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The Impact of an Academic Advising Program: A Case Study

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The relationship between advising and retention was one of the highest research priorities expressed by the NACADA membership survey taken in the spring of 1980. In response to the open-ended item: "Please indicate one or more questions about advising which you would like to see studied," forty-eight of the 350 persons responding "focused on relationships between advising and retention, especially whether improved advising would increase student retention."

The literature on retention is extensive and has been summarized in numerous works (including Grites's widely read report: *Academic Advising: Getting US Through the Eighties*) but specific evidence of improvement in retention resulting from an academic advising program is rare. This report is an effort to provide such evidence in the case of an advising program undertaken in the College of Arts and Sciences at Oakland University, beginning in the 1979-80 academic year.¹

AN ADVISING STUDY

In response to a number of problems encountered with Oakland University's advising system, the President commissioned a year-long study of advising. Questionnaires were distributed to all undergraduate students (except new students), and to all faculty members in the College of Arts and Sciences. A majority of each group responded—1799 students and 182 faculty. Interviews were conducted with twenty-five students who had recently left the University without graduating and with key members of University senate committees.

The study showed:

- that students and faculty believed the advising system did not properly serve student needs.

¹Charyl J. Polson and William E. Cashin, "Research Priorities for Academic Advising: Results of Survey of NACADA Membership," *NACADA Journal*, 1 (1981), 40.

²Thomas J. Grites, *Academic Advising: Getting Us Through the Eighties* (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1979). IOU.

See also Philip E. Beal and Lee Noel, *What Works in Student Retention* (Iowa City: American College Testing, 1980); Lee Noel and Lois Remick, "College Student Retentions: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography," (*American College Testing Year Sheet*, n.d.); Alexander Asin, *Premature Students from Dropping Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975), and Leonard Ramist, "College Student Attrition and Retention," *Findings*, 6 (1981), 1-4.

A review of the retention literature with specific reference to the problems of Oakland University is David C. Beardslee, "Thinking About Retention Is Thinking About People," *Oakland University Office of Institutional Research Memorandum #12, Supplement #5*, (June 21, 1979).

- that approximately three-fourths of **Oakland's** students were commuters, with special needs.
- that advising was largely ignored when faculty were evaluated for promotion or tenure.
- that many faculty gave advising a low priority among their professional activities.

A key recommendation of the study was that a small office be established reporting directly to the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. This office would seek to coordinate and improve faculty advising. It would be consulted when personnel decisions were made about faculty engaged in academic advising. In addition, it would provide some assistance with general education advising, especially to departments with large numbers of majors. The office was created in the summer of 1979, under the direction of a senior faculty member who continued to teach a class each semester. During the next two years its staff built up slowly to include one full-time and one half-time academic advisor and a half-time secretary. The staff was also assigned the responsibility for evaluating courses taken by students at other institutions that would be credited toward the College's general education requirements.

The advising office adopted a two-pronged approach to improving advising. It utilized "intrusive" techniques to reach students and encourage them to see their advisors and/or the advising office staff, and it took steps to improve the level of service the students would receive when they requested assistance.

"INTRUSIVE" ADVISING

To reach students, a member of the advising staff spoke to all freshman and transfer orientation students over the summer. The office set up a table on site during registration periods to assist students over those hectic days. Signs announcing the new advising service were posted in many locations on campus. With the permission of faculty, most large introductory classes were visited by an advisor, who gave a presentation urging students to see their advisors and/or visit the advising office. (This helped also to acquaint faculty with the program, since they also heard the presentation.)

Two evenings each week, a select group of student employees phoned College of Arts and Sciences students and undecided students at their homes. These students were asked how they were progressing in their studies, encouraged to see their academic advisors, and offered help with any school-related problems they had experienced. The calling began with freshmen and, by the end of the academic year, a majority of the students in the College had been contacted, and one-fourth of those called requested assistance of some kind.

While this study was being conducted, a regional accreditation team from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools visited Oakland. Although it praised the quality of students and teaching at the university, it commented that it had encountered many students who felt that academic advising was poor and remarked on the absence of advising services in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Call For Proposals

7th National Conference on Academic Advising October 23-26, 1983 • St. Louis, Missouri

Sponsored by: National Academic Advising Association
Hosted by: Kansas State University, Division of Continuing Education

"Beyond Change — Managing the Multifaceted Role of the Academic Advisor"

Plans are well underway for the 7th National Conference on Academic Advising to be held in St. Louis on October 23-26, 1983. Come join us!

