

### **Good Faculty Advising in the Research University: Are We Dreaming the Impossible Dream?**

I have never been overly concerned with the debates over which advising theory or delivery system is best. After 25 years in higher education, I have concluded the deciding factors in determining the quality of academic advising are seldom ever the advisor's professional title or even espoused theory of advising. What usually matters are such factors as a caring attitude, sensitivity, a strong sense of professional commitment to helping the student, quality referral services, a good training program, and accurate information. Given these, most faculty can provide excellent academic advising.

Why then does the preponderance of good academic advising appear in the smaller and midsized institutions? One can rule out most differences in student characteristics, institutional knowledge of what comprises good advising, and the feasibility of providing quality training and support services. The students are not that different. The knowledge base is there for all to use. Larger institutions usually have greater resources to devote to training and support services.

I have recently served on a variety of groups charged with suggesting avenues for improved institutional academic advising. I have concluded that any institution CAN provide excellent academic advising. Relative to other programs, doing so is not that expensive. Resources are seldom beyond reach. What seems to be lacking at the research institutions are commitment, priority, and follow-through from the top administrative levels down through the departmental leadership. I stop short of chiding individual faculty advisors because neither the messages they receive (written, spoken, or implied) nor their professional evaluation, reward, and advancement system convey the idea that excellent academic advising is a priority equal to that of research, acquisition of extramural funding, or teaching.

This perspective is nothing new, right? ACT and others have been telling us for years that the provision of good academic advising requires a commitment from the top down, clearly stated priorities, assigned responsibilities, and accountability. However, in the research university, the drive to acquire extramural funds and "turn out" research become so strong that the priority of and commitment to quality advising, and sometimes even quality teaching, are lost in the hierarchy of priorities or relegated to such a low level as to receive little attention.

The problem is illustrated by my recent experience with the academic deans at a research university. Parental complaints and alumni feedback had indicated very serious problems with the institution's advising. The president had decreed the improvement of academic advising to be a TOP PRIORITY and designated the chief-academic-officer and college deans responsible for its accomplishment. I met with the academic deans to discuss ways to improve advising. In the discussion that followed the presentation of the recommendations, I was somewhat surprised by one dean's observation that he "knew of NO research which demonstrated any relationship between the quality of academic advising and graduation rate." Equally discouraging was the comment of another dean who noted: "anything the students need to know to graduate is in the university catalog." I commented that an advising system should strive for more than graduation. Students also benefit from guidance on such topics as which electives, experiential learning opportunities, and cocurricular activities might enhance their postgraduation opportunities. In reply, the dean observed, "it is not our responsibility to see that these students get jobs."

Another dean representing the college in which advising was recognized as being the best at the university, noted that academic advising was recognized as a priority activity in his college and staff were evaluated accordingly. To determine how he had accomplished this, we examined how advising was addressed in the college's evaluation, salary, promotion, and tenure procedures. We reviewed the evaluation of a recognized outstanding advisor. The department head had noted that the faculty member was an outstanding advisor, was frequently requested by students, and as a result had a very heavy advising load. The department head then cryptically concluded that perhaps this helped explain his unsatisfactory performance in research and grant writing.

Until the top-level administrators at research universities choose to assign faculty advising a priority equal to that of research and extramural funding, broad scale improvements are likely to remain rare. Where they are achieved, they will be accomplished because good advising is important to an individual department head or faculty member—sometimes at their own professional peril.

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