

Meeting Upper-Level Students' Advising Needs: A Departmental Study of Student and Faculty Opinion

Virginia L. Smerglia, *The University of Akron*
Nicole M. Bouchet, *The University of Akron*

Research shows divergent student and faculty expectations of academic advising. However, few studies directly compare the two groups' opinions. Student majors and faculty members in the Sociology Department of The University of Akron were asked to rate academic advisors' level of responsibility for 42 advising tasks. MANOVA of student and faculty opinions showed that the groups differed significantly on two of four identified dimensions: advising students on campus resources and planning for the future. Suggestions for offering students a broader range of help and assisting nonadvising faculty members with advising awareness are included.

Faculty and Student Expectations of Academic Advising

The majority of academic advising research has explored student opinion. Very few studies examined faculty perspectives; even fewer compared how students and faculty members define or evaluate academic advising. Within those studies, there is no consistent definition or distinction of categories such as "advisor," "faculty," and "administrator" (Guinn & Mitchell, 1986).

Guinn and Mitchell (1986) surveyed students, faculty members, and administrators and discovered differences in their opinions of the advising role. Respondents were asked whether various advising tasks should be the primary responsibility, some responsibility, or no responsibility of academic advisors. Although questions asked of all groups were identical, group means were not tested for significant differences. Study results were reported in proportions of each group that believed particular tasks were advisors' responsibilities. Few results were published. Of the reported items, faculty members saw suggesting specific instructors and writing letters of recommendation as much less the responsibility of advisors than did students.

McAnulty, O'Connor, and Sklare (1987) found agreement among faculty members, advising staff, and students about advising roles. However, the items on the three different questionnaires were parallel but not identical. Faculty/staff and

student respondents agreed that advisors should provide a wide range of services. Few results regarding specific advising functions were reported, and of those presented, one contradicted the notion that a variety of service offerings were essential for successful advising programs. For example, many faculty/staff did not feel advisors should provide information on campus resources, and students said they did not request such information. This response may indicate that students were learning about campus services elsewhere or had learned that advisors were not a source for such information on their campuses.

In a Rutgers University study of departmental academic advising, Creeden (1990) noted faculty thought academic goals and planning are important advising functions, but career and personal issue resolution are not responsibilities of advisors. Creeden's results were supported by findings in another study in which students said that communication about career goals and choices was important to them, but that they typically had not discussed future vocation with advisors (Hanson & Raney, 1993).

In research that considered student opinion only, findings were similar. Although students considered help with understanding components and requirements of their programs central advising duties (Trombley, 1984), studies showed that many students also value assistance with academic and personal problems (Fielstein, 1987; Kozloff, 1985). Students said that discussions about career choices and goals are important topics, but the subjects most often discussed in advising sessions included registration and add/drop processes (Creeden, 1990; Hanson & Raney, 1993).

In one comparison of faculty and student opinion, the focus was advisors' performances on certain duties rather than whether the tasks are appropriate advising concerns. Stickle (1982) found the differences between faculty and student perceptions of advising "shocking." Faculty advisors rated their performances significantly higher than did student advisees in a number of areas including "... exploring academic problems" as well as discussing general education requirements and students' career plans (p. 263).

It is difficult to draw conclusions from research that used varied methods. Only one of the studies (Guinn & Mitchell, 1986) asked the same questions of faculty members and students. Another (McAnulty et al., 1987) compared faculty and student opinion using similar questions. However, the summary implication seems to be that students have more holistic views. Whereas faculty members or institutional viewpoint may be that academic advising is specific and focused on students' programs of study, students may not separate the interrelated components of their lives; they typically desire help with campus resources, career planning, and personal concerns.

Recent articles that inform advisors imply a need for helping students in new ways as specialization, complex job markets, and technological advances change the decision making and realities of career planning (Bertram, 1996; Shaffer, 1997). Such studies support the student stance that academic choices are part of a larger planning scenario that should be carried out by students with their advisors.

