First-Year Student Perceptions of Academic Advisement: A Qualitative Study and Reality Check

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Researchers on student preferences for academic advising style suggest that students prefer developmental advising but experience prescriptive advising. However, data regarding first-year students are absent from these studies, thus limiting the conclusions. Therefore, I describe first-year students and their expectations and experiences with academic advisement. Students in the study preferred prescriptive advising and described their advising experience as primarily prescriptive. Further examination of first-year students' advising preferences and consideration of effective advising as a developmental process, rather than a static philosophy of either developmental or prescriptive advising, is indicated.

KEY WORDS: advising approaches, expectations of advising, freshmen, student attitudes, student perceptions of advising

Introduction

In *When Hope and Fear Collide*, Levine and Cureton (1998) keenly described the paradox for today's college students. First-year students enter college with aspirations of being successful, but they simultaneously sense loss of family ties and experience a dramatic alteration of their everyday lives. As a result of this complicated situation, they want to be totally independent while at the same time want someone, often the academic advisor, to tell them exactly what to do (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Perry, 1970). Academic advisors are among the first staff members to interact with first-year students and can serve as important resources for them (Gordon & Habley, 2000). Research shows that students who make a connection to at least one adult on campus experience higher levels of satisfaction and higher retention rates than students who do not (Astin, 1978; Tinto, 1987). Advisors, whether members of the teaching faculty or professional staff, can foster a positive connection with their students by demonstrating themselves as knowledgeable student advocates.

Although students desire more interaction than they are receiving from faculty advisors and professional advisors (Light, 2001), many do not understand fully the role of an academic advisor (Fielstein, 1987). Advisors can bridge the difference in perspectives of the advisor and advisee by clearly defining their role and articulating the purpose of academic advising early in the advisor-student relationship. However, the disconnect between students and advisors is exacerbated by a wider debate about the elements that constitute effective advising. The debate about effective approaches to academic advising presents a dichotomy of prescriptive versus developmental advisement. The original debate was grounded in student development theory, but focus has been lost (Crookston, 1972; Grites & Gordon, 2000). Personnel in student services engaged in debate about the extent to which various academic and social experiences promote student development need to take the next step and embark on empirical research and assessment (Peterson & Einarson, 2001). As in many student services areas, outcome assessments for academic advisement are rare (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Available assessments of academic advisement are most often generated through surveys of student satisfaction with their advisor (Severy, Lee, Carodine, Powers, & Mason, 1994; Srebnik, 1988). These indirect measures of advisor effectiveness are useful, but the resulting data do not allow researchers to describe adequately students' perceptions of the role of an advisor, explain student preferences for advisor behaviors, or identify mechanisms to bridge the gap between student and advisor perspectives (Alexitch, 1997; Broadbridge, 1996).

I examined first-year students' perceptions of the role of an academic advisor, student preferences for type of academic advisement, and students' advisement experiences. I formulated two research questions to guide the study:

1. Do first-year students prefer developmental advising to prescriptive advising?
2. Do first-year students report receiving more developmental than prescriptive advising?

In the first section of the paper, I examine and extend the debate between prescriptive versus developmental approaches to academic advising. In the second section, I review several studies of student preferences for advising style. The literature review is followed by a description of a qualitative study in which first-year student preferences and experiences with academic advisement were examined. Finally, implications of the study in terms of improv-

ing advisor practice and conducting assessment in academic advising are presented.

Approaches to Academic Advisement

From a cursory read of the literature or attendance at an advisement research conference, advisors get the impression that a paradigm debate exists about academic advisement. They hear of the ongoing debate between *developmental* and *prescriptive* approaches to academic advising (Grites & Gordon, 2000). In this paper, I cannot adequately examine the entire historical complexities of the debate, but a brief overview of the perspectives will help explain the impact of the discussion on the current study and the stated mission of the advising office examined.

