The McDonaldization of Advising

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George Ritzer in his McDonaldization of Society *addresses four basic and alluring dimensions of modern life: efficiency, predictability, quantifiable and calculated service, and control (Ritzer, 1993). With increasing and alarming frequency, academic advising in many commuter colleges has adopted the McDonaldization mindset. This is not a surprising evolvement given students' limited time on campus and the high percentages of nontraditional students who, while attending college, are often holding jobs and supporting families. Chesterfield-Marlboro Technical College adopted the McDonaldization mindset as they sought to make the advising process quick and efficient. In academic advising, however, faster is not always better.*

Ritzer identified efficiency, predictability, quantifiable and calculated service, and control as those dimensions that have impacted on society and have resulted in a process he defined as *McDonaldization.* He used McDonald's restaurant as a metaphor to describe a "process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant have come to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world" (1993, p. 1). This process has changed not only the restaurant industry but also banking, dieting, shopping, work, travel, family, and education (Ritzer, 1993). Almost every sector of society has felt the influence of McDonaldization. A "fast food" mentality has become an integral part of life.

An academic workload for faculty included six classes and advising loads ranging from 30 to 60 advisees at Chesterfield-Marlboro Technical College, which adopted parts of the McDonaldition mindset with academic advising. Making advising quick seemed a logical goal because the Chesterfield-Marlboro Technical is a relatively small commuter college with a high proportion of nontraditional students, many of whom are attempting to further their education and manage family, employment, and other priorities as well. Advisors increasingly focused on making the advising process as quick, efficient, and as painless as possible, while assuming that the quality of student advising was remaining constant—if not improving. Some of the most appealing aspects of technology even hastened the embracement of the McDonaldization mindset. Advising issues and questions, which in the past had required a face-to-face discussion between advisor and advisee, could now be handled by E-mail or a few strokes of the computer keyboard. Students were permitted to advise over the telephone, select classes by consulting advisors other than their own, and make changes in their class schedules without consulting their advisors.

In academic advising, however, faster is not always better, especially when long-term benefits may be sacrificed for more immediate results. The need to involve students as partners in their education, and thereby in academic advising, is emphasized throughout the persistence and advising literature. Recently, Anderson (1992) examined student persistence and concluded that "promoting persistence must be geared toward stimulating, facilitating and empowering students to become personally involved and to put forth quality effort . . ." (p. 1). O'Banion (1994) noted, "students are responsible for making decisions throughout the advising process" (p. 11). Twelve major themes of advising identified by Creamer and Creamer (1994) included viewing students as partners in the advising process, recognizing the positive relationship between good advising and student persistence, and tying effective advising to positive educational outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

McDonaldization of advising may not allow students the opportunity to maximize their educational experience. By succumbing to the allure of the McDonaldization of advising, advisors were drawn away from a developmental and student-centered advising process, thereby limiting students' opportunities to become partners in the design and pursuit of their academic goals. Students did not complain. In fact, over 90% reported feeling that academic advising was meeting their needs, as they perceived academic advising as a means to an end—scheduling classes. They were all too often exposed to a neatly packaged schedule of courses that compromised the true quality and effectiveness of developmental advising.

With the aid of computer terminals, advising became more quantifiable and more predictable. Routine procedures produced routine advising ques-

tions. Interactions between advisor and advisee resembled a predictable, efficient, and quantifiable scripted encounter. Advising opportunities were missed. Dependency was fostered and advising became a series of predictable responses to the student question, "Here I am. What should I take?"

In spite of high levels of student satisfaction, the need for change became obvious. An unacceptably high attrition rate, recommendations from external accrediting associations, renewed statewide emphasis on institutional effectiveness and internal accountability efforts were all factors. Added to these was an advising process that was providing little or no job satisfaction to the advisors. Thus, it became imperative to implement changes that would enhance what most students and some advisors felt was an already functioning advising system. Proposed changes in the process were placed in the context of anticipated outcomes. From an institutional and divisional perspective, improved retention was the objective. Specific advising outcomes were developing the students' decision-making skills, enhancing self-esteem, fostering independence, and encouraging greater self-investment in the advising process.

The initial priority was to break out of the McDonaldization mindset that both students and advisors had adopted. Changes were designed not to make the academic advising process more cumbersome to students and advisors but to foster a more developmental philosophy and approach. The initial change was to move from a more "strung-out, catch-as-catch-can system" to a two-day block of time for advising only. All faculty advisors were present. Students were assigned a specific time to meet with their advisor with no external interruptions. Telephone advising was discouraged and one-on-one, face-to-face advising was encouraged. Schedule changes or problems requiring administrative approval could be solved with the student present. Advisors could communicate with the administrators and other faculty members about prerequisite requirements, placement testing and interpretation, transfer issues, and so forth, insuring the student would receive correct advice. Advisors had the opportunity to connect with the advisees and discuss career objectives, personal issues relative to the advisee's academic progress, and academic goals. For many advisors the process put a face with a name for the first time. The process facilitated a more deliberate and thorough approach to advising.

The immediate results of this initial modification were positive. Students were requested to complete a brief evaluation of the new process at the end of their advising sessions. The Institutional Research Office then compiled the results. All students (100%) indicated they were informed of their advising appointment in advance. Students indicated they felt more involved in the decision-making process (91%) and were provided the opportunity to have all their questions explored (94%). Most significant, 86% of the advisees considered the new advising process better.

Overall, the new approach appears to have placed Chesterfield-Marlboro Technical College on the road to an advising process that is more student centered and less schedule centered. The majority of advisors were enthused with the reactions of their advisees and felt the process was a great improvement. The experience at Chesterfield-Marlboro suggests caution as institutions rely more and more on technology and other avenues to make academic advising as quick, efficient, and painless as possible for both the student and academic advisor.

References

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