

EVALUATION OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

Evaluation Academic Advisors: Administrator and Faculty Perspectives

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Evaluation and improvement of advising is receiving increased attention from colleges and universities. According to a recent survey, advising was the major negative campus characteristic related to student attrition. Not surprisingly, the study also reported that one-half of the reporting private and public two- and four-year institutions viewed improvement of academic advising as a specific action program designed to improve retention.¹ What are the organizational dynamics of the interest in advising by colleges and universities? For example, what role does advising evaluation play in improving advising? How might administrators use advisor evaluation to benefit advisors, the institution, and, ultimately, students?

A national survey of academic advising by Carstensen and Silberhorn provides information about contemporary practices in that field. The primary delivery system for academic advising at seventy-five percent of the **820** institutions responding to the survey utilized faculty as advisors. Another seventeen percent of the sample indicated that professional counselors were the primary means for delivering advising services at their campuses.²

This discussion about different perspectives on evaluating advisors and advising services is based on the survey finding that the principal means of delivering advising services at most colleges and universities is to employ full-time employees.

¹P. E. Beal and L. Noel, *What Works in Student Retention: a Preliminary Summary of a National Survey* (The American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems: Iowa City, Iowa and Boulder, Colorado, 1979).

²D. J. Carstensen and C. Silberhorn, *A National Survey of Academic Advising. Final Report* (The American College Testing Program: Iowa City, Iowa, October 1979).

The Administrator

Campus administrators have been charged by their governing boards to guide the organization's fortunes. As executives and managers of the educational enterprise, administrators are sensitive not only to the educational needs and aspirations of their students, but also to factors influencing the organization's health and vitality. The anticipated decrease in the number of potential enrollees, and the resultant interest in lowering the attrition rate of students once enrolled, is a powerful determinant of an administrator's level of anxiety and behavior.

If administrators perceive, as apparently some have, that improved academic advising services may help the institution prepare for as well as weather the forthcoming storm, then administrative response is predictable. One may expect administrative action designed to encourage, facilitate, demand, and enforce actions to improve the quality and the perceived availability of advising. Administrators take this action in a sincere belief that such efforts will maintain and promote the institution successfully. From an administrator's perspective, advising improvement is a realistic goal that promises to alleviate the woes that have, or may, beset the institution.

Harris provides another scenario describing contemporary change in higher education. He suggests we can compare institutions to bacteria growing on a culture; when the culture changes, bacteria either adapt or die. Likewise, according to Harris, change in a social institution is not inner-directed, rational redirection but adaptation to an altered environment. To bring about change or adaptation in academic advisor performance, administrators are likely to think of advisor evaluation as a means of assessing or motivating advisors and of monitoring the degree of change required or attained.'

Evaluation has been defined as two types of programs, formative evaluation and summative evaluation.' In advising, formative evaluation seeks answers to the question "What can or should the advisor do to become a more effective advisor?" In a formative evaluation paradigm, the advisor is the client. Data are gathered to help the advisor consider and determine which course of action to undertake to improve skills and competences, and effectiveness.

Summative evaluation, on the other hand, concerns itself with answering the question "How effective, or productive, or helpful was the advisor?" A summative evaluation program seeks to aid the administrator in personnel decisions. The results of summative evaluation help an administrator **marshall** evidence about the influence or the success of the individual advisor or advising program. Also, the institution may use these data to decide how best to distribute institutional rewards among advisors.

'J. Harris, "How do you Know a Good College When you Stumble over One?" *Current Issues in Higher Education: Assessment*, American Association for Higher Education Monographs. 5 (1979), 35-38.

*M. Scriven, "The Methodology of Evaluation," AERA Monograph Series on Curriculum *Evaluation*, 1 (1967).