Crookston (1972) described the role of advisor as teacher and encouraged advisors to foster growth in the whole student. He recommended that advisors conduct advisement sessions that support the development of both personal and intellectual growth. Developmental advising provides students with important academic information and also leaves academic decision making in the hands of the students. Crookston suggested that a reciprocal relationship between advisor and advisee was essential. He reasoned that a relationship built on trust and openness allows for interactions and discussions that will foster student development.

In their theory of developmental advising, Winston, Miller, Ender, and Grites (1984) described student growth in three areas: academic, career, and personal. They adopted many of the relational approaches identified by Crookston and discussed the importance of engaging students in thoughtful dialogue about options within and across the three areas.

Prescriptive advising is associated with the knowledgeable advisor who knows all the requirements, provides sound answers to a myriad of logistical questions, and steers students in the right direction when they are lost. Prescriptive advising is hierarchical, with the advisor in command of the knowledge and the advisement sessions; the advisee is passive and in receipt of advice (Crookston, 1972). No relationship is described by the prescriptive approach. Interactions are primarily question-and-answer sessions and are driven by the advisor's interpretation of the student's academic direction.

The distinct ends of the continuum, developmental versus prescriptive approaches to advising, remained distinct until Hemwall and Trachte (1999) suggested another perspective: *praxis advising*. Like developmental advising, praxis advising champions the advisor-as-teacher metaphor. The difference in approaches emerges in the teaching interactions. Praxis advising is built on the strengths of the faculty, and its proponents challenge the assumptions and practicality of developmental approaches to advising. In the praxis approach, advisors provide sound advice about courses and logistics, but they also stimulate student interest by discussing the advisor's discipline and field of expertise. Hemwall and Trachte (1999) made the argument that the current role of advisor has moved from academic mentor to personal counselor, and they believe that this shift does not benefit advisors or students. They argued that faculty members are neither trained nor interested in the personal development of their students, and they would be well advised to solely provide sound academic and professional advice about their respective subject matter. Cautioning against the simple selection of developmental advising over other approaches, Laff (1994) questioned the assumption that prescriptive advising is necessarily associated with ineffective advising. He challenged the breadth of Crookston's description of prescriptive advising, suggesting that prescriptive advising experiences may serve as the catalyst to significant personal interactions and potential academic development in the student.

These three perspectives (prescriptive, developmental, and praxis) lie on a continuum that is ever changing (Jordan, 2000). Although writers in the field of academic advisement present a favorable view of developmental approaches in higher education (Gordon & Habley, 2000; Winston et al., 1984), little empirical evidence is available to demonstrate that advisors consistently use developmental approaches in practice (Saving & Keim, 1998). Ender (1994) cited several reasons that developmental advising failed to take hold in academic practice: Advisors (faculty or professional) do not know how to apply the theory; technology is making advising more impersonal; commitment is lacking on the part of administrators; and part-time advisors are overused. Hemwall and Trachte (1999) agreed with the assertion that faculty and professional advisors do not know how to apply developmental advising theory, and they took the argument further by suggesting that many advisors, even those who know how to apply it, have no intention of employing developmental advising.

Student Preferences for Academic Advisement

While research on academic advising and its relationship to academic and personal growth

remains an underexamined area of study, a body of research on student preferences for advisement type is growing. The researchers generally show that students prefer advisement and advisor characteristics that reflect developmental rather than prescriptive approaches to advising. Nevertheless, students report receiving more prescriptive than developmental advising (Saving & Keim, 1998). A consistent limitation in this research is the lack of first-year students in the samples.

