

Increasing Voluntary Student-Advisor Contacts

Carolyn A. Schnell, North Dakota State University

This study examines a method for increasing voluntary student participation in the academic advising process. During a first-year seminar required of all students entering North Dakota State University, advisor contacts were measured for students whose course instructors served as their academic advisors and compared them with those of students assigned to other advisors. Results indicated that students whose instructors also served as their academic advisors voluntarily attended advising sessions significantly more often than those who were assigned to advisors with whom they were unfamiliar.

As traditional student populations decline and financial resources become scarce, colleges and universities look for ways to increase student success and retention. According to Levitz and Noel (1989, p. 65), "... fostering student success in the freshman year is the most significant intervention an institution can make in the name of student persistence." Based on the idea that student-advisor contact is a means of increasing success and retention, this study looks at a method designed to increase their interactions.

Two reported means of enhancing first-year success and retention are freshman seminars and academic advising. Both encourage student involvement with the institution and its concerned representatives. Astin (1987) found that students who interact frequently with faculty members are more satisfied with their college experiences than those who do not. Tinto (1993) also reported that student integration into the college experience is achieved primarily through interaction with peers and faculty members. He noted important links between learning and persistence, and between involvement and the quality of student effort. Student relationships with peers and faculty members, both inside and outside the classroom, is positively related to the quality of student effort. Enhanced student effort results in both learning improvement and increased persistence (Tinto, 1993).

The literature abounds with research designed to study the effects of first-year seminars on retention. Because the first year has been the time of greatest attrition (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Tinto, 1987), most retention programs focus on the freshman student. Paul Fidler (1991) at the

University of South Carolina compared sophomore return rates from 1973 to 1988. He compared participants versus nonparticipants in freshman orientation seminars. In each year, participants achieved higher sophomore return rates—in 11 years at a significant level as evidenced by Chi-square analysis. Academic ability, race, sex, course load, or motivation accounted for the higher retention rates of participants. These results were replicated in studies of dropout rates from 1986 to 1993 by Fidler and Moore (1996), Shanley and Witten (1990), and Fidler and Hunter (1989).

Likewise, academic advising may serve as the basis from which a successful academic career is launched. Frost (1991) asserted that institutional provision of a well-designed freshman advising program sets the stage for student success throughout college. The relationship that develops between the advisee and advisor is one that increases student contact with a concerned representative of the institution, nurtures scholarly interest and excitement, furnishes valuable information, minimizes bureaucratic hassles, provides a supportive environment, and paces the student's progress toward a degree. A positive advising relationship is crucial to personalizing the undergraduate experience (Berdahl, 1995). According to Frost (1991, p. 13), "Advising is sometimes the only structured relationship that links students with concerned representatives of the institution."

Because the value of a successful freshman seminar and the importance of good academic advising thus documented, integration of the two services would presumably promote academic success and persistence. Wade and Yoder (1995) refer to a synergistic relationship between teaching and advising and suggest that the goals of instruction and academic advising are inherently the same since both reflect the goals of education. Ryan (1995) regarded the task of academic advising as an extension of the teaching role.

Barefoot and Fidler (1996) examined the role of the freshman seminar instructor who was at the same time serving as an academic advisor. At approximately one third of the 696 institutions studied, the instructor of the freshman seminar served as the academic advisor of seminar students. When examined by type of institution, instructors in 4-year schools were more likely to

advise their seminar students (36.2%) than those in 2-year colleges (27.6%). Seminar instructors in schools with 5,000 to 10,000 enrollments were more likely to serve as the academic advisors for their seminar students (43%) than those from larger (25.5%) or smaller institutions (less than 1,000 students, 38.2%; and 1,001–4,999 enrollments, 32.1%). The extent to which seminar instructors advised did not differ significantly by seminar type (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

To examine voluntary student-advisor interaction, a study of advising patterns at North Dakota State University, a mid-sized Midwestern institution, was undertaken. The goal of the research was to determine whether students voluntarily seek advising assistance more often when their academic advisors are also their freshman seminar instructors.

