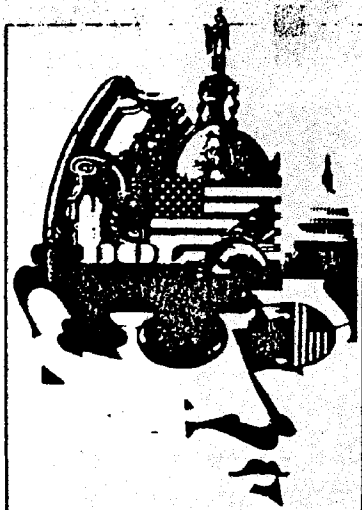




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Academic Advising in England and the United States — A Comparison

Irene Sherbo, *Specialist and Academic Advisor, Michigan State University.*

While on leave in England I was able to visit and meet with advisors in a number of English institutions. It was interesting to compare the mutual problems we faced in academic advising and some of the methods used in coping with them. Some of their problems are a result of their educational system. Since it is very different from the American system, I think a brief description of their system will help in understanding the problems.

England is a very small country and much is determined on a national basis, and the percentage of students entering higher education is much smaller. According to the UNESCO statistical yearbook for 1981 the number of 20-24 year olds in education in 1970 in England was 14.1% as opposed to 49.4% for U.S. In the latest year listed, 1977, it was 19.5% for them and 56.0% for us.¹

I have studied two groups, universities and polytechnics. Universities and polytechnics were originally organized to serve different needs but the differences between them grew less distinct with time. Ideally, universities are more theoretical than practical, stressing depth rather than breadth and specialization rather than generalization. Although the concept that study is valuable for its own sake rather than for applied usefulness still prevails, universities are now offering more degrees in applied fields. Polytechnics were established with the primary aim of teaching applied knowledge, but now they also offer liberal arts degrees. The Bachelor's degree in England usually takes three years and is granted by universities, polytechnics, and some colleges of higher education. Besides offering Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D. degrees similar to universities, the polytechnics (as they are called) also offer one- or two-year courses leading to a nationally recognized diploma or certificate (some of these are on a post-graduate level and some on a sub-degree level). The universities offer degrees in a wider range of subjects. "Sandwich courses" are especially characteristic of polytechnics, but are now offered at some universities. Students enrolled in the "sandwich-course" program work full time on a job in their field between their second and third year. Sometimes it takes an extra year for students to earn their degree, but the work is assessed and becomes an integral part of the degree requirements. These courses are successful, with students receiving needed experience in their fields, and acquiring an insight into what to expect in the "world of work." Unlike American students, English students are discouraged from working during the academic year, but are encouraged to work during the summer. The prevailing opinion seems to be that if students work they will not have enough time to partake of the "whole college experience." The employers of

¹UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1981.

he "sandwich-course" students apparently feel that they are worthwhile, because they continue to accept new students every year. The academic department assumes responsibility for placing students, but when students make their own contacts, they must obtain faculty approval.

Universities are autonomous and establish their own degree requirements, but polytechnic degrees must pass a rigorous validation test by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). In theory, academic standards at both institutions are on the same level. In practice, however, many believe that universities have higher standards.

Admission to degree programs is based on the results of national exams: General Certificate of Education at ordinary level — known as "O" levels, taken at the age of 16, and General Certificate of Education taken at advanced level — known as "A" levels, or, in some instances, for mature students, "equivalent qualifications" are required. Each institution specifies what grades are acceptable to them, i.e., Cambridge and Oxford require higher A-level pass than other universities, and often other universities require higher passes than polytechnics. The subjects a student wishes to pursue are important. There are some subjects in which he or she must have A-level passes. For example, accounting requires A-levels in English language and mathematics, and if a 16-year-old student, after O-level, decides not to continue with math A-level he or she will be unable to earn a degree in accounting. The student in England makes these decisions in secondary school; indeed, the decision often goes back to age 13, when he or she decides which O-level to study, since A-level material must be mastered before proceeding to A-level material. It is possible to work on one's own or go back to school and take a specific A level course (2 years) to earn the necessary requirements, but this is rarely done. An English student applies for and is accepted for a specific degree with little scope for a radical change. It is possible to make a change in closely related fields, such as from sociology to psychology or from biology to zoology without too much trouble.