In a focus group study in the United Kingdom, Broadbridge (1996) talked with 40 graduating seniors about their advising-style preferences. She found that students preferred a developmental approach but explained that student preference was an evolving process rather than a stable preference that lasted throughout the entire academic career. Particularly at the beginning of the advisement relationship, students expressed a desire for a caring, reciprocal relationship. Students stated that they needed extra time with an advisor at the beginning of their academic careers because they were nervous and not aware of the scope of changes associated with college attendance. Students stated a preference for a sustained relationship with the advisor at the beginning of college, but few students reported being part of such a relationship. The desire for developmental advising was not aligned with student reasons for seeking out advisors. Students in the study went to their advisors primarily for logistic questions and only discussed personal growth concerns when the issues precipitated an educational crisis. Participants in the study were at the end of their academic careers and were asked to recall their preferences following several years of advisement. Therefore, their recollection of first-year preference may have been clouded by years of experience, and any suggestion that preferences underwent change is difficult to substantiate.

Fielstein (1987) also conducted a qualitative study of student advising preferences. Using phone interviews and follow-up questionnaires with 90 students (38 sophomores and 52 seniors), she found that 82% of the participants reported that they wanted their advisors to be personally acquainted with them, and 63% indicated that their academic advisor was interested in them as a person. Students also felt that the reported level of advisor involvement would translate into student benefits, such as improved student motivation, assistance with future career contacts, and written letters of recommendation.

Other researchers studying student preferences have used quantitative approaches to examine advising-style preference. The Academic Advising Inventory (AAI) is widely used in this area of research (Winston & Sandor, 1984). The AAI contains two scales, the Advising Style scale and the Advising Activities scale. Through the survey, researchers ask students to rate their advising preferences and the amount of advising in which specific academic, career, and personal issues were discussed. Herndon, Kaiser, and Creamer (1996) administered the AAI to 481 community college students and found that students reported a propensity for developmental advising. Differences in advising preference and advising experience were reported across racial groups, gender, and enrollment status (full- versus part-time). Part-time students received more prescriptive advising than did full-time students, and African American students received significantly less advising (either prescriptive or developmental) than did White students. The academic years of the students in the sample were not reported.

Fielstein, Scoles, and Webb (1992) also used items from the AAI with community college students to examine student preference for advising style. They extended the demographic factors associated with advising preference by comparing traditional and nontraditional students. More traditional students than nontraditional students preferred developmental advising, but nontraditional students reported receiving more developmental advising. Only 2% of the sample consisted of first-year students, and therefore reported age differences cannot be generalized to first-year students.

Alexitch (1997) administered the AAI to 81 third- and fourth-year students in Canada who were advised by university professors. His findings replicated those of Fielstein et al. (1992), but his hypothesis was different. He believed that advising preference was related to student motivation. Students who were considered learning-goal oriented (i.e., they were interested in learning for learning sake) were more likely to prefer developmental advising than were their more externally motivated peers. The results show that increased frequency of advising was related to developmental advising. Learning-goal oriented students reported more interactions with advisors and were more likely to receive the type of advisement they preferred, which was developmental. The Alexitch study lends credence to the developmental nature of academic advising. Students who appeared to be more advanced in terms of development were more likely than their less-developed peers to prefer developmental advising.

The studies above demonstrate that student preference for advising style is more complex than

may have been previously thought by researchers or academic advisors. By focusing on the merits of two or three approaches to academic advisement, researchers and advisors assume that a single effective approach to academic advising exists. Instead of a static philosophy of advising, maybe a more effective philosophy is based on a dynamic approach. The absence of first-year students as participants in previous research is a major limitation for testing the temporal-based continuum with data already obtained. Most researchers included students in their second, third, or final year of college. To generalize the finding that students prefer developmental approaches to advising, more research is needed on first-year student preferences and experiences with academic advisement. Perhaps in early interactions with students, advisors should employ more prescriptive approaches to meet student expectations and set the stage for future opportunities to engage students in developmental discussions (Laff, 1994).

Methods

Academic Advising at the Advisement Center

Approximately 11,000 undergraduates attend the University at Albany, and 5,000 of these students receive academic advisement in the Advisement Services Center/Undergraduate Studies (ASC/US). Each of the 14 full-time professional advisors of the ASC/US carry a caseload of approximately 400 students. The number of students accessing ASC/US services decreases throughout the academic year as students declare their majors. Once a student declares a major, he or she is advised by a faculty advisor in the respective department. Students cannot officially declare a major until their second year, and most students enter academic majors at the end of their third or fourth semester.

