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Defining the Role of Academic Advising in the Industrial Setting: The Next Phase

Toni B. Trombley is director of academic advising, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont; David Holmes, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont.

A Profession of Futurists

The turning of the calendar to 1981, in itself not an unexpected event, has been nevertheless the occasion for peering into the future to see what our world is becoming. On the basis of sound statistical indicators as well as more philosophical musings, higher education professionals have come to believe that higher education's viability depends on predicting oncoming events and developments. We have become a profession of futurists.

If one accepts the proposition that anticipating the future is indeed a vital necessity in managing our programs and our institutions in the 1980's, we must become more skilled at describing the probable future, at assessing implications for today's decisions, and at integrating an evolving view of the future into evolving programs and institutions. Furthermore, we need to distinguish accurately those forces more or less inevitable and those forces that we may shape or alter through shrewd planning and decision-making. In effect, we need a conceptual framework for thinking about the future — even a crudely formed one — and a set of criteria for guiding our decisions.

In an important, though neglected, area of higher education, academic advising, we will apply the logic of futuristic thinking. What environmental factors will affect academic advising in the 1980's? What areas are susceptible to shaping through our decision? What goals are the most realistic and the most appropriate? How do we affect change?

Academic Advising: The Problems of Marginality

Academic advising, a term in common usage in higher education, connotes the provision of educationally-related information and guidance to students confronted with choices and alternative paths in their education. The manner by which American

colleges and universities have provided this advising long has been the subject of criticism from students, faculty, and administrators. Although virtually every institution pledges to provide personal attention and guidance to each student, most observers of advising report faculty who feel beleaguered by its demands, administrative conflict over who has responsibility for advising tasks, and students who expound upon advising inadequacies.¹ This criticism exists even where particular aspects of an advising program are working effectively. For various reasons, higher education has not yet developed approaches to academic advising that work to the satisfaction of all interested parties. What are the problems with academic advising? Our analysis suggests three major obstacles to good advising systems.

First, in the status order of the typical college or university, clearly academic advising is an activity of minor status. Most institutions have not publicly committed to advising or have not identified high-level leadership to promote advising programs. A symptom of this low status is that the largest group of advisors on most campuses, the faculty, cannot expect any special rewards for a commitment to advising or for superior performance. Lack of agreement exists between administrators and faculty on how much to weigh evaluation of advising and advisors in a program review process or to weigh evaluation of advisors in a faculty reward system.

A further symptom of advising's low status appears in the apparent gap on most campuses between student expectations for faculty assistance and the reality of most campus environments. Feldman and Newcomb, Astin, and others have demonstrated the positive relationship between student satisfaction and good interactions between faculty and students.^{2,3} We also know that students,

¹ Toni B. Trombley, "Academic Advising: Challenge to Universities," (prepared for 3rd Annual Conference of the National Academic Advising Association, Omaha, Nebraska, October 1979).

² Kenneth A. Feldman and Theodore M. Newcomb, *The Impact of College On Students* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969.)

³ Alexander W. Astin, *Preventing Students From Dropping Out*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975.)

concerned with their futures and confronted with myriad academic options, look to the advising system and to faculty for direction and help. Still, in contrast to the promises and values implied in most college catalogues, rarely do we find practices fully responsive to student needs and expectations. Students are misled too often by institutional rhetoric and they know it.

A second obstacle is a lack of coordination of the various offices and persons in advising functions. Many staff, including faculty, counselors, academic administrators, student affairs personnel, even clerical staff, have special responsibilities and aptitudes for meeting students' personal needs. Given the fragmented structure of most higher education institutions, few institutions have integrated programmatically or organizationally the various resources into a coherent campus-wide advising system. The unfortunate result is frequent internecine battles over who controls what. This lack of coordination and festering tension presents a major obstacle to developing an effective advising system.