Most studies have looked at campus-wide advising or advising during students' first two years at the postsecondary institution. Departmental advising has been largely ignored in research. One report from the Sociology Department at Oklahoma State University supported the students' position that advising should be comprehensive and career guidance is a fundamental component of the departmental advisor's role (Olson, 1981).

Because of existing research inconsistencies and the lack of studies on upper-level advising, the Sociology Department at The University of Akron, a state school of over 23,000 students, conducted a survey during the 1997 spring semester. Respondents answered questions about their advising expectations using a modified inventory of advising responsibilities originally developed by Guinn and Mitchell (1986).

Method

In the Sociology Department of the University of Akron, three persons advise undergraduates. Academic advising is done by an emeritus professor, who works approximately 12 hours per week, and a full-time instructor, one half of whose time is given specifically to that job. A third advisor, a full-time faculty member and criminologist, oversees all internships. Slightly more than one half of the 500 sociology students at Akron are pursuing sociology/law enforcement

or sociology/corrections degrees, requiring a 150-hour, field-placement internship.

Samples

The sample of sociology majors consisted of 159 students, 84.5% of whom were juniors and seniors. Of the mostly full-time student sample, one third of the respondents were male and the median age was 23 years. Most were white (71.8%) or African American (23.9%). Of all sociology majors, 23.3% were pursuing sociology degrees, 49.7% were sociology/corrections majors, and 25.2% were in the sociology/law enforcement curriculum. Although corrections majors were overrepresented, their advising experiences did not differ from other sociology students; all advisees interacted with the same advisors who used the same advising criteria for all undergraduates. Almost 87% of the respondents worked 16 or more hours per week at jobs outside of class; the median number of hours worked was in the 31 to 35 hour category.

Twenty-six faculty members comprised the second sample. Of these, 6 were full professors, 3 were associate and assistant professors, 14 were part-time (adjunct professors; permanent, part-time instructors; and auxiliary faculty) staff members, and 3 were doctoral students with teaching responsibilities. Two thirds of the faculty respondents were female. The sample was similar to the entire faculty composition at the University of Akron, which included full professors (24%), associate and assistant professors (19%), and part-time faculty members (54%).

Instrument

The student research instrument was a four-page questionnaire administered to sociology majors enrolled in core required and elective courses during the 1997 spring semester. The questionnaire presented demographic and basic questions, such as how often students saw or talked by phone with an academic advisor, how easy it was to arrange an advising appointment, and how important academic advising was to them relative to fulfilling their educational objectives.

The body of the survey was a 42-question inventory, a modified version of Guinn and Mitchell's "Advising Role and Responsibility Inventory" (1986), which asked students whether academic advisors should have primary, some, or no responsibility for various advising tasks. The faculty questionnaire was identical except that it also contained items related to teaching experi-

ence (types and years) and faculty members' academic advising experiences as ranked in importance to their teaching goals.

Results

A theoretical model guided by the literature review suggested that advising tasks may be divided into four dimensions: a) program-of-study planning, b) help with campus resources, c) future planning, and d) help with personal issues. These categories of advising tasks have been the focus of research for other investigators. Whether advising was studied in a departmental, college, or university context, whether respondents were administrators, advisors, faculty members, or students, these were the broad categories that defined advising.

Furthermore, the literature reviewed indicated that student and faculty opinion of advising differed, particularly regarding duties not associated with planning a program of study. Therefore, the areas defined by the tasks in this research were ordered from the most central function of advising, program-of-study planning, to the least central function, help with personal issues. Assisting advisees with personal problems was considered by some an inappropriate concern of academic advisors (Creeden, 1990), and a number of studies showed that helping students find campus resources or providing career planning advice were not necessarily supported as advising tasks (Hanson & Raney, 1993; McAnulty et al., 1987).