The Faculty Advisor

On one hand, Eble describes college professors as jealous of their independence, proud of their specialized competences, not easily led and suspicious of being told what or how they serve the institution.' On the other hand, Freedman and Sanford find faculty members interested in their work as teachers, believe they do at least an adequate job, but experience a recently developed uncertainty about their relations to students.* In much the same vein, Lindquist concludes that faculty are for — not against — responsible efforts to increase institutional effectiveness with reasonable efficiency. They mean to do as well as they can for their students and discipline.'

It seems reasonable to conclude that a well-reasoned and publicly-discussed means of gathering data about faculty performance in advising may generally be acceptable to faculty. Within a formative evaluation paradigm, one might expect many faculty advisors to welcome the opportunity to receive information about their performance as advisors. Assessment efforts designed specifically to assist faculty in their development and improvement as advisors, therefore, likely face low levels of faculty resistance or resentment. In addition to assistance for individuals, such assessment programs may contribute to another program of interest to faculty, the tenure system. According to Linnell, to make tenure work, some kind of performance evaluation should be designed to assist faculty who are not performing at acceptable levels to improve.'

The existence or the promulgation of evaluation programs to meet institutional needs causes some concern among faculty. In spite of the many changes that have occurred in academe, the belief remains deeply embedded that the individual should be unimpeded in his or her efforts to develop approaches to teaching, to undertake appealing research and control his or her destiny.' These feelings are felt most strongly when summative evaluation efforts are used to formulate decisions regarding dispensing of organizational recognition and reward. Faculty concerns about this use of evaluation data have been deeply felt and strongly held.

The individual advisor is concerned that advisor evaluation criteria are realistic, administered fairly, and universally employed at the institution. The issue is not that of being evaluated. Faculty know that they and their work are evaluated constantly. Rather, apprehension develops that evaluative criteria may be inappropriate to the

*K. E. Eble, *The Art of Administration* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979).

'M. Freedman and N. Stanford, "The Faculty Member: Yesterday and Today," ed., M. Freedman *Facilitating Faculty Development: New Directions for Higher Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973).

'Jack Lindquist, "Social Learning and Problem-Solving Strategies for Improving Academic Performance," *New Directions for Institutional Research*, (No. 20, Evaluating Faculty Performance and Vitality) Vol. V, No. 4, 1978, pp. 17-20.

'R. H. Linnell. "Age, Sex and Ethnic Trade-offs in Faculty Employment: You Can't Have Your Cake and Eat It Too." *Current Issues in Higher Education: Employment Practices in Academe*, American Association for Higher Education Monographs 4 (1979), 3-9.

'A. O. Pfnister, J. Solder, and N. Verocca, "Growth Contracts: Viable Strategy for Institutional Planning Under Changing Conditions," *Current Issues in Higher Education: Faculty Career Development*, American Association for Higher Education Monographs, 2 (1979), 33-39.

function evaluated. A related concern, the process may leave little opportunity for negotiation and individual lobbying in one's behalf. In the first instance, a criterion of advising effectiveness that noted what proportion of one's advisees changed majors, took leaves, or transferred to another institution could, without supplemental data, inappropriately indicate advisor effectiveness. In the second instance, a process of summative evaluation heavily mechanistic or empirical leaves little opportunity for the advisor to provide personally the appropriate administrator with an adequate scenario of relationships and products of the interaction between advisor and advisees. If the evaluative process is too rigidly standardized, heavily quantitative, and relies solely on data generated from a single source, then the advisor loses some flexibility either to monitor or to influence the process.

Another concern of some faculty is that evaluation will sharpen the eye of accountability. As objectives become defined and behavior and resultant outcomes measured, inadequate or ineffective performance becomes harder to conceal or, if detected, justify. Lessinger lists three types of accountability: performance, professional, and system. The first, performance accountability, begins with clearly-specified objectives and examines the difference between a learner's entry level and the desired end results. In the case of advising, growth in advisee knowledge or competence as a function of advising assistance is an example of criteria usable in this form of accountability.¹⁰

The second type, professional accountability, according to Lessinger, incorporates methods, materials, and processes that have demonstrated their validity and usefulness in producing desired results when applied to specific learners with specific educational needs. Operationally, data describing advisor behavior in the advising session may constitute criteria applicable in determining advising effectiveness in this form of accountability.¹¹ Currently, attempts are underway to develop an advisor evaluation form that includes an analysis of the relationship between advisor behavior and advisee-reported advising outcomes.¹² The development and analysis of appropriate data norms resulting from widespread administration of the form may provide advising coordinators with an evaluation methodology relevant in determining professional accountability.