Prior to the 1999–2000 academic year, the ASC/US consisted of 12 graduate assistants working 20 hours per week and who had caseloads exceeding 200 students. Students were advised by several advisors during their first 2 years, thereby precluding advisor-student relationships from forming. Seven professional staff advised smaller numbers of students and usually worked with students experiencing academic difficulty. In consecutive Student Opinion Surveys, a system-wide instrument measuring student opinions on multiple characteristics of the institution, students rated their experiences with advisement as poor. Policy makers at the University at Albany responded by investing in the ASC/US. The leadership was restructured and eight professional advisors were hired. Members of the search committee were charged with hiring "caring, nurturing, cosmopolitan scholars." The newly hired and remaining professional advisors were trained using a theory of developmental advising as a guiding principle (Crookston, 1972).

Participants

During the 2001 spring semester, 34 first-year students participated in one of four focus-group discussions. One group consisted of 6 participants; two groups contained 7 participants; and one group had 10 students. The sample was overrepresented by males with 23 males and 11 females participating in one of four focus-group discussions. Students reported interest in the gamut of academic majors, and at the time the survey was conducted, several students were undecided in their selection of a major. All participants were first-year, traditional-aged students living on campus during their first 2 semesters at college.

Procedure

A pilot study using similar research questions and a similar protocol as the final study (reported here) was conducted in the spring of 2000. The analyses of the pilot study process and data resulted in the clarification of the focus-group protocol and more concise research questions for the current study.

In the final, comprehensive study reported here, two students, one undergraduate psychology honors student and one educational psychology graduate student, facilitated the focus group discussions. They underwent training in qualitative research methodology. The training protocol followed recommendations by Krueger and Casey (2000) and consisted of reading focus-group research, reviewing and editing focus-group protocols, role playing, and documenting feedback of focus-group discussions.

Using flyers and personal invitations, members of the residential-life staff recruited students for participation. The flyers indicated that students would have an opportunity to discuss their experiences with academic advisement. The focus group sessions were one of many that resident assistants (RAs) provide throughout the academic year. Advisors from the ASC/US routinely offer informational programs on advisement in the residence halls. The collaboration between RAs and ASC/US staff is mutually beneficial. Advisors want to be more of a presence on the campus, and RAs need to offer a certain number of educational programs to residents each year.

With an informal greeting, the facilitator and a facilitator's assistant initiated the focus group. The

facilitator followed the guidelines developed by Claesson and Brice (1989): a) The same issue or questions were covered in all the focus groups; b) the order of the questions were fitted to the individual focus group; c) individual perspectives and experiences were allowed to emerge; and d) the information participants considered important was not presupposed. Spontaneous, context-based, follow-up questions to probe, clarify, and interpret information were used throughout the survey. Individual focus-group questions addressed the two overarching purposes of the study: to understand student advising-style preference and to understand student perceptions of their experiences with their academic advisors. Each discussion was audio taped and lasted from 45 to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

Audiotapes of each focus group were transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document in preparation for the text analysis. Transcriptions of the audiotapes were systematically transformed into naturally occurring units of information using thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By using the constant comparison method, I placed these units of information into categories based on similar content and meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method consists of the simultaneous coding and analysis of data so that researchers can make comparisons in and between categories and look for similarities, differences, and consistencies of meaning. I used the resulting categories to integrate themes as they emerged from the data. The final step in data analysis involved the interpretation of the themes in the context of the two questions guiding the study.