Method

Skills for Academic Success, University 199, became a general education course requirement for all new students entering North Dakota State in the fall of 1997. This class was also a requirement for transfer students with less than 24 credits. The sections surveyed for this study were limited to classes using a common syllabus in which instructors had received identical one-day training prior to the start of the class. (Though teachers could make additions to the syllabus, few instructors did.) The students met twice a week for the first half of the semester for one graded credit each. Instructors, recruited and hired specifically to teach the course, were expected to have obtained or be in the process of completing a graduate degree. In addition, teaching experience in higher education was a job requirement and those who had taught in a first-year seminar were preferred hires. Two of the instructors were employed with the expectation of being assigned academic advising duties.

Procedure

During summer orientation, 405 students registered for 32 sections of the freshman seminar. In 14 sections of the class, the instructor also served

as the advisor for 222 of the students enrolled. At the same time, 183 students in 18 sections were assigned to another academic advisor by the Office of the Registrar. Maximum class size was 25 students.

The course was offered the first half of the semester and was completed during week eight. Advising for course selection began during week ten with 2 weeks assigned to formal academic advising. At the end of the advising period, and before telephone registration began, academic advisors were surveyed to determine the number of students who voluntarily met with them during the prescribed time. With telephone registration, the potential exists for registration without prior advisor contact. Neither instructors or advisors had been previously notified that their responses would be included in the study.

The hypothesis stated that interaction with advisors in the classroom environment would lead to subsequent difference in voluntary student contacts during advising week. The SAS (1990) statistical package was used to perform Chi-square analysis of the data.

Results

Approximately 4 weeks after the completion of the course and following the second designated week of advising, lists of students and corresponding advisors were obtained and calls were made to the advisors to determine whether the students had voluntarily made an appointment to meet with him or her. Results shown in Table 1 indicate significantly greater student-advisor contact for advisees who had the same individual as both academic advisor and instructor, $\chi^2(2, N = 405) = 145.46, p \leq .001$, than those assigned to an advisor whom they had presumably never met. The instructor-advisors were able to keep track of all their advisees, while the Registrar-appointed advisors were unable to account for 8.2% of the advisees.

Discussion

This study found, based on voluntarily scheduled and attended academic advising appoint-

Table 1 Comparison of voluntary student appointments by advisor

	Appointment		No Appointment		Don't Know	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Instructor not advisor	72	39.3	66	52.5	15	8.2
Instructor as advisor	210*	94.6	12*	5.4	0*	0

Note. $\chi^2(2, N = 405) = 145.46, p \leq 0.001$.

ments, that students met significantly more often with their advisors if they had established a prior classroom relationship with them. In addition, advisors who interact with students in an instructional setting may become more familiar with them, thereby increasing awareness of which students schedule and attend advising appointments. Quality advising is seen as a means for improved student success and retention. Connection between a student and her or his academic advisor must take place for advising to be effective. At no time is student-advisor communication more vital than during the first year of a student's academic experience. This pairing of instructors as advisors appears to be a method for enhancing the frequency of student-advising contact.

While appointments were measured quantitatively, instructor-advisors also related anecdotal experiences about voluntary student contacts. Several freshman who had been in the classroom but assigned to other advisors met with their appointed advisors and later came to the instructor to have schedules checked. Six advisees requested appointments with their seminar instructors even though other advisors had been assigned to them. In addition, after the course ended, students continued to seek guidance from the seminar instructor even in cases where the instructor was not the assigned academic advisor. Such contacts suggest that the relationship established during the seminar continued to affect student behavior after the duration of the course.

While the information obtained in this study will guide future advising assignments for the students at South Dakota State, limitations exist when attempting to apply these results to other colleges. Instructors were hired specifically to teach this freshman seminar. Whether faculty members who specialize instruction for other courses would produce similar results is untested. The results were gathered in one semester and must be replicated over time. No attempt was made to assess the quality of the advisors or the advising session or to control advisor effectiveness or student variables. These are issues that would provide interesting future research. This study points solely to increased student-advisor contact with the expectation that supportive quality interactions by dedicated professionals will serve to enhance student success, satisfaction, and retention.

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Author's Notes

Carolyn A. Schnell is Director of the College of University Studies at North Dakota State University. She has served as an academic advisor since 1987 and currently coordinates the required first-year course for four of the colleges at the University. She is working on her doctorate at the University of Minnesota. Interested readers may contact her at caschnel@plains.nodak.edu