Students

A majority of students said that academic advisors should have primary or some responsibility for all tasks on the 42-item inventory. The degree of responsibility was coded: none = 0, some = 1, primary = 2. With regard to individual survey items, the closer a group mean was to 2.0, the higher the agreement level of the group about advisor responsibility.

According to the questionnaire responses, 97.5% of students felt that advisors have primary or some responsibility for suggesting courses. Other tasks less closely related to program-of-study planning, such as helping the advisee formulate a schedule based on his or her time restrictions, was stated by 78.7% of students to be an advisor's duty.

Concerning help with campus resources, the majority of students, 91.2%, felt advisors should have at least some responsibility for referring them to other campus offices and 84.8% suggested that advisors should communicate student

needs to the university. They said advisors should provide information about job markets (92.5%), explain prerequisites for graduate studies (95.6%), and communicate academic information about advisees to appropriate professionals (83.7%). With regard to personal issues, 72.1% of students said that an advisor should assist in development of decision-making skills and foster understanding and self-acceptance (59.2%).

Faculty

All faculty members supported advising tasks directly dealing with planning the program of study. In addition, most felt advisors should have primary or some responsibility for referring students to other campus offices (96.0 %) and communicating student needs to the university (84.0%). Fewer faculty respondents believed advisors should assist students with postgraduate life. Still, most faculty members said advisors should have some or primary responsibility for providing information about job markets (84.6%) and communicating academic information about advisees to appropriate professionals (84.6%). In regard to personal issues, slightly more than one half said advisors should assist advisees with developing decision-making skills (56.0%).

Comparison of Student and Faculty Opinion

The descriptive data on individual advising tasks offer a prelude to examining multivariate findings. Practices perceived as close to the central function of advising—planning the program of study—were strongly supported by both faculty members and students. Indicators that relate to the other three functions of advising—knowing about and referring students to campus resources, career planning for jobs and graduate school, or helping with personal concerns—showed more divergence between faculty and student opinion. The divergence occurs in the number from both groups who indicated advisors have some responsibility for a task and the number who indicated advisors have primary responsibility. These differences impacted the multivariate analyses described below.

Cronbach's α -reliability procedures were used to test how well questionnaire items fit together under the four categories of advising tasks (Vogt, 1999). Cronbach's α -coefficient is a measure of internal consistency for each factor (in this case advising-category indicators among questionnaire items). Scores range from 0, completely unreliable to 1.0, perfectly reliable. The resultant scores were toward the high end of this range, suggesting

that the survey items under each category were measuring similar ideas. However, if two questionnaire items referred to tasks that had almost exactly the same meaning, only one was included in the analysis because using both would bias the measure. The reliability measure would appear to be very high; for example, respondents would likely have the same opinion about whether advisors should help students with dropping classes or with adding classes. Alpha reliability results for items related to the four advising areas were a) program of study planning ($\alpha = .80$), b) help with campus resources ($\alpha = .73$), c) future planning ($\alpha = .74$), and d) personal issues ($\alpha = .81$).

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted using the student or faculty status as the independent variable and the scores on the four categories of tasks as multiple dependent variables. One of the advantages of using MANOVA instead of ANOVA (analysis of variance) is that the former does not generate the Type I errors that can occur when testing related dependent variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989).

To investigate the impact of the main effect (student or faculty opinion) on the individual dependent variables, a step-down analysis was performed on the dependent variables in the following order: a) program-of-study planning, b) help with campus resources, c) future planning, and d) help with personal issues. In this procedure, the first dependent variable was tested in a univariate ANOVA. Then each succeeding dependent variable was tested with all preceding dependent variables treated as covariates.

Some items (tasks) were not included in the MANOVA because interitem correlations were low. Most items, less than 2% for students and 4% for faculty, had no missing data. Group means were used to replace missing data on individual items so respondents would not be dropped from analyses.