Two techniques were employed to ensure that the qualitative data collected were valid. First, 20% of the text was analyzed by an independent evaluator not on the research team to determine if he could use the codes to summarize the data in the same way as the research team. Inter-rater agreement using the codes was determined by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements and disagreements. Inter-rater agreement was above 90%. Second, an extensive audit trail was developed to enable a full exploration of any inquiry. Information in the audit trail includes the raw data, data analysis and reduction products, data synthesis products, and process notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion

Several themes related to the research questions emerged. First, students generally indicated a preference for prescriptive advising. Although the finding was consistent across and within the four groups, a less prominent preference for advisors who provided assistance around areas of personal growth also emerged. Second, students described advisement meetings as primarily logistic interactions about course selection, general education requirements, and other questions related to course registration. In a subtheme of student experiences, participants consistently characterized their advisors as personable and knowledgeable. Few indicated that their advisor was unkind or insincere. In the focus-group meetings, dynamic interactions ensued as students discussed changes in expectations as a result of interactions with advisors. The major themes reflected from the data are described and illuminated by student comments and quotes.

Student Preference for Advisement

Unlike previous studies, in which researchers found that students prefer developmental advising, first-year students in this study at the University of Albany overwhelmingly cited prescriptive advising as the expected and preferred style. Students believed that "advisor" was synonymous with "high school guidance counselor," and they expected the advisor to be versed in the minutia of course syllabi and professor teaching styles.

In this study, first-year students likened the role of the advisor to their high school guidance counselor and many expected to be "handed a course schedule" each semester. The finding was somewhat surprising because students were given a list of over 100 courses from which to choose during summer orientation, and they registered for 5 of these courses after consulting their advisors. However, students failed to make the distinction between discussing choices with their advisor and being given certain classes to take in subsequent semesters. The phrase "advisors should give us classes," in various forms, was heard over and over. One woman described the role of an academic advisor in this way: "finding courses, basically recommending what courses you should take to fulfill your major and general education classes." Another student's expectations echoed the previous comment, "I thought I would go and tell them what I want to major in and they say, 'alright you have to take this and here's some classes you should take,' and they would give you a schedule and everything."

Students expected advisors to identify professors and classes that were easy. In three of the four groups, students conducted a thoughtful debate about the extent to which advisors should steer

them toward classes that were considered "easy A's" or toward professors that were easy graders. Those who championed the notion that advisors should help "select easy courses" were the victors in all instances of debate on the topic. Even students who pointed out that the definition of "easy" would be subject to advisor bias suggested that advisors should fully describe the content and methods of instruction for each course about which a student inquired. One student appeared to appreciate multiple sides of the selecting-easy-courses debate:

> I don't think they know you well enough to say "this is an 'easy' or 'hard' class" because they probably don't know what you can handle and cannot handle. If they say it is an easy class and in fact for you it is hard, and then you didn't expect it to be. But what they should do is just tell you what the class entails. That's what they need to know, like all the details. And from there you can make your own decision. And they can help you, guide you in that decision.

Many students indicated a desire for advisors to explain in great detail the content, type of instruction, and assessments used in each class. The theme reflects a preference for prescriptive advisement because students in the study equated the ability to identify classes that satisfy student majors, minors, and general education requirements as the main role of an advisor. One student asked what advisors do if they are not "giving out classes." He elaborated on his inquiry: "What do they do when they are not meeting with students? Obviously we meet with them for a certain amount of time at the beginning of the semester. What do they do after that?" Clearly a sustained advisor-student relationship is not formed if the student believes that the sole function of an advisor is to hand out classes according to a chart or description in the undergraduate bulletin. One student responded to a suggestion that advisors could help with a personal problem: "Advisors deal with academics, not feelings." Students who expect advisors to select classes may falsely assume that the advisor has knowledge of student interests, goals, and approaches toward their studies, but no one in the focus groups clearly explained how advisors would obtain such information on students.