The conference will feature Key Speakers:

- Patricia Cross, author of *Accent on Learning*, *Beyond the Open Door*, *The Junior College Student*, Distinguished Educator, Editor, and Scholar of Higher Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education
- Silas Funnell, Ada S. McKinley Educational Foundation (Chicago), Educator and innovator in developing career and educational opportunities for Blacks in higher education
- Lee Noel, Educator and Developer of Research on educational background and advising as factors in the retention of students in higher education, American College Testing Program

Program Proposals are Sought

Program proposals are being sought for oral presentation/discussion sessions, as well as in-conference workshops, topical seminars and the idea Exchange (informal, open arena for display and discussion of ideas utilizing handbooks, guides, handouts and other tools for the advisor).

Suggested topics include (but are not limited to):

- | | |
|--|---|
| • Advising the Student Athlete | • Freshman Year Programs |
| • Advising in Teaching/Learning | • Developmental Theory in Advising |
| • Advising the Adult Learner | • Computer as tool for Advisors |
| • Legal Aspects of Advising | • "Special Student" Populations |
| • Advisor Stress/Coping | • Advisor Selection, Training, Evaluation |
| • Sexual Bias in Advising | • Managing the Central (or Decentral) Advising System |
| • The Advisor and Academic Integrity | • Institutional Attitude Toward Advising |
| • Planning and Implementing Change in Advising | • Time Management |

A Program Abstract of 50 words must accompany the full proposal. Send five (5) copies of the proposal, and the abstract postmarked no later than May 2, 1983 to:

Charles W. Connell, NACADA Program Chair 1983
201 Woodburn Hall, College of Arts & Sciences, West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia 26506 / Phone: (304) 293-4611

Deadline for submitting proposals: May 2, 1983

Selections will be made and chairperson notified by May 31, 1983

*Howard C. Kramer and Robert E. Gardner, *Managing Faculty Advising* (Ithaca, New York: privately in 1978) (this footnote is in reference to " " on page 60)

IMPROVING FACULTY ADVISING

To help **improve** faculty advising, a **variety of activities were** undertaken. The **director** of the program visited each department to **discuss** how the **new office could be of** assistance in improving **that** department's academic advising. Although **no one** would be promoted or awarded tenure primarily on the **basis of contributions as an advisor**, faculty **were promised** that academic advising **would be recognized** as an important service to the University and brought to the attention of **committees and administrative officers** involved in retention, promotion and **tenure** decisions. In accordance with this promise, the **director** also **met** with the **elected College and University personnel** committees, before **they began their deliberations**, to **emphasize** the importance of **good** advising to the College and to urge them to afford it due consideration in their **decisions**.

The small advising **office** kept an advisor on duty **during university business hours** throughout the year. Students **could** visit for immediate advising, call for appointments or, if they **preferred**, have advising questions answered on the phone. Each visit or call was written up **immediately** on the half-page "transaction form" adopted by the office. In the past, students had complained **that they sometimes received** bad advice which was not always **remembered** by the advisor. Now a record was **available** to protect both student and advisor in such cases. In addition, members of the advising staff could review **each other's** transactions.

Faculty members **were also** invited to phone the office with any **information or interpretations** they might need when advising students, **because they were not expected** to be advising "experts." In effect, a "hot-line" information service **was available** to faculty at all times to **help them be more effective advisors**. Faculty **requests for assistance** also made it **possible** for the advising office to implement a key **element** in the **Kramer-Gardner model** put forth in *Managing Faculty Advising*! The office sought to provide to **faculty callers** the kind of service it hoped they **would provide students**, thus providing **them** with a model.

A series of luncheon meetings **was arranged between** the college advising staff and the "chief advisors" of each department and major program in the college. Departmental secretaries also were invited to **lunch in several groupings each year** to **discuss** the new advising program, and **were asked to help inform both students and faculty** about the **services offered**.

RESULTS

Despite the **departure of the President** soon after he had established the new advising office, the program **appears to have been highly successful**. Qualitatively **this conclusion seems warranted** from the **extensive positive feedback** the program has **received from both students and faculty**. Quantitatively the indicators point to **only small parts of the program's impact**. The **most persuasive** of these indicators is the **startling demand** for services visited upon the new office. In its **first nine months of operation** (in a college with an approximate undergraduate **enrollment of 2500**) **the office received over 100 requests for**

assistance from students and almost 100 from faculty members. During the **program's second year**, there were 3000 student requests for assistance and **more than 200** from faculty members. Both student and Faculty **requests** continued to rise during the third year. (See **Table I.**) In addition, the office **dealt** with more than 100 **prospective** students referred by the **Admissions Office**. The **kinds of assistance** provided by the office are shown in **Table I.**

