university offices such as admissions, registration, orientation, computing services, counseling, career planning, special student services, placement testing, adult student services, athletics, and academic advising serve to improve the flow of information and improve the dynamics of the advising system (see, e.g., Glennen, et al., 1989). In many cases these groups are involved with internal governance decisions, such as those concerning academic policies and procedures. These groups may also sponsor advisor training workshops and author advisor manuals or newsletters. Networks facilitate effective advising changes better than individual advisors, the typical ad hoc committee, or institutional task force (see Arndt, 1987; Looney, 1988; Smith, et al., 1985). When these groups focus upon assessing and improving activities at the institution, they constitute what are known in the TQM literature as *quality circles*.

Networks formalize many informal, campus-wide connections that advisors readily make in practice. H. C. Kramer (1985, pp. 44-45) refers to "boundary spanners," individuals with "lateral relations" who gather and disseminate information (see also Looney, 1988). Boundary spanners are the cross-unit eyes and ears of an effective advising system. Without them, many planned-for improvements in advising may not be actualized (see, Looney, 1988), and many changes, which from a limited perspective may seem like improvements, turn out to be problems when implemented (Smith, et al., 1985).

A different aspect of networking is the more recent emphasis upon *cross-training*. In cross-training, personnel are trained not only by their supervisors but also by employees who specialize in other areas, often on a reciprocal basis with each staff training the other. Such cross-training in higher education enables personnel to see students and situations in a more global fashion and serves as a foundation for boundary spanning. Cross-training is especially productive when it goes beyond a presen-

tation of information about a unit to describe internal procedures used by other units and the constraints or problems those units encounter. On-location training sessions enable outside personnel to experience the day-to-day staff routines and to witness the encounters between students and staff. Cross-training also serves as the basis for anticipation of possible consequences, be the context one of advising a student or implementing changes within a unit. By understanding more about how parts of the system work, participants in the system elevate the system's overall effectiveness.

To be effective, networking and cross-training must be viewed as opportunities for collaboration. They must be forums not only for shared information but for consensus building about common goals and perspectives (see NACADA, 1995). The tenor of the network is crucial. If the institutional climate is permeated by protection of personal "turf," creative use of available resources to solve critical problems may not occur. The more that units reveal their inner workings, the more they may be scrutinized. Openness and sharing will be diminished if one or more units, or even key representatives, feel threatened by others.

One means for fostering a networked, collaborative advising system at the level of the institution involves designating a particular person to be the coordinator of academic advising. Whatever titles these persons might have, their roles would be to ensure that the advising system fosters the development of both students and advisors (see, e.g., Frank, 1988; H. C. Kramer, 1984). In terms of systems theory, this person's role would be to focus on the self-regulation and self-adaptation of the system, that is, to monitor how the system functions and evolves. Such monitoring would involve a feedback process in which the coordinator understands the advising system's function and uses it to create system changes: assessment and planning in tandem form such a feedback process. Equally important is a feedforward process in which an administrator anticipates and plans for changes in the advising system processes and/or environment rather than waits for the consequences to occur. To be effective, the advising coordinator (boundary spanner par excellence) needs to be aware of the advising system as a whole and the institutional changes that could impact the system. Coordinators "out of the loop" can only function in a reactive, feedback manner rather than proactively in a feedforward fashion. Similarly, a coordinator in name only, with no significant avenues for influencing how the advising system functions, is equally "out of the loop."

Transcending Advising: Institutional Mission

Ultimately, the vitality of the advising system depends upon how it is linked to the lifeblood of the institution. The institution's mission offers a significant, transcending context for academic advising. The significance of institutional mission for advising is reflected in the first section of the *Academic Advising Standard: Self Assessment Guide* (Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs, 1988). The first item in this section reads: "There exists a well developed, written set of academic advising goals that are consistent with the stated mission of the institution." The primary context for the advising system is the institution's chosen identity and purpose. A secondary context is the mission's goals for student development: "The academic advising program goals are consistent with the stated student services/development goals of the institution." Glennen and Vowell (1995) make the institutional context the lead section in their monograph about academic advising. By implication, judgments of the academic advising system must be grounded in the institution's stated mission and student development goals.

In addition to the explicit mission of the institution, other documents lay the foundation for academic advising (see Glennen, 1995). Many institutions have adopted the philosophy of advising statements. Undergraduate catalogs often include statements about advising, as do manuals concerning academic policies and regulations. Each of these influences how advising is transacted and perceived.

Beyond institutional self-statements, there are the concrete embodiments of these commitments. How much attention is paid to academic advising by, for example, the faculty evaluation process and the strategic planning goals? Is advising linked to a campus-wide retention effort or student-centered approach? Are the needs for effective advising part of an institutional consensus or, instead, the goals of individual units (and advisors) in isolation? When hard budgetary decisions are made, whether in times of expansion or retrenchment, how do advising-related goals fare? Administrative support is crucial in each of these areas of concern. For example, Glennen, et al. (1989) describe the important roles played by campus administrators as advising was improved. Frank (1988) has described a model of how advising systems evolve when attention is paid to the goal of improved advising. The converse situation of atrophy has not been examined in the literature but is all too vivid in times of budget cuts, retrenchment and concern over "turf" (see Smith, et al., 1985).