Even though students generally preferred prescriptive advising, individual students in each focus group expressed a desire for developmental interactions. For instance, some students spoke of the role of advisor as a mentor, an individual who would help students in their classes or by listening if the advisee experienced a problem. These students indicated that good advisors provide guidance and offer tips or information that help them avoid the pitfalls associated with the first year of college. Some used the phrase "growth" and considered advisors potential allies in their academic and personal development. One student put it this way, "I think an advisor is somebody who will help you, be there for you, for more than just school—somebody that you can go and talk to." Another student in the same focus group concurred and suggested that in-depth advisor-student discussions facilitated academic choices. He said, "Good advisors listen to your interests and point you toward classes that might interest you." The quote exemplifies the limitations of the developmental-prescriptive advising dichotomy.

Student Experiences with Academic Advisement

An examination of student descriptions of early experiences with academic advisors revealed two important themes. First, students reported their advisement experiences as logistic, reflecting prescriptive rather than developmental interactions. Second, students consistently described advisors as personable and generally felt that advisors were knowledgeable about academic requirements.

The finding that student experiences reflect prescriptive advising was consistent with their advising-style preference. Unlike previous research in which a discrepancy in the type of advisement preferred and the type of advisement received was found (Alexitch, 1997; Fielstein, et al., 1992), students in this study received accurate logistical advising, which was consistent with their preferences. Students generally reported that in meetings with their advisor they had focused mainly or exclusively around course selection. Slightly fewer students reported seeing their advisors about the requirements of the general education program or to discuss a major or a minor. Students described the discussions in terms of understanding the components or requirements of the majors and minors rather than the opportunities or unique characteristics of various fields of study. The following quotes reflect experiences of prescriptive advising:

> My advisor, because I told her I was majoring in communication, and she seemed like she was pointing me in the right way, classes to take and stuff. She also told me a couple of general education classes to take that will help me in communication.

> My advisor is really focused on general education and she wants me to get rid of all of them

> and she basically told me to take classes that would take care of two at a time. Also, she's trying to help me with my major as best as she can.

Although a majority of the experiences reported in the focus groups were consistent with prescriptive advising, students shared advising experiences considered developmental in nature. One student remarked that his advisor remembered his name early in the semester, and he has since built a relationship with him. He stated, "Sometimes we talk and I see him in the campus center and he knows my name. I am able to talk about personal kind of stuff." Another student commented that her advisor remembered the context of their previous meeting. "When I went to make my schedule, he remembered what I was talking about in the last session. I guess it's good to know that they have some idea of who you are. That is a definite plus."

Students indicated that their advisor was personable, caring, or nice. Students described advisors as people who cared for them as individuals and felt that advisors were invested in their academic future. Furthermore, students stated that advisors were extremely knowledgeable in areas about which students inquired during advisement appointments. One student summed it up for his advisor: "I think my advisor is very knowledgeable about what you have to take, and I think she has good intentions." The quote and others like it in the study are consistent with Ford and Ford's (1989) recommendation that advisors should strive to be both caring and knowledgeable. First-year students in the current study were confident with the advice they had received and felt that their advisor was the individual to approach for information. Perhaps first-year students did not perceive a need to see their academic advisor for information other than courses and other logistics. Because students view their advisor as personable and knowledgeable, they may see the opportunity to seek out the advisor when and if the need arises. If they consider the advisor as an important resource for future information, the advisement received is potentially developmental, and when working with first-year students, advisors need to build credibility around student needs. If current needs revolve around classes and understanding major, minor, and general education requirements, advisors who are knowledgeable and caring may be encouraging future developmental discussions and interactions with advisees (Laff, 1994).

Students presented few negative statements about advisors. When sharing a negative comment, most related a discrepancy between student expectations and advisors actual roles. Negative comments were primarily leveled about the detail of information provided on individual courses or quality of individual faculty members. Some students said that they were "put in the wrong class" or "given the wrong class," which are statements that demonstrate student preference for advisors who provide a list of classes to the student.