The third type mentioned by Lessinger is system accountability, that is, a means of determining if the constituent elements of the advising system are working together to achieve system purposes. Some measure of how or what the individual advisor contributes toward the successful functioning of the total advising system at the in-

¹⁰L. M. Lessinger, "Accountability: Present Forces and Future Concerns," In S.I. Knezevich(Editor), *Creating Appraisal and Accountability System: New Directions for Education*. 1 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973).

¹¹Lessinger. (Mimeographed.)

¹²S. C. Brock. "Measuring Faculty Advisor Effectiveness," Memphis: Paper presented at the Second National Conference on Academic Advising, 1978 Mimeographed. W. Cashin, "Measuring Faculty Advisor Effectiveness," A Progress Report. Omaha: Paper presented at the Third National Conference on Academic Advising, 1979 (Mimeographed.) H. C. Kramer and R. E. Gardner, *Advising Survey Form*, 3rd edition (Manhattan, Kansas: Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development 1979).

stitution may illustrate criteria for this form of accountability. For example, advisees' reported confidence in advising services or advisees' level of satisfaction with advising outcomes may prove useful as indicators of an advisor's contribution to the advising system."

Problems with Standards

A substantial problem for the **evaluator/administrator** in each of the three types of accountability concerns the standards to be used. Standards may be either **norm-referenced** or **criterion-referenced**. Norm-referenced standards are used to compare individual advisor performance with the performance of some other group of advisors. Criterion-referenced standards focus on the attainment of specific criteria: for example, does the advisor know the location of the registrar's office or procedures for changing classes or majors. A criterion-referenced approach emphasizes absolute mastery of specified tasks. Selection of standards is especially important in summative evaluation.

Defining appropriate standards for summative evaluation of advisors is a basic source of difficulty. Academicians and administrators have a capacity to see the same thing from different perspectives. Conversations about what advising is and should be, whether advising can and should be evaluated, and how to implement procedures for evaluation, quickly elicit a diversity of opinion. Yet agreements must somehow be reached and confirmed. This process of publicly discussing, defining, and deciding the parameters of advisor evaluation is a crucial process in initiating summative evaluation of advisors. Since summative evaluation is, by definition, a means of directly influencing each advisor, we can expect that rumors about a **summative** advisor evaluation will gain a ready audience. Consequently, the process through which an evaluation program is conceptualized and developed remains a key factor in successful implementation and continuation of the program.

Implications

Clearly, both forms of advising evaluation have a rightful place in the workings of a contemporary institution of higher education. Pressures on and in the institution require that accurate, accessible, and humanistic assistance from the more sophisticated and experienced members of the academic community be available to students. At the same time, the politics of retrenchment, accountability, and cost efficiency demand that administrators assume the burden of efficiently managing and effectively guiding the institution's affairs.

Consequently, it is not a matter of which form of evaluation be given priority; rather, the challenge is how best to establish an organizational framework that will permit both to exist and contribute to organizational health and vitality. A major difficulty in many institutions is that of maintaining clear, and shared, perspectives of the objectives of each type of evaluation. Formative evaluation efforts must be

¹³Lessinger.

guarded zealously as a program designed to benefit the individual advisor. To that end, program particulars should be articulated clearly, program accessibility easily attained, and data confidentiality assured for those wishing to avail themselves of this service. In other words, advisors should understand how the formative evaluation program works, find it easy to participate in the program, and experience little threat as a consequence of participation. If formative evaluation is to be conducive to learning by the advisor, then program parameters must be defined and monitored in ways designed to promote such outcomes. What this means, of course, is that formative assessment data should not be gathered or should not be used to achieve purposes incompatible with the objective of advisor learning and development. A special danger is the innocently-posed request from the dean or department head to use formative evaluation data for summative evaluation purposes.