Institutional commitment to and reward for advising are important factors in establishing an advising system to meet students' needs (see, e.g., Frank, 1988; Kapraun & Coldren, 1982). Units and individuals within the advising system fulfill other functions, such as teaching or recruiting, in addition to those which promote effective advising. If motivations for an effective advising system decline, motivations for competing functions will gain strength, and nonadvising activities will be emphasized in the institution while the impetus for collaborative efforts and networking for advising will dissipate.

Of course, a given institutional goal can be pursued in multifaceted ways. Advising can improve student retention, for example, but so will several other components of institutional activity (see, e.g., Kapraun & Coldren, 1982). Advising must compete with other activities when resources are allocated to institutional goals. Moreover, conflicts often occur when multiple goals are incompatible. For example, an admissions office focusing on enrollment growth may want entering students to register for classes as soon as possible to "lock them in" to the institution, while an orientation office focusing on student development issues might emphasize programs occurring after high school graduation, and an advising office might desire a later date of enrollment to ensure completion of placement tests and receipt of comprehensive student information. Each unit may make different recommendations concerning dates for a combined orientation, advising, and registration program.

Institutional priorities set the agenda for units, faculty members, and staff and will affect advising transactions both with students and among units/advisors. The planning process (see, e.g., G. L. Kramer, 1984) and discussions of resource allocation should reflect those priorities. Byrd (1995) notes that various trends in higher education administration may significantly impact the roles of academic advisors; these impacts should be discussed when administrative decisions are being made. The organizational culture must also be considered: "Shared beliefs and values represent common assumptions that guide organizational thinking and action" (H. C. Kramer, 1984, p. 49). These shared beliefs and values will, as a matter of course, influence perceptions of the advising system, its value and status.

In order to improve the advising system from the perspective of the institution, the implication is clear: linkages between academic advising and the mission of the institution must be discussed, clarified, articulated, and supported. An important aspect

of this process of discussion, clarification, articulation, and support involves professional development (see NACADA, 1995). Persons who influence the vitality of the advising system should be familiar with the profession of advising and the critical features of advising practice. As members of professional associations and as conference attendees, faculty and staff develop as professionals and share institutional information for comparison. This enhanced professionalism feeds back into the institution's advising system. Professional contacts with colleagues from other institutions enrich one's home institution. Indeed, being trans-institutional is one means for fostering improvements in academic advising (see, e.g., Looney, 1988). As the constituent elements of a system develop, so can the system itself.

Conclusion

In contrast to the organizational approach, what general recommendations does systems theory offer for administrators of academic advising programs?

1. We need to examine advising activities in a broad context, not just within our own positions, offices or institutions. We must also broaden our view beyond the advising organization itself: we must keep the institutional ecology in mind.

2. In order to improve the system of academic advising, we need the collaboration and support of faculty and staff throughout the institution, at every personnel level from the president and/or chancellor to the work-study student and part-time clerical employee.

3. A director of advising, whether given that specific title or not, has direct control over only a portion of the academic advising system. The system as a whole crosses unit and division boundaries and has diverse influences.

4. In order to meet certain institutional goals through improvements in academic advising, we must understand the entire context of academic experiences and decisions. Advising is not separated from other units within the institution even if other units are primarily focused on other objectives.

5. Showing interest in another unit's activities should not be seen as intrusive. By learning more about different parts of the system, we are better able to work within it and to be productive. For similar reasons, we should be receptive to others' interests in and suggestions about our own activities and operations.

The academic advising system as a whole exhibits great diversity and is so expansive that comprehensively perceiving its various influences is

difficult. Based on their unique perspectives, members of the institution are likely to have differing views of what advising is and how it is working. The situation is not unlike the story of the blind men touching different parts of an elephant. Each developed a different view of what the elephant was like. As the story goes, they even began to argue about their perspectives, each being both right and wrong (Shah, 1970).

Unfortunately, discussions about academic advising all too often follow a similar pattern. For example, when Lazerson and Wagener (1992) suggested that faculty should assume responsibilities for advising and that staff advisors should be eliminated, Grites, Kelly, and King (1992) responded in a rather defensive way. It is likely that the divergent viewpoints arose from differences concerning what is meant by "advising," what should comprise the advising system, and how this system should be linked to goals of higher education. The public exchange would have benefitted by examining these broad, yet fundamental issues.

The systems approach to advising provides a rationale for holding such broad, fundamental discussions; for coordinating unit activities; for improving staff functions; and for integrating advising into the central mission and goals of the institution. It is a rationale for promoting quality advising system-wide.

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