A third obstacle to good advising revolves around faculty. The vast majority of faculty do not possess the necessary range of skills and knowledge to be excellent advisors, do not have easily available opportunities to develop these capabilities, and, perhaps most importantly, do not have the motivation to change the existing situation. Advising, like teaching, is personal interaction requiring both knowledge and communication skills. Although most campuses have developed teaching improvement programs in recent years, advising has not received equivalent attention. As a result, the richest source of advisors on most campuses remains a relatively underdeveloped resource.

Advising's low status, confused organizational arrangements, and lack of trained personnel emphasize the marginal position of academic advising in contemporary higher education. This situation does not surprise us but it is important to recognize, especially as institutions set out to improve educational quality at a time of expected shrinking resources. May we reasonably expect the status of academic advising to rise and the quality of advising to improve during the 1980's? The conventional wisdom dictates that marginal activities and programs will suffer first as the competition for resources intensifies and the political atmosphere heats up. What will be the consequences of marginality? Our glances into the future indicate that the expected may not occur; indeed, academic advising may become a critical function on the

receiving end of high-level attention and of new financial resources. In a phrase, we predict that institutions will come to believe that a strong academic advising system is one of the best investments during the 1980's.

The Advising Movement

Before looking at specific factors affecting the future of academic advising, we should point out that the recent history of academic advising carries implications for the next few years. Until recently, no national organization represented academic advising. Also, within our colleges and universities, advising largely has remained an unexamined function. In a sense, academic advising has been one of higher education's hidden functions.

A major step toward elevating advising to a stature worthy of study and interchange among professionals occurred in October 1977. The First National Conference on Academic Advising was held in Burlington, Vermont and drew 275 participants from around the country. An independent evaluation of the conference discerned wide-ranging interest in continuing and expanding the conference. Since 1977 the National Conference has been held in Kansas City for 350 participants and in Omaha for 415 participants and in Asheville for nearly 600 participants. The National Academic Advising Association was incorporated in 1979. Membership in the nascent organization reached 500 in less than a year. During this same period of time, the American College Testing Program conducted a national survey of academic advising practices. The Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development in Higher Education at Kansas State University introduced a standardized advising evaluation form for national use, and many institutions began to develop instruments to assess the quality of advisors and advising. A movement has emerged to improve the status of academic advising. For the first time, a community of researchers, practitioners, and makers of policy regularly communicate with each other and interested constituencies. An important aspect of these developments is that academic vice presidents and presidents have participated extensively. These phenomena indicate that institutional leaders recognize the importance of academic advising and seek avenues for improving performance on their campuses.

These events at the national level have enhanced the importance of academic advising. As a result of this national movement, there are emerging tools of change, including a network of advising experts on campuses around the country, advising consultants

available to campuses, evaluation instruments, strategies, and published research. These resources will act as catalysts for building viable academic advising systems. We believe, however, that the critically important arena of the individual campus remains relatively underdeveloped. As yet, the new interest in advising and the new community of knowledgeable professionals have not produced, except on a small minority of campuses, significantly improved academic advising.

Clearly the next stage of development of the advising movement must focus on individual campuses. Activities at the national level must support efforts at the local level. Institutional leadership must emerge, leadership committed to academic advising and able to develop programs that fit the unique setting of one's college or university.

Changes in the Higher Education Environment: Implications for Academic Advising

With persistent marginality and an emerging national movement as aspects of the present situation, what developments within higher education likely will influence directly the future of academic advising? What events will affect individual campuses and how are institutions likely to respond? How must they respond? An abundance of new studies and statistical projections show forcefully that we face a future that will challenge our abilities to adapt to different conditions, to cultivate the unfamiliar, and to accept new values. These changes will be imposed, in great part, by a sluggish economy coupled with the presence of new and more diverse students. The concepts of the 1970's, retrenchment, reallocation, decline, survival, will take on new meanings as we are impelled to refocus our energies and our thinking.

