From the Editor

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Michael Lynch

Advising, European Style[1]

Edward J. Danis

In 1995 I was fortunate to be chosen for the Fulbright Seminar for U.S. Academic Administrators in Germany. Because my administrative responsibilities focus on academic advising, I naturally was curious about possible parallels in Germany. Given the differences between the respective systems, I actually expected none. However, I discovered that German students do need and seek assistance from professionals in advising/counseling centers, i.e., the *Studienberatung.*

It was fascinating to encounter colleagues who had the same educational mission and who, in a conceptual sense, spoke the same language. These advisers affirmed a certain amount of indecision among students entering the university and among enrolled students who had decided that their original choice of major was inappropriate to their developing interests and intellectual abilities, i.e., *Studiengangwechslers.* They also related how, similar to U.S. universities, many German curricula have become so complex that students need special help to negotiate them.

Unfortunately, our time together was brief, but it did initiate interest that continued via e-mail. After about 18 months of electronic discussion and networking, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Studien-, Studentinnen-, und Studentenberatung (ARGE)* invited me to give a lecture at their conference, held in late February, 1997, at the Technical University of Berlin. (The ARGE might be viewed as a rough equivalent to NACADA.)

The lecture that evolved was entitled "Studienberatung in den U.S.A.: Was Können Wir von Einander Lernen?" ("Advising in the United States: What Can We Learn from Each Other?") It pointed out the obvious differences between the higher education systems, and then detailed the developing and surprising similarities. There were two motifs in the lecture that struck a chord among the meeting's participants and caused animated discussion for the next three days.

The first was the fact that U.S. universities in the past few decades have increasingly emulated the corporate world. They are unequivocally run like a business. Of course, from the very beginning, U.S. universities had to be concerned about fiscal matters. For the most part, they have always depended upon student tuition, philanthropic gifts, and government subsidies. But now higher education in the States readily and openly talks about quality management, downsizing, reengineering, enrollment management, profit centers, and so forth.

The business-like aspect of U.S. higher education was frighteningly familiar to the ARGE members, because they had seen corporate practices and jargon creeping into their professional lives, and, to make matters worse, the jargon was in American English. My remark that the situation in Germany was not nearly as extreme brought very little comfort. They had experienced the painful reorganization of institutions in the New States shaped from the former East Germany, and were seeing the specters of downsizing and reengineering everywhere in the halls of academe. In Berlin alone, institutions of higher education were facing 30% budget cuts.

The discussion of the corporate identity in academe flowed into the second motif. During budget crises, advising and counseling are invariably the first to undergo close scrutiny by decision-makers. Advising/counseling centers are the stepchild of the university and have little or no political power. The argument that "we do wonderful work and care for the welfare of the student" is not enough, and advising/counseling must be ready to account for itself in language that decision-makers understand. In this literal, linear era, that means data.

I advised our German colleagues that their quality work must somehow be quantified. How many new students or *Studiengangwechslers* were advised concerning the major most suitable to their interests and abilities? How many students sought curricular direction because the requirements for their major confused them? How many were assisted vis-à-vis choosing courses of

studies at other universities in Germany or elsewhere? How many students with personal problems were able to continue their studies because of good counsel? Finally, how does all this advising/counseling account for revenue savings and/or enhancement for the university, the state, and/or society? These are difficult questions, especially the last one. German advisers/counselors were not trained to think this way. For that matter, neither were advisers in the States, but the latter slowly—and maybe too slowly—are adapting in order to survive. My prophetic message was to prepare for a greater demand for accountability.

I further advised they should document uncertainty among students, although this might be very difficult in the German system. In the U.S. we have learned that a large majority of college students are in some way undecided and expect to change their major at least once. We also know that some U.S. administrators do not like to hear this. It goes against the comfortable (and mythological) tradition that most students choose majors and stay with them until graduation. From their traditional point of view, there is something abnormal about uncertainty, and working with undecided students is not worth the effort; if uncertainty is ignored, it will go away. This being the situation in the U.S., one could confidently guess that the attitude would be stronger in Germany. Although the *Studienberatung* deals with it every day, I surmised that uncertainty among students is probably invisible to administrators, and I cautioned the audience to consider ways to bring it to light in the form of hard data.

Another important observation from the ARGE Conference was that the *Studienberatung* in Germany is staffed in large part by trained counselors and licensed psychologists. This was intriguing because it is a direct reflection of how academic advising evolved in the States. Three decades ago, U.S. student counseling offices, which were created to help students with personal issues, noticed an increasing number of students coming to them with academic advising questions. Students always vote with their feet, and the counseling offices delivered the necessary assistance. Eventually, academic advising became an activity distinct from personal counseling and, in many instances, was moved officially to associate deans' offices and academic affairs.

The same movement seemed to be occurring in Germany. One psychologist related that many of her students were not so much concerned about the existential meaning of their life as they were concerned about what major to pursue. She confirmed that many of the ARGE Conference participants were not counselors or psychologists. They came from a variety of disciplines and were primarily engaged in advising in academic affairs units rather than the *Studentenwerk*, i.e., Student Affairs.

German acquaintances have remarked that trends in the U.S. often arrive in Germany five to ten years later; the bad take five years, and the good take ten. My lecture avoided making value judgments, but its central theme was that a type of cultural transfer was definitely taking place. A corporate mentality had entered German higher education, and I predicted it would increase. The concept of indecision among students and a greater need for academic advising were apparent, and the *Studienberatung* could have a critical role to play in this educational development. To play this role for the benefit of the students, higher education, and society, the *Studienberatung* must begin to consider and implement strategies for documenting its worth to those who pay the bills.

By observing first hand the challenges that face the *Studienberatung*, I saw advising, American style, in a distant mirror. It was relatively easy for this American to perceive objectively what has happening in and coming to Germany. It was a reflection of our most basic concerns here: How can advisers protect and defend themselves?

In this country, questions about the value of advising have not abated. They have become stronger and have resulted in unfavorable action at many institutions. Someone from the audience in Berlin jokingly remarked that I sounded like a Civil War general with my statements about attacks on advising and strategies for survival. His comment was quite correct, because I was using German words reserved primarily for military contexts. An idiomatic oversight? Not entirely. At every NACADA conference, we hear stories about advising positions being eliminated, advising centers being collapsed, and the advising function assigned to personnel who do not hold bachelor's degrees.

If anything is to be learned from the advising situation in Germany, it is that academic decision-makers **everywhere** in their struggles with fiscal problems very quickly focus on cut-backs in advising to save money. For the past ten years at NACADA conference sessions, data have been presented which clearly show that advising does not cost much. In fact, it can save or even make money for the institution. Obviously, we must relentlessly promote our value to our institutions,

and on our campuses we must continue to make friends with important persons who can have an impact on our fate. Perhaps as a unified entity we can somehow develop creative ways to impress upon upper-level administrators at all of our institutions that quality advising performed by educated, trained personnel is inextricable from the noble and moral mission of higher education, and can also play a positive role within the cold reality of fiscal responsibility.

[1] This article was adapted from a similar one that appeared in *The Funnel: Newsmagazine of the German–American Fullbright Commission, 33*(3) (summer 1997): 53–55. It is reprinted here with permission.