

From the Co-Editors: Is Academic Advising a Discipline?

Academic advising has been referred to as a faculty responsibility, a service, a field, and a discipline. Since the days in which it was just one of many responsibilities bundled within the faculty role, academic advising has become relatively independent within higher education. It is no longer wedded to personal, career, or vocational counseling as “academic counseling.” It has metamorphosed until it no longer carries the “counseling” modifier at most institutions of higher education and it is now labeled “academic advising.” While being thought of as a bundled faculty responsibility, a service, a field, or a discipline, academic advising was establishing its independence. More and more, the administrative home of academic advising is located within the academic affairs rather than the student affairs sector. In this column, we examine some definitions of academic advising that help identify advising as a bundled faculty responsibility, a service, a field, and a discipline.

A Bundled Faculty Responsibility

From when Harvard was founded in 1636 and through the early years of higher education, academic advising was an unidentified role assumed by faculty. The definition of the advising function became more explicit in the mid-to-late 1800s when some institutions formalized their advising programs. Glennen (2003, p. 42) described the contemporary version of the traditional faculty role well when he wrote, “The role of faculty advisors is to provide academic advice, help establish student goals, provide career guidance, assist students in selecting a major course of study, clarify graduation requirements, disseminate information, and generally assist students in achieving academic success.”

In writing about how faculty responsibilities changed over time, Habley (2003, p. 24) stated that

to the faculty member’s role as teacher and mentor were added ever-increasing expectations for him or her to be researcher, writer, grant procurer, and participant in faculty governance and other activities. Although these roles were defined and rewarded differently in the various institutional types, it became clear that college faculty were expected to be proficient in multiple roles, with advising only one of many.

Kuhn (2008) suggested that the important traditional faculty responsibilities for teaching, research, and service are shifting to others as a result of ever-increasing demands for faculty performance in research that results in scholarly publication. The increasing demands for research activity have also diminished the expectations for teaching and service productivity. Hence, as advising is being unbundled—at a time when ever more students require assistance and direction with their academic, social, and personal concerns—its function is being assumed by individuals whose primary purpose is to advise students.

A Service

To the degree that it contributes to the assistance, help, use, benefit, and welfare of students, academic advising is a service. It is similar to the professional services rendered by doctors or lawyers, who are usually reimbursed on a per visit or per service basis. However, unlike doctors and lawyers, advisors are typically salaried by the institution rather than paid directly by clients, and they rarely set their own hours and work arrangements.

Over the years, many student services have become formalized into administrative offices. These include, for instance, admissions, orientation, records and registration, financial aid, transfer, career development, student life, health, child care, fitness, housing and residential life, food, judicial affairs, intramurals, as well as counseling and psychological services. At some institutions, academic advising might be found in this list, while at others it would be associated with academic colleges, departments, or schools. Whether or not academic advising is more properly placed within student affairs or academic affairs probably depends on whether it would be evaluated for its effectiveness in producing student satisfaction (which would auger for placement in student affairs) or student retention and graduation (which would auger for placement in academic affairs).

A Field

The term “field” is so generic that calling academic advising “a field” says little about its essence. *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* gives nine separate definitions of the noun form of *field*, and one of those states that a “field” is “an area or division of an activity (a lawyer eminent in his ~).” This definition is sufficiently broad to incorporate

academic advising as a field within higher education. Other definitions of field indicate that it is “an area of human activity or interest,” “a topic, subject, or area of academic interest or specialization,” and the identifier for a “profession, employment, or business” (www.thefreedictionary.com/field). *Field* has also been defined as “an area which can be comprehended in a given way.” Other examples denoting *field* as an area of investigation, interest, or study suggest inclusiveness but fail to delineate boundaries (www.yourdictionary.com/Field). A field can also be “a realm of knowledge or of special work or opportunity (the field of electronics)” (www.yourdictionary.com/field). Finally, *field* has been defined as “a branch of knowledge” in which synonyms such as “discipline,” “subject,” and “study of” are commonly used (www.ardictionary.com/field/2134). These definitions give a wide swath to the contextual meaning for what can constitute a field. With these definitions of field in mind, we find that academic advising is appropriately referred as a field in higher education.

A Discipline

While advising continues to be a bundled responsibility for faculty members at many institutions, roommates, family members, clerical staff, faculty members, and administrators also provide information, support, insight, and direction to students. However, the numerical growth of full-time advisors since 1990 is evidence that advising is a field of endeavor within higher education. In all types of institutions—public or private and small or large—advising has established an institutional foothold. The growth from a volunteer gathering of about 275 interested individuals in 1977 to a professional association that 31 years later would boast of over 10,000 members is an additional testament to the growth of the field of academic advising.

We are compelled to ask: What criteria would need to be met for academic advising to be considered a discipline within higher education? By definition, each academic discipline represents a branch of knowledge that is formally taught as a part of the curriculum and in which scholars publish the results of their research inquiries about practice and theory. While a discipline could be called a “field,” not every field could be called a “discipline.”

Some of the criteria required to establish a field as a discipline would include scholars who research and publish about the discipline in adjudicated journals, and one would expect that tenets of it are taught in higher education institutions. The historical disciplines in medieval universities typically

consisted of theology, medicine, jurisprudence, and arts. As the sheer amount of information increased and research methodologies grew more sophisticated, the initial disciplines served as willing hosts for subfields that subsequently blossomed with activity and eventually assumed identities as disciplines. For instance, in the 1800s universities responded to the demand for a practical curriculum to contend with agricultural and industrial challenges to expanding territories and populations. To the traditional disciplines were added nonclassical languages and literature, physics, chemistry, biology, and engineering. Between 1900 and 1930, education, sociology, and psychology assumed disciplinary status in the higher education curriculum (Wikipedia, n.d.). Because of the growing canon of disciplines, what does academic advising need to accomplish to be considered a peer within the canon?

Weaving thoughts from Waetjen (2002) with our own, we suggest that advising will be recognized as a discipline when it has a body of credible organized knowledge that is unique; when it has a clear delineation of the modes of inquiry by which it validates itself, creates new knowledge, and advances as a discipline; and when its intellectual content is offered as a coherent grouping of courses in degree-granting majors at several institutions of higher education.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that advising is ubiquitous throughout higher education inasmuch as faculty members, administrators, family, friends, and roommates are all known to “advise” students. However, we believe that the term *academic advising* should refer to situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter. We have tried to show that academic advising can be a bundled faculty responsibility, a service, and a field within higher education. However, based on published discipline-oriented research findings in adjudicated journals and acceptance as a degree-granting area, we conclude that academic advising must establish more credentials before it can be considered an academic discipline.

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