Preference Challenged by Experience

Student preference for prescriptive advising was discovered through the study. Another theme pointed to potential changes in student expectations after several advisement interactions. Students wrestled with changes in expectation that accompanied their experiences with an advisor. One woman indicated that she was confounding the results of the study by changing her mind from statements she made earlier in the discussion. She explained the ambiguity or change in perception this way:

> I know I am contradicting everything and messing up your study. But I think my advisor is more helpful now that I think about it. But maybe that's because I didn't really know anything when I went in to see my advisor, so I was completely confused. So I think she is more helpful now, but maybe that is because I know a little bit more.

Other students discussed how their prematriculation perceptions of advisors changed once they arrived on campus. Many students assumed they would be treated like a number and would not get individual attention from professors and advisors. Some reported that they feel like a number in the ASC/US, but others, who expected to feel like a number at a large university, were pleasantly surprised with the personal attention they received. To further complicate the results, but to lend appreciation for the complexity of preferences and experiences, one student combined all possible expectations and changes in expectations. He indicated that he thought he would be treated as a number; subsequently the student was not treated as a number, but in the end, he stated that he did not care either way:

> I didn't actually have that high of expectations of what it was going to be like. I just figured it would be pretty much business-like, but my advisor remembered me and recalled the last time we talked. She knew right away who I was and pulled out my folder without even asking my name. So it was more personal than I

expected. I mean it is still not too personal, but I really don't care.

Although students had an appreciation for context, such as the environment of a large university, they seemed to bring certain preferences to the process that impacted advisor and student interaction. Maybe new students feel that "it is not cool" or appropriate to want to hang out or talk with an advisor, but perhaps experienced students recognize the value of a relationship with an advisor. Chickering and Reisser (1993) used student development theory to suggest that students are more likely to work independently early in their academic career and not recognize the importance of taking advantage of the resources offered by the college. Although this element of developmental advising was not specifically addressed in my study, Chickering and Reisser's contention may be supported by the findings.

Conclusion

Through this study, I attempted to do more than re-center the debate about the relative merits of developmental or prescriptive advising. The results challenge the existing literature on student preference for advising style in two important ways. First, first-year students were not participants in previous studies. The absence of first-year students calls into question the overarching assumption that college students prefer developmental advising to prescriptive advising. Second, the findings of the current study provide empirical evidence at one institution that first-year students prefer prescriptive advising to developmental advising. One interpretation of this finding is that prescriptive academic advising that meets student needs and expectations can be used to initiate developmental interactions and dialogue around academics, career, and personal goals in subsequent advising meetings. The research design in the current study does not accommodate an analysis on that hypothesis, but it sets the stage for future research to investigate its merits.

The study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample was not representative of the campus population, as men were overrepresented in the focus group discussions. While the current study involved nearly twice as many men as women, the major findings reported here reflect themes that emerged in a pilot study conducted in 2000 with an evenly distributed number of men and women participants ($N = 50$). Second, RAs recruited participants, and therefore, student participants were not selected randomly. All participants were first-year students who were advised in the ASC/US and therefore met the two absolute criteria underlying the sample selection. A final limitation is that students were not provided with prompts or questions that specifically cued them toward discussing developmental versus prescriptive preferences or experiences as is customary practice by researchers using the AAI (Winston & Sandor, 1984) or other survey instruments. Instead, using the focus-group methodology, facilitators asked students to discuss the role of academic advisors and to describe their experiences with advisement (Broadbridge, 1996).

The findings of the current study provide evidence of the complexity surrounding student preferences for advising style. First-year students at the University at Albany generally preferred and received advising that was more prescriptive than developmental. The finding was somewhat surprising because advisors were trained in the developmental approach to advising and adhere to developmental advising as a guiding principle. Unlike previous research, participants in the study reported a preference for prescriptive advising and were generally pleased with the advisement they received. If a level of disconnect between advising-style preference and experience emerged, student discontent would likely be more pronounced in the findings (Alexitch, 1997; Fielstein et al., 1992).