Another factor affecting the flexibility of choice for the English student is the system of grants. Parliament has decreed that local authorities give financial grants to any student meeting the residency requirements who has been accepted by an institution of higher learning. The authorities will only pay fees (tuition) for three years, except for extenuating circumstances. Hence, if a student starts on one course and decides on a radical change and has the qualifications to change, he or she may do so, but must start again and local authority will not pay. This point was clearly illustrated in a letter to the newspaper *The Guardian* on April 12, 1977, which runs an education section every week. It reads:

"I have completed one and a half years of degree course in chemistry. My exam results so far have been mediocre. But my main problem is that I feel that I have chosen the wrong area of study and that my interests lie in economics, which I have never studied formally, but have read fairly widely. The professor of economics here is not averse to my changing course but would place me in the first year. This would lead to grant problems, obviously, as at the moment I am on a full grant... Should I persevere with a degree in a subject I don't like, and don't want a career in, or try to change?"

In the reply the education editor made a plea for better vocation guidance at the secondary level and then advised the student to stay with chemistry and earn the degree the next year because:

"In today's changing industrial world more and more employers feel that, in many instances, the subjects of the degree are of less importance than the degree itself. Employers are looking for graduates who have shown that they have the ability to study to degree level, have been stretched, can analyze and solve problems and, hopefully, can communicate intelligently. Obviously there are exceptions. If an employer wants a civil engineer he is unlikely to appoint an arts graduate, but in many areas the employer will undertake to provide any specialist training that may be required — especially in the commercial world."²

The lack of flexibility in English education has been an ongoing problem for students. The problem was solved recently when modular degree programs were instituted. These programs, unlike other degree programs in England, parallel the American system. The requirements for the modular degree varied from institution to institution, but the degree is based on a "foundation year" (like our general education or distribution requirements). Theoretically, this provides a balance between specialization and general understanding. The modular degree program increases flexibility and opportunities by: (1) deferment of choice; if the same modules are required for two different degrees the student may decide at a later date which one to select; (2) varying the rate of progress and the number of modules taken each term; (3) transferring credits from a sub-degree to a degree program; (4) transferring credits from one institution to another (this is extremely difficult, if not impossible, at present); (5) offering broader interdisciplinary and thematic degrees, and general studies degrees. Each module is a unit with an exam and a grade, as opposed to other degrees where the student takes one final exam at the end of the year. The degree is granted after the successful completion and accumulation of units, and advising (or counselling as they often call it) becomes important. In the City of London Polytechnic brochure on the *Modular Degree and Diploma Scheme*, it states that "Each student, with the help of his personal counsellor, the subjects tutors and the careers advisory service, is encouraged to plan and develop a study program based upon the progress that is being made."

Careers Advisory Centers are sponsored by the government and are located throughout Britain for the aid of all its citizens. They are used to help students with career choices who do not plan to continue their education, and also help those that continue with career selections in higher education. Once a student embarks on a course, he or she is encouraged to use the Careers Advisory Service at the Institution. Offices vary, but the careers officer is paid either by the central government or by the institution, and it is not uncommon for the careers advisor to work some days of the week in an Institution of higher learning and other days in the office in town. The type of work performed at the careers office is similar to the work performed at a placement center in the United States i.e., publishing lists of job openings and setting up interviews with employers. The Careers Advisory Service also has available the latest information on careers and literature on what careers one might investigate, given specialization, interests and aptitudes. A committee comprised of career advisers in higher education compiles excellent and complete career information sheets on different careers and distributes them to all careers centers. Because of the present nature of the centers, they are frequented mainly by third-year students beginning to think about employment. Without exception, each careers officer expressed regret that

²*The Guardian*, London, April 12, 1977.

Students didn't come in earlier in their course to seek the assistance of an advisor. For example, the field of law is one of the most overcrowded fields, and the careers advisor could suggest alternative fields for students to consider without disappointment and panic at the end. The careers services are trying to publicize themselves more in the hope that first-year students will avail themselves of the services earlier. Careers advisers and careers guidance literature stress the point that students need to plan; to take responsibility for their lives and work; and to develop alternate plans of action based upon a realistic knowledge of themselves and their goals. Advisors should understand that their counselling of students is not for a vocation but for a way of life.