Administrators face a difficult and complex task of making decisions about the work of, and attendant rewards for, a group of highly competitive academicians. Not surprisingly, administrators would seek assistance to help them meet this challenge. One suspects, however, that some requests by administrators for information stem from the need to have data available to substantiate a decision rather than to aid in making one. Designers of summative evaluation must consider the functional utility of program components. Are criteria clearly defined and communicated easily? Are criteria applicable to all advisors? Have procedures for data gathering been pre-tested? Have guidelines for data reduction or data analysis been formulated and tested? Because of the institutional importance of summative evaluation data, many questions need to be addressed before initiating data-gathering. There are, as well, a variety of local institutional understandings and arrangements that must be identified and discussed by appropriate parties as a precursor to the formal launching of the summative evaluation program.

Exceptions notwithstanding, administrators and their institutions will participate in some form of advisor evaluation. What factors might be considered as these programs are either implemented or continued? Fox and Staw suggest that it may be best to design organizational reward systems so that allocation of resources is highly contingent upon performance, even though clearly, such a design may increase individual needs for justification.¹ At the same time however, an evaluation research group might be instituted in the organization as an in-house consulting unit. The idea here is to increase pressure on individuals and academic work units to perform, and also to offer evaluation consulting as an aid to improve local performances. Applied to the delivery of advising services, both formative and summative evaluation have a role to play. Summative data may be used as a basis to reward, and thereby motivate, advisors while formative data may be used as a form of performance feedback to facilitate individual improvement.

Recommendations

Guidelines for advisor evaluation, whether for formative or summative purposes, should be disseminated widely throughout the institution. Members of the local

¹F. V. Fox and B. M. Staw, "The Trapped Administrator: Effects of Job Insecurity and Policy Resistance Upon Commitment to a Course of Action, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24 (1979), 449-471.

academic community should clearly understand philosophy, goals, procedures, and timetable for the evaluation program. Where both forms of evaluation operate, a situation perhaps common to many institutions, participants must exert every effort to clarify the parameters separating one program from the other. This clarification is especially important if some personnel, for example the advising coordinator, play roles in both evaluation programs. Although it may not be possible to answer satisfactorily all the allegations about advisor evaluation, comprehensive, public, and continuing attempts to do so are required.

After evaluation program guidelines have been defined and disseminated, they should be painstakingly followed. Deviations from the publicly-stated format serve only to fuel, or perhaps to prove, allegations that the evaluation process is not trustworthy. Should experience demonstrate that evaluation guidelines need amending or revising, responsible authorities can institute an orderly process designed to remedy malfunctioning components. Spur-of-the-moment decisions to short-cut procedures, to streamline the process, or to offer special favors to a friend or colleague — however sincere the motivation — risk the long-term success of the program. Evaluation is a system-level intervention. As such, an advisor evaluation program has implications for the entire institution and must be accorded the careful, systematic treatment that reflects a major institutional commitment.

Before undertaking a formative evaluation program, institution officials should carefully consider resources available to assist advisors in improving their skills or competences. After all, what purpose is served by informing advisors that one's advising could be improved if few resources are available to help with that endeavor? Too often, colleges and universities subscribe to the myth of faculty omnipotence in all forms of endeavor, leaving the faculty to shift for themselves. Although such institutional negligence may perpetuate the myth, it does little to help systematically those who wish to do their best.

If, as reported by Beal and Noel, institutions are sincere in their statements about the importance of improving academic advising, then a carefully planned program of advisor evaluation may help lead the way.¹⁵

¹⁵Beal and Noel.