The preference for prescriptive advising may be related to student level of reasoning about college and themselves (Perry, 1970). Many students are worried about taking the appropriate courses and fear that a wrong choice will result in an inability to graduate within 4 years. Students may be articulating parental or societal pressure to graduate within a specified time frame, or they may simply not be able to fathom that college provides real academic choices and flexibility beyond the five core subject matters in high school. For these students, the advisor can play an important role in helping them understand the new academic environment and support new ways of thinking. This explanation supports Alexitch (1997), who found that student maturity in reasoning, as evidenced by internal academic motivation, was related to a preference for developmental rather than prescriptive advising. An alternative explanation could be that students are aware of the large caseloads for academic advisors and believe that advisors cannot provide anything other than the basics of courses and academic regulations. A few focus-group students acknowledged the burden of a few advisors in a large school and suggested that more advisors

should be hired. Increasing the number of advisors does not impact advising-style preference or student understanding of the role of academic advisors or how academic advising is conducted. Previous research on advising-style preference provides little information about the extent to which advising practice characterized by survey items, for example on the AAI, is feasible or desirable in a given advising context. Without knowledge of the objectives of a specific advising office or the objectives describing effective faculty advising at an institution, one cannot accurately assess whether students are meeting those objectives. Educators and administrators also have a dearth of knowledge about the expectations or perceived needs of the students served by academic advisement, either by faculty, advisement center staff, or combination of both. Greater attention should be paid to outcomes assessment in academic advising (Smith, Szelest, & Downey, in press).

Policy makers at the University at Albany listened to the voices of students and made tangible changes in the ASC/US to improve the quality of advisement. First, they have built upon the belief that the keys to good advisement involve making a connection with individual students (Ford & Ford, 1989; Tinto, 1987) and using assessment results to improve advising practice (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). In consecutive summer orientation sessions, advisors clarified their roles and defined the purpose of academic advisement in the first year at the ASC/US. They also balanced the time allotted to present important academic information and discuss academic goal setting and decision making. Administrators aided the change in focus by making a strategic decision to add more summer orientation sessions, thus reducing the number of students per session. Increased time in both the group introductory session and individual advisement sessions helps advisors become acquainted with the students and allows students, regardless of their advising-style preferences, to see the advisor as a potential resource. Experience and training reduced many advisor errors reported in the pilot study. Advisors are more knowledgeable of various course sequences and the intricacies of the majors.

During staff training in the spring 2000, involved faculty representatives from various departments in the College of Arts & Sciences met with advisors to discuss the details of the department. Faculty members provided information about special features of the major (internships and research), various career opportunities, and specific questions they have encountered from students about the major. The information gives advisors greater knowledge of the departments and an appreciation for the activities and opportunities available to prospective students.

The results of the study provide a baseline of information pertaining to student preferences and experiences with advisement at the institution under study. Armed with this information, advisors must decide how to use it as they prepare to work with future cohorts of first-year students. Advisors in the ASC/US are committed to developmental advising and seek to bring students into a reciprocal relationship where issues around academic, career, and personal growth are discussed. Advisors firmly believe that students should have the flexibility and independence to make decisions within and across the three areas. However, some students are ready for in-depth discussions when they arrive on campus and others are not. Advisors need to be progressively engaged in thoughtful dialogue with those who are not yet ready for developmental advisement. Demonstrating concern for student well-being and providing accurate academic information set the stage for pursuing more developmental conversations in future interactions. The developmental nature of the academic advisement process marks a distinction between the prescriptive versus developmental advising dichotomy.

Future focus-group discussion results will be compared to evaluate any changes in student preference and experiences with advisors. Focus group discussions will be conducted every 2 years, providing time for advising innovations to be fully implemented before effects are examined. Other lines of research involve cross-sectional or longitudinal focus-group discussions to examine the proposition that advising-style preference evolves from a prescriptive toward a more developmental approach as students proceed through college. Progress along this continuum would be advanced by advisor intervention, as evidenced by a deliberate approach in early advisement interactions and progressively altered probes and discussion topics that reflect a more developmental approach throughout the first 2 years of advisement. More research on first-year student preferences is needed to provide support for this assertion.

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