A.G. Watts, Senior Fellow and Executive Director of the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling warns, however, that although one must have choice, choice for choice's sake is not necessarily good, and when there is choice it must be accompanied by help. Help can be in the form of such simple objective information as stating the choices; or explaining what is best suited to the individual's interest and abilities, and how to fit it coherently together; or helping students work through their own feelings and various possibilities; and arriving at decisions on their own, or some combination thereof. In his article, "Careers Education in Higher Education: Principles and Practice" in the *British Journal of Guidance Counselling*, Watts states that the two traditional ways of offering career information are (1) factual information through pamphlets and other printed material, and (2) advice by advisors passing on the benefits of their experience. Watts said the disadvantages of the factual information are: (a) Is the student motivated to use the information (b) Is the student capable of understanding it? and (c) If the student does understand, can it be related to his or her own needs? The disadvantages of the advice by advisors are: (a) Can an advisor diagnose a person's attributes and interests in one or two sessions? and (b) How objective is an advisor's perception of an occupation?

Watts also advocated courses with formal structures which would fulfill four main objectives:

- **Opportunity Awareness** — understanding the structure of the working world, its opportunities, demands, rewards and satisfactions;
- **Self-Awareness** — development of the sense of oneself, personality, qualifications, abilities, aptitudes, skills, physical strength, interests and what give satisfaction;
- **Decision Learning** — making decisions, being aware of different ways to make decisions (impulsive vs. deliberate); differentiating ways appropriate for different problems; balancing the pros and cons of a decision; learning to accept responsibility for one's decisions;
- **Transition Learning** — awareness of such things as the hierarchical patterns of work and skills needed, such as inter-personal, budgetary and communicative.¹

"Decision making" appears repeatedly in English literature on counselling, just as it does in American literature. It was mentioned repeatedly in my personal interviews with advisors who agreed that one of their major tasks was to help students make decisions. An R. Corbett, Director of Student Services, in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Careers and Guidance Service in Further and Higher Education in 1975, stated that he believes one cannot identify "right-decisions," only "wrong" ones, and that helps relieve the tensions of decision-making by making us admit our own inability to guide accurately,

by presenting life as a series of decisions, few of which are totally irrevocable. He also stated, what most advisors know, that one cannot separate career counselling from personal counselling. Often a student comes in for career advice when he really has something else on his mind. Advisors consistently mentioned how important it was for them to be on the alert for the student's real reason for the office visit.

In England, as in the U.S., there are probably as many advising systems as there are institutions. I did not encounter a university or polytech that did not have an advising system, although in some it may not have been identified specifically as such. For example, in a letter the Registrar of the University of Leeds states that there is "no formal academic advising procedure here. Advice on courses, counselling, etc. is done by a number of people, and practice varies from department to department." In most institutions advising is done by a member of the faculty who is called a "tutor," with resource people such as career advisors, a "psychological" counselor, a chaplain, and a doctor or nurse. The role of tutor is an old established one in England. The booklet for new undergraduates at Girton College, Cambridge states that tutors are "responsible for the welfare, health, discipline and general progress of their students and are their links with the University administration." The relationship between student and tutor is very personal. Remember that an institution of 10,000 students is considered very large. Each tutor is assigned a small number, perhaps 6-10 students. The *Notes for Personal Tutors* published by the University of Warwick states that the function of a Personal Tutor is to: (1) "Establish such contacts, both formal and informal... as will enable him to know whether any personal problems, or any difficulties or misapprehensions are preventing him from obtaining full benefit from the University; (2) offer his students advice on any matter, including matters not immediately arising from their formal instruction, when such advice is asked for or appears to be needed; (3) help his students to feel that the University has an interest in them as individuals and not merely as members of a class; (4) help to broaden his student's outlook and stimulate their immediate academic work."

The University of Warwick had just over 4,000 students in 1978. At the University of East Anglia where the student body numbered just over 3,000, the personal and academic counselling are separate. The academic advisor sees each of his or her advisees once a week. The advisor helps the students with choice of classes; with planning work, with early attempts at essay writing on the university level, and with understanding what is expected in seminars. It is also the advisor's job to make sure that the students are not behind in their work.

In most polytechs, and particularly in the modular degree programs, each student is assigned to an advisor, usually a member of the teaching staff in the department in which the student is interested. However, if there are not enough faculty members in a particular area, students are assigned to anyone available. These advisors act as personal tutors, which means they are responsible for both the academic and social well-being of the student. If a student's interests change, or if a student and the counsellor do not establish a satisfactory rapport, it is possible to change tutors. Some institutions have a mandatory review at the end of the first year and tutors or students may suggest appropriate changes. But the ease and rate of change varies enormously among institutions.