Kenneth Mortimer, director of Penn State's higher education center, predicts that the future will be unique in that it will "combine shrinking enrollments with expenditures and pressures that threaten to outrace the growth in institutional revenues." He further states that "there is no historical precedent for the fast deceleration of growth projected through 1990."⁴ The National Center for Education projects peak enrollment to occur in the Fall '81 with a four percent deceleration in growth

by 1988.⁵ These projections rest on the assumption that present enrollment patterns and student composition will continue. Both predict a period of retrenchment.

The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education in its final report predicts a less ominous future. It foresees a period of adjustments. These adjustments do not equate with retrenchment. The Council predicts that by the year 2000, there will be "radical changes" in the composition of the student body with the greatest adjustments by entrenched faculty and administrators. The Council describes the approaching era as the "Golden Age of the Students" who will be recruited, supported, counseled, and admitted more aggressively. One-fourth of these new students will be minority, one-half or more will be women, one-half will be over twenty-one, and equally significant, there will be as many part-time as full-time students. Institutions continuing to attract essentially the same composition of students as in the 60's and 70's will have, they warn, one-half of their classrooms empty by the year 2000.

Although educational leaders already have articulated the need to be more rather than less innovative, the Carnegie Council sees indications that institutions will indeed face threats to their survival and will, instinctively

- ... change admissions requirements;
- ... place increased emphasis on the retention of students;
- ... search for non-traditional students, who in the past have been the least preferred.⁶

These are logical steps and not necessarily defeatist in nature. A critical question, however, will be whether institutions assume a psychology of decline and of survival at-all-costs or whether institutions assume a psychology of calculated change and improvement. Planning for decline and planning for change embrace unique sets of values. Whereas the former perpetuates an existing value system, the latter challenges the basis of those attitudes and values. Many administrators and faculty may lack the flexibility, insight, resilience, motivation, or confidence to assume a positive stance toward change.

⁴ Kenneth Mortimer, cited by Jack Magarrell in "The Three 'R's' of the Eighties: Reduction, Reallocation and Retrenchment," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (7 January 1980), 6-7.

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, cited by Jack Magarrell in "The Three 'R's' of the Eighties: Reduction, Reallocation, and Retrenchment," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 (7 January 1980), 6-7.

⁶ "Three Thousand Futures: The Next 20 Years for Higher Education," 1980 (as excerpted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 January 1980, 9-12.)

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As institutions take necessary steps toward guaranteeing their survival, the area of student retention holds a special potential for moving an institution in a positive, progressive direction. Retention of students is important and will become much more important. Indeed, retention is a survival issue. Furthermore, the rate of student retention closely ties to the quality of academic advising. We believe the healthy institution will place the highest value on meeting the diverse needs of each of its students. This stance will enhance prospects for survival. This stance will elevate the importance of good academic advising.

Retention, Academic Advising, and Institutional Values

Studies in the area of retention by Noel, Pantages and Creedon, Pascarella and Terenzini, and others leave scant doubt that the academic advising system plays a major role in the student's process of identification and perception of 'fit' with the institution.⁷ An important aspect of the student's development and growth lies in making personally satisfying decisions. To do so, each student needs the opportunity to take personal risks and to retain an element of control over the development of his or her academic program. Students, in general, seriously consider alternative ways to earn credit, such as, part-time programs, individually-designed majors, transfer, stopping out, unique subject matter concentrations, double majors, and multiple degrees. When presented the opportunity and guidance through an academic advising system to shape features of their own academic lives, they find their personal relationship with the institution enhanced and their desire to persist strengthened.

Traditionally, faculty advising has involved the performance of mechanical functions such as signing of registration cards, maintaining student records, and describing requirements of an academic major. These elements do not demand substantive personal contact between the student and advisor and, in fact, too often become an exercise in one-way communication. Advising, as defined

in current literature, is a much broader concept. It is developmental in nature, and includes helping students to define educational interests and goals; providing guidance in choosing from among options; and strengthening students' abilities to reach decisions consistent with their values, aptitudes, and personality characteristics. Within this more comprehensive view of academic advising, advisors must be able to establish and maintain a relationship with advisees that helps them "conceptualize their situation and future possibilities."⁸

We conclude that the following understandings must guide us to meet successfully the challenges of the 1980's:

- . . . Advising has a major impact on students' satisfaction with their educational programs and, in turn, on their perception of fit with the institution; institutional commitment to advising must be demonstrated in terms of human, fiscal, and physical resources;
- . . . effective advising presupposes the existence of a well-articulated set of principles and guidelines;
- . . . components and criteria of an effective advising system can be isolated;
- . . . skills and insights of good academic advising can be developed;
- . . . appointment of one individual or office to coordinate the total advising system will prevent fragmentation between units and promote desirable outcomes.