The mean ratings for student and faculty opinions in the four areas of advising responsibilities

are presented in Table 1. Results of the MANOVAs showed significant differences between student and faculty means for two of the four dimensions that were developed using the indicators of advising tasks. No significant difference was found between student and faculty opinion in the most central advising function, program-of-study planning. This dimension included tasks such as guiding course selection, reviewing course work requirements, explaining requirements, and helping formulate a class schedule.

Help with campus resources included such tasks as communicating students' needs to the university and referring students to various campus offices. Students were significantly more likely to consider these tasks as primarily or somewhat an advisor's responsibility than faculty. Similarly, advising students about future career plans, such as helping them explore life goals and providing information about job markets and graduate schools, showed a significant difference; students were more likely to expect these tasks as part of the advisor's role. Both students and faculty members saw help with personal issues as less the responsibility of academic advisors. Students were somewhat more likely than faculty members to say that advisors have responsibility for tasks such as assisting in self-understanding and counseling. However, the difference between their mean score and faculty respondents' mean score was not statistically significant.

The student sociology majors said it was appropriate for academic advisors to have significant input in planning their programs of study and in tangential areas. The faculty respondents apparently consider the academic advisor's role to be more narrowly defined than do students. They focus on academic planning, specifically course selection and planning for degree completion. These findings agree with previous studies that were based on nonspecific comparisons of student and faculty opinions.

Table 1 Mean ratings of advisor responsibility by student and faculty responses

Item Group	Number of Items (tasks)	Students (n = 159)		Faculty (n = 26)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Program of Study Planning	11	1.44	.34	1.50	.30
Help with Campus Resources	8	1.36*	.37	1.28*	.31
Future Planning	7	1.33*	.40	1.20*	.30
Help with Personal Issues	6	.95	.47	.77	.44

Note. * $p < 0.05$

Conclusions and Suggestions

The differences between faculty and student definitions of academic advising tasks are important for effectively meeting or redefining student expectations. If instructors are unaware of student-defined needs and advising resources, the quality of students' academic or career outcomes may be negatively impacted. In addition, knowledge about opinion differences informs the work of departmental academic advisors.

As evidenced in the literature and among students and faculty members in this study, suggesting courses, recommending electives, explaining general college and major requirements, and helping students develop schedules are the core responsibilities of advisors. No significant difference was found between faculty and student mean scores with regard to program of study planning, the responsibility most often discussed in academic advising research.

For advising tasks included in the second dimension, help with campus resources, student and faculty opinion differed significantly. More students than faculty members said that communicating student needs to university personnel, attending in-service meetings, referring students to appropriate campus offices, and providing deadline awareness are academic advising responsibilities. The research context, a large urban university, provides a complex bureaucratic maze. The majority of student respondents work in jobs outside class, which limits the amount of time available for exploring campus resources. Perhaps faculty members, who probably understand the bureaucratic campus complexities, fail to appreciate students' need for guidance to available programs.

To assist students in finding campus services, Akron sociology advisors have developed new relationships with on-campus student-resource offices. For example, they communicate with the university referral service that helps students evaluate their academic success potential. They meet with general education advisors to provide students with a smooth transition to upper-level courses. They are also investigating ways students might enhance their degrees with added skills and expertise. They are well versed on a number of interdisciplinary certificate programs that augment major courses of study. They developed a new semester newsletter and a Web page to give students information about academic changes, departmental news, and campus services.

Future planning, the third dimension, includes general tasks such as knowing the educational

background needed for certain careers and providing information on job markets and prerequisites for graduate studies. It also encompasses individualized assistance in such areas as advisee exploration of life goals and timetable creation for educational objectives. Significantly more students than faculty members viewed future planning exercises as an advising chore. This result supports one of few documented departmental studies that found that faculty members did not consider career issues a responsibility of academic advisors (Creeden, 1990).