Many of the problems of the administration of advising and counselling schemes are similar in England and the U.S. Two students, (Thomas and Willcocks), spent 12 days at
October 1983

¹British Journal of Guidance Counselling, 5, #2. (July 1977).

he city of London Polytech studying the modular degree program and wrote a report as part of their requirements for the M.A. degree in curriculum development at the University of Sussex. One point they made was that because the role of the counsellor implies a wide range of activities, i.e., "the provision for objective information; advice on courses appropriate to the student's abilities and interests; the development of a coherent programme; making the student feel at home in the institution and helping him with those personal problems that may affect his studies, the teaching staff is thus required to take on a heavy burden of counselling responsibilities." The point was of particular interest to me as a No Preference adviser at Michigan State University. I believe MSU has solved the problem by shifting the burden of advising from the teaching staff to non-teaching professional advisors. The two students also pointed out that in small subject areas there is a danger of "counselling in" because the faculty has a vested interest in students pursuing a particular subject, as in American institutions.

The report also notes some reasons students gave for not seeing their counsellors:

1. Too busy with this term to think of next term;
2. Bad early experience with counselling so that the student fails to perceive its value;
3. Counsellors cannot be found;
4. Counsellors are always on the telephone;
5. Counsellors who think advice could be sought and offered in writing;
6. A counsellor who is, to quote a student, "rather vague about the scheme, but a nice fellow";
7. Counsellors not fully aware of the complex pattern of pre-requisites, etc.;
8. Students not knowing who their counsellors are.

Thomas and Willcocks, in their report, stated that "uncertainty, indecision and a sense of alienation are classic dilemmas of the 18-21 year old; and the Modular Degree scheme with its demand for choice and its lack of recognizable base for students must aggravate the personal problems experienced by some students." This problem is familiar to advisors, particularly those working with students with undeclared majors; the student whose personal problems often stem from being upset because he or she hasn't declared a major yet. Pressure from parents is often a contributing factor. The authors conclude that the counselling system for the modular degree program at the City of London Polytech was ineffectual for those who really needed it. Students persistently seeking information and advice are no problem. The issue is how to get to the student in trouble, "If the student had only come in for a conference!"

The counselling organization at Keele University more closely resembles the University Undergraduate Division at MSU than any other English institution, and it is described in some detail in a book by its staff, Audrey Newsome, B.J. Thorne and K.C. Wyld, *Student Counselling in Practice*. To prove my observation that advisors on both sides of the Atlantic deal with the same problems, I cite from the 1970-71 Report of the University of Keele Appointments and Counselling Committee which noted that 25 different colleges and universities worldwide came to discuss their counselling services. They categorized their interviews in order of frequency: subject choice, academic difficulty, study habits, leaving school, general vocational information, specific vocational information, vocational indecision, personal, informational, concerns about others, and miscellaneous.*

*Audrey Newsome, B.J. Thorne and K.C. Wyld, *Student Counselling in Practice*, (University of London Press, 1973).

The 1976-77 review of the City of London Polytechnic Student Advice Center contains a statistical breakdown of the types of student problems presented to it. One hundred and forty-four grants and financial problems; (there is a large number of foreign students having problems with grant money arriving on time from their governments). Fifteen queries re: Home Office and consulate (foreign students); 7 general muddle; 8 medical, including pregnancy; 17 career/course (career problems go to the careers advisory service); 27 exams; 10 study; 56 personal; and 27 miscellaneous.

In discussions with the counsellors, I was able to break down some of the general categories: Students' personal problems associated with being away from home for the first time; living in some sort of communal situation for the first time, or, for those living in bed-sitters, the sense of isolation; sex questions; lack of self-confidence; increased freedom; no close contact with teachers; and the other normal problems associated with the maturation of the normal 18-21 year old — Who am I? What values do I have? On the study side the students often found it difficult to adjust to the different learning atmosphere, to the faster pace, to the more independent learning situation (often tutorials in England), and having to take more responsibility for learning and doing assignments and apportioning time. Under study habits and skills advisors help students with note taking, reading and summarizing skills, time planning and setting up schedules. One thing English counsellors said they hear repeatedly is "In secondary school I didn't have to work too hard and I was one of the top students, but here everyone is as smart or smarter than I and I have to work much harder to keep up." Under exams they deal with both techniques and exam anxiety. Some other problems are: wrong choice of subject, losing interest, lack of concrete goals, and indecision about continuing in higher education. The students are worried about the job market (the unemployment rate in Britain is now 14%) and are shifting to where they hear the jobs are. The familiar example is the media emphasizing the lack of teaching jobs, causing a drop in students entering education, although there are still shortages in commercial and economic studies and mathematics.