TABLE I
ARTS AND SCIENCES ADVISING OFFICE
TRANSACTIONS, 1979-82

	1979-80 (9 months)	1980-81	% Change 1979-80 to 1980-81	1981-82	%Change 1980-81 to 1981-82
Total Advising Transactions	1194	3286	+ 275%	4027	+ 23%
Student initiated	1080	3013	+ 277%	3536	+ 17%
Faculty/ Staff-initiated	108	374	+ 253%	491	+ 80%
Most Frequent Kinds of Faculty/Staff Transactions	1979-80 (9 mos.)	1980-81	1981-82		
Information on college or university procedures	29	45	74		
Assistance in evaluating transfer credits	—	68	73		
Interpretations of college or university requirements	47	54	72		
Sending a student to us for additional help	6	8	50		
Petitions of exception	7	3	42		
Referrals—where to send a student for additional help	9	10	28		
Most Frequent Kinds of Student Transactions					
General education advising	204	707	82		
Referrals	407	666	78		
Aid in evaluating transfer credits	55	478	58		
University or college procedures (how to, whom to, where to, what if. . .)	184	431	42		
Choice/changes/additions of major	89	417	40		
Help in course selection	154	667	31		
Questions about advisors (names, office and phone numbers, office hours)	62	143	2		
Petitions of exception	80	212	2		

In the fall, 1979 term, 2885 students were enrolled in majors or programs in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Only a **small fraction** of these transactions appear to have had an impact on student retention; however, statistics collected by the Registrar's Office and the Office of Student Services suggest that the program did have a **significant impact** on retention in the College. Table II shows that the rate of withdrawals during fall and winter semesters dropped **considerably** below the **previous rate** for Arts and Sciences and undecided students in each of the two academic years after the new advising program was established.## At the same time, the withdrawal rate for students in other units of the University rose. Enrollment in the College had been falling each year by nearly 300 students (around 5% of the total undergraduate enrollments), but in the fall of 1981 enrollments actually increased slightly in both absolute and relative terms, though fewer new students were enrolling in the College than in previous years. (See Table III.)

TABLE II
UNDERGRADUATE WITHDRAWALS DURING FALL
AND WINTER SEMESTERS

	1978-79	1979-80	1980-81
College of Arts and Sciences			
Enrolled	4737	4302	4058
Withdrawn	261	185	193
Rate	5.5%	4.3%	4.8%
Undecided			
Enrolled	1941	2417	2372
Withdrawn	99	82	94
Rate	5.1%	3.4%	4.0%
All Others			
Enrolled	9569	10,225	10,929
Withdrawn	375	430	478
Rate	3.9%	4.2%	4.4%

Source: Regular Withdrawal Reports; Withdrawals Office; Student Services; and Enrollment Reports, Office of the Registrar, Oakland University.

The analysis in Table II probably underestimates the withdrawal rate for undecided students, since enrollments are based on registration lists, while the majors of those withdrawing are based on interviews at the time of withdrawal. Fall and winter term enrollments and withdrawals for each academic year have been added together, and post-baccalaureate, non-matriculating, second degree and guest students from other institutions have been omitted from the analysis.

The increase in the rate of withdrawals in 1980-81 over 1979-80 among arts and sciences and undecided students coincided with the curtailment, due to budget cuts, of the program of making evening phone calls to these students at their homes. All of the increase took place during the winter semester, when these calls were curtailed.

† The figures in Table III have been adjusted for year-to-year variations in the Registrar's categorizations of students enrolled in programs of music and theatre arts.

TABLE III
FALL TERM ARTS AND SCIENCES ENROLLMENTS
1978 TO 1981

Year	Arts & Sciences Enrollment	New Students Past Year	Arts & Sciences Totals Undergraduate Enrollment	% Change From Previous Fall Term
1978	2858	1000	31.8	-5.1
1979	2528	852	27.1	-4.7
1980	2193	729	23.1	-4.0
1981	2248	708	23.7	+0.6

Source: Enrollment Reports of the Office of the Registrar, Oakland University.

Moreover, inspection of petitions of exception submitted to the Committee on Instruction of the College revealed a sharp reduction in the percentage of students citing poor advising as a reason for needing to have a rule or requirement waived. Within the five year period prior to the new advising program, 23% of the 500 or more petitions submitted cited poor advising; however, in the first three years of the new advising program, this percentage went down to 9%. In addition, a memorandum from the University Records Office reported "a marked decrease in problems relating to poor advising when reviewing the College's graduating students." The results of a student survey conducted early in 1982 were also consistent with these and other indications of improved advising in the College. †

CONCLUSION

The documentation provided offers support for the contention that improved advising not only increases retention but may also cause other important changes of which improved retention is merely an indicator. Finally, the study demonstrates that good advising may make life easier and learning more accessible for a significant portion of the students served by our colleges and universities.

† Results of this survey, compared with responses to the survey conducted in 1978 for the advising study mentioned above, showed an improvement in the position of the College of Arts and Sciences relative to other units in the university. Differences in questions, sampling procedures and timing for the two surveys, however, make rigorous statistical comparison of these results inappropriate.