Demonstrating Quality and Value: The Challenge for Academic Advising

Persuasive evidence exists that academic advising, student retention, and institutional stability are strongly linked. This linkage suggests that the future of academic advising is bright and that institutions will elevate its importance. Further, this evidence suggests that obstacles of low status, organizational confusion, and untrained staff can be overcome. We believe it important, however, to recognize that in the competitive atmosphere of the 1980's nothing will be certain. It is not inevitable that in response to changing conditions institutions

⁷ Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini. "Predicting Freshman Persistence and Voluntary Dropout Decisions From a Theoretical Model" *Journal of Higher Education*, 51 (1980), 60-75. Noel Lee, "College Student Retention: A Campus-Wide Responsibility." *Journal of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors*, 21, (1976), 33-36. T. J. Pantages, and C. F. Creedon, "Studies of College Attrition," *Review of Educational Research*, 48 (1978), 49-101.

⁸ Toni B. Trombley, "A Self-Study of a Centralized Academic Advising Unit at the University of Vermont in Academic Advising." A Resource Document (1979 supplement), edited by David S. Crockett. (The American College Testing Program, 1979).

will choose to improve the way in which they provide academic advising.

Competition for resources will become keener, and more programs will stagnate at present levels (or in some cases disappear) as institutions are forced to allocate diminishing resources and choose among several attractive alternatives. This situation is a cold fact of the 1980's. On what basis will decisions about programs and resources be reached? How will institutions choose concerning whether and how to modify, expand, contract, initiate, or eliminate programs? What will be the fate of academic advising in this decision-making milieu?

Two overriding criteria likely to be utilized in rational decision-making are *quality* and *value*. Quality has been defined in the following manner:

Questions of quality involve assessment of the extent to which a program achieves its goals, ie., of its excellence and contributions in its appropriate teaching, research, and service activities.⁹

Value has been defined as follows:

The theme of value embraces the nature, importance, and responsiveness of a program's goals as they relate to the needs and goals of the university, of students, [of the state], and of the region and nation. The theme of value does not imply intrinsic worth — all programs and all program goals are probably intrinsically worthy — but rather the importance and signifi-

cance of a program and its goals to the mission of *this* University at *this* time.¹⁰

Whereas historically the ethos of higher education has included an uncompromising aspiration for quality, the criterion of value largely has been ignored. We have not had to make many hard choices of relative value. The 1980's will differ on this score, and critical decisions will be ones of value.

Several developments suggest that, potentially, advising will assume a stronger position with respect to judgments of relative value. In general, academic advising is becoming much more important to the welfare of colleges and universities. It is crucial, however, that advocates of improved academic advising respond consciously and effectively to these criteria for decision-making in the 1980's. First, the effectiveness and excellence of advising programs must be demonstrated. Good quality is a fundamental, and it must be evident to others. Second, the importance of academic advising to the institution's interests must be argued persuasively and be supported by evaluation. In the hierarchy of priorities, it must be demonstrated that an effective academic advising program remains essential to institutional survival and to educational quality.

In the years ahead, academic advising will assume a much more visible, important role on many campuses. These campuses likely will have achieved and demonstrated the quality and value of advising. What remains critical is institutional action that can redirect energies to meet the emerging educational needs of our future students.

⁹ Robert Arns, "Areas of Emphasis for the University of Vermont," unpublished planning document, University of Vermont, August 1979.

¹⁰ Arns.