It seems reasonable for students to expect career and graduate school guidance from advisors in their major. At the Sociology Department at Akron, more than one half of the majors have applied degrees that include internships, and a large portion of the other sociology majors expect to attend graduate or professional schools. To help students plan for the future, the sociology department now takes part in arts and sciences career planning programs that offer special assistance for sociology majors. For example, alumni have returned for a brief workshop to describe how their careers have progressed and how they found their jobs. Also, the advisors have developed a relationship with the career placement office so advisors have current information on student resources available there and a time frame for their use. One advisor attended a workshop on advising students who plan to attend law school, the goal of many sociology majors at Akron.

In conclusion, mean responses about help with personal issues did not demonstrate significantly different opinions between students and faculty members. By comparing responses between dimensions, one finds that fewer respondents in both groups felt advisors were obliged to help advisees with personal problems, but more student than faculty respondents expressed the belief that helping advisees with personal issues should be an advising enterprise.

It seems students desire well-rounded advising service that integrates their academic needs with related issues, such as career plans, abilities assessment, and success strategies. Faculty members may not have always considered students' attitudes about advising. To enhance awareness of student advising needs, advisors have been more visible and available to sociology faculty members, giving information about departmental undergraduate advising. They are accessible to faculty members who need help or have questions about resources for students. They keep track of course demand and carry on a dialogue with fac-

ulty members and sociology students about problems and needs. New printed guidelines and meetings with advisors are provided to student office assistants. The additional information enables assistants to answer routine questions and understand the importance of each type of advising appointment.

These efforts to give students a broader advising menu and to acquaint faculty members with advisors as resources have so far been received very positively by both students and faculty members. Departmental consensus about devoting resources to advisors is key to enhancing student and faculty satisfaction with advising.

References

- Bertram, R. M. (1996). The irrational nature of choice: A new model for advising undecided students? *NACADA Journal*, 16(2), 19–24.
- Creeden, J. E. (1990). Components of good advising: Differences in faculty and student perceptions. *NACADA Journal*, 10(2), 30–36.
- Fielstein, L. L. (1987). Student preferences for personal contact in a student-faculty advising relationship. *NACADA Journal*, 7(2), 34–40.
- Guinn, D., & Mitchell, R. (1986). Academic advising: And different expectations. *NACADA Journal*, 6(2), 99–105.
- Hanson, G. R., & Raney, M. W. (1993). Evaluating academic advising in a multiversity setting. *NACADA Journal*, 13(1), 34–42.
- Kozloff, J. (1985). Delivering academic advising: Who, what and how? *NACADA Journal*, 7(1), 49–61.
- McAnulty, B. H., O'Connor, C. A., & Sklare, L. (1987). Analysis of student and faculty opinion of academic advising services. *NACADA Journal*, 7(1), 49–61.
- Olson, C. M. (1981). Professional academic advising and career planning: An integrated approach. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, November, 483–88.
- Shaffer, L. S. (1997). A human capital approach to academic advising. *NACADA Journal*, 17(1), 5–12.
- Stickley, F. (1982). Faculty and student perception of faculty advising effectiveness. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, May, 262–65.
- Tabachnick, B., & Fidell, L. (1989). *Using multivariate statistics*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Trombley, T. B. (1984). An analysis of the complexity of academic advising tasks. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, May, 234–39.

Authors' Notes

Virginia L. Smerglia is a visiting professor and a departmental academic advisor at the University of Akron. Her previous publications are in aging, family, and teaching journals. Address correspondence to V. Smerglia, Department of Sociology, The University of Akron, Akron, OH 44325-1905; E-mail vsmergl@uakron.edu.

Nicole M. Bouchet is a doctorate student in sociology, specializing in social psychology, at the University of Akron. Her other areas of interest are social inequality and the sociology of education. She was the graduate assistant for the departmental study on advising. Address correspondence to N. Bouchet, Department of Sociology, The University of Akron, Akron, OH 44325-1905; E-mail bouchet@uakron.edu.

The authors thank Mark Tausig, Nancy Miller, and Donald Stull for their valuable input during the preparation of this manuscript.