Audrey Newsome says that counsellors need to "explode the myth of the safe profession." They need to campaign for flexibility to allow people to shift from one field to another without feeling that they have invalidated their courses, but rather that it is a learning experience aiding their personal and vocational development. We all know the large portion of graduates who are not ultimately employed in their field of specialization, but the problem is how to "explode the myth of the safe profession" in face of the pressure from faculty, who have a vested interest, the business world, parents, the media, etc.*

A number of problems that advisors in England have experienced are similar to the ones experienced by advisors in America. How does one make one's services known and accepted? In England, all counselling centers are involved in some degree in the orientation process; many have leaflets available for distribution describing their service; many try to get publicity in the student newspaper; and some counsellors are permitted into classes for a few minutes at the beginning of the term to describe their work. Counsellors speak to clubs; some counsellors invite each new student in for an individual conference, and the City of London Polytech has a 24 hour telephone answering service. Persuading students to avail themselves of the services offered, particularly those who could benefit from it, was one of the worrisome concerns of the counsellors.

*Audrey Newsome, et. al.

Most centers make a concerted effort to win over faculty and to maintain a good relationship with them. My impression is that the importance of counselling and advising as an integral part of higher education is less readily accepted in England than in the United States.

I have pointed out some of the differences and similarities between the two countries in the counselling/advising administrative structure and the types of problems encountered. The issue nearly everyone agreed to was that a prime function of the counsellor, advisor, or, whatever he or she is called is to act as a "listening ear."

My conclusion from this study is that advising and counselling problems and solutions have no boundaries. They truly have international dimensions.

Building Community in Freshman Year

MICHAEL J. COLLINS, *Dean, School for Summer and Continuing Education, Georgetown University*

Those who perform the job know that academic advising is not very tidy work. While advisors have offices and appointment books, catalogs and files, their advice is often given on the fly; over the salad bar in the cafeteria; in the corridor between classes; and outside the sports center after a three-mile run. "Can I substitute a course on the Civil War for History 101?" "Does my AP credit in English get me out of Expository Writing?" "Do I really have to take calculus to get into medical school?" Advice on the run is not what the system envisions, but if the questions are neither troubled nor complex, and if the answers are thoughtful and thorough, students, who are notoriously reluctant to make appointments, may get some of the advice needed. They may be encouraged by the informality of the process to make an appointment to discuss the larger issues of their education at greater length.

Academic advising is never done in a vacuum. It is carried out in a particular environment that either supports the effort to advise students or works against it. If students and advisors draw lettuce from the same bowl, good advising can take place at lunch in a cafeteria, but if food fights are the normal order of business, it cannot. This article presents some thoughts about *building community through freshman orientation*, and in the process not only advising students about courses and requirements as they enter a college, but creating an environment in which all the efforts to assist students, academically and humanly, will have a greater chance of success.

I'd like to begin by recalling the second book of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen*. It tells the story of a knight, Sir Guyon, and his guide, a palmer, whose mission is to reach the Bower of Bliss, the beautiful home of the enchantress, Acrasia; capture the enchantress; destroy the Bower; and change back into men all of Acrasia's former lovers, whom she has turned into swine. It seems a large order, to say the least.

Nothing is easy in the world of romance. It takes 6,147 lines to get the job done. All sorts of strange and terrible things happen along the way. The knight loses his horse; he and the palmer inherit a baby whose hands are permanently stained with blood; they meet a monster called Furor and his mother, Occasion; Sir Guyon battles any number of evil knights and resists several temptations to dalliance; the palmer gets lost; Guyon is delayed in the Case of Mammon, the "God of the world and worldings"; he is educated in the House of Temperance; but finally he and the palmer reach the Bower of Bliss, the